

AL HARRIS STORIES



Al, left, sitting with author and fellow Frontier pilot Tex Searle at the Jun 2019 Salt Lake City Frontier Reunion. Tex wrote THE GOLDEN YEARS OF FLYING and the following is an excerpt from it.

STRANGERS IN THE DARK

I believe my most unpleasant experience involving an individual I'd never met before took place in Billings, Montana. As soon as our passengers had deplaned from the Convair 580, we rushed to check out. The hour was late, and the motel restaurant where we overnighted would soon be closing.

We checked in at the motel and barely made it to the restaurant on time. After ordering, we sat our bags behind the counter and went into the restroom to wash up. My copilot, Al Harris, finished drying his hands and as he stepped out the door, he flipped the light switch off.

With hands that were soaking wet, I felt my way in the dark towards the light switch. At that moment, the door partially opened and I could make out the features of my copilot, and then he stepped back. I was ready when he made his second appearance. Grabbing a handful of water I waited. When he stepped in I flipped the water in his face, and with soapy hands, grabbed him around the neck in a slight choke hold and held on.

I looked to see who the stranger was that just stepped in and switched the light on. Only it wasn't a stranger, it was my copilot. Horrified, I looked at the man I was still holding in a choke hold. Cowering before me was a small gentleman about seventy years old and wearing a gray flannel suit. His eyes were as large as mine. I attempted to wipe the water off his suit, but I only made it worse. Stumbling over my words, I tried to apologize. The little guy yelled, "I'm all right! I'm all right!" Then he turned and rushed out of the restroom.

My copilot had retreated to the lobby and along with a stewardess they were telling all. With everyone in the lobby now aware of my blunder it sounded like a brawl out there. Mortified, I opened the door and humbly stepped out to face my audience.

While seated at our table, Al proceeded to give his version of what had transpired. He said as he opened the door the second time, the little guy ducked under his arm and sauntered in. He knew what had happened when the little guy cried out in terror.

It didn't soothe my feelings any when he added, "Then the little guy with big eyes rushed out with beads of water running down his suit and disappeared out the first exit he could locate. He's probably home right now telling his wife that some nut wearing a uniform is in the restroom of the Holiday Inn choking the patrons as they unsuspectingly make their entry."

For some reason I passed on dinner that night, and being the poor sport that I am, I didn't invite the copilot to make any landings the following day.

Several trips later, we were on a layover in Denver. That evening Al dropped over to my room to watch a movie on TV. Al had removed his shoes and left them at the foot of his bed. When the opportunity arose, I slipped his shoes into my overnight bag. After the movie I watched Al return to his room in his stocking feet. He didn't ask about his shoes and I didn't volunteer anything.

The next morning there was a knock, it was Al asking if I had noticed his shoes laying around. I got down on my hands and knees and looked under both beds and around the room and then innocently told him I couldn't find them. He said, "I must have set them in the hall when I unlocked my door, and apparently someone has walked off with them."

I volunteered, "With the black socks you have on no one is going to notice. If they do, they'll just think your another airline pilot who got dressed for an early morning trip."

With time growing short, we caught our transportation to the airport, and checked in at the crewroom for our trip. One of the dispatchers asked Al where his shoes were? Al said, "Somebody walked off with them."

With a big grin on his face the dispatcher said, "You guy's flying these early morning trips ought to give yourselves more time to wake up in the morning. Captain Dave Rampton showed up here one morning still wearing his house slippers. Some of you wear socks that don't match, and one captain was wearing his suit trousers with his uniform coat and hat, and now you show up with no shoes at all.

Al didn't think this was very funny, and with everyone asking where his shoes were, he was starting to feel a little self-conscious. I waited until he walked over to pick up the latest weather, and while he was occupied, I slipped his shoes into his overnight bag. When it was time for us to walk down the flight line to our waiting aircraft, I asked, "Are you sure you don't have your shoes? Passengers who will be boarding our trip will see you down there walking around the aircraft without shoes. They're going to wonder what kind of copilots this company employs. Are you sure you didn't pack them with all your other clothing? Maybe you ought to check your overnight bag again; and while you do that, I'll climb aboard and check the cabin."

When Al boarded the aircraft, he was wearing his shoes. I knew I was going to be safe as they were starting to board passengers. . . and I had gotten even. (Kinda)

THE GOLDEN YEARS OF FLYING By TEX SEARLE, FRONTIER PILOT

The Golden Years of Flying - As We Remember
FRONTIER AIRLINES 1946 - 1986 BY CAPTAIN TEX SEARLE

DC-3 Pilots Share Their Tales of a Remarkable Era of Flight

Here is the legacy of an earlier day in aviation history. Flying the Rocky Mountain region with the Frontier Airlines pilots who achieved the best safety record in civil aviation, a record based upon the most stringent measure of the number of takeoffs and landings while flying extreme conditions. Frontier Airlines (not to be confused with the company currently using the Frontier name) flew from 1946 to 1986. In her early days, crews hand-flew DC-3s over the high Rockies, in and out of small airports hidden deep in mountain canyons with approaches often referred to as "black holes" due to their almost ominous darkness and lack of reliable visual references. Relating their first-hand experience of flying through "tornado alley" without radar, flying in canyons of sodden clouds with lightning displays an explosion of highlighted pagantry throughout the heavens, the pilot storytellers in *The Golden Years of Flying* invite you into the cockpit for a lighter dimension, one you will surely enjoy the legends and hangar tales of their shared experiences.

As a retired FAL captain himself, the author points out that "flying the DC-3 was just about the best thing that could happen to a man."

"...Stories of a remarkable airplane and the people who had the privilege of sharing experiences during this exhilarating chapter of commercial aviation."
—Captain Jack Schulte, FAL Retired

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CAPTAIN TEX SEARLE

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