

Love to laugh?

I'd like to confess a personal weakness. It's my soft spot for playful people, especially playful pilots. That's why, when I received a



In Rod Machado's *Private Pilot Handbook*, the author teaches flight in a relaxed and humorous style.

letter from Trans World Airlines Capt. Dave Gwinn many years ago, I knew we'd be friends for life. Here's the story.

I had just completed a video segment for ABC's *Wide World of Flying* on the type of clothing aviators should wear to minimize bodily damage in the event of a post-crash fire (i.e., wear cotton, not polyester). With a blowtorch, and clothing laid out like a tiny flat pilot, I graphically demonstrated how assorted fabrics burned or melted at different rates. Upon opening Dave's letter, my senses were fired up by the strong scent of smoke. Since I do my own home-appliance repair, I'm used to the assault of fresh-made smoke (and stunning electrical discharges, too). Nevertheless, the smell caught my schnozz snoozing. I removed his letter, which had burn marks and singed edges on all sides. As I recall, it began as follows:

"I'm a little miffed at your recent video. I tried your techniques for not burning my shirt and trousers and hurt myself in the process. I'm in the hospital now. Thank you very much..."

Now that's a sense of playfulness and humor that had me "Gwinning" from ear to ear.

What is it about playful pilots—those with childlike, not childish, qualities—that makes them attractive to others? It's a question to which I've given considerable thought over the years. My take is that playful people are happy people and happy people are more inclined to make you feel happy. No need to complicate that logic with fancy psychological rhetoric; it's just that simple. And I know of no major enterprise where appropriate childlike playfulness isn't welcome, even on the flight deck of a major airline.

I had a chance to see this firsthand when I rode jump seat on Capt. Dave's TWA retirement flight in November 1998. During climbout in a Douglas DC-9 from St. Louis, while passing through 12,000 feet, our airplane pointed directly toward a towering wall of clouds. Dave looked back at me and said, "You know, Rod, these are the times that make me wish I had an instrument rating."

When landing in Chicago, Tom Herson, Dave's copilot on this flight, informed him that he could expect a right crosswind. Dave slapped his left leg, patted his right hand, then quipped, "OK, that means we gotta push this leg and twist that arm."

Who wouldn't find that sense of playfulness endearing?

As I see it, there's often much to learn from another's sense of playfulness and humor. Micro-examples and little stories provide us the oft-needed strategies for coping with the rigors of daily living. That's why, when I received a pre-publication copy of Capt. Dave's new book, *Airways and Airwaves: Stories I Tell to Friends*, I realized I had more than just a highly entertaining book about humorous aviation exploits and playful cockpit shenanigans. In a sense, I felt I had an operating manual used for teaching adults how to be a bit more playful.

Anyone who's been around an airline terminal knows how stressful travel can be. So any opportunity for appropriate playfulness is often wel-

comed by all parties involved. Take, for instance, Dave's story of the well-dressed businessman who asked to buy a round-trip ticket. "To where?" inquired the ticket agent.

"To right back here, of course," he replied (and smiled).

Delivered with a playful spirit, this retort no doubt generated a few good laughs for both parties.

Then there's Dave's story about the flight attendant who had a passenger ask for a cup of coffee during a critical boarding time.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we'll only be serving coffee after we're airborne."

"Well," he huffed, "if you were a guest in my house and wanted coffee, I'd see that you had one promptly."

She smiled and said, "Yes, I'm sure you would. And if I were a guest in your house I would not bring 200 friends with me."

Can you think of a more effective way of making a point and diminishing a passenger's frustration?

Then again, there are times when a pilot says something that just begs a playful retort. According to Dave, on his first trip to Las Vegas in a Boeing 707 the flight crew crested the mountains in descent about midnight and saw a billion candlepowers' worth of casino lights radiating out of the desert darkness.

Dave was in awe and said, "Gee, does it always look like that?"

"Nope," said the captain. "Come in here about noon and you can't see any lights at all."

Airline pilots are not the only ones who wish they could retract a statement or two. Flight attendants are equally guilty.

Dave recounts the story told by Capt. George Shanks about flying across Meteor Crater in Arizona. The crater is the hole story of an impact from millions of years ago. Many football fields could easily be submerged in the crater. Apparently, a flight attendant came to the cockpit to deliver coffee and noted the hole, of which the Douglas DC-10 gave a rather expansive view. She asked Capt. George about it. He explained

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that it was Meteor Crater. She stared a moment and commented, "Wow, it just missed that parking lot, didn't it?"

Ouch! Rock on.

As I mentioned earlier, there are few occasions where appropriate playfulness isn't welcome. This includes checkrides, too. Here's the story Dave tells of his demanding twin-engine airline transport pilot checkride with inspector Merrill in 1969: *Merrill was enjoying this. In a holding pattern he failed one engine and issued a climb clearance. Then he failed one VOR receiver. This was single-engine, single-VOR holding and a heavy workload (especially after he denied my request for priority handling).*

Merrill failed the remaining VOR and issued an NDB [nondirectional radio beacon] clearance to MCI [Kansas City International Airport]. On the way, I turned the cabin heaters and blowers on high. This was on a 100-degree day in Kansas. In little time we are both sweat-soaked and the cabin temperature is intolerable. Merrill: "Can you tell me any logical reason WHY we have the heat ON?!"

Me: "Yes, there are so many things failing on this airplane that I want every system operating. If they quit, I'll know."

That really tickled Merrill. I noticed he turned the cabin heaters OFF. Once we arrived at the LOM [locator outer marker], he issued an NDB approach. We had an appreciable crosswind. As the needle flipped we hit one good jolt of convective turbulence. Fantastic! The turbulence bounced my instrument-training hood up and I could readily see the airport. It was an easy task to set up a splendid visual, crosswind final.

Merrill: "OK, go around. That was pretty good."

Me: "Good, hell! That was perfect."

Merrill: "How do you know?"

Me: "Cause I could see it as well as you could."

Merrill: "Let's go home. I give up." [Dave passed, of course.]

Practically speaking, a great deal of humor involves having fun at the expense of others. Fortunately, most of us don't mind being the butt of good-natured humor. This is especially true when it comes to responsible practical jokes. Yes, yes, I know. Not everyone is gifted with sufficient common sense to know the difference between a good-natured practical joke and a hurtful one. I'd

like to think, however, that pilots have a little bit more in the bank when it comes to their deposits of common sense.

In this category, Capt. Dave is without peer. Many of the stories in *Airways and Airwaves* are hilarious recounts of zany practical jokes, in which Dave was often directly involved, often as instigator or at least unindicted perpetrator.

There was the time when Dave was copilot on his friend's (Capt. Mike's) retirement flight and the entire flight attendant crew was Hispanic. Dave convinced all the flight attendants to speak only Spanish to, and in the presence of, Capt. Mike. Then Dave set about convincing the captain that none of the flight crew spoke or understood English. It worked, and it wasn't until the captain parked the airplane for good that he learned of the ruse. Capt. Mike admitted this was the finest memory he could savor from his entire career.

Then there's the wild story of Capt. John, who as a young Boeing 727 flight engineer made a small adhesive sign that was placed on the wall next to him in the cockpit. This wall just happened to also be the wall of the front lavatory. The sign read, "Forward Lavatory Viewing Lens." John would wait for a flight attendant to visit the cockpit, at which time the captain (a co-conspirator) would say, "John, I've got to use the restroom. Take a look and see if anyone is in there."

Of course the flight attendant would say, "You mean you can actually see into the lavatory?"

John would reply with, "Yep, we can't have the captain standing in line back there...."

Without a doubt, this is one of the funniest aviation stories I've ever read (and you'll have to read the book to find out what happened next).

According to psychologists, children laugh an average of 485 times a day. Adults, on the other hand, laugh about 15 times a day. Why the loss? Perhaps the word *mortgage* explains part of it. Losing 470 laughs a day as we stroll into adulthood has to be symptomatic of something, and it can't be something

that's all good, either. That's why it's great to laugh, as well as learn how pilots find ways to play. Dave's *Airways and Airwaves: Stories I Tell to Friends* is worth its weight in punch lines for accomplishing both of those objectives. Check it out online (www.daveginn.com).

 Visit the author's Web site (www.rod Machado.com).

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