

SWAT Dogs and Tawny Port

By Judith R. Lear

As a flight school owner and aircraft broker I am frequently required to travel for business. The purpose of these trips may vary; for instance, my partner and I may be hired to ferry aircraft back into our area or to handle a closing on an aircraft much like a real estate broker would close a property or to inspect an aircraft and/or all of the three. For the most part these trips are not only enjoyable but educational. And then there are those that make you question the very core of this country's fiber and the essence of its heart and soul.

One spring two years ago I found myself on such a trip. We had been hired by a business man named Hans, who was quite fed up with airline travel and decided to buy a twin engine, private airplane. By his calculations the time and money he would save on his trips -- including the salary of the pilot -- was more beneficial to him than the current option of flying the airline.

We had just returned from St. Louis on another closing when the agent of a twin engine aircraft located in CA called to counter a bid I had submitted for Hans. After haggling with the seller's broker, a final offer was agreed upon and the next step was put into play; confirm a clear title, inspect the plane and the aircraft logs and fly it home to Virginia.

Over the years my partner Tom and I have made many aviation related friends along the way. One of them was Rick, who had recently moved to Las Vegas. We decided the first stop would be Vegas to visit Rick.

As a veteran pilot instructor of 33 years, my partner was definitely the one who wore the pants in the flying arena and I trusted his judgment unquestionably. One of his steadfast, no exception rules when ferrying a plane was day flying with Visual Flight Rules (VFR) only. So it would be with this flight, also.

After spending three days in Chico CA inspecting the plane and preparing the closing documents we were ready for our voyage home. After reviewing the course I was surprised that Tom had charted us straight across the Sierra Nevada's; albeit, at their lowest elevation! Hmm, may I retract that statement about trusting Tom unquestionably?

Since the buyer's pilot, Anthony, was with us to pick up the plane I would ride back seat instead of my usual right seat co-pilot. Along the way Tom would instruct Anthony and at the end of the trip sign off on his multi engine

endorsement. That is if Anthony could keep Tom awake long enough to do so! Did I mention that this was also part of the responsibility of the right seat? As a helicopter instructor and fixed wing pilot Anthony proved himself a worthy student. He not only handled the aircraft proficiently but by remained relaxed as Tom occasionally nodded off.

Then it happened! The plane began to climb uncontrollably. Maintaining an altitude even remotely relevant to 14,000 feet became impossible. We were “wind surfing.” As a preliminary precaution we had all been sucking O2 since we exceeded 10,000 feet so there was no risk of hypoxia; however, Anthony, a flat-lander was alarmed. I heard him exclaim nervously over the intercom, “I can’t control the altitude!” Now fully alert Tom instantly calmed the young pilot. “Just go with it, don’t fight it. The plane will level out.

Needless to say from the back seat I had my eyes glued to the instruments, particularly the altimeter. I watched as the needle uncontrollably rotated clockwise: 15,000, 15, 500 ...16,000 and so on until we had reached 17,500 feet very near the aircraft’s ceiling! Tom, ever cool, assured Anthony that we would level out and I’ll be damned if we didn’t!

Anthony clearly relieved resumed his “role” as pilot in command, while I ceased my incessant wriggling in the back seat. Tom went back to sleep. The plane gracefully gained and lost altitude over the mountains wind surfing until we had cleared the ridge and began preparations to land. We had been on Flight Following with the tower since leaving Chico so we called ahead and announced our intent. The landing was perfect and Anthony required no intervention from Tom. We were in Vegas! Party time!

In my experience dealing with pilots, I’ve found there to be two types: the fly hard and fast, all business behind the yoke but party just as hearty type A and the studious, clean cut t-totaler’s type B like the image the commercial airlines portray. The line seems equally drawn right down the middle. Did I mention we were the former?

Prepared to experience the sites and landmarks of Las Vegas we met Rick at the private airport. We weren’t disappointed with Rick’s hospitality but knowing what lay ahead – or so we thought -- we called it a short night. Once back to the hotel we charted the course for the next day; right over the Grand Canyon.

Now if you think our flight was unnerving the day before ... well ... just let me say I had no clue what we were in for in the latter part of this flight -- thermals! However, for now we effortlessly soared to 10,000 feet cruise altitude and I settled into the back seat with book in hand.

Kaboom! I was lifted -- I swear -- a foot off my seat! Instinctively I looked out the port hole to see if the wings were still attached. They were, but I feared they would soon depart the aircraft if we hit turbulence like that again! The flight was so rough I could barely appreciate the scenic view beneath me. I recalled water skiing as a teenager and the best way to describe the airplane's attitude was skiing over rough seas at high tide!

Once again the Anthony-Tom team landed us safely on the ground. This time the port of call was San Antonio, TX. I jumped out of the plane obviously shaken, never so eager to disembark a vessel in my life. Nearly running now, I stayed far enough ahead of the two pilots that they could barely lip read my demand. "I need a drink!" Tom and Anthony trailed behind me laughing and I suspect the joke was on me! Of course, why that might be I haven't a clue!

Ready to accommodate my demand -- a rare occasion in itself -- we chose a hotel near the airport that also had a bar. It never ceases to amaze me how truly unique and different our country can be travelling from one area to the next. And by air, the differences are even more dramatic. Less than 5 hours before we had left the bright lights of the Las Vegas Strip and were now seated in a restaurant, complete with waiters dressed as cowboys and severed bull heads hanging off the walls!

We all ordered steak cooked to perfection and a stiff Scotch and water for me; surprised? Again, not knowing what lie ahead on our next leg, we left the restaurant and had a nightcap at the hotel bar. We all retired early that evening electing to chart the next day's course in the morning.

It was a beautiful, clear VFR day along our chartered course and the temperatures were expected to remain warm along the southern route. Determined not to chance another turbulent flight cold sober, I insisted we stop at the liquor store on the way to the airport, where I picked up a bottle of port. I would put myself in the class of a moderate to light drinker especially in relation to my pilot team but today I would make the exception. Once again, I took my leave to the back of the plane, only this time I was going to enjoy it regardless of the conditions!

The liquid did its job. I was comfortable and relaxed and not at all concerned that the weather had turned sour somewhere along the route. I did notice the commotion up front, while Tom and Anthony dodged the dark full clouds rapidly forming around us. Due to inclement weather the decision to land was made and we found ourselves in a small southern Georgia town. The sights and sounds of this laid back town could have been taken straight out of a scene from *The Dukes of Hazard!* It was only mid afternoon when we landed and reasonably sure this would be our last stop before arriving Virginia; we elected to clean the plane. Due to my fairly tipsy condition, I didn't mind at all that I completed most of the work and luckily the pending rain held until we had finished.

We gathered the luggage -- and the empty port bottle -- and strolled across the ramp into the small terminal where we discarded the evidence. We ordered fuel, called the hotel shuttle and waited in front of the terminal until the van arrived. No sooner had I placed my hand on the door of the vehicle than we were swarmed by law enforcement officers! The local sheriff was there, along with the FAA, the DEA and their dogs and the local police! It was a movie scene straight out of a sting operation that left us dazed and confused. Of course, my first thought was, "How did they know I was drinking on the plane?" But as quickly as the thought occurred, it vanished with the realization that I had done nothing illegal.

The officers quickly and assertively disbanded our team and separated us for questioning. As we were led away from each other our eyes were full of question and not in the least, fear. As a group we were totally dumb founded and had no idea why we were being stopped. I watched Tom as the DEA and FAA led him back to the ramp where the plane was tied down. It was only later that I learned that they had ordered him to nearly disassemble the aircraft right on the ramp! One by one, he removed the seats and the carpet as the sniffing German Shepherds performed their duties.

Since Anthony was not Pilot in Command and I was merely a passenger, we were held where we were stopped being drilled about our "intentions." I couldn't hear Anthony's questioning, but I clearly recall my own. "Where are you coming from? What business do you have with this plane? Who owns it, and where is it headed?" On and on the questions were fired at us and I could tell by Anthony's body language, he was nearing his tolerance limit. I wondered how long it would be before this young former marine would have had enough. Meanwhile, I responded to the barrage of questions as quickly as I could, all the while praying silently that the officers would not smell the wine on my breath.

With the officers in tow ever cool Tom led his entourage leisurely past us laughing at something he had murmured to one of them. As unexpectedly as we had been apprehended we were released with orders not to leave the area until we were notified that the investigation had been concluded. As quickly as they stormed the airport environment the officers were gone, leaving us wondering, "What the hell just happened?"

Forced into sober reality, my thoughts rushed forward to what in the blue blazes I was going to tell the new owner! The scene played out in my head. "Ah, sorry Hans but we've been detained in cow-dunk GA with your half million dollar airplane. Why, you ask? I haven't a clue. When will we return? Beats me -- we haven't been told, yet."

Oh, my ... not good, not good at all! What on earth were we going to do? I didn't know about Tom and Anthony but I felt like I was playing out a Laurel and Hardy skit complete with the phrase, "Well, Ollie, it's a fine mess you've gotten us into, now!"

Finally at the hotel we agreed to plot our next course of action -- which was -- call a lawyer! And as the group's mouthpiece, I was elected to call the new owner. As luck would have it, I fretted over nothing. Hans laughed hysterically as I hemmed and hawed through the sequence of events. Did this sharp business man recognize something about our flight crew that I had not? Could that be why he thought our excursion was so funny?

The guys claimed neither of them slept well the night before and I know I didn't. Breakfast in the hotel restaurant was quiet with the exception of charting the course home. That is, if and when we were ever released to leave! We never knew beyond our own speculation why we were stopped and detained that early spring day. Only that we were, and more importantly that *they could*. Fortunately, the plane was clean and even with all the checks and balances in play, you can never be completely sure of what you may be in for when you transport an unknown aircraft. Sometime that morning our background checks all cleared and we were released to go.

Solemnly, we departed the field clawing our way once again through the GA clouds, this time determined to make it home. Thankfully the final leg was uneventful and for the first time during the trip we were escorted by a turbulence free, tail wind for most of the flight home. At last from three miles out PVG was in view. I couldn't recall ever being as happy to view the cross wind runway at our home base.

We were greeted by an excited and satisfied customer while taxiing up to the ramp of the sales office. Tom offered to take the new owner up but Hans generously declined, instead opting to take over my seat in the rear. Anthony proudly showed him all the bells and whistles with which his new plane was equipped. Waving off Hans's invitation for a celebratory dinner, Tom and I left knowing that even with the unexpected detours we had done our jobs successfully.

Now as I write this, nearly two years have passed and we have continued to relocate aircraft each with its own distinct story. I am happy to note here that none, however, can top our unexpected layover in Georgia.

Editor's Note:

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