

BECOMING THE "OLD MAN" IN THE LEFT SEAT

BY JAMES ALBRIGHT

"Captain."

Or, more properly: "Pilot in Command."

Also there is "Aircraft Commander," "Left-Seater," "Crew Boss," and in some of my Air Force squadrons before we had women in the cockpit: "He Who Signs for the Jet."

No matter what you call the position, the first time you assume that duty shapes you forever as a pilot. For me that happened in 1984 flying a Boeing 720 for an Air Force squadron in Hawaii. At the time I had about 1,500 hours, half of which was flying jets, the T-37B and T-38A, with no crew at all.

The Boeing 720, what the Air Force called the C-135B and other variants, was Boeing's failed attempt to come up with a long-range version of the Boeing 707, before they figured they could do the same thing with a fuselage plug and bigger fuel tanks. Western Airlines bought most of them; the Air Force was the second largest customer. It was a nice airplane for the time, but the systems were pretty rough by today's standards.

The day after I upgraded to the left seat I was sent to Squadron Officer's School,

"Charm Class" as we called it, and my first ever copilot got his introduction to squadron life without me. From all accounts, Lieutenant Jim Dunlap was going to be one of the best the squadron had ever seen.

I took the three months to reflect upon all the aircraft commanders I had flown for when I was the copilot. I had my share of tyrants, guys who would point to the navigation light on the right wing tip and say, "See the light, co? Well everything to the left of that belongs to me, and don't you ever forget that."

I was going to be different. I would be the crew commander that listened carefully to everyone, weighed the pros and cons, and made fair decisions everyone could be proud of. "The old man," they would say, "he's a tough old bird, but he's a good leader. You want to be on his crew." We had large crews, four in the cockpit, four in the radio compartment, and four crew chiefs. And I would be what they all called the old man. I was twenty-seven.

Our squadron was fairly senior, a plush assignment flying such a nice airplane in Hawaii. We spent most of our time in the Far East but our first mission as a crew was to the mainland U.S. That is where I



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Captain James Albright is a Gulfstream G450 chief pilot and webmaster of Code7700.com, an aviation web resource with a worldwide following. He was an Air Force pilot for twenty years, having flown a variety of aircraft and holding positions as instructor pilot, chief flight examiner, and squadron commander. After retiring as a lieutenant colonel he has flown as captain and check airman for various multinational corporations, charter operators, and private companies.

AIRCRAFT FLOWN

Cessna T-37B
Northrop T-38A
Boeing KC-135A
Boeing 720 (EC-135J)
Boeing 747-200 (E-4B)
Canadair CL-604
Gulfstream III (C-20A/B/C)
Gulfstream IV
Gulfstream V
Gulfstream 450



"The Boeing 720, what the Air Force called the C-135B and other variants, was Boeing's failed attempt to come up with a long-range version of the Boeing 707"

found myself with my first soul-searching moment as the guy in charge.

We were flying up the coast of California with a minor pressurization problem: the cabin would vary a couple of hundred feet every few minutes, causing a pop in the ears. The system was pretty basic. The engines pumped air into the cabin and three outflow valves, one for each wheel well, would permit just enough air to escape to keep the cabin pressure

"I had my share of tyrants, guys who would point to the navigation light on the right wing tip and say, "See the light, co? Well everything to the left of that belongs to me, and don't you ever forget that."

comfortable. At least that is what Boeing had intended.

Copilot Dunlap seemed to have some new tricks up his sleeve. I glanced over to see him fiddling with the pressurization system over his head.

"Whatcha' doin'?" I asked, trying to be casual about the whole thing.

"I heard from the other copilots," he said while fiddling some more, "that you can move the manual pressure control five or ten degrees counter clockwise and lower the cabin altitude a good five hundred feet."

"Isn't that an emergency procedure?" I asked.

"No," he said. "It works."

I sat back and said nothing. In my vast career as a copilot I always hated the aircraft commanders who would automatically tell me what I was doing was wrong, refusing to listen to another

point of view. I wasn't going to be one of those aircraft commanders.

Still, I thought, we were at 35,000 feet and our time of useful consciousness without pressurization would be measured in seconds, not minutes. The manual system required the copilot's finesse on a very small control knob whereas the automatic system was motors, rheostats, and pulleys that removed all human input. The automatic system was used every single flight, the manual system almost never. What could go wrong? What indeed.

The first thing that happened was the air getting sucked out of my chest. Or maybe it was the air crystallizing in front of me into fog. The noise came after. It was a loud roar.

Our pilot oxygen masks were above our heads and I reached for mine instantly, gasping at the cold, sterile air. The next step was to hit a few interphone switches to establish communications with the cockpit crew but that wasn't what I did. I reached, cross-cockpit, over the copilot's head to rotate the manual pressure control full clockwise, restoring automatic control.

The air in my lungs returned, the fog subsided, and things were quiet again.

"Don't touch that again," I said to Dunlap, "without asking me first."

"Yes," he said meekly, "sir."

Nobody seemed to be injured and some of the passengers in back thought it was fun. It was fortunate we were landing at a Sacramento Air Force Base with a similar aircraft, the WC-135. I would have time to think of something to tell home base while the mechanics looked us over to make sure we hadn't broken anything.

What they found was the nose outflow valve caked over with tar and nicotine, years of smoke exhalations from our communications crews sitting right on top of the thing. The outflow valve, for some reason, was sealed shut until the manual system commanded it full open. They cleaned the valve and cleared us for flight.



"And I would be what they all called *the old man*. I was twenty-seven."

"I learned that being a crew commander isn't a popularity contest; sometimes you have to squash creativity for the sake of safety..."

So, a week later, we had a war story to tell and Lieutenant Dunlap had his first "Don't ever touch that" admonition from the old man.

Dunlap learned that playing around with something in the emergency procedures section of the flight manual is best left for the simulator.

Me? I learned that being a crew commander isn't a popularity contest; sometimes you have to squash creativity for the sake of safety.

Good lessons for us both. **JA**



"It was a nice airplane for the time, but the systems were pretty rough by today's standards."