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## Memories

by retired pilot, Gene Hall

### HISTORY 6

In October 1966, I had arrived. I was way out of seniority, but I had a CV-440 reserve captain line of time. Paul Angel was three hundred numbers ahead of me, but he was leading the good life, flying DC-8 copilot to SJU. I had probably moved up to a week or two of a regular line of time and Paul called me to trade a trip. He had some important conflict and, as painful as it was, I gave up my 440 captain's trip for his 8 copilot trip. Not only didn't I want to be a copilot, but it was with **Rowe Davidson**. Rowe was only two months from age sixty retirement and he was not the most popular captain in MSY.

Everything was routine MSY-SJU. Rowe flew the leg from San Juan to Montego Bay and I breathed a sigh of relief as I took the controls and headed for New Orleans. Everything was okay until we were southeast of Moisant, entering a high downwind for runway 10. The tower offered us runway 1 and Rowe accepted. I suggested that we were too high and should continue for 10. He declined and I slowed the aircraft, lowered the flaps and landing gear. In landing configuration, I once again suggested that we were too high for runway 1. Rowe said; "I will help you," and placed the inboard engines in reverse thrust. The DC-8 is certified to use idle reverse thrust on the inboard engines as a speed brake only when the aircraft is in a clean configuration, i.e. when the landing gear and flaps are in the retracted position. The main gear touched down fifty five feet short of the runway. The Tower advised us that a spectacular shower of sparks was trailing behind us. The flight attendants were accustomed to hard landings and they were making the after landing PA, when we interrupted them to tell the passengers to evacuate the airplane.

The main damage was to the under carriage. Five of the eight main wheels were destroyed and there was some flap and wing damage from metal that was dislodged from the main gear. **Dave Garrett** later told me that the damage was about \$250,000. It has been a few years, I may be wrong about the number, but I think that is close. **Jack McKee, Rowe**, and I got together the next day to write a letter to **Pre Ball** to explain the accident. A couple of days later, Rowe and I were summoned to Atlanta to meet with Pre and **Frank Rox** who was then the vice president-legal. In our letter to Pre, we had made no mention of the inboard engines being in reverse on final approach with the aircraft in landing configuration. We were scheduled to meet with Captain Ball and Vice President Rox on a Monday.

The preceding Friday, I received a telephone call from **Captain V.O. Johnson**. He told me that he and **Captain Henry Horstmann** wanted to meet with me immediately. I was living in Elmwood Plantation Apartments on Veterans Highway and invited them to come there.

They came in and sat down with me in the living room. Dick started the conversation by telling me that I was a first rate pilot, who had just made a horrible mistake by not telling Pre Ball the truth about the accident. Dick said that if you tell Delta Air Lines the truth, they will completely support you, but if you tell a lie, you are toast. They both went on to say that they had known Rowe for almost thirty years and he was going to hang this accident around my neck. Henry said that we had lied to protect Rowe by placing all the blame on me by withholding the reverse thrust information. They concluded the meeting by telling me that Pre was so fair that I could make it right by confessing that the engines were in reverse as soon as our meeting started. They also brought to my attention that the truth would come out when the flight recorder was analyzed.

Two senior captains were willing to drive across the causeway to help a wounded junior birdman. It was those kinds of people who built it for us and made us the most successful airline of the day. I thanked them when they left my apartment, but I never thanked them enough. It took a long time for me to focus on how much I owed those two men.

It was raining in Atlanta the morning of the meeting with Pre. It was scheduled for 0900 and Pre was late. Frank invited me into his office while we waited. Dave Garrett had introduced me to Frank sometime earlier when the two of them were on one of my flights, but I had never met Pre. Frank didn't yet know about the reversed engines, but he told me that Pre felt that our report placed too much blame on the copilot and it needed to be rewritten. He also said that Pre had already told him that Delta Legal would defend me if the FAA wanted to take any action against me.

Pre came in about a half hour late. He was wet and he was ranting about having a flat tire on I-85, just north of the airport. He was clearly identified as a Delta employee because his car had "Fly Delta" bumper stickers. Dozens of cars with "Delta The Airline With The Big Jets" stickers or whatever the slogan was in 1966 on their cars passed and nobody would stop. The ever lovable Frank laughed and said; "I don't blame them, I wouldn't have stopped for you either." That exchange between the two of them had a very relaxing effect on me.

The meeting started at a conference table with Pre and Frank on one side and the two of us on the other. Pre started the meeting by telling us that he didn't like the way our report "read". He said; "Gene has almost thirty years left here and this needs to be cleaned up before we give it to the FAA. He asked Rowe to give his version of the approach and what he thought might be the cause of the short landing. Rowe started off by stating that everything seemed like it was routine and he really didn't understand why it happened. I interrupted and said; "Captain Ball, are you aware that we had the inboards in reverse thrust on final approach, in landing configuration?"

The silence was deafening. It probably only lasted three or four seconds, but it seemed much longer. He stared at me and then turned, and said; "Rowe, is this true?" Rowe said; "Yes, but"..... He was trying to say that done correctly, it was okay, but before he could finish the sentence, Pre yelled; "Then you've done it before". With his head in his hands, he admitted that he had.

I had heard about Pre's temper and it had just lived up to its reputation. I think I heard some very effective four letter words for the first time. He cooled down a little bit and said this meeting that he thought would take one hour was going to last all day. He told us to come back after lunch, because he needed time to get **Heimendinger, the Douglas Chief Pilot** on the phone and find out what the stall characteristics of the 8 would be with the reversers operating in landing configuration.

I was not very hungry, but I was trapped with Rowe. The two of us walked from the General Office to Morrison's Cafeteria.

Rowe was very unhappy with me and he was giving me instructions on the proper use of the trim tabs, as we entered the cafeteria and encountered one of my old friends. **Bud Fryer** was a flight Instructor in Columbus and had been one of my instrument flying teachers. I had not seen him for at least ten years and there he was in Morrison's Cafeteria. He joined us for lunch. I was happy to see him, but it would have been a lot more fun for both of us if it hadn't been that particular day in that particular situation. He had flown a charter trip, CMH-ATL that morning, and was waiting for his passengers for the flight back to Columbus. Explaining what I was doing there was somewhat awkward.

After a lunch that seemed as long as a weekend layover in downtown Shreveport, we returned to the G.O. Pre wanted to speak with Rowe privately. That left Frank and me alone for a few minutes. He told me that Pre was informing Rowe that he was officially retired as of that day. He said; "Captain Ball is pissed and, before you leave, you better reconfirm that he will still let me defend you against the FAA."

We reconvened in the conference room and Pre told me that Rowe had flown his last Delta trip. He told us that he had a conference call with Captain Heimendinger and some Douglas Engineers and they said they had no idea what the stall characteristics might be in the configuration that Pre described, because they "didn't think that any of their test pilots were dumb enough to try it in any of the test flying".

We then had a lecture on just how bad it would have been for Delta and us, if the original report had gone to the FAA. There was no doubt that I would also have been fired. As the

meeting ended, I said; "Captain Ball, this morning, you mentioned that I still had thirty years left to fly for Delta. You now have the truth. Are you still going to let Mr. Rox defend me?" He paused and grinned for the first time that day, and said; "Frank needs the work and he seems to enjoy his fights with them so much that I guess we will let him take your case". That was also the first time I had smiled for several days.

Frank instructed me to not talk with anyone from the FAA unless he was present. He predicted that they would contact me for a meeting, and they would try to use me as a witness against Rowe by telling me that they would not be as severe with me if I would co-operate. He gave me his home phone number so I could contact him immediately after hearing from them.

I didn't have to wait very long. A DC-8 Safety Inspector, whose name I have forgotten, called me four days later. In the meantime, my left eye was seeing double lights at night when there was only one. **Bob Schimek** had been my next door neighbor when I was living in **Hank McGrew's** house. He was Chairman of Ophthalmology at Ochsner Clinic and did my FAA physicals. I had visited him during the week and he said my eye was probably acting up because of stress. It only took a couple of days with Rox for my vision to go back to normal.

I called Frank that afternoon, after speaking with the FAA Inspector, and told him that I had agreed to meet him and **Dick Renner** the following Monday in New Orleans. The inspector was out of the Houston FAA Office, and was not well liked by the pilots. (If anyone remembers his name, let me know.) He was bringing Dick Renner from the Atlanta FAA Office with him, because it was general knowledge that Dick was very competent and well respected by the Delta Pilots. He felt that I would be more comfortable talking with him if Dick was along. They were arriving MSY about noon on Monday for a luncheon meeting.

I gave Frank all the information and he was excited that the meeting would be in New Orleans. There have been three or four times in my life when I met someone for the first time and felt like we were best friends after the first meeting. Frank was one of those three or four. After he found that Joan and I didn't have any dinner plans for Sunday evening, we had a vacant guestroom and I could get guest privileges for golf at Metairie Country Club on Monday morning, his travel plans were easy. He came on Sunday afternoon.

**Bud Watson** was the new Assistant Chief Pilot and he and I picked Frank up at the airport. We took him to our place at Elmwood Plantation Apartments and checked him into our guestroom. While we were having a drink, Joan decided that she had already heard enough "hangar flying" and she opted out of dinner.

Nineteenth century plantations in the Jefferson Parish area were long and skinny. The Mississippi River was the main transportation for cotton, etc. The reason they were skinny was because river frontage was so important. The original Elmwood Plantation house was on the river and the property ran all the way to Lake Pontchartrain. Our apartment was on the back side of the original plantation. Carlos Marcello was reputed to be the Mafia Godfather in New Orleans and his younger brother, Joe, was operating a very popular restaurant in the old plantation home. The three of us had dinner there and Bud and I became very comfortable with Frank by the end of dinner.

We had asked **Joe Bourn** to join us for golf. Joe was a junior second officer and was the best golfer in the base. My previously mentioned regular group consisted of **Watson, Morton, and Plummer**, but if anyone couldn't play, Joe and **Harry Koch** seemed to be the first backups. We enlisted **Charlie Peck** to meet the "fuzz". Charlie was the second officer on the trip and was invited to the meeting.

Charlie's timing was perfect. He showed up at Metairie Country Club as we were finishing on the eighteen green. Dick saw me and remarked that the timing was good. They walked into the pro shop to wait for me and the inspector, who had called the meeting, saw the guest sign in sheet on the counter with my name on it. **M.E. Watson** was the next name and he said; "Watson, he's a chief pilot, he was not invited to this meeting!" Charlie told us he then saw the third name, **Frank Rox**, and his voice went up several octaves; "Frank Rox, he's a Delta Lawyer; he certainly wasn't invited to this meeting!!!!"

We said goodbye to Joe and entered the pro shop. After shaking hands and making introductions all around, we went to the dining room for lunch. We ordered lunch and made small talk about everything except what the meeting was supposed to be about. Frank had the same great timing as **Bill Tuero**, he knew when to strike. Finally, about the time we were having dessert, there was a slight pause in the conversation, and he said; "Gentlemen, you probably wonder why I am here today." Dick Renner acted embarrassed like he was really wondering what he was doing there. The other guy mumbled something like, yes he was, with a nervous giggle. Frank went on; "I am Gene Hall's lawyer. I instructed him that I would drop him as a client if he talked to any of you without me being present. I am the best lawyer in the world at opposing the FAA and guess what he is paying me; .....Nothing! I am eight wins and zero losses against you now and I am hoping you will take action against him, because I am looking forward to going to nine and zero."

I never heard anything about that accident again.

Lots more about Rox to come!