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ELEVATOR OPERATORS AND PILOTS

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by David Burns

We were cruising west under a moonless dome of stars against the usual nighttime flow of heavy traffic bound for Europe. Our route kept us just north of the Atlantic track system, a set of parallel airways now stacked with oncoming planes. Three hours had elapsed since departing Stockholm, and another three would pass before dawn would break over the coast of Newfoundland. All was quiet and normal, and to break the monotony, I would occasionally say hello to oncoming planes, well off to our left, by flashing our landing lights.

Quiet and normal, but a tension had been building on the flight deck during the last few days of this weeklong trip. Cody Hicks and I were both qualified captains, with him being senior and therefore the designated boss for this flight. Like most of my colleagues at this small and cliquish company, he was a conservative Christian with political views to the right of center. In his case, his views were also to the right of Attila the Hun. He frequently peppered his conversations with “God bless America,” while seemingly nonpolitical topics became cues to spout an opinion. “Obummer,” as all right-thinking Americans knew, was a foreign-born Muslim whose real agenda was to destroy America and our sacred way of life. Being his captive audience of one, I was also being taught that all taxation is theft. We were transporting classified personnel and cargo from an unnamable location in central Asia (due to a nondisclosure agreement) to an airport in Virginia on a 500-million-dollar a year contract funded by the State Department. When I asked him how our salaries are paid, he replied, “By the company.”

I’d had enough and suggested that he try to connect the dots, all of which were staring him in the face. While speaking a little slower than normal, I said I would help connect two of the dots for him—our salaries are really paid through taxes. He then proceeded to pump a finger in my face while claiming I had just called him stupid, and off we launched into an embarrassing shouting match packed with anger, name-calling, and mutual revulsion. It was just

the two of us on the flight deck, but I had to leave. Regardless of the regulations, I didn't care whether he put on his oxygen mask or not, and the sooner I could get on the other side of a slamming door, the better. Supposedly, we were two professional adults in charge of a ninety-million-dollar aircraft transiting the North Atlantic. Once in the cabin, one of the male flight attendants said, "Wow. That was something."

"You heard?"

"Every kind word."

"Every kind of word, more like." He laughed and said it wasn't the first time he'd heard shouting from a flight deck.

I was impaired with anger, so much so that I stomped off the flight deck while leaving it to a lone individual whose anger and impairment equaled my own. During those few minutes abeam Iceland, I was as damaged in my ability to pilot an airplane as I had ever been while flying fatigued, hungover, or even drunk. If, during the peak of our argument, we had been presented with a sudden emergency requiring teamwork and methodical thinking, our abilities to resolve the problem would have been grossly compromised and entirely self-induced.

Fatigued, hungover, or drunk pilots are relatively rare, with fatigue being the most prevalent by a wide margin. Add to these deficiencies flying while sick, stressed, or nurturing untreated mental illness, and those occurrences are still rare. But over a career spanning thirty-five or forty years, how many pilots can honestly claim they have never once flown while impaired by one of these conditions? Full disclosure, I have flown with all but one of those, and perhaps even that is an understatement. The best selection methods along with the best training will still not eliminate the root cause of all aviation accidents: a human flaw at one or more links in the chain leading to the accident. And yet, in the vast majority of airline accidents which are chalked up to pilot error (which is the vast majority of all accidents), the pilots were not impaired. We can further tighten the selection process and improve training, and we can pile more and more regulations on to the industry, yet the problem with pilots will persist because impairment or other human imperfections are not the problem. Pilots themselves are the problem, due to their very existence.

Airlines have been tolerating the liability of pilots for

generations, but technology and market forces will ultimately render that problem obsolete. Pilotless planes will be coming to an airport near you, and the airlines themselves (minus their pilots, of course—but other employee groups will be quite happy) will embrace these new planes with more enthusiasm than any other innovation in their history. From management's point of view, pilotless airplanes have a long list of positives, yet the one that will be touted the loudest is safety. Although they will be safer, the real, less emphasized reason to make the change will be their massive cost savings.

Odd as it may sound, safety is not the first priority for the owners of airlines. Profit is. All senior management decisions adhere to this dictum. In fact, American corporations are required by law to prioritize shareholder returns above all other considerations. Of course, a poor safety record costs money, and a very poor one finishes the company. Airlines care about safety, but only in the abstract as it relates to profits and survivability.

During my final year at a major U.S. airline (which has since amalgamated several times into one of the surviving few), the company underwent a complete management change, beginning at the top. The newcomers now running the show had never been airplane people; instead, they were lawyers and MBAs, and this shift in background was consistent with the trend affecting the entire industry. Gone were the days of Juan Tripp at Pan Am or Howard Hughes at TWA, who were certainly good businessmen, but their first love was aviation.

One of the new executives at my former airline was overheard questioning a department head on the necessity of having a training department. The brainstorm driving this visionary insight was disclosed in his follow-up questions: "Why do we even have a training department? Our pilots are already trained when they come here, aren't they?" The new MBAs were oblivious to the basic role of an airline's training department, let alone the regulatory requirement to even have one. It had never occurred to him that maintaining the proficiency of pilots (and flight attendants, mechanics, dispatchers, et al.) was an ongoing and never-ending process. Nor did the archaic concept of a training department fit the new corporate mantra that all company departments must now be "profit centers."

American Airlines has approximately fifteen thousand pilots, with a median annual income of \$135,000 (2019). That's two billion dollars a year, just in salaries. To that we can add various payroll

taxes plus the massive overhead this presents to human resources. In addition, a training department for such a large group must also supply and manage hundreds of classrooms and instructors and dozens of flight simulators. Each of those fifteen thousand pilots must spend approximately eight hours a year in one of those simulators, which costs over a thousand dollars an hour to operate. This, after a purchase price of approximately \$15 million per simulator. The senior executive was on to something, in that airlines will indeed be shedding their training departments, but not for the reasons of his brainstorm. They will permanently close their classrooms and mothball their simulators just prior to the day their last human pilot lands an airliner for the final time.

In the early 1980s, a spate of articles in various trade publications discussed the likelihood of airline flight decks ever going down to one pilot. The industry was still adjusting to the demise of the flight engineer, a position made obsolete with evolving technology. But going down to one pilot would never happen, said the winning consensus. One pilot out of two having a heart attack is not a dire emergency (for the airplane, anyway), and if that is the only onboard problem, there is a near certainty that the flight will land safely. But one pilot out of one having a heart attack is a different order of emergency. Added to that is the now ever-present obsession with security. Are we really willing to put several hundred people inside a 500-mile-an-hour guided missile, carrying eighty tons of fuel, and place it all in the hands (and mind) of one person? The consensus got it right and, like the executive wanting to eliminate the training department, also for the wrong reason. We will never go down to one pilot; instead, we will go straight to zero.

The technology already exists for transport category airplanes to be pilotless, and the roads to implementing these technologies are well past the theoretical stage. If Boeing doesn't get onboard, Airbus will. If neither, China will produce one, with or without outside help, as will other countries or wealthy entrepreneurs. The Chinese have become quite successful capitalists, and they know full well what liabilities employees are. But more than likely, every airplane manufacturer will be fully committed to producing large, pilotless, fully capable aircraft.

Eventually, these "autoplanes" will be significantly cheaper to build than the planes of today because they will actually be a lot simpler. Various onboard radar systems connected to flight

computers directing an autopilot ... all these items exist in some form on aircraft today, but now we have the technology and reliability to toss out the human middleman, which is the most unreliable and accident-prone cog in the current system. The flight deck itself will be an unnecessary anachronism, an expensive duplication of unneeded complexity. All of the instruments, controls, switches, oxygen systems, and even the forward windows (at \$60,000 each) will be superfluous because all of it exists to transfer information to human pilots and then provide those human pilots with the ability to respond to that information. With the flight fully automated, all of this engineering and hardware can be eliminated, not only reducing the purchase price of the aircraft and employment costs, but also reducing operating costs due to significant weight savings.

The flights would be fully automatic from first movement at the gate, through taxi, takeoff, and every phase thereafter to the gate at destination. This would be programmed by the airline's dispatch department and likely coordinated through a mostly automated air traffic control system. Yes, even our beloved air traffic controllers' days are numbered, as parallel technologies will do to them what they will inevitably do to airline pilots. Airline pilots are going the way of elevator operators, and for precisely the same reasons.

The cabins will still be staffed by flight attendants, but with limited authority. They would certainly be able to communicate with various authorities on the ground, along with the ability to request the aircraft not take off or, if in flight, to be diverted to land immediately. Likely the most common reason would be a passenger's medical emergency. But in any case, the flight attendant would state the condition, and it would be up to others on the ground to reprogram the flight. Or not.

Will the public accept this? By the time the airlines and aircraft manufacturers get their PR and marketing folk on it, passengers will not only accept autoplanes, they will demand them. The public will have been primed by being witness to the FedExes and UPSes of the world flying thousands of point-to-point cargo flights with a near-spotless safety record. The massive cost savings to every user in the chain will also be a selling point to the public.

Today, drones are already replacing human-flown crop dusters at a fraction of the cost and with greatly improved safety records. Twenty years from now, there will not be a single crop

duster flown by a human pilot. Fighter pilots can look forward to the same fate, as military drones are rapidly replacing them. Already, the U.S. Air Force is training more drone operators than fighter pilots, and the trend is only going to accelerate.

Pilots will push back, of course. When technology eliminated the flight engineer, their unions tried to prevent the FAA from certifying the new aircraft to operate with only two pilots, but their arguments were no match for the political and financial power of the airlines and the manufacturers. If anything, the gap between the power of pilots' unions and their industry has only widened today.

I won't predict exact details with specific timelines. In the 1960s, they claimed that by the turn of the century we would all have flying cars and spaceports and friendly robots to do all the work, and perhaps these fantasies were inspired by *The Jetsons* cartoons. But I will claim that within two generations, the vast majority of scheduled passenger flights will be operated by pilotless airplanes, and they will be programmed from the ground and operated fully automatically, without even an earthbound "pilot," such as most drones are operated today.

What would be lost without pilots flying our transport planes? Not a thing, other than the human experience of viewing our planet from the panorama of an airliner's flight deck. A dome of stars under a moonless sky and saying hello to oncoming airplanes. And despite the seeming contradiction, such a view can be very grounding. I've seen most of the world's mountain ranges, deserts, and oceans from this perspective, in a variety of sunlight and darkness, and still my favorite view is a moonless night over an ocean with no sign of human life below. In the coming decades, most of these experiences will be consigned to living memory—and after a few more decades, not even that.