



50 FLYING STORIES: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN AIRLINE  
TRANSPORT PILOT

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# FLYING STORIES

*The Life and Times of an  
Airline Transport Pilot*



**CAPTAIN RANDAL ROTH**

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Ashland, Oregon



# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction and Dedication</b>	1
<b>Relationships</b>	
1: Kindness Appreciated	7
2: Oils Gets a Name	9
3: It Will Be Over Soon	11
4: An Amazing Sim Tech	14
5: Assertiveness With Respect	17
6: Too Much on the Brakes	19
7: Caribou Hunting and Float Plane Flying	23
8: Records of Fun	26
<b>Shenanigans 1</b>	
9: Almost Lost a Stripe	31
<b>Double and Triple Checking</b>	
10: Two Good Reasons for Using and Following Checklists	35
11: A Checkout, Two Green and a Red	38
12: Out of Gas	43
13: Elevators Are Important	47
14: Chocks, Chunks, and More	50
15: Lightning Strikes Thrice	52
16: Time to Shut One Down	55
17: I Learned About Flying from That	59
18: Hot Damn, Mister	66
<b>Shenanigans 2</b>	
19: Claws Out—Nine Lives Flies	71
<b>Fitness to Be a Pilot</b>	
20: Bad Decisions Are Cumulative	75
21: Everyone Needs Two Heroes	76
22: Overweight and What to Do?	79
23: First Flight in a Falcon 10	81
24: The Flying Brick	83
25: A Nose Wheel Missed the Weeds	85
26: Two Airlines Make the Same Mistake	88
27: <i>Kersplat</i>	90
28: Da Two Stemme Oops	93

### **Shenanigans 3**

29: Peter Le Pew 99

### **Plane Mechanics**

30: Musical Rotor Heads 103

31: Three for One On the Ranch 107

32: Bet Your Job or Will It Start 109

33: Always Write It Up 111

34: The Mad Barking Dog 114

35: To Master or Knot 117

36: To Jump Ship...or Not 121

### **Shenanigans 4**

37: The Captain Shaped Like a Pear 127

### **Close Calls**

38: The Student and Teacher and Bushes Relationship 133

39: Treetop Flyer = Sawdust in Your Eyes 137

40: I Should Have Made a Low Pass 139

41: Two of Two Feathered 143

42: Do All Flight Decks Need a Door? 149

43: Da Bang 151

44: Sick Landing, Captain 154

### **Shenanigans 5**

45: Pilots Are Cheap 164

### **That's Just the Way It Is**

46: Too Cold for Man, Beast, or Plane 169

47: Loose Lips...Do Sink Ships 171

48: Bermuda Triangle Luck 173

49: Two Hundred Knots to New York 175

50: When to Take an Aircraft 180

### **Shenanigans 6 (A Bonus Story)**

The Things You Do When Boredom Sets In 187

**Pilot Jokes** 189

**A Closing Safety Suggestion** 193

**About the Author** 195

# Introduction and Dedication

AS FAR BACK AS I can recall, flying was in my blood. Growing up on a ranch just outside of Sturgis, South Dakota, some of my earliest flying memories come from when I was a boy. During grade school recess, a friend and I imagined a bunker/hangar on the side of Big “S” Hill, a large hill overlooking the town with the word Sturgis outlined on painted white rocks. From that whimsical hangar opening, we would take off and fly our imaginary flights above the legendary motorcycle town. A couple of years later, my father, Jim Roth, gave me my first airplane ride. It was in a Piper Comanche 250, and I was hooked. Aircraft were in my thoughts and dreams for many years to follow.

After high school, my first opportunity to be paid for flying came during a three-year stint in the US Army. As an OH-58, “Kiowa” Crew Chief in former West Germany, I was trained as a mechanic and low-level “Nap of Earth” (NOE) navigator. From that experience, I knew I had to become a pilot. Over time, the government provided the GI Bill and much-needed tuition assistance for aircraft mechanics’ school, college, and flight training.

A few years later, I had my first solo in a Grumman TR-2 and eventually passed a private pilot check ride, with precisely thirty-five hours (the minimum flight time allowed by regula-

tions). I had started in what I then did not know would be a career of piloting.

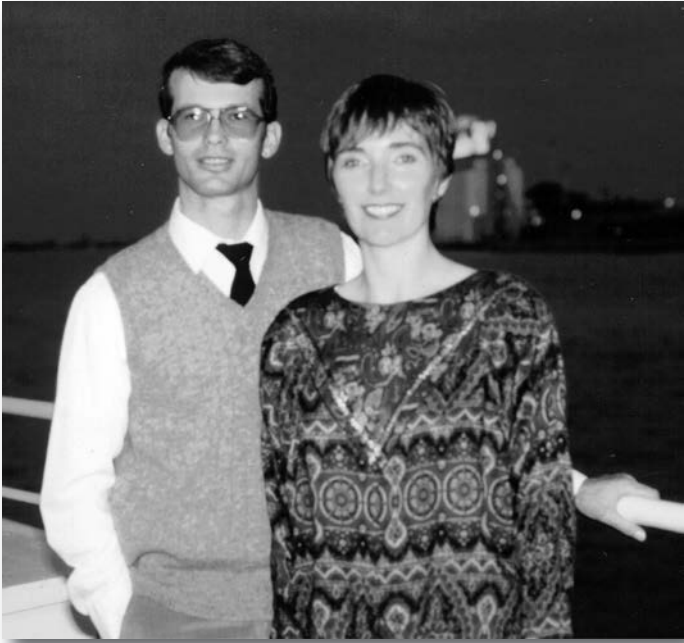
My young wife Cheryl and I moved many times chasing flying jobs, which were found few and far between. Twice, I phoned her at her nursing job, and after a few minutes of discussion, she agreed to tell her boss that today was her last day, and we would be moving for her husband's new job. Oh, what a saint she was then and has always been. Her sacrifice of personal ambitions and career made all the difference in my success. Without her, honestly, I don't know what would have happened. In my view, I owe our combined success all to her.

Those moves included a short stint flying bank checks out of Phoenix, Deer Valley Airport; a year in the frozen tundra of Big Piney, Wyoming; and eight months as a freight dog pilot out of Burbank, California, where I flew King Air 200s, and new-to-me Learjet 35s, Falcon 10s, and Falcon 20s.

During the spring of 1985, I would fly four nights per week, Monday through Thursday, and travel to airline interviews around the country on Friday and Saturday. On May 6th, 1985, my airline career began. Republic Airlines phoned on a Wednesday while I was on a Falcon 20 freighter trip in Newark, New Jersey. The following Monday, I reported for indoc training in Atlanta, Georgia. Little did I know that in just over a year, Republic would be bought out by Northwest Airlines, where I continued to work for 23 years. In 2008, Northwest and Delta Airlines merged, making them the then-largest airline globally. In 2010, I retired from Delta, having accumulated some 22,000 hours of flight time.

In 2018, our son, Nathan, lived with Cheryl and me while finishing his Master's Degree. During that time, after sharing several flying stories with them both, one day he said, "Dad, with all those great flying stories, you really should write a book."





Cheryl and Randy Roth

In a few weeks, he helped me title several of the stories. After a few months, he listed thirty-five. In time, we totaled fifty or more. Hence, the name of this book, “Fifty Flying Stories.” Many thanks go to him for his diligence and much-appreciated assistance.

Life has blessed my dear Cheryl and me. This book is dedicated to her and our two wonderful children, Nathan and Diana. Without them, my life would not be whole.

By reading this book, I hope someone may avoid crashing an airplane.

Now, let’s get to those flying stories. It is my desire that you, the reader, will learn and be entertained by them. The majority



The Roth Family  
(Upper): Nathan  
(Middle): Randy and Cheryl  
(Lower): Diana

of chapters in this book are from my personal experiences. A few of the chapters are from various pilot friends of mine who in all cases have been conveniently renamed, Bob.

Perhaps you can decide what you might have done in each situation. More importantly, for those young and upcoming professional pilots who read this book, I hope you can learn from the frequent lessons and possible lethality of these experiences before you have to learn from them on your own.

Blue Skies and Tailwinds to All,  
—Captain Randal Roth

# Relationships





## 1

**Kindness Appreciated**

WITH A NEWLY MINTED PRIVATE pilot's license in my pocket, I was able to fly some local and short cross-country flights out of the old Riverside Airport on the southwest side of Tulsa, Oklahoma. On one occasion, I made a rather grave mistake and was treated kindly by Air Traffic Control (ATC).

With only a total of around forty hours in my logbook, one morning I took off from Riverside. Approximately forty-five minutes later, using only my limited visual navigation skills, I found what I thought was my intended airport of landing at an uncontrolled, Unicom-only (read; no Air Traffic Control tower) airport. Entering the traffic pattern on downwind, I broadcast my position on the local Unicom frequency. In only a couple more minutes, I was on the runway and making a taxiway turn off when, very much to my surprise, there was a sign on a Fixed Base Operator (FBO) hangar with the name of a different airport!

I had landed at the wrong airport.

More importantly, this airport had an air traffic control tower! Not panicking, I thought for a few moments and came up with a plan. Ideas such as, without landing clearance, had the tower controller given me a green light to land as a no-radio aircraft? Was I in big trouble? What should be done now?

Hoping for the best and without clearance from Ground Control, I taxied back to the beginning of the runway I had just landed on. After a few minutes in the run-up area, I pulled in behind other departing aircraft, came up on the proper tower frequency, and asked the tower controller for a southerly departure. Very much to my surprise, and without comment, the con-

troller gave me a take-off clearance to the south, and nothing else was said.

To this day, I don't know if the tower or ground controllers ever knew of my mistake. Either they hadn't noticed or were very kind. I like to think it was their kindness and have tried to pass that same kindness on to others, especially in the aviation community.

Moral of the Story: Every year, numerous instances of pilots landing at the wrong airport or on the wrong runway occur worldwide. These include light aircraft pilots, military pilots, and highly trained airline crews. Frequently, it is an embarrassing incident. On occasion, the consequences can be quite severe and cause considerable loss of life.

## 2

### Oils Gets a Name

A FEW REMARKABLE THINGS OCCURRED during the two-and-a-half years I was privileged to attend Embry Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU). When the university and its rapidly expanding flight training program first opened, there was no air traffic control tower at the local Prescott, Arizona, airport. Only the long-established flight service station was available for air traffic advisories. Frequently, several aircraft would be in the uncontrolled field's traffic pattern. It was not uncommon to have six, seven, or even eight aircraft in the traffic pattern with their low flight time pilots maintaining visual separation between one another. On a clear, nearly calm, and sunny day, I happened to be in the busy traffic pattern with several other aircraft when a student attending the university came on the radio saying, "Yo, Prescott traffic, Riddle 24, VOR inbound. We got no oil pressure. How about a little slack in the pattern, eh?"



ERAU Grumman Tiger # 60

Within seconds, we were all departing the traffic pattern in various directions to give way. Moments later, another student, wisely, came on the radio, giving no aircraft call sign and transmitted, “Looks like the pattern is breaking up. She’s all yours, Oils. Come on in.”

Oils’s nickname stuck. He was a good student and a friendly guy. Fortunately, Oils’s problem was only a simple pressure gauge malfunction.



## 5

### **It Will Be Over Soon**

**WHILE LIVING IN BIG PINEY**, Wyoming, my wife's parents, Wendell and Leona, visited us. One evening, my boss called to tell me he needed a construction bid package delivered to Denver the following morning. After asking him if he knew of the Denver weather forecast, he said he had been watching the Denver weather and, "it had to go."

The following day, I asked my father-in-law if he would like to ride along on the trip to Denver in the Cessna 421. I also informed him that the weather looked pretty snowy and that it could be a long day. He said yes, and we departed on what would turn out to be quite an adventure.

The weather in Denver that day turned out to be exceptionally snowy. Snow accumulation rates were between one and two inches per hour. Knowing that the expected flight time of around one hour and forty-five minutes would likely be much longer, we fueled the airplane full, giving it an endurance of over five hours of flight time.

We departed Big Piney for the old Denver International Airport with an instrument flight rules flight plan filed. Once airborne, ATC advised of the need to fly a holding pattern only eighty miles from Big Piney. After thirty minutes of holding, we were cleared closer to Denver and held again for thirty minutes. Nearing an initial approach fix for landing in Denver, we were held again for twenty-five minutes. Upon arrival at the holding stack of airliners awaiting their turn to land at Denver, we held again as the runway was plowed.

Finally, we took our turn amongst the airliners and landed. The total flight time was almost four hours, with over half of it in the clouds and airframe icing.



Enjoying a day at Disney World

Landing in Denver, the amount of snow on the ground shocked us. The airport's snowplows had been doing a fine job. The runways and taxiways were reasonably clear. Our aircraft was parked at an FBO, and we took the bid package, via taxi, to the state bid office. On the way back from the office, our somewhat crazed-looking, marijuana-smelling cab driver gave us a scare. As another vehicle turned left in front of us, it ran a red light. Our driver swerved and slammed on the brakes to miss the oncoming car. After sliding to a stop, the outlandish cab driver turned around and said, "If you guys hadn't been here, I'd have gotten myself a new cab today, ha ha."

After refueling the 421 full of fuel and deicing the aircraft, we departed for the trip back to Big Piney. There was little-to-no

delay for our return trip until we approached the airport. With the airport in sight, we had crossed a warm front, and there was a large thunder cell about ten miles northwest of the field. The cell was abnormally large, with a top of nearly 45,000 feet. I slowed the aircraft and began a long straight-in visual approach, thinking we would easily land and put the plane in the hangar before the nearby thunderstorm was even close to the airport.

On about a three-mile final approach to land and around 1,500 feet above ground level, moderate turbulence was followed by even stronger, nearly severe turbulence. Knowing that it would be impossible to land, I throttled up the engines and began a climbing turn away from the airport. Looking over at my father-in-law, I saw that he was clutching the bottom of his seat with two hands, for all he was worth. He was gritting his teeth, and his eyes squinted in concern.

To try to comfort him, I said, "Don't worry, it will be over soon."

My remarks were intended to mean that the turbulence would be over quickly. His expression showed that he misunderstood and obviously thought that we were going to crash and die!

The turbulence eased in a couple of minutes, and we turned further south to land at Rock Springs, Wyoming. There, we refueled and waited for the storm to pass.

Not surprisingly, the next day, when I had another flight, I asked Wendell if he would like to go along. He looked at me sternly and said, "No."

*Moral of the Story:* Always take care with your remarks to passengers. They may not be of the same mind as you are on a subject.

## 4

**An Amazing Sim Tech**

**IN MAY OF 1985, I** was hired by the original Republic Airlines and officially became a “Duck.” Herman, the duck that was painted on the tail of all company planes. Following two weeks of indoc at the company headquarters in Atlanta, my simulator partner and I reported for training in Minneapolis.

Training for the McDonald Douglas DC-9 first officer’s position was going well. We were several sim sessions into the training when, one evening, the simulator froze up, and our instructor was unable to reset it.

The instructor made a phone call from the sim’s phone to the airline’s in-house support staff. Within a few minutes of the technician’s arrival, he had the sim up and running again, an inauspicious start to our simulated air show.

When our sim instructor asked us if we would like to watch the sim tech give a little demonstration, of course, we both said yes, and thus began a fantastic demonstration of flying skills as the aircraft was cleared for takeoff on Runway 4 at Minneapolis.

Flying from the left seat and operating as a solo pilot, he took off and leveled the plane only fifty feet above the runway. He retracted both the landing gear and flaps while leaving the power set for takeoff. He passed the end of the runway, still only fifty feet high. I noted that the airspeed was increasing through 300 knots. Traveling Northeast, low-level, over the Mississippi River, he pulled up to about two-hundred-fifty feet above ground level and made a ninety-degree banked turn between a few high-rise buildings. That high-G turn pointed the aircraft back toward the airport. During the return to the field, he did a nice four-point barrel roll while lining the plane up for what looked to be a high-speed pass down Runway 22.



In my new Republic Airlines uniform,  
taken just prior to simulator training

At the midpoint of the runway and just above the surface, with an indicated airspeed near the high-speed red line, he abruptly pulled straight up, at full power. Passing through 5000 feet AGL while still going straight up, he suddenly slammed the throttle levers from wide open to idle. Moments later, he reached down and shut down both engines with their fuel cut-off levers.

Now flying like a giant glider, the tech pulled over from vertical to a descending half-loop while extending the landing gear and full flaps. A few seconds later, as Runway 12 right came into view and below the aircraft's wheels, he made a smooth touchdown. Turning the aircraft off a high-speed runway turn

off, still with no engines running and having started the APU earlier, he coasted across the ramp area. He came to a perfect stop at our assigned gate using backup hydraulic accumulator power for brake pressure.

Immediately after setting the parking brake, he jumped up out of the seat and waited a few moments to exit the sim as the sim's actuators settled and the access ramp locked down for his departure. He said, "Looks like she's fixed. You guys have fun." With that, he skipped down the access ramp and was out of sight. The other first officer candidate and I were both amazed. The sim instructor had a great big grin on his face.

The tech's performance in the simulator was dumbfounding and flawless. Even Bob Hoover would have been proud. I never knew if this routine was pre-arranged with our instructor or not. After witnessing such a stellar performance, flying that sim seemed a little easier.

*Moral of the Story:* Just when you thought you were good, some people will amaze you with their skill. Always...stay humble and kind.

## 5

### **Assertiveness With Respect**

**DURING ANNUAL RECURRENT TRAINING**, I was privileged to watch a pilot training video entitled “Assertiveness With Respect.” That video portrayed multiple scenarios where one pilot or the other was uncomfortable with the operation of an aircraft or the actions of a fellow pilot regarding either safety or established procedures.

Past accident history has tragically shown that when one pilot crew member does not speak up or is concerned about the safe operation of an aircraft by another crew member, the end result may be horrific. No doubt, when either the first officer or captain respectively asserts themselves verbally, concerning safety, the chain of events leading up to a potential accident can be broken.

American Airlines flight 1420, which crashed on June 1st, 1999, in Little Rock, Arkansas, was a prime example of needed assertiveness. The following scenario developed with a highly experienced captain/chief pilot who had recently seen more desk time than flight time at the controls, and a new-hire first officer that may have been somewhat intimidated by the captain:

1. The aircraft flew through thunderstorms.
2. It was not configured to land on a wet runway.
3. There was an excessively strong crosswind.
4. The aircraft’s auto spoilers were not armed.
5. The plane slid off the end of the runway resulting in the death of ten passengers and the captain.

Even though both crew members were fatigued, had the first officer respectfully asserted himself concerning the safe operation of the aircraft, things may have turned out much differently on that ill-fated flight.



In Republic Airlines  
First Officer uniform

As for myself, I know that during my ten years as an airline first officer, I was often intimidated by the captain. This was worse during the first couple of years, and gradually, things changed to where I was more and more comfortable speaking up when the rare occasion arose that may compromise safety. Conversely, during my fifteen years as captain, I tried to be a better and better listener to the first officer in

his or her quest to ensure the safe operation of an aircraft.

*Moral of the Story:* Enjoy the job of piloting and share that joy with your family and fellow crew members. Respectfully, assert thyself, not if, but when, safety may be compromised. Over the years, both military and airline operators of large aircraft have, thankfully, changed from the once “captain’s aircraft” concept to a universally required “crew” concept. More modern and much safer, flight crews are now tasked to work together for a safe operation.



## 6

### **Too Much on the Brakes**

ARRIVING IN THE WASHINGTON, D.C., area, in an Airbus A320, we checked the recorded weather broadcast on the Automatic Terminal Information System (ATIS). With winds out of the north at eight knots gusting to twelve, we planned and briefed for a daytime visual approach to Runway 36 at National Airport (DCA).

Please note: Both the airport name and runway numbers changed shortly after this incident. The name change to Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport occurred in February of 1998, and in 1999 Runway 18-36 was renumbered to 1-19 due to the earth's magnetic field drift. In 2012, that same runway was lengthened three hundred feet to add an FAA-compliant overrun.

As the pilot flying the aircraft, I briefed the daytime Mount Vernon visual approach to Runway 36. This route would typically take our plane over George Washington's Mount Vernon home and follow the Potomac River northbound. Due to the wind out of the north, the aircraft being at mid-weight, the longevity of the aircraft's brakes, passenger comfort, and my experience level on the aircraft, as part of the arrival briefing, I directed the first officer to select low braking on the aircraft's automatic braking system.

Prior to crossing over the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and only a few miles from the airport, ATC approach control switched us over to the DCA tower frequency. Checking in with the tower controller, he cleared us to land and added that the wind had changed. The surface wind at the airport was now out of the southeast at five to eight knots. Knowing that the wind change was now a tailwind rather than the expected headwind, I directed the first officer to change our automatic brake setting

for landing from the previously briefed low position to medium. I also made a mental note to be sure to set the aircraft down on the runway at or just before the standard touchdown blocks painted on the runway. These two actions would typically make for a planned runway turn-off near the 4,500 to 5,000-foot point of the 6,869-foot-long runway.

While looking outside the aircraft to maneuver for landing, I noticed in my peripheral vision that the first officer made a change to the auto brake setting. I did not see that the first officer had inadvertently selected the auto brakes to the max setting.

Upon touchdown and to everyone's surprise, the automatic braking system did exactly what it had been programmed to do. When the tire's wheel speed sensors reached the required speed of 72 knots, and the wing spoilers deploy signal was sent to the spoilers, the auto brake computer immediately sent an electronic signal of one hundred percent maximum braking effort to all four of the aircraft brakes.

To say that the deceleration for max auto braking was violent would be an understatement. A pilot friend of mine, who had been onboard an A320 months before during an aborted takeoff, where the auto brakes are customarily set to max to avoid a runway overrun, told me the effect was "like hitting a brick wall."

The aircraft's nose wheel, which had been several feet high above the runway at touchdown, slammed down onto the runway. The book, lying on my forward tray table, was propelled into the instrument panel. Fortunately, my auto-locking shoulder harnesses locked my upper torso from being thrown forward. The aircraft's main wheel tires, two on each landing gear, with anti-skid activating, made four very long skid marks of roughly two thousand feet each.

Just as I was nearly able to manually depress the brake pedals,

which would have cut off the maximum brake pressure to the brakes, the first officer, uncommanded, reached up to his forward instrument panel area and depressed the auto brake low selector switch. This action caused two quick reactions. First, the aircraft brakes released around ninety percent of their applied pressures. Second, everyone on board, myself included, who by now were physically straining hard against the rapid deceleration, thrust themselves aft into their seatbacks.

After turning off the runway at only 2,000 to 2,500 feet, I brought the aircraft to a stop. It had been quite a ride. Looking over at the first officer, his first remark was, "sorry." I picked up the public-address handset and made a very apologetic announcement to our passengers. In a minute or so, I explained to them what had happened. We had made a mistake and now would work our way to a parking gate.

In only a couple of minutes, the aircraft brake temperatures rose rapidly through 500 degrees Celsius. Asking the first officer to open his Quick Reference Handbook (QRH) concerning brake Temps, the QRH directed no taxiing and no parking brake to be set above 600 degrees Celsius. Further, the QRH directed that the fuse plugs, which are designed to melt rather than risk an exploding tire due to overpressure, may be expected to melt between 625 to 640 degrees Celsius.

As the first brake temp indication passed 600 degrees Celsius, I asked the first officer to let the ATC Ground Controller know that we were unable to taxi any further. When the aircraft came to a stop, I asked the first officer to hold the plane stopped with his brake pedals and alternate from the left to the right brake continually. Next, I made another PA announcement to our passengers and called our local operations on the number two radio.

As the brake temps on one brake, and then another, reached

620 degrees Celsius, we were expecting a wheel fuse plug to “blow” or relieve the tire pressure at any moment. Fortunately, at around twenty minutes, all brake temps gradually began to decrease. I made a written memo of each brake’s max temp for the aircraft maintenance log. None of the fuse plugs had, thankfully, released. While we sat in the cockpit for several minutes, I took the opportunity to have a little chat with the first officer.

Saying to him that it was just a human mistake that is bound to happen eventually, I went on to say that I was grateful he had selected the low auto brake position when he did. That action had most likely avoided an expensive repair to the aircraft or media attention should we have experienced four blown fuse plugs with their associated four flat tires.

Upon arrival at the gate, the ground maintenance crew was ready with two large cooling fans for our aircraft’s brakes. In a few minutes, the fans had sufficiently cooled the brakes. A mechanic completed a maintenance inspection of the brakes, tires, and wheels. Another mechanic signed off the required inspection in our maintenance logbook. Due to their much-appreciated help, our subsequent flight departed only a few minutes late.

Later that evening, I completed a crew incident report outlining the events that had taken place in DCA. A few weeks later, while reading a company-published incident summary, I was not surprised to see my exact words from that report published for others to learn from.

*Moral of the Story:* Try your best not to make the company incident newsletter. It is much better to learn from others’ mistakes rather than make them all yourself. A few months later, a new first officer procedure vastly reduced the frequency of this exact type of incident.

## 7

**Caribou Hunting and Float Plane Flying**

AN AIRBUS A320 FIRST OFFICER and friend shared two stories. The first is a memorable caribou hunting experience while flying a large tundra-tire-equipped Cessna 206. The second, a scary and nearly lethal incident, occurred while he was piloting a different Cessna 206 floatplane. He acted as only the pilot during his first couple of years with a hunting and fishing outfitter. In due time, he became both the pilot and guide.

**Number One:**

The outfitter's Cessna 206 six-seat aircraft was set up for hunting expeditions. The original factory tires were replaced by tundra tires. The outfitter had removed the four back seats to make room for camping equipment and sleeping accommodations inside the aircraft.

With the hunting client on board, the pilot flew from their operations base to look at a large herd of caribou. Noting the herd's general direction of travel and the State Game Fish and Parks rules that required no hunting on the same day of aerial observation, the pilot and client estimated where the herd would be the following day. There, they found a safe place to land the aircraft. That warm evening, they set up a makeshift camp. After dinner and a bit of conversation, they went to sleep atop their sleeping bags in the back of the airplane.

The next morning, just as dawn was breaking, the hunter/client had to pee. With the aircraft's windows completely fogged over due to condensation from the two occupants' breath, neither the pilot nor the client could see outside. Stepping out of the aircraft in just his underwear, the client

was relieving himself when he took a look around and saw, much to his amazement, over 2,000 caribou surrounding the aircraft.

Alerting the pilot, the hunter whispered, "Hand me my rifle." As the rifle passed out of the cabin door, the pilot said, "Shoot a big one." Laying his rifle atop the aircraft's engine cowling, the hunter selected a large nearby male and pulled the trigger.

Moments later, both still in their underwear, the pilot and client were standing outside the aircraft with big grins on their faces. The morning hunt had been short, chilly, and very productive. Soon, they were flying back to base camp with the quartered caribou laying amongst the camping gear. Both of them had quite a story to share.

### **Number Two:**

Nearing the end of a very busy hunting and fishing season, my pilot friend (Bob, of course), who had been putting in quite a few hours of piloting and guiding, flew a Cessna 206 on floats across a large lake. Onboard, he had three passengers and mounds of gear. That day's weather was low overcast at only about a hundred feet above the water. Fortunately, beneath the clouds, it was clear with unrestricted visibility. Following a normal water takeoff, he leveled the aircraft at about fifty feet above the water and, in doing so, was below the low cloud deck, allowing him to see across the thirty-mile vast lake. When approaching the far shore, Bob made a normal water landing. After a short water taxi and beaching the aircraft, he and the passengers went about the task of unloading the gear.

After double-checking his passenger's pick-up time, scheduled for a couple of days later, Bob departed their shoreline campsite for the solo flight back across the lake. He began to relax with the aircraft lightly loaded and easily trimmed for level flight

between the still-present low cloud deck and the water. In a few minutes, fatigue set in. Not paying close attention to his piloting duties, Bob fell asleep. With no one operating the controls, the well-trimmed plane flew on for some time. While still at cruising speed, one of the plane's floats struck the water hard. After being jolted awake by the impact of the float hitting the water, Bob quickly resumed flying. The aircraft had entered a very shallow descent with the left-wing low. When the single float struck the water, even though he was very startled by the impact, Bob was thoughtful enough not to pull back hard on the stick and thereby avoided putting the aircraft into the clouds. After scaring himself awake, he leveled the wings and flew on toward the floatplane's home base. For many years after the incident, he wondered how he had survived such a mistake.

*Moral of the Stories:* Sometimes; plane dumb luck is on your side. Other times it is not. Always stay alert and mindful of your surroundings.