

A Close Call . . .

*~ By the late Captain Dick Young,
Western Airlines Retired*

I think all pilots from the day they solo until forevermore have an ego problem, it just comes naturally. After all, they have achieved something that most people never experience. This ego is more prevalent at times, if the situation and company he happens to be in brings it out. If it gets too prevalent the 'Supreme Chief Pilot,' (who is over all pilots) calls him in for a droning down or we will call it an ego adjustment.

Older pilots do not struggle with it as much as the younger ones. The following story is about one such instance, and it is about myself.

The year was 1941, and I was working as a flight instructor for Boeing School of Aeronautics, then a subsidiary of United Air Lines. The school was located in Oakland, California. They had a special division for future airline pilots located in Tracy, California. Nothing but future pilots for the line were enrolled there, and they all including instructors where required to wear an airline uniform.

I had an airplane of my own, a very attractive low wing, a good eye catcher around airports. I kept it in a hanger at the Modesto, California airport not too far from Tracy where I worked. I was at Modesto working on my airplane and flying it some on December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed. I heard the news on my car radio on my way home that Sunday afternoon.

We all showed up for work on Monday morning with Pearl Harbor in our minds. Soon after that, news came, that all civilian flying on the west coast up to 110 miles inland was to cease. The airplanes were disabled, such as removing the propellers or magnetos, for national security reasons.

This caused the Boeing School to pack up lock, stock and barrel and move inland to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Every instructor took an airplane along with a student, and headed for Cheyenne. I spent Christmas Eve in Elko, Nevada on my way to Cheyenne with my student. We started up Flight operations in Cheyenne on the 2nd of January, 1942.

My wife and our belongings drove to Cheyenne later in January. We found a small basement apartment. We had been married about a year and a half.

The next thing was to get my airplane out to Cheyenne. To do this, I would have to get out to the coast and over to Modesto. I needed to get the propeller and magnetos installed, and then obtain the special permit to fly it out of the "Defiance Area."

I could ride the airline to Oakland area as a crewmember which would require me to wear my uniform, the same as the airline pilots wore. I carried a leather flight jacket that I would wear when not traveling on the airline. In addition, I would travel light, just carry my jacket and a shaving kit. I got to Oakland late in the day, put on my jacket, and caught a Greyhound bus to Modesto arriving late that night.

I got up early the next morning, rounded up the propeller and magnetos, got the engine running and made a little test hop around the field. First, I had to go to the defense department and get a permit to fly out of the area.

In checking the weather en-route to Cheyenne, I found it had deteriorated over Reno and Salt Lake City, so that caused me to change my flight path. I had to take the long way around the bad weather. So, I would be traveling through Bakersfield, Kingman, and Albuquerque to Pueblo, Colorado. Then I would fly into Cheyenne from the south. I left Modesto and made it into Kingman, Arizona. Here I stayed overnight and left the next morning. I had a late start, around 10:00 AM because I had a little work to do on my plane before I could leave. I arrived in Pueblo late evening and debated about going on to Cheyenne after dark or staying over and leaving early in the morning. I decided to stay overnight as I was getting tired, and had a long day already.

The airline agent at the airport sort of ran things around there. They had a small office for their operations and a waiting room for passengers. In those days, the airlines operated Lockheed 12's, a full passenger load was just six people. The agent told me I could leave my airplane parked right in front of their gate as long as I was going to leave early in the morning before their first flight of the day arrived. I assured him I would be gone before that time. "Do you have a place I can hang my uniform coat?" I asked.

"Sure," he responded "hang it right there in the closet with ours," which I did.

I got a room in town and a good night's rest. I awoke early and had an early breakfast, and felt just fine. It was a nice, clear morning, pretty chilly, and January 25th, 1942. I could feel the egoism coming on. The morning was just right for it.

I got out to the airport in plenty of time to leave before the airline came through. There were a few people gathering maybe a dozen or so. Just right for a little ego to start showing. I walked a little taller in making my preflight—gassing up, checking the oil, kicking the tires, etc. My feet didn't even touch the ground, I was walking on about a half inch of air, and "ground effect" under my feet. Everyone was watching me while waiting on the other plane to arrive. I started up the engine to let it warm up. I'm ready to go, I'm going to "take off" and split the ozone, heading for Cheyenne.

The last thing to do was to go in and get my coat from the closet, which I did. I was very careful to carry it thrown over my arm so that all the observers could see my wings, and the stripes on my sleeves. After all, I was an instructor, and I was teaching those airline dummies what it was all about. Everyone is watching now, I step up on the wing, open the cockpit door and toss my coat in behind the seat, and as I do, I notice one of those saddle bag pockets had something in it. I never carry anything in them, after all they don't look good all puffed up. Oh well, I thought, I will check them when I get home. But, then I had a second thought, and had better look now.

So I reached in behind the seat, again very careful, to hang it over my left arm, so everyone can see my wings and stripes on my sleeve. Standing tall and straight, I reached in the pocket with my right hand, and pulled out the object—holding it out about arms length. I am dazed and in complete shock. I look up and down the

ramp fence, and sure enough, EVERYONE was still watching me, on this clear, crisp morning.

There I am holding in my right hand one of those old fashioned "Girdles" that women used to wear to make them look slim and trim and hold those nylon stockings up, garters and all! Suddenly, all ego is gone, vanished completely. I stepped down off the wing and started back to the airline office. This time I did not even open the gate, I just walked under it.

I ran into the airline agent coming out, and I said "If this is someone's idea of a joke or a prank, I am not entering into the spirit of this thing. I came very, very close to going home with that 'Thing' in my pocket!"

He asked, "Where did you get that?"

I replied, "Out of my pocket, I could have walked right into my kitchen at home and pulled that 'Thing' out of my pocket."

He reflected for a second and said. "Do you know what happened? The city just hired a guard to watch the airport at night, and his wife comes out here and stays with him at night. She must have gone in the closet in the dark and put it in your pocket by mistake, thinking it was his."

I just went out without another word, got in my plane, no ego showing at all, slightly red face, and a few inches shorter. Leaving for Cheyenne as quickly as possible with as little fan fare as possible.

When I arrived at Cheyenne, my wife of only a year and a half was there to meet me. I immediately told her about my trip and the events of the morning in Pueblo.

I don't know for sure if she ever really believed me. One thing, I am sure of, if I had gone home and pulled that "Thing" out of my pocket, in front of her. The only thing left for me to do would have been to leave the country, and maybe join The French Foreign Legion.

A close

Call for sure!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ➔