



**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



# New Year's Eve

From stress to wonderment

**IT'S 9 P.M. AND** it's dark outside...and cold. Not exactly my best time of the day. I'm a morning person. The only way I can remain alert at this hour is by ingesting massive amounts of coffee.

The two of us have accomplished all the briefings, flows, and checklists that are required in preparation for modern airline flight. The Fokker 100, our chariot for this evening, waits expectantly. Push-back time has come and gone, but the agent says we're waiting for passengers.

"Last flight of the night," she utters sullenly. She has to wait, too. Her shift is only over once we are out of sight. I reach for the public address telephone and make one of those optimistic passenger PAs full of hope, and possibility. Moving quickly through the discussion of the delay, I segue on to more pleasant topics like the flight time and weather in Portland.

Fortunately, I have planned for this moment. I have craftily compelled the first officer, Frank, to fly this leg. By long-standing tradition, the captain flies the first leg of a trip. From then on, we alternate. Knowing my own dislike for late-night flights, I have maneuvered him into this leg.

Eight hours ago, at the beginning of this trip, I carefully counted the number of legs on each day of this four-day trip. The first day has an odd number of legs, the second and third days an even number. Perfect! "Why don't you start out flying today," I had casually offered, knowing I had just dangled catnip in front of a tiger. First officers seem to perceive the offering of the first leg as some sort of tremendous confidence in their flying ability, but in this case, it was only my desire to avoid flying when I would normally be in bed.

Regardless of who exactly is flying this leg, for now, we wait. After a suitable period of time sitting around, the last of the passengers show up, on the run, from some far off corner of this massive airport terminal. At least they look sweaty and disheveled. It makes for a better show for those already on board if they appear as if they have made an all-out effort to get here as quickly as possible. The agent hollers the count through the cockpit door and slams it shut. Why do they always feel they have to slam the door? It closes very quietly with the proper technique.

"Brakes released, cleared for push-back," I tell the unseen ramper on the tug, and we lurch into motion.

**Somewhere over the dark vastness of Vermont's Green Mountains, as we are descending through 30,000 feet, the clock strikes midnight.**

As we begin to move it is time to awaken the two Rolls-Royce Tay engines that will propel us to our destination this evening.

"Spin one."

Frank reaches up and punches the start button for engine No. 1. At the appropriate 20 percent N2, I bring up the fuel lever. Nothing. We wait...we wait some more; no light off.

"Fuel lever cut-off," I call as I move the fuel lever to closed. "Keep it cranking," I tell Frank, as if he would forget. He knows his job better than I do.

**ADVANCED deck**

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1.0 G  
73 kt  
180  
170  
160  
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120  
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-90  
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-140  
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-180  
-190  
-200

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CRS 333 ETE 12:58  
TRK 353 SPD 172 KTS  
WPD W28 DTW 27.3 NM

FUEL OIL ELEC  
1500 GPH PSI TEMP PSI VOLTAMP  
1400 1300 1200 1100 1000 900 800 700 600 500 400 300 200 100 0

79% HP  
23.8 MAN  
2550 RPM  
TACH 254.85

ACI: 5942 G1  
TANKS 500 450 400 350 300 250 200 150 100 50 0  
388 381 384 390 399 393  
24.6 304  
11.7 CHT  
139.3 141.5 139.4 139.8 137.2 136.8

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“Starter cut-out.”

As No. 1 spins down, we start No. 2. Maybe No. 1 just needs a rest; I certainly do. No. 2 starts up merrily and the power settings stabilize. We wait for No. 1 to spin down to a slow enough speed to risk re-engaging the starter. If we hit the starter when it's spinning too fast, we can shear the shaft. The rampers have now disconnected the tug and have disappeared to wherever rampers go when we are not around, but we have a mechanic stationed to observe the engine for tailpipe torching.

“Spin 1.” At 20 percent N2, I bring up the fuel lever...no light off...this time we don't wait so long. “Fuel lever cut-off.” Clearly the gremlins have a firm hold on the situation tonight. We wait 30 seconds.

“Starter cut-out.”

After a few radio calls to compel them to action, the rampers show up again to tug us onto the gate. They're not happy. They were about to head out the door for home, too.

“Ladies and gentleman, we have a slight maintenance delay. We'll have the maintenance staff look at the situation and hopefully be on our way shortly.”

I hear a communal groan from the general direction of the back of the airplane as all 97 passengers express their collec-

secondary to the time required to properly complete all the paperwork.

“The passengers are getting surly,” says the flight attendant as she comes into the cockpit to escape their inquisitive eyes.

“Not as surly as me,” I say, as I wonder for the umpteenth time why I am awake at this hour. It's 10 p.m. Even if we left the gate right at this moment, we wouldn't be landing until midnight. The thought of that is painful to me; I go get myself another black coffee from the galley to fortify myself.

#### WE'RE ON OUR WAY

Surprisingly, after an hour or so, the fates have tired of playing with us, or maybe it's just that the mechanic wanted to go home to his own family and bed, and we are on our way. The gate agent yawns loudly as she slams the cockpit door again. Didn't make enough noise the first time, I guess. The rampers push us back...again. They're surly now, too, along with the passengers, and me. Everybody's surly. Due to the maintenance delay, there are no other airplanes moving on the airport at this late hour. We taxi unimpeded to runway's end for our now very late flight to Portland, Maine.

It is New Year's Eve, and we, as junior

**An immense carpet of pyrotechnics erupts before our eyes. From Montreal to Boston, from Albany to Bar Harbor, horizon to horizon, everywhere below, the earth explodes with celebration.**

tive displeasure. I have no idea if we'll be on our way “shortly” or not, but sometimes being a captain is more about distributing hope than substance. We begin the dance of the on-gate maintenance discrepancy, which begins by finding someone in this vast labyrinth of a company to care about our plight and ends with an interminable delay waiting for the logbook to reappear. The actual time required for the repair is often

pilots, are working on this holiday rather than enjoying the warmth of our own hearths, which isn't as much of a sacrifice as one might think. First of all, no one invited me to a party. And secondly, the one thing you can count on in the airline business is the oppressing sameness. Once you leave your front door, it doesn't matter if it's Christmas, Thanksgiving, or any other day of the year. Everything is always the same. It makes the fact that you're here



at work, instead of home with your family, easier to accept.

It would seem the passengers are in no better situation, as they too will be spending the dawn of the new year with us somewhere over New York state. As I look back today on the mundane events that precipitated the delay, I wonder...was the engine's refusal to start merely happenstance, caused by an insignificant part that had simply chosen that opportunity to fail? Or was it an intentional act by some unseen overseer of fate whose only purpose was to position us to experience the moments to come?

#### SILENT NIGHT, PEACEFUL NIGHT

The night, so calm and peaceful, makes time seem insignificant as the lights of towns drift by below. The plane appears to be hung from the heavens on a wire. Tremendous winter visibility makes the entire northeastern seaboard a feast for our eyes. Does it really matter if it is still today? Tomorrow will surely come, as it always does, with relentless determination. But this tomorrow will be different than any other. Without our conscious awareness, the world, at peace in the 20th century, is about to set foot across the threshold of the 21st.

Somewhere over the dark vastness of Vermont's Green Mountains, as we are descending through 30,000 feet, the clock strikes midnight.

What was that? We cast our bleary eyes toward a small explosion of light on the

horizon. Our tired minds try to grasp just what it is that we see. There, and then gone. Wait, there's another, and another, and then, at once, an immense carpet of pyrotechnics erupts before our eyes. From Montreal to Boston, from Albany to Bar Harbor, horizon to horizon, everywhere below, the earth explodes with celebration, as the last century is relegated to history, and we welcome the future.

Roman candles, mortar shells, and sky-rockets sally forth exploding in red, green, white, and purple. The magnificence of the heavens, moon, and stars is, for once, only a disappointing reflection of the majesty below. The immensity of the display is difficult for us to absorb. Like a bed of wildflowers bursting into bloom on the first day of spring, everywhere we cast our eyes the world is aglow.

We sit in silence, the two of us, too afraid to speak. Too afraid to break the spell

cast by this magnificent display. Our eyes dart from one burst of brilliance to another as we try in vain to take it all in. Trying to absorb the enormity of the here and now and commit it to memory before its inevitable end. Slowly the smaller celebrations ebb to a close, leaving only the cities afire with light. And then, they too begin to wane as the new century becomes not tomorrow, but today.

We sit stunned, unable to process the enormous unexpected display that just played out before our cockpit windows. I feel numb, not knowing what to do or say, as if we too are just passengers in the night, mere stowaways on this voyage of discovery. And then, from the gloom of the cockpit off to my right, my partner utters one word: "Wow!"

Wow, indeed. What else can be said? No words could possibly convey the

emotions, the thoughts, the impact of such a magnificent sight. We, as pilots, view things of great beauty and consider them every day. We oversee, from our perch in the sky, an ever-changing world of majesty, but poets, masters of the spoken word, we are not. Perhaps "wow" is the perfect word to describe this wondrous night flight through darkness and light. Perhaps it is the only word to convey a pilot's-eye view of such grandeur. My lips move to mimic my fellow aviator as I, too, utter the only word that comes to mind.

"Wow!" EAA

**Jeff Skiles**, EAA 366120, has been a pilot for 34 years and has almost 21,000 hours logged. He owns a 1935 Waco YOC cabin biplane that he keeps in Brodhead, Wisconsin. Jeff is EAA Young Eagles co-chairman and was first officer on US Airways Flight 1549, the Miracle on the Hudson.

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