

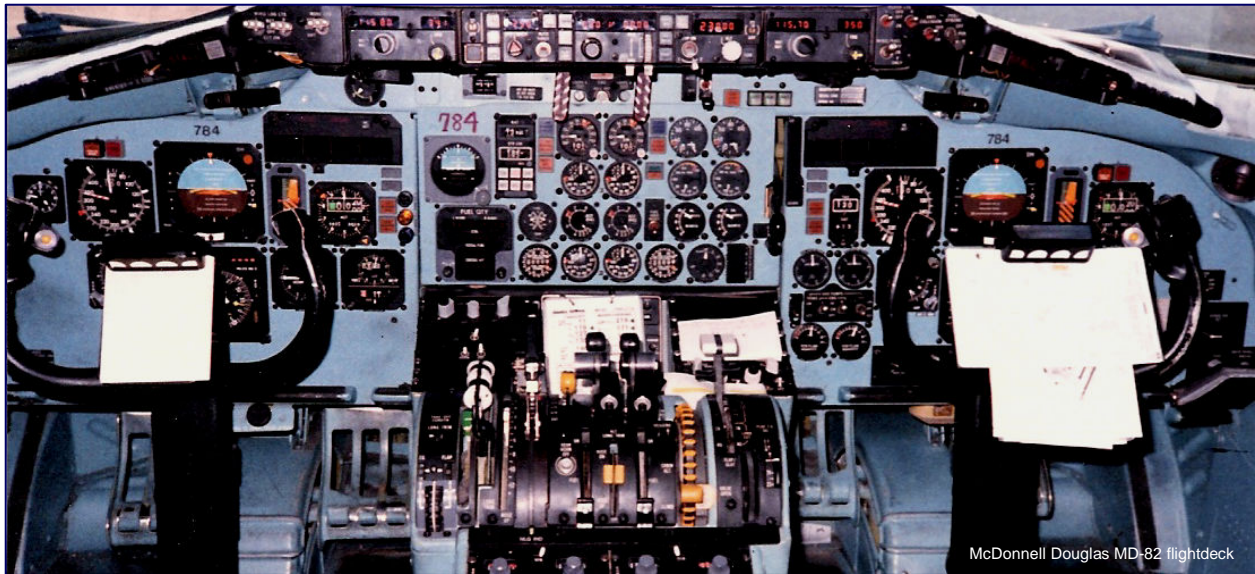
OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FLIGHTDECK

- 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



THE WALKAROUND

...PAYING ATTENTION TO WHAT NEEDS ATTENTION



The transport category aircraft used for airline operations are incredibly complicated machines. Because of this, numerous cockpit checks and an inspection of the outside of the airplane are both required prior to each flight.

As an airline first officer, it was my responsibility to complete the visual inspection of the exterior of the airplane. Known as the "walkaround," this was not just a quick glance, but was a very specific and thorough examination of the condition of all exterior components, including the wings, fuselage, flight controls, landing gear and tires, panels and hatches, probes and sensors, etc.

The inspection of our airline's McDonnell Douglas MD-80s followed a specific route. After turning on the wheel well lights with a switch located behind a panel below and to the left of the main cabin door, I would travel around the aircraft in a clockwise direction to inspect the nose section and nose gear, right forward fuselage and right main landing gear, right wing, right rear fuselage, tail section, left rear fuselage, left wing, etc., until returning to the nose section. Once convinced that the exterior components of the airplane were all in an airworthy condition, I would return to the flightdeck to prepare for the next departure.

Because the MD-80 is 147 feet long and has a 107-foot wing span, the walkaround took several minutes to complete. One day, while in the middle of a walkaround at Chicago's O'Hare Airport - and after traveling all the way around to the left wing tip - I suddenly "woke up." I'm not sure what I was thinking about, but my mind was definitely NOT on the walkaround. I realized that I had *looked* at everything I was supposed to look at, but had not really *seen* anything.

Shocked by my inattention, I went back to the aircraft's nose section and started over. But this time I didn't just look, I *saw* - meaning I looked, processed and accurately determined the condition of the airplane's exterior. And, although that "worthless walkaround" happened many years ago, I've thought about it at the beginning of every walkaround that I've completed since.

Inattention in the aviation environment is, obviously, not a good thing. Inattention in life is also not a good thing. You can probably recall your grade school teacher saying something like, "Class! Pay attention!" She knew that daydreaming or a lack of concentration did not enable learning. And remember the old sitcoms that had us laughing about someone who was reading the newspaper while *pretending* to listen ("yes, dear . . .no, dear . . .that's nice, dear")?

It is a fact that, although we humans can receive numerous inputs simultaneously (through sight, sound, touch, perception, etc.), we can only concentrate on or process one thing at a time. And that, of course, is the problem. It is true, for example, that you cannot watch TV or read a book *and* have a conversation at the same time. It's one or the other. We have to choose what we're going to process. And, what we choose to process is a product of what is most important to us at the time.

That's why we might *look* at our teenagers, but be so lost in our thoughts about work that we *don't see* the hurt or fear in their eyes. Or, we might *hear* our wife's words, but be so fixated on something else that we really *don't listen* to what she is trying to share with us. Or, we might *notice* the senior citizen across the street, but be so focused on driving off to yet another activity that we *don't comprehend* his loneliness. Or, it might be that we are just so wrapped up in and focused on all the "stuff" of each day that we haven't taken the time to process and comprehend the shortness of life, the condition of our world, the value of relationships, the blessings of health and family, the importance of a relationship with God, or the reality of eternity.

All of these things that we should and could process and understand are often lost because of our lack of or our diverted attention. However, these are the things that *need* our attention. These are the things that we *should* be processing.

I was able to repeat my walkaround, to go back and see what I needed to see, and to make sure that I had not missed anything. In life, however, we seldom have the opportunity to "go back." We need to be aware, therefore, that the tasks, responsibilities and other things that demand our attention - while not necessarily bad things - can keep us from stopping to really listen, really see, really process and really understand the *important* things and, more significantly, the *important people* around us. Like I learned during my walkaround, we need to "wake up" and pay attention to what really needs our attention.

THE BOTTOM LINE? What we choose to give our attention to is a product of what we really care about. Our attention, then, leads to understanding and comprehension, which lead to compassion or concern or correction or whatever else is necessary. And those are all good things. But...it all starts with caring. ■

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