

## History 12

My brother Don was a Captain with American, and I was bragging about Delta always being the airline with the fewest letters of complaint to the Civil Aeronautics Board. In the seventies, the numbers of letters were tabulated monthly and ratings were published. We were customer service oriented, and I was very proud of our standing. Don had heard just about enough of my rhetoric on the subject, and he hit me with; "Of course you get the fewest letters, most of your flying is in the Southeast. Fewer people are capable of reading and writing there, look at the illiteracy rates."

Making the customer happy was a high priority for almost all of Delta in those days. There was wide consensus that the route with the most difficult customers to make, and keep happy was New York-Miami. Milt Herlong was the MIA Station Manager. I didn't know Milt well, but I knew that Miller, Rox, and Cooper regarded him highly. He was likeable, and he seemed to be just laid back enough to do well in Miami.

I have two stories involving Milt. Ron Allen was involved in the first, and he told me the story, so I am satisfied with the facts. The second came to me second or tenth hand and it may be embellished somewhat. Far be it from me to ever stretch the facts, that is unless it would improve the story.

As Ron told the story, it was customary for one senior officer to stay in the G O through lunch. The Senior VP's rotated staying on duty so that a decision maker would always be available during business hours. Ron had the duty one day, and he received a call from a senior executive of a fortune 500 company that was a major Delta vendor. The company name is not important, but they were and are one of the largest and most successful companies in the world. Unlike today, it was not unusual for top people in business, entertainment, and politics to travel on the airlines, but certainly the company and the customer's position got Ron's immediate attention.

He told Ron that he was calling from the MIA Station Managers office, and he went on to tell a horror story of his trip from LGA to MIA. It seems that he and his wife were in first class with their children, and the children's governess was in coach. Lunch was served, and there were some NR passengers in first. The angry passenger and his family were near the rear of the cabin, and the flight attendants miscalculated, and served all the non revs, and ran out of a choice of first class entrees, or maybe all first class entrees before his entire family was served.

Tom Miller told me once that most successful people in important positions are so busy that they will not bother to write a letter of complaint or make a call; they just take their business elsewhere. Complaints from those kinds of people are very helpful in improving service. Well Ron has an important executive with an

important company on the phone, and Ron is embarrassed that we have failed, but what a great opportunity to show him how important the Delta customer is, and at the same time, identify a customer service problem that can be fixed. He apologizes for our failure, and tells him that he and his family will be the guests of Delta for dinner that evening. A limo will pick his family up and take them to a Miami restaurant of their choice, and take them back to their hotel. With that, the exec said; "That is very nice of you Mr. Allen, but I am in Miami Police handcuffs in the station manager's office." With that, Ron asked to speak with Milt, and got the rest of the story. The exec had left out one minor detail. He was so irate that he hit a stewardess because of the lunch shortage. I don't remember the final outcome, but he was not Delta's dinner guest that evening.

The other story took place at the MIA ticket counter on a busy Sunday afternoon before ticket automation. It was also before they used the curving lanes, and long lines of customers were in front of each counter position. Agents were writing tickets by hand, and there was tension on both sides of the counter.

One cigar smoking customer was leaning forward with his elbows on the counter, and the smoke from his stogie was drifting into the ticket agent's face. The agent didn't have to say anything for the clown to see that the smoke was bothering him. The wheezing and coughing were a dead giveaway. When he realized that he was bothering the agent, he leaned as far forward as he could, and got his face as close to the agent's face as he could, and started blowing the smoke in the agent's face. As bad as his manners were, his judgment was even worse. As it was told to me, the agent was crying as he threw his pen down, hit the clown in the face, and proclaimed that he was resigning from Delta Air Lines. He climbed across the luggage that was waiting to be checked, chased the guy out the front door of the terminal as he was hitting him in the back of his neck and head with his fist. I don't know what shape the customer was in when they were separated, but the red coats took the agent downstairs to the agent's lounge where he was when Herlong arrived from home. Milt had already had eyewitness reports from other customers and employees. I don't know exactly what Milt said, but the bottom line was that we were already behind, and facing flight delays before the incident. He told the agent to take a few minutes to pull himself together, and get back to work writing tickets. I don't know if the story is exaggerated or not. I do know that it was a time when we took care of the customers and each other.

In that same era, Joan and I were pass riding somewhere, and the flight was heavy. I asked the gate agent how it looked for us. He said; "Captain, if any non revs get on this flight, you will." I couldn't hide my surprise at his answer, and he went on to say, "You don't remember me do you?" I stammered something to the effect that I knew we had met somewhere. He said; "A couple of years ago, I was a ramp tramp in Detroit, and you were flying a DC-9 that came in just before midnight. All the ramp guys looked forward to that flight every night because it had trays of really good sandwich quarters in first class. Frequently there would

be a couple of trays that had not even had the cellophane opened because most passengers had already had dinner. Some of the guys probably abused the privilege by taking cokes, etc. off, and management banned us from going on the airplane. We couldn't get to the sandwiches, but you could. You took those trays into the break room every time you flew that trip." We were seated in first class that day, I have often wondered if any higher priority folks were in coach or left behind.

Most of us took great pride in our customer service, and the average crew member had dozens of letters from passengers, thanking us and complementing us for the extras that we didn't think of as extras. I think my favorite incidence of our people going above and beyond happened in 1975 at BOS.

It had been almost exactly three years since the merger with Northeast. I am safe in saying that while most former Yellow Birds had bought into, and happily joined the "Delta Family", some had not. The differences in the cultures of the two airlines were significant to say the least. I was introducing myself to the BOS flight attendants who were on one of my flights shortly after the merger, and before I could say anything, one of them said; "Here comes another Denny Delta, please don't tell me your name is Bubba." I said; "How did you know that my name is Bubba? Let me introduce you to First Officer Bubba, and the younger fellow is Second Officer Bubba." But now, it was three years later, we were mostly integrated, and most of the old hardnosed unionism and suspicion had disappeared.

It was August 10, 1975, a beautiful Sunday morning at DCA. We were originating a 727 flight to Montreal with a stop in Boston. The American Bar Association Convention was starting in Montreal in the afternoon, and all 148 seats were filled, mostly with lawyers on the way to YUL. Everything was routine from DCA-BOS, and was until we taxied away from the BOS terminal. We were full, and we were told that we only had two passengers who were not lawyers. While running the check list, we discovered that the horizontal trim motor was inop. We tried everything we could try in the cockpit. Nothing helped and we returned to the gate. Maintenance worked for almost an hour before they told us they didn't think they could solve the problem.

Here is the situation. We have 146 Washington and Boston Lawyers on the airplane. They are all going to a convention that starts that day. There are three more flights to Montreal later in the day, and they are all oversold. Edward Levi was the US Attorney General, and he was booked on the next flight. He was the keynote speaker, and his subject was the White House abuse of using the FBI for political purposes. That is just a little aside, but I wonder what how he would treat that subject today.

Getting back to our problem, I make a PA and ask the passengers to stay near the gate until I can find out what is going to happen. We deplane (I love those

airline words), I call Flight Control and suggest to the dispatcher that it would be much better to cancel a FLL flight full of summer budget tourists than a flight full of lawyers. They tell me they will study the problem and let me know.

I go back to the gate house, and level with the passengers. I explain that at best, it looks like a lengthy delay. By this time, all the baggage has been removed and the airplane has been taken to the hangar. I start a priority list for standing by on the next YUL flight which by this time is only about an hour away. I tell them that we are very aware that they are all very important, big time lawyers, but the most important passenger on the flight was an elderly Indian grandmother, who had immigrated to the United States about forty years before. She was connecting to a charter flight to Bombay from Montreal. It was her first trip back home, and if she missed the flight, she would probably never have the opportunity again. We had already conspired with the agents to make sure that she made the flight. The next most important person was a lawyer who was the main speaker for the opening session that evening, so we told them we would make every effort to get him there on time. By this time, the whole group was on our side because they knew we were trying, and they were cheering when I made PA's to give them the info. The First and Second Officers went to the bag room to find the bags of the two passengers that we were going to get on the next flight, and I went to Ops to call Flight Control. The dispatcher told me that he was against stealing an airplane off another flight, and it was becoming apparent that we were about to strand an airplane load of lawyers overnight. That is worse than "just not good".

Hoyt Fincher was the Senior Vice President Operations. Hoyt was not a pilot, and had moved up from the maintenance side of operations. I called his home, and he answered the phone. I explained our predicament to him, and told him that I thought this flight was not one that should be cancelled. He agreed with me, and said he would call me back in five minutes. He did, and said that a reserve crew had already been called to bring us an airplane from ATL.

The delay has lasted more than an hour, and when I get back to the gate with the news that we had an airplane on the way, there was applause and cheering. I think a few Bloody Marys had been consumed by this time, and they were about the most congenial delayed group that I had ever come in contact with. My crew had never left the gate except to go to the bag room, and they were still interacting with the passengers. A few minutes go by, and suddenly a 727 drives into our gate. Maintenance had fixed the stabilizer, and our machine was ready to load and go to YUL.

We had an airplane load of happy lawyers, and at least eight or ten of them wrote complementary letters, but the most gratifying letter that I saw in my thirty six years as a "Denny Delta" came from the two ladies who were working the gate. It was sent to CEO Tom Beebe, and his office sent the whole crew a copy. I have lost the letter, but they told him they were Senior Agents in Boston, and they had not understood what the "meaning of Delta Family was" until an Atlanta

flight crew showed them. They recounted the whole story of the near cancellation and went on to say that in all their years at Northeast, they had never seen a flight crew do anything other than retreat to the crew lounge when a flight was delayed. They thought it was remarkable that the crew never left the gate, but it was even more remarkable that one of them had gone to the bag room to retrieve bags for two passengers, only to find that the copilot and engineer had already taken care of that.

They ended the letter by saying that they now understood, and they were very happy to be in the family. I enjoy blowing my own horn, but what we did that day was not abnormal for Delta crew members of the era, and it was fun. It was a little like turning chicken "you know what" into chicken salad.