



Survival after the Arrival!

The Terror and Trauma of the Ground Transportation Experience

by Jerry E. Tobias

Corporate pilots face many challenges and complexities in today's aviation environment. Some of these are common to all flight crews: crowded airports and airspace, security threats, the runway incursion problem, etc. Others, such as operations at unfamiliar airports, frequent use of uncontrolled airfields, and unpredictable schedules, are more unique to corporate aviation. Among all of these concerns, however, I would suggest that none causes corporate aviators more consistent consternation than does the issue of crew ground transportation!

"Seriously?" you ask. Absolutely! And any of you that have been a part of corporate aviation for more than four days know exactly what I'm talking about: After you have very meticulously planned every infinitesimal detail of an important trip for your company's senior executives, picked your way around severe weather while changing altitudes several times to maintain the best possible ride, made a beautiful approach and landing in incredibly gusty crosswinds, and then - as always - deposited your executives safely and on time at their destination, *you discover that all of the problems you faced during the flight were insignificant compared to the great challenge now before you of getting safely to and from the restaurant or hotel!*

Corporate crews usually have a couple of ground transportation options available: a passenger van (from the FBO or hotel), or - perhaps, if you meet certain confidential criteria that no pilot has ever been smart enough to figure out - a crew car. Although these transportation provisions are appreciated and even helpful, they also produce much frustration and fear (or - if you are really lucky - maybe even a little amusement). Let me explain.

The passenger van is the usual and first-offered means of getting you from one place to another - if it is available. Crew vans are typically hand-me-downs from day care facilities, which is why their interiors are often decorated in a unique cheerio stucco motif. Besides appealing to young, always-hungry copilots, these vans do provide a form of suitable transportation - unless, of course, you care anything about your time or your safety.

Tell the person at the FBO customer service desk that you'd like to go to lunch or the hotel,

for example, and you are likely to hear something like: "Oh, you only bought 1200 gallons today? Well, I'm sorry (snicker, snicker), but all twenty-four of our crew cars are all out right now. However, our van can take you anywhere you want to go within a quarter mile of here. Shall I let the driver know that you need a ride? He should be back in about two hours. Or, the hotel van could probably be here by 11 pm."

Eventually, when (or if) the van does arrive, you pile in with twelve other crews going to 15 different restaurants or six different hotels. That's a good thing, though, because the mass of other bodies is usually the only collision protection available (I haven't been in a van that had all the seatbelts available or in working condition for at least ten years!). And protection is a great idea, because these van rides are probably the closest you will ever get to understanding what being a metal duck in a shooting gallery feels like! But once you've squeezed in, there is nothing more you can do; the terror and trauma are about to begin!

There is only one rule that drivers are taught at Van Driving and Scare Tactic School: *Always be FAST, LOUD, and EXTREME!* This rule, plus the fact that most van drivers are selected from the NASCAR Qualifying School dropout roster, explains why they always maneuver violently, drive at terrifying speeds (except for when they have to slow down for other van accidents), turn the radio volume to a decibel level that approximates a G-II at takeoff power, and set the air conditioner to around -25°F in the summer and the heater to +110°F in the winter.

Your response to all of this, naturally, is also *loud* (uncontrollable screaming) and *extreme*: You and the other crews that fearfully slide from side to side while trying to plug your ears to minimize permanent hearing loss from the radio and while either freezing or roasting are always *extremely* glad to carefully unfold yourselves and crawl out of the van at the end of the trip! And, if you have been transported to the hotel, you are also *extremely* glad to see your small, soft-sided bag again after the 3700 pounds of other suitcases and flight bags that were thrown on top of it are all unloaded (even though your 14" high bag is now 1" high, and its fragile contents have been reduced to a few handfuls of dust and debris).

Now, before all of you van drivers get upset with me and start taking your frustrations out on other crewmembers, you should understand that I am not implying that *all* of you operate in the fashion that I've described. Nearly all, but not all.

As I mentioned earlier, though, the other transportation mode occasionally available is the infamous "crew car," which - as you are all aware - only comes in two varieties: the midget-sized, late model sedan or the old, worn out "beater."

The newer cars are what you encounter the most. These nondescript vehicles, which are normally smaller than the roller skates that you had as a kid, all come with the same "luxury" (translated: "save your money; they're just pilots!") amenity package: two doors, a steering wheel, seats made from recycled concrete, and a heater system that has no defrost mode (which reminds me: the one thing that you will never, ever find in a crew car is a windshield scraper; providing such useful devices apparently violates specific crew car "anti-convenience" ordinances in many



states). And, in addition to being inadequately equipped and very uncomfortable, these little crew cars are also - for reasons obvious to most preschoolers but not to the manufacturer - very unsafe. Other than that, they serve their designated purpose well. However, if you ever see what appears to be a smashed soup can in the middle of the highway, please do the right thing: stop and help the crew get out of the wreckage.

The older crew cars available at some locations can best be classified as "pot luck." I've experienced everything from fifteen-year-old recycled police cars to elegant old Jaguars. But once in a while you get lucky: you find an FBO in some remote part of the country that lets you drive a classic old "road boat." These huge antiques are the "queens" of the national crew car fleet, and can actually provide - in a "what-have-we-gotten-ourselves-in-to" kind of way - a bit of intrigue and even laughter.

You have undoubtedly encountered one of these cars: it rolled out of a GM plant somewhere long before your copilot was born, it has a hood about the same size as an ocean-going oil supertanker (except the supertanker takes less room to make a turn) and a trunk considerably larger than your first apartment, its windshield is cracked, the dash board is split in four places, the steering wheel has about 90° of "play" in each direction and the front tire shimmy is violent enough to loosen the crystal on your wrist watch (you don't actually "steer" a car like this, you just sort of "aim" it in the right general direction), the headliner sags about ten inches below the roof, only two of the doors can still be opened from the outside, and the disintegrated seat cushion padding has formed a crater that makes you feel like you're sitting in the kitchen sink. In short, it's a beauty! And it is relatively safe, simply because it has a size and weight advantage over just about everything except a diesel locomotive (although, just as in the vans, the only passenger restraining device is usually the front windshield).

Don't ever pass up an opportunity to experience both the sense of adventure ("Where is it headed now?" or "Just how and where do we park this big thing?") and the nostalgia ("I think my grandfather had one of these when I was in the second grade!"), though, that cruising around in such a unique example of "mass" transit can provide. Just sit back and enjoy the journey (assuming you can see anything over the dash board). And take time to survey the car's contents. That sticky old 1950s Grapette bottle under the front seat might actually be worth something (although the three-dozen local area maps and the two bushels of very stale popcorn on the floor probably are not).

No matter what kind of crew car you end up with, however, I need to remind you - for obvious legal reasons - to be very careful with it. Many FBOs, for example, now make you fill out and sign about thirty sheets of paperwork before they let you take a car out of the parking lot. And, although you probably have no recourse except to sign, be sure to read the fine print. It usually reads something like:

"I hereby authorize this FBO to charge my company exorbitant fuel prices, excessive ramp fees, and incredibly outlandish service charges for things I don't need or even ask for from this day forward if I don't wash, wax, and lube this vehicle before returning it in better-than-new condition within the next three minutes."

"Oh," I hear you thinking. "Maybe that explains it."

And don't forget to return the crew car key. That has happened so many times that many FBOs now attach some unwieldy device to the key (like a 24 inch bolt or the nose gear assembly off of an old Hawker) just to keep you from taking it with you.

So just keep in mind that, although maneuvering your twenty-plus million dollar corporate transportation device from one airport to another is often a very difficult task, it is still the easiest part of the trip. Ground transportation for your crew is uncertain at best, and will continue to be very stressful and unsafe until the day that crew cars are required to meet minimum standards and all van drivers actually complete a training course (the grand prix game at the local arcade doesn't count) that helps them learn to recognize things like stop signs, pedestrian cross walks, speed limit signs, etc. In the interest of crew sanity and longevity, I would also suggest that all corporate aircraft initial pilot qualification courses include a minimum of eight hours of training on the subjects of crew vehicle safety and transportation trauma recovery (with an additional two hours during each recurrent course).

In the meantime? Rent a car whenever you can (a full-sized, armor-plated model is best). When you can't, though, just make sure that your insurance premiums are paid up and that you've said your "good byes." Then take a deep breath, cross your fingers, and hold on tight! ■

Note: This article first appeared in Business & Commercial Aviation. Copyright © 2003, Jerry E. Tobias