

A photograph showing a brown felt hat and a yellow patent leather shoe resting on the white metal surface of an airplane wing. The hat is a fedora style with a dark band. The shoe is a pointed-toe pump. The background shows the dark, textured ground below the wing.

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A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Charlottesville

By Mike Jones

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In earlier editions of this paper, I have mentioned those odd circumstances where personalities, nature, or technology conspire against slipping-the-surly. This tale is another in that memorable aeronautical tradition, ever more vivid because it just happened a few days ago.

By the way, before this tale unfolds any farther let me assure you all the names have been changed except mine. My neighbors have long memories. And guns.

It all started with a phone call from Dwayne, a big wheel at one of our smaller local charter schools.

“Do you remember when you donated a flight in your airplane for the animal rescue people?” he asked ebulliently. “I heard it was great. Do you think you could do that again, for my school’s annual fund raiser?”

I replied I was out of the fund-raiser business. I have donated a dozen flights over the years and few have turned out well. Many of them have been postponed for weather. One lady had me take her and her daughter to the coast, which was fine, but then expected me to return and pick them up a week later – two charity flights for the price of one! Another passenger brought their chihuahua along and the little guy was so scared he puked during turbulence. Most non-flyers don’t get weather problems and they certainly don’t understand weight-and-balance.

Dwayne was neither discouraged nor dissuaded, explaining this would be their biggest fund raiser of the year. He said the event was über-well attended.

“I’ll fix it up. We’ll make your flight the most glamorous donation of the evening,” he explained glibly. Then he punched below the belt.

“People will be really impressed to see your airport,” he mewed.

He must have seen my LinkedIn page. I’ve been working with the management of my local airport for seven years and we’ve made great progress. Our goal has been to make the airport relevant to the non-flyers in our community, so they can appreciate the airport even if they don’t use it themselves. We have two busy flight schools, a “professional pilot” program with the local community college, a small but exciting air show, Young Eagle events, and a Halloween “trunk or treat” that brings thousands to the airport. When Dwayne said kind things about my home-drome, how could I say no?

My almost-sainted wife says I’m a slow learner. She may be right.

I sent Dwayne a glistening professional photo of my sturdy Cessna and a goofy selfie of my grinning visage, along with a straightforward write-up detailing my contribution. I promised I would fly up to four humans, not exceeding 800 pounds, to any destination within an hour’s flight, and bring them home the same day. (See? I did learn something!)

Dwayne must have spent decades in marketing. He takes my plain-Jane verbiage and turbocharges it. He picks a unique destination with a special appeal to his audience: a mountain-top winery near Charlottesville, Virginia. He arranges a wine-tasting event and persuades the winery to toss in a seven-course lunch. He even arranges a limo ride from the airport to the mountain top; no dusty taxi for these high rollers. He glams-up the whole package on a glossy poster loaded with adjectives and exclamations. By the time he was through I was ready to buy the donation myself.

Several weeks later, the phone rings again. Dwayne is more excited than an Alka Seltzer stuffed into a ginger ale. “Can you believe it?” he baited me. “We got \$7,000 for your flight. Everybody was talking about you! The bidding was wild!”

Holy schmolely, Batman, \$7,000 for an airplane ride? This is Centurion, not a Citation. I better get a haircut.

Try, Try Again

The appointed day draws near. The passengers are emailing me, panting with excitement. The Weather Channel paints a gloomier picture: cold fronts running into warm fronts, convection, possible tornadoes. The guests ask if we can “fly around the storm?” Regretfully but firmly, this greybeard PIC postpones the trip and takes the heat. That’s why the guy in the left seat gets paid the big bucks.

Everybody’s schedule is tossed in the air: the passengers, the winery, the limo company, everything. But we rebound, regroup, reschedule.

The next available date is perfect... the plane will just be coming out of annual and be in tip-top condition. Until the needed parts don’t arrive on time.

The third time is the charm they say, and everything looks great until one of the guests gets deployed for some special military training. At this point, even optimistic Dwayne had his head down on his desk.

September is a great month for flying; cooler air, fewer thunder-bumpers, forests changing colors. My guests ask to re-schedule again, and sacré bleu, it all comes together. The plane is tip-top, the schedules all fit and the long-range forecast is picture-perfect. We lock and load, and on the appointed day it is a magic flight north to Charlottesville.

My passengers are two couples. Nobody stretched the spandex, which was a relief for me and the Cessna's weight-and-balance. In fact, they were Hallmark Channel lovely: prosperous, professional and polite. The taller husband had soloed years ago, so he requested the co-pilot seat. The more heavy-set husband sat next to his long-legged and high-heeled wife, who filled the center row with a wide-brimmed hat so soft and elegant I wanted to pet it. The petite brunette gracefully slipped into the way-back row.

We Finally Launch

We launched briskly into the sky, with oooohs and ahhhhhs all around. For an hour and twenty minutes we peered at the mountains and the bottoms of valleys, houses, rivers and tobacco farms. They had a thousand questions about planes and piloting. We arrive at our destination with a perfect "chirp-chirp" landing and things got even better: the limo already was there. My passengers departed, thrilled, giddy and laughing.

For the next six hours, I chewed through some office work at a borrowed desk; it was a very productive afternoon and nothing was wasted.

But wasted were my passengers when they arrived back at the FBO. Somehow, I had neglected the math: vineyard + wine tour + big lunch = schnockered.

Their afternoon had been splendid, maybe too much so, starting with champagne and cheese when they arrived. There was a tour of the winery with wine sipped right from the casks. The elaborate lunch featured special vintages paired with raw oysters and other delicacies. The day finished with a lengthy visit to the winery's gift shop where small glasses of refreshments help credit cards fly from wallets.

Not Fast Enough

My pie-eyed passengers arrived at the airport ninety minutes late, waltzing into the FBO with open glasses of wine. Voices were loud and giggly, everything was soooo wonderful. The high-heel shoes had disappeared and they wandered the FBO barefoot. Shopping bags clanged with heavy glass bottles. There were numerous and lengthy visits to the lavatories. Were they in any condition to fly?

As the sun drifted low in the west, eventually I poured their wine down the sink and then into the Cessna. The seating arrangements were jumbled; the tall husband moved to the middle row; the blonde stumbled into the way-back third row seats; the quiet, heavy-set husband sat next to me. Cradled in his arm was an open bottle of merlot. From my perspective, the gaping wine looked like he was riding shotgun on an old-fashioned stagecoach.

ATC gave me an excellent routing and quickly we were on our way. The bottle of merlot looped through the cabin until it was vanquished. Everything was soooo funny. I remember reading *The Odyssey* in high school, and Homer had a famous quote I did not understand at the time: “[it is] the wild wine that sets the wisest man to sing, to laugh like a fool, to drive a man to dancing...” I just didn’t know it could happen in a Cessna.

The tall husband tried to thank me for the flight, several times, but his tongue wasn’t up to the task.

“Mike, this was really really,” he started several times, but couldn’t find the predicate in his fuzzy brain. “We were talking, and this is ah, it’s ah, really.”

“I’m glad I’m in the back,” the blonde yelled. “I’m gonna take a nap.” She stretched out on the Centurion’s tiny bench seat, shoeless feet gynecologically high in the air.

My stolid co-pilot started fussing with his pockets. Out popped a container of chewing tobacco; a sour, acrid scent filled the cockpit.

“So Mike, what do you call a cow with no legs?” the tall husband asked me as the plane burst into laughter, knowing what was coming. I had no clue, and he answered his own question.

“Ground beef!”

A moment later, my co-pilot spits a wad of brown chewing tobacco saliva into the empty wine bottle as he looks across the horizon at the quickly-setting sun. I pushed the power higher. This was no time to try to save a few gallons of gas.

“So Mike, what did the fish say when it ran into a wall?” I was ready to take a razor to my wrists. “I give up,” I answered.

“Dam!” came the punchline.

With the help of a gentle tailwind, we made good time back to Pinehurst. I had started my descent into the pattern when my round-shouldered co-pilot started to shake; his shoulders hunching upward. He was struggling to control his gag reflex. He turned away from me and all I could think about was my brand-new leather interior. It was a close-run thing, but the moment passed without further excitement. He returned to watching the flight, face white but clothing dry. I abbreviated my approach, greased that landing like none before and taxied to the terminal at take-off speed.

My plane and I are well-known at the airport, and the line guys marshalled us perfectly. They chocked the nose wheel and perched their golf cart under the wing of the plane, perfectly positioned to pick up passengers and luggage. All exactly right and super-professional.

Then their jaws dropped as the doors to the plane popped open like a clown car at the circus. My boozy friends oozed onto the tarmac. The heaving co-pilot dropped to his knees, his liter bottle of tobacco juice clanking heavily

on the tarmac. The taller guy swung his legs out like a punch-drunk prize fighter, pulling a bag of wine after him. The brunette was more composed while the blonde, refreshed from her nap, launched into a giddy and slightly incoherent explanation of the day to the amusement of the befuddled line guys. My passengers were cheering and laughing.



There are whole weeks that go by without the line guys getting hugged by passengers, but that evening my boozy foursome made up for any deficiencies. Without invitation, three of them squeezed into the airport golf cart, along with purses and bags of wine and the line guy driving it, leaving the tall guy to lurch his own way to the FBO.

Before the line guy drove them away, he paused and looked at me quizzically, his eyebrows asking, what have you done to these people? All I could do was shrug. It wasn't my party.

Epilogue

The next day I am back out at my hangar, cleaning the bugs off the airplane and reorganizing the interior. I like things just a certain way, and I enjoy putting them into order. As I crawled through the airplane, I wondered how my

four passengers were feeling. I found a high-heeled shoe under the middle seat and a cork under another. My prize trophy was that beige wide-brimmed floppy hat, scrunched into service as a pillow in the third row. That's one souvenir I will treasure forever.

About the Author



Mike Jones is a 30-year Cessna pilot with more than 3,500 hours in his logbooks. He also is the chairman of the airport authority at the Pinehurst Airport and looks forward to learning the ways in which other airports are enhancing their relevancy to their community. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.