You Sure This Ain’t Greyhound?

If all of your airline travel has been in the last 15 to 20 years, you’re used to it. The crowded airplanes and the overweight, baggy shorts clad, backward baseball cap wearin’, duffel bag totin’, high-top gym shoe yahoos, with everything they own in assorted carry-on bags, any one of which is in violation of airline travel policy. But the airlines seldom, if ever, enforce their own policy for carry-on bags.

You probably have a perfect mental picture of that overweight guy in 15B, trying to jam a 36-inch bulging duffel bag into the 24 inch compartment directly over your head. The bare midriff between his tank top and cut-offs brushes up right against your cheek. His tattoos are on every exposed body surface. Topped off by a shaved head, a goatee, and a ring tastefully piercing his eyebrow.

That’s way different than how it used to be. I remember my first airplane flight. It was probably 1962. My grandmother and I were going to fly to Jacksonville to visit my favorite aunt, who was the mother of my favorite cousin, Kathy. Kathy was gorgeous, a blond with a sunny personality. I’d see her each summer at my grandparents’ farm when all the relatives gathered for a reunion. God, she got more beautiful each year.

Mom had asked me to get off from my summer jobs to accompany Grandma to Florida. She was going to stay for a few weeks. I’d only stay for a few days, then fly back to work at the paper mill where, I hoped to earn enough money for my junior year at Ohio State.

Making sure Grandma got to Florida safely had an added bonus. I’d also see Kathy for a few days. Could I get off from my job? Of course I could do it.

Mom bought the tickets from the travel agent in town. We were actually going. No paper mill drudgery for a week. And glorious days under the same roof with Kathy.

The big day! I put on my only suit, with a white shirt and tie Mom and Dad drove us to the airport. We checked in at the counter, and went to the gate. Most of the people in the airport were dressed up in their Sunday best. In the early 60’s, you got dressed up to fly. And, there was an excitement in the air. The fortunate few were going to fly to fascinating destinations. The rest were there to see them off, and maybe to see that new marvel of the modern age, the jet airliner. Most of the airplanes flying then were still propeller driven.

Our flight to Jacksonville was on a TWA Constellation. A big, tri-tailed, four engine propeller job. The stewardesses were dressed in suits and tasteful little hats. The pilots in the cockpit their uniform jackets on. The flight engineer, seated behind the co-pilot facing a huge panel of dials and instruments, had his jacket on too. The crew’s formal dress code gave me, and probably the rest of the passengers, added re-assurance. It signaled they clearly had no intention of getting those fine uniforms dirty in some flaming plane crash.
Our flight to Jacksonville was about half full. Grandma and I had a row of seats to ourselves. Shortly after takeoff, the young and very professional stewardess served us a full meal; chicken, potatoes au gratin, green beans with those little onion rings, bread, and coffee, tea or milk. On white cloth napkins. And this was what it was like just in tourist class in those days. I could only imagine what it was like for the folks in first class.

Into the ‘70’s, flying was an experience I looked forward to. Generally, there was an open seat next to you. You had your choice of window or aisle. Reasonably good food. Attractive stewardesses. And one dollar martinis. On a long flight to the west coast, it was possible to get several hours of work done, have a couple of drinks with dinner, and read a good book. All with plenty of legroom and a place for your briefcase in the empty seat next to you.

Fast forward to today. Every flight is over booked. Surly desk agents won’t make eye contact. Airports are jammed with humanity. Most look like they just rolled out of bed to get to the airport. Unshaven. Dressed for yard work. Pulling a U-Haul sized suitcase on wheels plus a backpack or a bulging shoulder bag. And they intend to carry-on all of it. Do they even consider checking those bags to their destination? Are you kidding? And risk losing all their luggage, and its precious contents which I can only imagine to be a complete collection of Disco Hits of the 80’s on 8-track.

Nine times out of ten now, you get jammed into the middle seat. The biker with the shaved head is on your left. A Jenny Craig dropout is on your right. He’s yelling into his cell phone. She’s gobbling French fries out of a McDonalds bag between her knees.

What happened to turn air travel from one of life’s small pleasures to hell on earth? The Democrats. Jimmy Carter. De-regulation. The idea to make air travel affordable not just for business executives or the wealthy, but for the little guy.. Open it up for everybody. Make flying as inexpensive as TAKING THE BUS!

My job with a Fortune 500 company allowed me to do a lot of traveling by air. We lived in Atlanta. My sales territory was the Carolinas and both Virginias. Getting in and out of some of the towns there wasn’t easy with commercial flights.

One evening in 1972, I had a 6-hour wait for a flight out of Roanoke to the small town of Lewisburg, West Virginia. The number of commercial flights was limited. But a guy at the bar told me about a charter service he used to get around the area. The charter service was over the border in West Virginia. Just for the heck of it, I called and asked how much they’d charge to come get me and to take me to Lewisburg. They said $60. That was less than the commercial fare. And, they said they could be over to get me in 40 minutes. I said, that’s a deal and decided to do it. Canceling the commercial flight I had booked. Was easy in those days. The airlines were flexible with changes and cancellations. Trying to get an airline to make a last minute change today is tougher than finding a sympathetic parole board for Charles Manson.
Within an hour, my charter plane landed and pulled up to the terminal. I immediately figured out why it was only $60. The plane was an old 1940’s vintage tail dragger. It had seen a lot of use, judging by the oil smudges on the engine housings. The pilot opened the door, got out and sauntered into the terminal. His battered cap was pushed back on his head. His jacket was open exposing a yellowed white shirt. His hands were in his pockets. I walked over to him, carrying my fashionably thin briefcase and suitcase.

“You Mr. Friel?” he asked in a booming voice.

I nodded yes.

“Great,” he said, with a big smile. “Nice evening to fly. Come on up in the cockpit with me. You can ride in the co-pilot’s seat.”

Heck, this was pretty cool. My own private airplane and pilot, and I get to ride up front. Why didn’t I think of this before?

He quickly went through his checklist, and showed me where to plug in my headphones so I could listen in to the tower. When I was a kid, I’d wanted to be a pilot, so this was going to be an experience.

We took off. First time I’d ever experienced taking off up front and being able to see directly out the front of the plane. As we climbed out over the hills surrounding the Roanoke airport, he pushed his headphones off, and began asking questions about what I did, about my family, my job. He rambled about the scenery below, about his career. The guy was a marathon talker. I was his new best friend. He seemed to be paying attention to everything but his flying. He was turned facing me, left hand casually on the wheel, right arm draped over the back of my seat, as if he was kicked back in his living room.

We flew over remote mountains to Lewisburg, a small town nestled in the rolling hills of southern West Virginia. But we had to land in the neighboring town of White Sulphur Springs. I had heard the runway there was a little tricky. The approach was between two small mountains, and recently a small plane had crashed on the approach. All aboard had been killed. I was beginning to hope my pilot would pay a little more attention to his flying.

We started down. The plane went into a sharp bank to the right, so that I was looking almost straight down. My pilot kept up his discourse, talking now about the Model T Ford he was rebuilding. We leveled out and started down toward the hilltops. Ahead, I could clearly see the two mountain peaks, the narrow opening between them, and the runway in the distance. Captain Bob continued to talk, casually glancing out the windows from time to time. He hardly paid attention to the business of landing. He didn’t seem concerned at all about the treetops coming closer and closer.

I was paying attention. Those trees seemed to be coming up pretty fast. And that gap between the mountains was narrow! The wingtips looked like they would brush the trees
on both sides. I started to say something, but thought better of it. Hell, he was the pilot. He was a lot older than me, and obviously he hadn’t killed himself yet.

We dropped through the gap. Miraculously, we didn’t hit anything. I started to relax. Then I noticed we weren’t lined up with the runway. We were going to miss it!

Captain Bob continued his relaxed banter, oblivious to the impending disaster. We were just moments away from a fiery, cart wheeling crash on the rutted muddy grass.

I couldn’t keep it in anymore. I blurted out, “Captain Bob, we’re going to miss the runway!”

He didn’t bat an eye. In that same casual voice, he said, “Hell, boy; I never use the runway. Landing in the grass saves wear and tear on the tires.”

I thought about immediately pulling out my Goodyear card and begging him to use the runway this one time, just for me. I would buy him a new set of tires that same day.

Captain Bob landed that old airplane as gently as he’d lower his granddaughter into her crib. We brushed over the grass at around a hundred miles and hour without so much as a bounce. And Captain Bob just kept up his running commentary.

Flying as much as I did back in the ’70’s, I got used to the occasional rough turbulence I encountered in storms at altitude. One day, I was flying from Toronto to Winnipeg. We took off under threat of thunderstorms. I was in an aisle seat near the front of the tourist section. My row mate in the window seat was a small, elderly gentleman who obviously didn’t fly much. He was clearly nervous. His white knuckles gripped the armrest as we climbed through a light buffeting to altitude. About an hour into the flight, the buffeting picked up. We were into some rough air on the fringe of the thunderstorm, visible off to the right. Lightning flashed in the clouds in the distance. My row mate looked around nervously. I could hear his labored breathing.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash of lightning off the right side of the airplane. The sound system in the airplane ceiling began to buzz loudly. Even I was startled.

My row mate grabbed my arm and screamed, “What was that?” His nails dug into my arm.

I casually replied, “I think the plane just got struck by lightning.”

He turned to me, his face drained of color. His lips quivered. “Then why don’t the pilots tell us something?”

I probably should have taken his concerns a little more seriously, and said something comforting. Instead, I casually answered, “They’re probably dead at the controls.”
His eyes got wide. He began to whimper.

I immediately softened and told him that lightning strikes weren’t uncommon, and rarely did any serious damage.

I doubt the old fellow ever flew again.

I have been through a couple of emergency landings over nearly 40 years of air travel, although nothing particularly serious. One time though, I thought I was on my final flight.

Several of us were on a morning flight from Toronto to Vancouver for a meeting. We were flying Air Canada, on a 727. It was a big plane with two engines on either side of the rear of the aircraft, and one tucked into the base of the tail. We were about an hour into what was normally a four flight. The stewardesses had just cleared the breakfast trays, and I had settled back in my aisle seat to read the Toronto Globe and Mail. Other passengers had reclined their seats to nap. The sun was streaming in through the small windows. The only sound was the white noise of the three jet engines. A smooth flight, well before the era of in flight phones, laptops, or air rage. Three more hours to Vancouver. Three hours to relax, read, or nap. Not a bad way to spend a morning.

Suddenly, there were three rapid-fire explosions in the rear of the plane. I jerked the newspaper in surprise, tearing it down the middle. I looked up and around to see what had happened. Other passengers were instantly alert.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Four more explosions. My mind went blank. I froze in my seat, expecting the plane to begin disintegrating. I had never experienced anything like this. This couldn’t be happening to me. Air crashes only happened to other nameless, faceless people.

Bang! Bang! More explosions. Was the plane dropping? I looked around again. A stewardess struggled up the aisle, steadying herself on the seatbacks. Tears streamed down her face. Now I knew we were in trouble. Desperate trouble.

I looked forward. Passengers gripped their armrests and braced themselves, anticipating the break-up of the airplane in flight. But there was no screaming. No visible panic. Just quiet fear and dread on the faces I could see.

What was going on? Why didn’t the pilots say something?

I glanced out the window. The sun was shining. A bright and beautiful day 35,000 feet over Manitoba. And it occurred to me that this is how it would end. Within moments, there’d be another series of explosions and the rear section would began to tear away. There would be a roar as the plane decompressed. We’d be sucked out violently from our seats, into the collapsing ceiling and jagged metal of the dying airplane, to fall seven miles to our deaths. I hoped it would be quick, and that it wouldn’t hurt too much.
My thoughts turned to my wife, and children. At that moment, Agnes was probably in the kitchen doing dishes. Matt and Jennifer were in school. My mother was at home in Chillicothe, Ohio. I was struck by a black feeling, a deep sadness that I’d never see them again. Agnes would soon get a call from the airline, informing her of my death. She would go to school, and somehow break the news to Jennifer, 9, and Matthew, 7. How would they take the news? Agnes would call my Mother, and tell her that her son was dead in a plane crash in the wheat fields of Manitoba. All this flashed through my mind. The images were clear. The feeling of immense dark sadness deepened.

I will never forget the emptiness of that feeling, the dark helplessness of impending loss, the absolute certainty that I’d never see my wife, my children, or my mother ever again.

And I am still struck by the absence, at that moment, of any panic or screaming. We all waited for the end. The seconds passed, turning to minutes.

There was a click overhead. The Captain keyed his mike. “Folks, we think things have settled down for now. We had some problem with our number three engine. We’ve shut it down, and the flight engineer tells me things look stable. So we’ll continue on to Vancouver unless we have any more problems.”

I could hear the sighs of relief, and nervous laughter as passengers began to loosen up. I turned to my row mate, who flashed me a strange grin. I suspected I had the same goofy look on my face. We were going to make it after all.

Later, the pilot came back on the intercom. He told us that even though he didn’t expect any more problems, emergency crews would meet our flight at the Vancouver airport. He told us how to assume the emergency landing position in our seats, to put the pillow in our laps, and face down in a braced position. Trying to further lighten the mood among the passengers, he said, “You’ll have something to tell the folks at home.”

We made our approach into Vancouver. The flight deck told us to assume our emergency positions. We neared the runway.

As we were about to touch down, I glanced out. There were the big yellow crash trucks below, lights flashing. My adrenaline instantly picked up. The 727 passed over the runway, and settled. A smooth landing. I could picture in my mind the crash trucks accelerating to full speed to catch up with us in case anything happened.

As the plane decelerated and began to roll to a stop, all the passengers began applauding. We were safe. We would walk away. After hundreds of thousands of miles in the air, it was the only serious incident I ever had. But the experience of being, at least in my mind, in a near death situation, is something I’ll never forget. It was the beginning of my personal journey to understanding the meaning of the Three Priorities of Life and Business: Family is #1, God is #2, and Work is #3.
The company I worked for in Denver in the 80’s had a private plane that we used for flying to our remote branches, or bringing customers into Denver for meetings. The plane was a turboprop King Air with room for eight passengers and a crew of two. We had a full time pilot named Drew. Tall and lanky, he was a perfect image of those legendary bush pilots who first flew the mountain routes. Marlboro Man good looking. Great mustache. Great sense of humor. Great pilot.

We always kidded our customers about taking an “insurance poop” before boarding our plane. It didn’t have a bathroom; just a pee tube we had lovingly named “Sweet Lips”. You went to the rear of the cabin, knelt down on your knees, and urinated (carefully!) into a funnel shaped device with rubber lips around it. Good thing most of our customers were men. We weren’t sure how that design would work for women.

We always had beer on the plane for those trips. So Sweet Lips got a workout, especially on long flights back to Denver in a headwind from points east. Sometimes, those headwinds were so strong, it appeared the traffic on the interstates far below was actually going faster than we were.

One day, one of our salesmen told a great story about bringing one of his customers to Denver from Grand Junction. Grand Junction was a six-hour drive west from Denver, through the mountains along I-70. Using the King Air, it was a forty-minute flight across the Rockies. It was a spectacular flight day or night. The scenery below was rugged, generally snow covered and forbidding, but incredibly beautiful.

According to that salesman, named Jim, he’d arranged for one of his customers, Butch, to fly to Denver to look at a piece of construction equipment. Butch was a housing contractor, and our company sold, among other things, the kind of front-end loaders Butch used in his business. Jim had driven over to Grand Junction, making calls along the way. He had arranged for our pilot, Drew, to meet him and his customers at the Grand Junction airport late in the afternoon. Drew would then fly Jim, Butch, and his partners to Denver for dinner and a machine demo the next day.

Things began to unravel the afternoon of the trip. Drew had clearance problems getting out of Denver, so Jim and his customers repaired to the Junction airport bar to kill time. And to drink beer. A couple of orders of nachos later, along about 4:00 o’clock, Drew was still on the ground in Denver, so the boys ordered hot dogs. They thought by the time they got to Denver, checked into the hotel and drove to a restaurant, it might be as late as 8:00 o’clock, and the hot dogs would be just the ticket to tide them over. Besides, hot dogs go great with beer.

Finally, the King Air landed in Junction, and Drew helped the customers and Jim load their luggage. As usual, Drew had the big cooler full of Coors, Miller Lite, and Bud. After strapping in, they took off for the forty-minute ride to Denver.
As Jim tells the story, about fifteen minutes into the flight, Butch started to get a look of discomfort on his face and squirmed in his seat, as if to get more comfortable. He leaned over and whispered something to Jim.

Jim immediately unbuckled his belt, got up and eased forward to the cockpit.

“Drew,” Jim said, “you got to land this plane. Now. Butch has to take a shit.”

According to Jim, Drew looked at him incredulously. He gestured toward the windshield and the mountain peaks below. “Land? Where the fu*k do you expect me to land?”

Jim said, “Ol’ Butch tells me he’s never had to take a shit this bad. He’s pretty uncomfortable.”

Drew said, “Tell Butch it’s 20 minutes back to Junction, or 20 minutes to Denver. See what he wants me to do.”

Jim went back and consulted with Butch. Jim said Butch’s face was red. His legs were crossed, and his eyes appeared to be bulging. After a hurried whispered conversation, Jim went back up front to talk to Drew.

“Butch says you have got to find a place to land. Right now. He’s about to explode.”

Jim said Drew raised his hands helplessly. “Jimmy, there ain’t an airport between here and Denver. This airplane needs nearly a mile of straight, level pavement to land on. Look down carefully. Do you see ANYTHING that comes close to that? Tell Butch to hang on for 20 more minutes. I’ll declare an emergency, but the tower’s gonna ask what kind of emergency I got. When I tell ‘em, they’re gonna laugh their asses off.”

Jim went back to Butch, and told him it’d be at least 20 minutes before they could land and get him to a bathroom.

At that, Jim said, Butch looked at him with disgust; grabbed Jim’s briefcase, opened it, emptied out everything— all his papers, calculators, cigarettes, onto the floor. He eased out of his seat, wrestled his pants down, and shoved the empty briefcase under him.

Jim said it was a good thing it was one of those deep briefcases.

When they finally landed in Denver, Butch was the first person off. Didn’t wait for Drew to open the door. He opened it himself, strode rapidly toward the terminal, threw the briefcase into a trash barrel and kept walking into the terminal without looking back.

I never asked Jim if he got the order for the loader.