

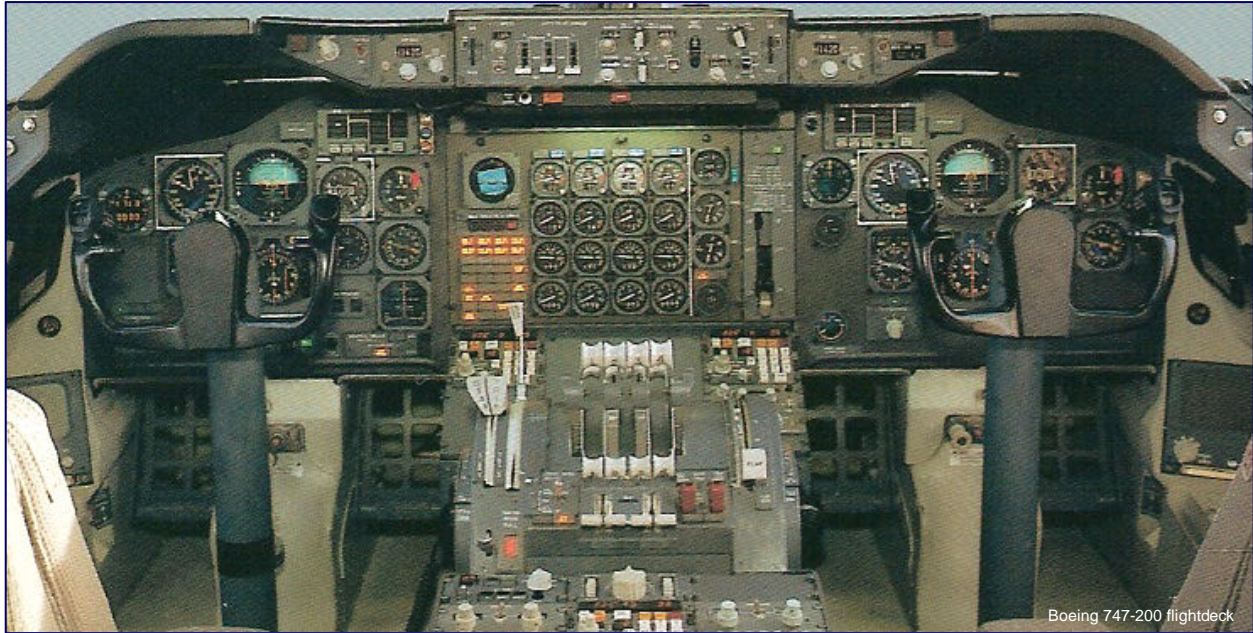
# **OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FLIGHTDECK**

- LIFE LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH AVIATION -

by Jerry Tobias

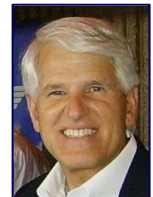
*"I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw."*

*Proverbs 24:32*



## **747 TRAINING**

### ***...UNDERSTANDING THE MORE IMPORTANT THING***



My 12 ½ years as a U. S. Air Force pilot were very rewarding. After completing pilot training in Texas, I flew Strategic Air Command tankers (Boeing KC-135s) in California, tactical airlift (Fairchild C-123Ks) in Vietnam, then airborne command posts (Boeing EC-135s) in Hawaii.

Our four and a half years on Oahu were over in a flash. Leaving Hawaii, of course, was a bitter-sweet experience. Our first winter at our next assignment, Offutt AFB in Omaha, Nebraska, however, was just bitter...bitterly cold. Not that winters in Hawaii weren't traumatic. They were. We would read about the blizzards on the mainland, put down the newspaper, and then have to decide which beach to visit. Those were difficult times.

I initially flew the "Looking Glass" airborne command post at Offutt AFB. Incredibly, the Strategic Air Command had an EC-135 continuously airborne for over 29 years (from 1961 to 1990). The Cold War threats during those years were real, and because of its military capabilities

and the continuity of command and control that it provided, the Looking Glass was a very significant and effective deterrent.

Two years later, however, I received a "dream" flying assignment: the Boeing E-4, a highly modified version of the Boeing 747-200. The E-4 was then known as the National Emergency Airborne Command Post, and its mission was challenging and significant. Since the Air Force used contracted 747 training, I soon found myself at JFK Airport in New York City, where I began the TWA (Trans World Airlines) 747 pilot qualification course.

The training started with two weeks of ground school. The instructors were great, and I learned the systems on the 747 inside and out. Our progress went well, and the other Air Force pilot in the program (a test pilot from Edwards AFB) and I asked if it would be possible to get an ATP and a 747 type rating (Airline Transport Pilot license and FAA Boeing 747 captain qualification) as we went through the course. But, our TWA simulator check was scheduled on Memorial Day, and since the FAA didn't work that day - and since FAA certification was not a part of the Air Force training contract - ATPs and type ratings were just not going to work out.

After ground school, we began the 747 simulator training phase. That's when we met our assigned TWA instructor pilot. Bill, I'll call him, was an extraordinary instructor. He was personable, kind and respectful, and had single-handedly rewritten the TWA training syllabus to meet our particular needs. Then, after a week or so of Bill's very intense and thorough simulator sessions (normal, abnormal and emergency procedure training), we were ready to tackle the real thing, as the Air Force contract also included four training flights in TWA 747s.

The flying was both challenging and fun. Bill worked as hard in the right seat as we did in the left, of course, as he ran us through the required maneuvers and approaches. Bill continued to train us during the flights and encourage us during the debriefings. He was dedicated to us and to our success and, although everything about the TWA training program was superb, Bill made it even better.

The morning of our last flight, however, I received a call from TWA saying that our scheduled airplane had not made it back from Europe, and that we would have to fly our last training flight the following day. But, just after hanging up, I quickly called TWA back and asked if it would be possible to come in for an FAA oral exam (a required aircraft knowledge test) and a simulator check. I was told, though, that no, they just couldn't make that work.

A few minutes later, however, I received another call, saying that if we could be there in 30 minutes, an FAA examiner would stay to give us our oral exams and simulator checks, as there happened to be a rare open simulator period.

I quickly called the other Air Force pilot, got dressed, and grabbed all of my 747 manuals. The FAA oral exam usually took place right after ground school, which was two weeks behind us. Many of the facts we'd be asked, while probably still known, had been "buried" by our current

study of checklists, procedures and maneuvers. So, I reviewed aloud every 747 detail I could find as we drove from our hotel in Queens to JFK.

After we arrived at the training facility, the FAA examiner took me into the 747 procedural trainer and asked me every question he could think of (or had written down) about the 747. Even though I was certain that there were facts about the airplane I'd probably forgotten, he didn't ask me anything that I couldn't remember.

The simulator check that followed was just as amazing. TWA provided the simulator period at no cost (it never appeared in our training records), put a TWA 747 captain in the right seat to serve as copilot, and sat a TWA 747 flight engineer at the engineer's panel. My check ride went exceptionally well, thanks - at least in part - to the seasoned crew that flew with me.

The next day, the same FAA examiner rode on our last training flight to finish the checks necessary for our ATPs and type ratings. Bill, however, had been replaced by another TWA instructor pilot. We successfully completed the Air Force training requirements and our FAA evaluations, and left New York the following day with great admiration for TWA and, especially, for Bill. It had been quite a month, and I now had an ATP, a Boeing 747 type rating, and was headed back to Omaha to what I was certain was the best job in the Air Force.

It wasn't until several weeks later that I learned what had really happened. The evening of our third and next-to-last flight at TWA, Bill, who was a great aviator and, by then, a good friend, had been senselessly and tragically shot and killed, a victim of domestic violence. He went from flying with us that day, to gone an hour or so later. We hadn't known it at the time, though, because TWA had decided to shield us from the truth.

Bill's death was a sobering reminder to me of the uncertainty of the length of our lives and of how important it is to maintain a proper perspective of the journey. Life is *not* about what we do, what we achieve or what we possess. Life is about our relationship with God and our preparation for eternity. It's about our relationships with each other. And, it's about the opportunities we all have - no matter how brief they may be - to touch, encourage and make a difference in the lives of those we encounter along the way.

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***Each man's life is but a breath. Psalm 39:5***

***Serve one another in love...love your neighbor as you do yourself. Galatians 5:13-14***

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THE BOTTOM LINE? In this day of failures, furloughs and foreclosures, it is even more important to remember what is really important. My 747 rating, for example, is now nothing more than a notation on a piece of plastic in my billfold, but the *people* that I have been blessed to know mean more to me than ever. My family, I have learned, is more important than my flying, and my relationships are more important than my ratings. ■

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