



BY BARRY SCHIFF

Wings in your pocket

A flight is no safer than its pilot

IN 1989, MY SON, Brian, was seated in a Lockheed L-1011 simulator briefing room at the Trans World Airlines Training Center in St. Louis, Missouri. He sat somewhat nervously facing a panel of three interrogators who would help to determine if he would be hired as a TWA flight-deck crewmember. One was a stoic individual from human resources who seldom asked questions but took notes at a furious pace. The



other two were a check airman and a flight manager. They were more relaxed and probed into the young candidate's experience and knowledge. On the wall to Brian's left was a floor-to-ceiling image of the TriStar's cockpit and on the opposing wall, a whiteboard used by instructors during simulator briefings. On the wall behind the pilots and facing Brian was a large poster displaying a photograph of a pair of TWA captain's wings. Beneath the photo was the statement, "The most important wings on an airplane are on the pilot."

During a brief pause in the interview process, Brian sat quietly, wondering what might come next. The flight manager broke the silence, motioned toward the poster, and asked, "What does this mean to you?"

Knowing my son as I do, it would not have surprised me had he responded with something such as, "Well, it means meeting pretty flight attendants, having a well-paying job, receiving free airline passes, and flying neat airplanes all over the world." Wisely he took the question more seriously.

Brian studied the poster for a moment and, according to his best recollection, replied with something such as, "It means that the safety of a given flight is determined more by the pilot in command than the actual wings of the airplane."

The other pilot rocked back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head, and asked, "Would you mind

elaborating?" The pressure was on, but Brian overcame that and subsequent hurdles. On April 28, 1989, and at the age of 21, he became TWA's youngest pilot—and among the most experienced in his class. (A proud father is entitled to mention such factoids.)

I've shown copies of that poster to many general aviation pilots over the years, especially when giving flight reviews. It is useful in generating conversation about safety of flight.

The structural integrity of an airplane (and especially its wings) is taken for granted. It is extremely rare for an accident to occur because of structural failure. The vast majority (typically 75 to 80 percent) are caused by pilot error, which is why the wings worn by the pilot are so much more important than those attached to the airplane. (General aviation pilots symbolically wear wings, too, in the form of the FAA certificate carried in their wallets.) In other words, a flight is no safer than its pilot, and this applies as much to the pilot of a Cessna 172 carrying one passenger as it does the captain of a Boeing 787 carrying hundreds.

The airline captain, however, has significant advantages over the lightplane pilot when it comes to making the right decisions. He has had years of extensive and intensive training. Add to that years of experience flying as a first officer and having the opportunity to learn by osmosis and observation how to conduct an operation safely. (In some cases he similarly learns what not to do.) The airline captain also has a partner in the cockpit to help share the load.

The lightplane pilot assumes the same responsibility for the safety of his ship and his passengers without these benefits. Nor does he have the systems redundancy and reliability built into jetliners. Yet he can become the command pilot of a passenger-carrying airplane and bear the same responsibilities for life and limb with as little as 30 or 40 hours of total time logged.

In a sense, therefore, the lightplane pilot has a greater, more difficult burden for ensuring the safety of flight. He alone makes all of the decisions regarding a given flight, which is why that TWA poster, I think, applies more to lightplane pilots than it does to airline captains.

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