



BY BARRY SCHIFF

## Saving Jobs

Resisting the pressure to get there now

**LAST MONTH** in this space I discussed some obvious reasons why airline operations are safer than single-pilot operations in light airplanes (“Proficient Pilot: Wings in Your Pocket”). A reason not mentioned is that airline pilots rarely are invested personally in reaching a specific destination. It doesn’t matter to them personally if weather causes a diversion or a cancellation. One Hyatt hotel is as good as another. Lightplane pilots, on the other hand, often do have individual reasons that can motivate them to go or continue, even when good judgment dictates otherwise.

A classic example of such “destinationitis” is the 1999 accident involving John F. Kennedy Jr. Because of the need to attend a family wedding at Martha’s Vineyard, Kennedy departed Essex County Airport (New Jersey) at night, flew into deteriorating visibility over the Rhode Island Sound, and continued seaward without a visible horizon. He, his wife, and her sister perished as the result of spatial disorientation.

All of us are susceptible to peer or internal pressure to begin or continue a flight when we shouldn’t. In 1969 I was flying a Piper Arrow from Nairobi to Nanyuki, Kenya, for a vacation at the Mount Kenya Safari Club. The weather was lousy, and towering cumulus clogged our route north. I commented to my friend in the right seat, Dr. Jim Taylor, that we likely could circumnavigate the weather with an easterly detour. He looked at our wives in the backseat and then scanned the darkening horizon.

“Let’s go back,” he said.

“But, Jim. We’ve already paid for our rooms.”

He then said something so simple and so profound that it has affected my aeronautical decision making ever since. “You know something? In a few years we won’t know the difference.”

During the late 1980s, my son, Brian, was a flight instructor and corporate pilot working his way through college as an aeronautics major at California State University at San Jose. On May 10, 1988, he had been working for ACM Aviation and was assigned a charter flight that involved ferrying a Piper PA-28RT-201 Arrow IV from San Jose to the Carmel Valley Airport (now closed), picking up two passengers, and flying them back to San Jose.

After Brian had landed at Carmel Valley, his two passengers approached the aircraft with numerous large boxes of computer equipment. Brian told them

to stand by for a few minutes while he recalculated the weight and balance to account for the unanticipated and heavy load. The taller passenger paced impatiently and kept breathing over Brian’s shoulder, apparently hoping that this would shorten the delay. Brian calculated that the airplane would be within limits, but he was uncomfortable taking off at maximum-allowable gross weight from an unimproved, 1,850-foot-long runway toward rising terrain on a 90-degree, calm day.

He advised his passengers that the airplane didn’t have the performance needed to operate safely from that airport with that load. The same irritated passenger became even more so and said, “We’ve done this before with another pilot and had no problems.”

Brian replied that he was not that pilot and offered, “How about if you drive to Monterrey Airport, and I’ll pick up you and your equipment over there. It’s only a 20-minute drive, the runway there is long, and it will be a safe flight.” The passenger was fuming but had no choice but to yield. Brian wouldn’t budge. The other passenger said nothing.

Not one word was spoken during the flight from Monterrey to San Jose or while taxiing to the ramp. A lineman unloading the Arrow told Brian, “The boss wants to see you in his office.” Brian knew that he was headed for the chopping block but was philosophical: “I would never work where I’m afraid to be fired.” He was nevertheless prepared to defend himself.

He entered the office and was told to close the door and take a seat. “How much do we pay you, Brian?”

“Fifty dollars a day to fly the Arrow,” he replied.

His boss pondered that and said, “We are going to increase that to \$100 per day. Not many have the courage and conviction to put Steve Jobs in his place and keep him there. I’m proud of you.”

Brian’s boss and the owner of ACM Aviation, A.C. “Mike” Markkula Jr., was the other passenger on that flight. Markkula also had provided early and critical funding for Jobs and his partner, Steve Wozniak, and was a CEO of Apple Computer.

Brian was only 20 years old at the time, but he had learned at an early age the legal and moral meaning of being pilot in command—and being the final authority with respect to the conduct of a flight. **AOPA**

**BARRY SCHIFF** has been an aviation media consultant and technical advisor for motion pictures for more than 40 years.

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