

From: Roger Lewis <dfwbumgroup@hotmail.com>  
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To: Roger Lewis <splitwindow@mac.com>

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## Memories

by retired pilot, Gene Hall

### History 4

I had lived for a time at 715 St. Philip Street in the Quarter. It was about two doors from the corner of Bourbon and St. Philip, which just happened to be the location of my "club", Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop. The operator was **Tony Biceno**, who had opened the first openly gay bar in the second block of Bourbon several years before. Most nights, Tony would be manning the bar. When he talked, he sort of turned one side of his mouth up and talked out of the side. Tony and I were always friends, but when I started bringing Joan in for a beer, there was very little or no charge. Joan didn't drink, but I might have a few, and Tony felt that having pretty girls in his joint was very good for business. One night, I asked Tony if he had made any money out of the bar business. He leaned over to speak confidentially, turned up the corner of his mouth and said; "Are you kidding? Three months after I opened Tony Biceno's, I put wall to wall carpet in my whole house."

Most of the MSY Captains were fun to fly with, however, it is well known that we had some who were, shall I say egocentric, and we had some others who were just eccentric, or maybe worse. There was the Cajun Captain, who turned the LGA Departure Control radio off because they made too much noise, and I guess all those instructions were just too confusing. Keith Hagstette was working at LAX before he advanced to Flight Control. The 880 put out lots of smoke. One day, he was watching the MSY-LAX 880 land, and the smoke stopped suddenly. He said a TWA cargo tug came to Delta Ops with the news that a Delta 880 was stranded on the runway with blown main gear tires. It was Captain Cajun. We were in a parts pool with TWA, and they were able to replace the tires and the return flight got out close to on time. Two days later, the same TWA cargo guy shows up at Delta Ops and tells Keith that there is a Delta CV-880 stranded on the runway. Keith said; "Bull s\_\_\_! That was day before yesterday". Well, Captain Cajun had struck again! TWA was out of tires and there was a significant delay this time.

There was the captain who stood in MSY Ops and proclaimed that Jack Reeves should be terminated because he had mistaken Yazoo City for Jackson and landed at the wrong airport. It was only a few years later that the proclaimer landed at Yazoo City instead of Jackson, and by that time Jack was the Chicago Chief Pilot.

I enjoyed flying with the captain who only sat in the left seat when departing or arriving at the terminal. He would generally make a very nice bed with blankets and pillows beside the radio rack. He only flew (slept) the Caracas trips, and that allowed the second officer (me) to do half the flying. Half our DC-7 fleet didn't have auto pilots and it was amazing how often the second officers were invited to fly those airplanes.

One of the most senior pilots had a habit of landing short and he almost killed a load of people, including yours truly, on a DC-8. He was terminated and, later, terminated himself by running out of fuel in a light airplane.

**Bill Tuero** was one of almost everyone's favorites and definitely on the most unforgettable characters list. I stated earlier that he was one of the two best stick and rudder pilots that I ever flew with. I bet that any of his old copilots would corroborate that statement. Most second officers were not legally qualified to make take offs and landing, and some captains never let us fly. Bill was so confident in his own skills that he would let us fly a lot. He was like a great surgeon teaching a resident in the operating room, he knew how far he could let us go before we got in trouble. He taught many young pilots how to be captains.

Most of us, who were motivated by having a good time, would agree that he also taught us how to layover. He could drink more martinis than most mortals. I tried to keep up with him a few times, but it was impossible. Bill could pass wind on command, and you did not want to get in a wind passing contest with him. Sometimes the cockpit air would turn brown and we would don oxygen masks. He loved to sneak one and call a stewardess to the cockpit and blame it on the copilot or engineer.

We had one captain in New Orleans who was famous for exaggerating the truth. I will call him Bump (not his real name) for as I told you earlier, I don't want to embarrass anyone, I only want to have fun reliving the good old days. Most of us were still wearing coats and ties on layovers and Bump was probably the most well dressed of all the pilots. He always looked more like a banker or lawyer than a pilot. One night, Bump was in a crowded elevator with Bill and me in the Memphis Peabody Hotel. He was well dressed as usual. He was not paying much attention to us, as we didn't quiet meet his standards of layover dignity. Well, Bill cut one of those silent jobs that completely changed the atmosphere in that small space, just as the door opened. Bill quickly stepped out of the elevator, turned around to face the crowd, and loudly said; "**Bump Jones**, I cannot believe you would do that in a crowded elevator. That is so rude". The door closed. That release of gas was the mark of a true champion, completely silent and deadly. We were all gasping for breath. I have never seen a face as red as Bump's on anyone with less than third degree burns. It was awful, but worth it. It seemed like forever to the next floor. Everybody out, except Bump. His face was still crimson as the door closed.

Bill enjoyed embarrassing Bump, because Bump was so proud and so vulnerable. I think it was 880 flight training in Atlanta, when a group of us were sitting in the Hilton Inn lobby before dinner. Bump entered the lobby and was on his guard because Bill was in the group. Bill was very cordial in starting a conversation with him and asking him how he thought the ground school was going. Bump made the mistake of letting his guard down as he pontificated on the strengths and weaknesses of the ground school. He enjoyed having the attention of the whole group of a dozen or so pilots and he was waxing eloquently about the evolution of training from the days of the bi-planes. Bill waited until Bump had our rapt attention and interrupted him. He said; "Bump, you obviously know a lot about training, I want to test your knowledge to see if you are keeping up with the class. I will ask just one question." Bump now knows he has been had by the master. His face is pink, on the way to red. The group of pilots is rotten and we are reveling in his discomfort and trying mightily to stifle our laughs. We and Bump know the boom is about to be lowered. Then the question; "What powers the beta box"? By now, Bump's face is crimson and he is stammering gibberish. Bill's timing is as great as that of Bob Hope in his prime. He said; "Bump, you need to pay attention. It is powered by the number three TR." Bump immediately falls deeper into the trap by quickly replying that he was just about to say that and we all came unglued. As I recall, and that was a long time ago, the beta box was mechanical and was not powered. The master had nailed his foil twice with one thrust.

Bill was a fine athlete. His brother, Jack, was the NCAA tennis singles champion in 1949 at Tulane and he was the tennis pro at New Orleans Country Club. His daughter, Linda, played tennis on the pro circuit.

Bill's life came to a strange and unhappy ending. He went missing and was found in a fishing boat on a bayou. I don't know if the cause of death was known.

I observed early on that most captains, who were hard to fly with, were generally not the best aviators. There were exceptions and **Paul Bennett** was one. Some copilots and engineers didn't like flying with him and I faced my first trip with him with fear and trepidation. He quickly became one of my favorites. Paul simply wanted everything done his way, the same way every time. If you could and would operate by the book, he was a fun guy to be with. If you couldn't, you best sign on with another captain. He knew more about the old c-band radar on the piston airplanes than anyone I ever flew with. There were about seven steps in tuning and adjusting it to get the most out of it. Paul was the first pilot to show me how to operate it. The x-band radars were on the jets and they were simpler to operate.

He was a terrific instructor. He was fun on layovers, particularly in CCS and SJU. He and **Jimmy Reynolds** were great friends. They both liked the Latin culture, food, music, drinks, etc. Paul and I visited Jimmy both in Florida and in Montego Bay and I had the opportunity to visit with Paul in Biloxi shortly before his death.

Tuero and Bennett made statements to me that I never forgot and, by coincidence, they were both made in the bar at the long gone Air Host Inn that was caddywampus across from the Hilton Inn in Hapeville. I had just checked out as captain or was just about to and Bill and I were having a beer. He said; "You are going to be a miserable captain to fly with." I was shocked and I asked why. "Because you are a perfectionist about your flying and you are going to be too strict. Most copilots can't live up to your expectations." Wow! Nobody ever told me that before. On the one hand, it was a complement coming from the greatest natural aviator I ever flew with. On the other, it hurt my feelings, because what he was saying was that I was a horse's rear end and I best lighten up. I don't know if I lightened up much or not, but I have never forgotten those words.

I ran into Paul in the same bar one afternoon a couple of years later. I was a DC-9 Captain and I told Paul that he taught me more about operating a jet transport than anyone else. I told him I appreciated the influence he had on me. I went on to tell him that I had quit instructing copilots. As long as they could keep the "blue side up", I was letting them go. Paul said; "I can't tell you how it pains me to hear you say that. I will never stop instructing. These guys have to be taught how to be Captains."

I was the ALPA MSY copilot rep for one term. I was flying down to San Juan one night with **Captain Tommy Bridges**, and he asked me what year I was born. I told him 1935, and he laughed and said he had been on the line since I was one year old, and now I was telling him what his wages and working conditions were going to be.

**Bill Fry** was a senior Delta Captain, but a Brigadier General in the Air Force Reserve. He commanded the reserve unit in Memphis during the Korean War. He would sometimes commute from MSY to his home in Ojai, California in one of the units F-84s. He thought it would not be good to have a lot of publicity about a Delta Air Lines Captain using the F-84 for commuting. I never understood our management's reluctance to open the jump seat, but for years, they didn't want it occupied. Bill didn't need it. C&S didn't fly to California anyway and he had a private jet before private jets were cool.

Military flight plans list the highest rank on board and Bill is off a Caracas trip and is flying to California. It is after midnight, he is stopping to refuel at an airbase in New Mexico. He has put Brigadier General as the highest rank on board and "no honors" on his flight plan. He really wants to be very discreet and not talk with anyone.

Get the picture; it's the middle of the Korean War, it's about 0300, and a General is flying a single seat fighter across the United States. The base CO in New Mexico thinks there must be something huge going on and he would like to know about it. Not only is the base CO there to meet his flight, but he has the base marching band assembled. Bill said that he was really embarrassed. The first question after all the saluting and music was over was; "What's going on General?" He couldn't tell the guy that he was just an airline pilot on the way home and the more times he answered questions with "no comment", the more important this secret mission seemed to be.