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Memories

by retired pilot, Gene Hall

Unlike Barack Obama, I am not narcissistic enough to write an autobiography without any outstanding accomplishments, so this is not meant to be about me. I am writing some family history for the benefit of my grandchildren, and I will include some airline stories from the glory days. Obviously, they can only come from my perspective, but they are meant to be about Delta Airlines, and **Dave Garrett, Tom Miller, Joe Cooper, Frank Rox, Pre Ball, Snake Smith, Bud Watson, Jim Morton, Bill Jeter, Bill Tuero, Paul Bennett, Gene Blondeau** (UAL pilot).....and lots of other old friends including some great stewardesses, some of whom later morphed into great flight attendants. I am remembering things about people who were friends. The sixties and seventies were the glory days for our industry and most especially our company. What I will be sending to you will be unedited because I will be missing some names, dates, etc. that you can help me with. My daughters will edit later for the grandchildren. With any luck, they will never know that Gramps made a gift C in eighth grade English.

I am sending this to those of you who responded to my tribute to **John Pott**. Several of you encouraged me and asked to be included if I did any more reminiscing. When I was younger, I lived in the future. You know: can't wait to graduate, can't wait to get my driver's license, can't wait to make captain, etc. I finally matured enough (or aged enough) to live in the present, but things are such today that I am having more fun living in the past.

A large percentage of what I want to write about my old friends is funny. I was forty one years old before I became a Christian and much of what I remember is X rated. I hope not to embarrass anyone. When I became a Christian, a lot of folks couldn't believe it. Some of you may not believe that I had a rather wild reputation. In fact, **Frank Rox** and I were playing golf at East Lake in Atlanta one day in the late sixties, and he told me that He thought I was the wildest airline pilot he had ever known. He said it as a compliment. The Church of the Apostles is in the big cathedral looking building on Interstate 75, just north of West Paces Ferry Road in Atlanta. Three or four years after its founding, the pastor, **Michael Youssef** was having dinner with a doctor and his wife. They were discussing the church, and the wife asked what Gene Hall's relationship was to the church. Michael told her that we had planned the first service in my living room, and that I was an elder. He said she got a very faraway look in her eyes, and he asked her if she had been a Delta Stewardess. "Yes, how did you know", she replied. He told her that the new Gene was very different from the old.

The main difference in the old Gene and new Gene is forgiveness.

The first installment is ready to mail.

This will be redundant for a few of you, but not for most. My list of a few old friends, who responded to my tribute to John Pott last year, is growing by the minute since **Travis Foster** and **Dave Roberts** sent the intro out to their e-mail lists. I want to put this project in the proper context to try and head off as much misunderstanding as possible. After the Pott letter last year, I received about thirty e mails from people thanking me for writing it. Several encouraged me to write more about the "golden Years". A couple even said that they enjoyed my writing style. I didn't even know that I had a writing style, I had to think about that one for awhile. At Hall Fletcher Junior High in Asheville, North Carolina in 1949, eighth grade English was all about grammar, punctuation, and diagrams. Miss Crawford the teacher was an old maid who was about as stern as a 1968 model MSY Stewardess Supervisor. I mostly looked out the window, and dreamed about baseball, and my history teacher. Not necessarily in that order because my history teacher was absolutely, completely, and stupendously, drop dead gorgeous. For some strange reason, Miss Crawford took a liking to me, and gave me a pass. That is why some of my periods are after the quotation marks when they should be before, and vice versa. You might see than when it should be then, etc. My daughters will edit the whole mess later, after I expand it with all the personal family history. They can also take some of my X-rated stories that I have rated PG, and either eliminate them or edit them to G for a family audience.

Corky Willens is a retired flight attendant. We never met on the line, but her e mail encouraged me to write a history of those times, if not for publication, then for my grandchildren. Her letter had a major impact because she complimented my story telling ability with a letter that was beautifully written. Heading off the misunderstanding earlier referred to has to do with my coming to Christ when I was 41 years old.

Some of my old Baptist buddies are probably going to look at some of my writings, and say; "I don't think I would have told that". Some of my non "born again" buddies (at least half my current friends fall into that category} will say; "This has too much Jesus talk for me". Well, this ain't gonna be about Jesus, but at the same time I will not deny Him. I remember how shy I was about revealing my becoming a Christian in the beginning. I walked into ATL Ops one day and **Stan Jurgelsky** (MSY) was entertaining a group of pilots. Stan stopped his comedy routine long enough to ask if what he had heard about me was true. I uttered yes, as I hurried by without stopping. I am no longer ashamed of the gospel, but by the same token, I still enjoy an occasional martini, good wine (and even some that might be classified as mediocre), and having a good time. One second officer that I led to Christ told me that it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been a regular guy, not what he had envisioned that "born agains" were like. We flew four trips together, and our conversations took place in the cockpit, over beers in the hotel bar before dinner, and during dinner. His point became more clear when **Joe Ivey** asked me to start a pilot bible study with him. I asked him why in this world he would want me of all people to do that with him. He said; "Gene, when the doc took me out of my mother's womb, and slapped me on the butt, I turned the other cheek. I don't even remember when I wasn't a Christian. You on the other hand, have credibility with a lot of these guys. It is like the alcoholic helping the other alcoholic. They identify with you." I was sorry I asked, but I enlisted.

I have already written about some of the people that I am going to give you my impressions of. The world knows about the leadership style of **C.E. Woolman**. As a manager, he was probably not in the same league as some of the great corporate CEOs of his time, but as a leader, he was up there with the likes of General Patton.

I want us to remember that **Tom Miller** was the genius that started "bunching" the flights in Atlanta that not only led to ATL being the biggest airline hub in the world, but sparked the growth that put Atlanta in a different league from other Southern cities of the time.

I want you to know the real Rox. I bet that none of you ever experienced the chef in a restaurant running you out of his restaurant at the point of a butcher knife, but **Frank Rox** and I did.

I haven't sent the **Captain Bill Tuero** chapter to you, but it is written. I will add some material that **Pat McGirl** (MSY) sent this morning. The only thing that Bill could do as well as, or better than fly an airplane was pass wind. When Bill flew, Delta had to furnish the airplane, and fill it with gas. Bill on the other hand was always filled with gas, and he could pass it at will.

I am going to tell you about the accident that ended **Rowe Davidson's** airline career in 1966, and then meeting with **Pre Ball**. I have more to say about my buddies who were in the

Hilton Inn accident that caused me to be a pall bearer for three of my best friends in a three day period. After 42 years, tears still come when I think of it. I am going to tell some stories that some of you will be able to confirm, and I encourage that. Tell me some of your memories, and I will pass them along with credit to you. Joan and I sat in bed this morning and laughed so hard that we cried, reading e mails from **Keith Hagstette** (MSY Crew Scheduler & later ATL Dispatch), and **Pat McGirl**. One more thing; The reason I have time to do this now is because I am in Atlanta for six weeks of radiation therapy. In early January, I was standing in the kitchen in Mississippi mixing a martini (Bombay Sapphire Gin mixed 8 or 9 to 1 with Noilly Pratt extra dry vermouth, on the rocks with 2 large olives. That is just in case you ever invite me to dinner), and I bumped my head on the stove hood. After saying a few words not becoming to a gentleman, I was assured that it was not bleeding. The next day, I felt something that seemed to be a very small scab. I assumed I had bled a little. A few days later it was still there, and I scratched it off. Lo and behold, it came back. You pilots know that most of us have had more than one spot frozen off the left side of our faces, and most are benign. My physician daughter looked at it, and said it didn't look dangerous, but it was time to visit the Dermatologist, and she would probably freeze it. Her practice is busy, and it would normally take 30 or 60 days for a routine appointment, but she had a cancellation, and saw me the next day. She shaved it, and called me two days later with the news that it was malignant melanoma. When I am in Atlanta, I play golf on Saturday mornings with a group at the Piedmont Driving Club. One of my best friends in the group is **Dr. Rein Saral**. He was a pioneer in bone marrow transplant at Johns Hopkins. Emory recruited him to establish their bone marrow unit several years ago, and later promoted him to CEO of Emory Clinic. He retired from that a couple of years ago, and is now finishing his career as the Associate Director of the Winship Cancer Center at Emory. I telephoned him right after I talked with my Pastor, Dr. Michael Youssef. I was in Mississippi, but I was at Emory the next day. The operation was a success, and the lymph nodes were negative. I entered a trial program that checks me every three months, and I was informed that there was less than a 20% chance of reoccurrence. Three of them came back in four months. I have had them removed along with more negative lymph nodes. There is no indication that there might be future problems, but this time I am getting six weeks of radiation. Today was the second day. I should be glowing in the dark very soon. The reason that I am telling you all of this is because airline pilots have a much higher incidence of skin cancer than mere mortals have. It is a product of all that nice sunshine above the clouds. Mine were amelanotic, meaning they were skin colored. They were so harmless looking that even when they returned my M.D. Anderson trained surgeon thought they were harmless. If you aren't going to your Dermatologist for a complete body scan on a regular basis, go! They are harmless if caught early, fatal if not. It is by God's grace that I found this melanoma. It was the size of a dull number 2 pencil point, and could have been ignored for a long time. I tell people that martinis and golf have finally been good influences in my life. It was uncovered because of mixing a martini, and I received quick medical care because of golf.

Installment #1

I think I can make a very good case for the 1950's being the greatest time in U S history to grow up. The Korean War ended in July 1953, and most folks didn't know where Vietnam was till the 60's. It was a time of peace and prosperity.

When my Delta class of twelve pilots came to work in October 59, **Dwight Eisenhower** had been in the White House since 53. Color TV was in its infancy, but only a few programs were being broadcast in color. Bonanza had recently become the first regular weekly series to be all color, but I didn't know anyone with a color set. We didn't have computers, fax machines, or cell phones. Pan Am had started the jet age with the Boeing 707 the year before, and Delta had introduced the DC-8 about three weeks before we arrived. Passengers dressed like they were going to a dinner party or church. They didn't smell bad, and on the four engine flights they were served champagne and hors d'oeuvres. Celebrities were still flying the airlines, and most people actually enjoyed flying.

In 1954, I had my first airline flight as a passenger on a Golden Crown Delta DC-7 from Knoxville to Cincinnati. The year before, during my senior year in high school one of my college freshmen buddies had taken me on my first flight. It was in an Ercoupe. I won't describe the Ercoupe except to say that they are very small, and the early version had no rudder pedals. But the view was fantastic, and I started dreaming about learning to fly. The thing I remember most about the trip to Cincinnati on the 7 was the stewardesses. Wow, you were a glamorous bunch!

During my sophomore year in college, I was hired part time by Lane Aviation at Port Columbus in Columbus, Ohio as a line boy. Gassed, stacked in the hangars, and cleaned all the private airplanes as well as fueling American, Delta, and TWA. I started flying lessons in a Cessna 120. It was a high wing, two place airplane with a 85 hp Continental engine. It was too expensive to rent, so I saved \$600 and had a friend who was over 21 co sign a note for \$300, and for \$900 bought a 1946 Aeronca Chief. My instructor, Charlie Clay was a crop duster, and one of the two best stick and rudder pilots (**Delta Captain Bill Tuero** was the other) that I ever flew with. I received my private pilot's license after 40 hours of flying. Unfortunately, shortly thereafter and against my instructor's advice, I decided to make a solo roundtrip from Columbus to Asheville, NC in the middle of summer. I became acquainted with mountain thunderstorms for the first time and landed the Chief in a road near Harlan, KY. Unlike the plane, I was uninjured. The Aeronca lost the right wing on a fence post, and I sold it for \$250 which almost paid off my loan.

For the next three years, I bounced back and forth between East Tennessee State U and Ohio State U, and kept building flight time and getting ratings. Flying lessons were expensive. And I had several part time jobs during those years. The best paying one was selling new Fords in 1956. The most interesting and fun one was in 1957, radio announcing for WGGG in Gainesville, FL.

My first contact with Delta as a pilot was in 1958. I was fully licensed by then, and was flying co-pilot for Youngstown Airways. Forest Beckett was the owner, and he was a visionary ahead of his time. The company was operating a dozen plus Twin Beeches, Twin Bonanzas, and DC-3's for companies in Youngstown and Pittsburgh. I was flying out of Allegheny County Airport in Pittsburgh for companies as varied as Heinz Soup, Westinghouse Air Brake, Timken Roller Bearing, etc. The two passengers that I most remember are **Henry Timken** and **Arnold Palmer**. Henry was the CEO of Timken Roller Bearing, and he would always sit on the jump seat of the Twin Beech if there were no other passengers. He was very interested in flying, and treated us like peers. Arnold Palmer was a young pro, he never flew with me, but I met him several times in our lounge when he was arriving or departing. He was very charming, and always had time to talk.

I was on a layover in Chicago in the fall and stayed in the Congress Hotel. Before deregulation, Chicago was one of the major layover cities for Delta. We had a big operation there as well as a crew base. North Central shared our concourse, and they fed us traffic for our long hauls until deregulation allowed them to feed themselves. That is a whole another story. At any rate, we were in the Congress, and there were Delta Pilots and Stewardesses all over the lobby. I struck up a conversation with DC-7 **Captain Charlie Green**. Charlie was in his early thirties and was very senior for his age. He was handsome, articulate, and just what most 23 year old pilots wanted to be like. The airlines were hiring very few pilots in those days. Delta hired quite a few in 1956, but only about one hundred in the three years until our class in 59. Charlie told me that a class of 25 pilots was in the process of being hired then. He gave me the personnel manager, Horace Messer's phone number. I called him the following day, but I was too late, the class was starting that day.

In December of 58, I landed a job flying a Cessna 310 in Atlanta. The airplane was owned by a mechanical contracting company, but was used primarily by Bowater Paper Company. Bowater was headquartered in London, and in those days, foreign companies could not own airplanes in the U S. A few months after my hiring, the company traded the 310 for a 680 Aero Commander. I was in high cotton, a 23 year old kid flying first pilot for an international company. We traveled frequently to Montreal, and to plants in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. I hung out with company executives on layovers, and learned that there were better wines than Boones Farm. They were a terrific group to work for, and when they learned that my goal was to fly for Delta, they raised my pay to \$1000 per month, and gave me the opportunity to start "learning how to make paper" for extra pay. The lure of the glamour of airline flying was too great.

Ted Johnson was the Atlanta Chief Pilot, and I visited him about once a month during the middle of 59. The first time I interviewed, he asked me how tall I was, and I told him I was 6 feet 5. Ted said, "No you aren't, you're 6 feet 4". That was the height limit in those days.

Horace Messer didn't want to hire me because I was classified 1-Y for the military draft. When I was a high school junior, I had a kidney infection that was generally considered to be fatal. My family doctor's nurse was the wife of the local draft board chairman, and when I reached eighteen, he automatically gave me a medical deferment. When one graduated from high school in Elizabethton, Tennessee in 1953, the main choices were college, the military, or Detroit assembly lines. Carter County could always meet the draft quotas with volunteers, so even when the draft was active, they rarely, if ever drafted anyone.

Ted (bless him) got Horace to agree that he would hire me if I would go to Mr. Woolman's personal physician for a complete physical. I spent three days in Crawford Long Hospital at a cost to me of just over \$300. I have had several mentors in my life, but nobody more significant than Ted Johnson. It is hard to describe what it was like to fly for any airline in 1959, but Delta was in a class by itself. If we weren't already, we were becoming the most successful airline in the world. I felt like I had won the lottery.

Our class of twelve pilots started in October. It was just three weeks after the DC-8 had gone in service. Our first contact with Delta as a class was with the Director of Methods and Training, **Dave Garrett**. Delta was too involved with the DC-8 start-up to train us as engineers, so they contracted with United to combine us with a United class of twenty five, and we spent two months in Denver. Dave said, Delta would have hired twenty five, but United would only agree to twelve. We were **Malcolm Simpson, Ray Fox, John Richards, Ron Rice, Perry Lee Smith, Joe Russell, Bill Jeter, Jim Wilson, Stan Jurgelsky, Al Corrigan, Al Durham, and Gene Hall**.

Our pay was \$350 per month in training, and \$450 per month for the first year on the line. I was always afraid that somehow they would find out that I would do the job for free.

Dave came out to Denver at the end of the first month to make sure that nobody was busting out of the program. He also brought our pay checks and took us out to dinner. He always said that he felt he was in our class because that is when his promotions went into high gear, with the rapid expansion of the industry. We had a twentieth reunion dinner at the Capital City Club in Atlanta in 1979, and Dave was our honored guest.

Atlanta was my first choice and Dallas my second for the initial base assignment. I was number five in seniority, and missed Atlanta by one number. I was assigned to Dallas, but sent to New Orleans for two weeks TDY. **Bill Jeter** and I were on the same flight from ATL to MSY, and we met a fellow who owned several French Quarter bars. He gave us his card as well as several tickets that were good for free beverages in his establishments. He did warn us that girls were disrobing to music in some of his clubs. Bill took the names of the ones with the girls so we could avoid those and only check out the others.

It was the first part of December and the crew rate at the brand new Airport Hilton Inn was \$7.14 per night. For a little perspective on inflation, the DC 8's price was five million dollars and change per copy. After checking in we walked back across Airline Highway to operations. Tony was the agent on duty. Bill introduced us as new second officers, and told him to give us a roundtrip limo ticket to downtown New Orleans. Tony looked at us like we might have just dropped in from another planet and before he had time to respond I interrupted and asked him to excuse us for a moment. I pulled Bill out the door and told him to stay there and let me handle the negotiations with Tony. I went back in and explained that we were indeed new second officers and we might have enough money left for meals until payday, and that a nice man had given us free drink tickets, but we couldn't afford taxi fare to town and back. Tony said "no problem" and stamped a couple of tickets. I went outside with the tickets and told Bill that I got the tickets by pleading poverty rather than giving orders. Being the Marine Captain that he was he said: "I am an officer, and he is an enlisted man." Bill was a fast learner: He stayed in the Marine Reserves, but quickly realized that being an officer didn't mean so much in civilian life. He became the very best friend of my life. If there was a better town than New Orleans for a single guy whose number one priority was having fun, I never found it. I worked a base swap out with **Jim (Tex) Wilson** and stayed in New Orleans.

We were newly minted DC-6/7 second officers. My seniority number was around 712. The fleet consisted of the DC-3, CV 340/440, DC-6/7, the first two or three of the initial order of five DC-8's, and the C-46 for cargo. We had 700 pilots, but only 500 stewardesses because we had so many one stewardess airplanes. **Jack McKee** was the MSY Chief Pilot, **Johnny Seng** was station manager, **Doris Kinnebrew** was in crew scheduling, and **Inez Stolte** was in charge of the stewardess base. The majority of our layovers were in Chicago and Detroit, but we heard stories about the senior layovers in Caracas, San Juan, Havana, and Ciudad Trujillo which changed back to Santa Domingo after the dictator Rafael Trujillo was assassinated in 1961.

My first trip was on a DC-6 to Love field with **Jimmy Harkness** as the Captain. In January 60, I rented an apartment on Central Avenue between Jefferson Highway and Airline Highway. The rent was \$125 per month. Bill Jeter shared it with me until his wife Madeline moved from California about six months later.

J. R. Reynolds was my next room mate. Jimmy was a senior co-pilot, and/or very junior captain. He had recently been divorced, and had not yet married Carita. Jim introduced me to serious poker.