



Prologue

The first week of March 1990 was one I will never forget. But not for the reasons I had hoped.

The sacrifices I had made for the previous twelve years had just begun to pay off. I was a newlywed, married to a lovely woman with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life. We had just spent a wonderful vacation with friends, skiing in the magnificent high country of Colorado.

I left for work with optimism and hope for our future, knowing that I was about to finish probation as a “new hire” pilot with Northwest Airlines. My evaluations from previous Captains had all been excellent, which meant I was passing my probationary period with flying colors.

My wife Deborah and I were looking forward to my full pilot status and a healthy raise, finally putting behind us the low first-year pay an airline pilot receives. We were so close to buying our dream house on a lake in Nashville, Tennessee, that we were giddy with excitement. Everything was going our way. We had nothing to fear—or at least, that’s what we thought.

And then my world crashed down around me on the morning of March 8, 1990.

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Outside it was a cold, wet morning in Fargo, North Dakota—but not as cold as inside the cockpit, due to the working relationship between the Captain and the other two pilots of our jet. That morning I was the Flight Engineer on a Northwest Airlines Boeing 727. As the plane entered the dark



runway for takeoff, then raced down the runway, accelerating to attain takeoff speed, my insides were ripping apart in turmoil. I watched as the First Officer pushed the three engine throttles forward. The air inside the engines was being compressed under tremendous pressure—as were the thoughts overwhelming my brain. Fear bounced between my ears; the situation was rapidly spiraling out of control.

With the engines developing thousands of pounds of thrust, the aircraft rapidly approached the speed necessary to develop sufficient lift on the wings to become airborne. The shaking of the airframe paralleled the shaking inside me. I was aching to scream “Stop!” and return to the gate, but I could not form the words. I’m convinced no one there would have listened to me, anyway; nonetheless, had I known what was waiting for us later, I would have done things differently.

Something that rarely happens in a modern commercial airliner was taking place. The crew coordination, communication and teamwork so important for the safe outcome of a flight had been completely compromised days earlier by the poor leadership of the overbearing Captain. This officer, rude to the point of being downright mean, had nothing but criticism to offer anyone. The icy air hanging between all of us comprised a dangerous element in the cockpit.

The gear handle was raised and the landing gear rumbled into the wheel wells. The airspeed increased dramatically as the drag from the main gear was eliminated from the slipstream. As the airplane climbed higher into the dark morning sky, I contemplated the unfolding situation. Earlier, my repeated requests and desperate attempts to prevent this flight from ever taking place had failed miserably. Now everything I had ever worked for was at stake. My short airline career—a career that I had made so many personal sacrifices to attain—might end with this flight.

The reason: I was sitting in the cockpit of a commercial jet unsure whether there was alcohol running through my veins. I had done everything I could do to get this airplane properly pre-flighted and ready for takeoff—but I had failed to preflight myself. My life-long struggle with alcohol had resumed, and this time I had carried it into the cockpit with me, compromising my own personal value system. And I was not alone. At the time, I could not remember exactly how much I, along with the Captain and First Officer, had drunk the night before—but it had been considerable. Now shame, embarrassment, even anger washed through me, followed by a

feeling of total, absolute defeat. Thank God we had not been discovered—yet.

So there I sat, part of a dysfunctional crew, working under a “leader” who was himself out of control. I was trapped in a situation I did not understand, and my decision to take this mess into the air had been one of the worst of my life. Just a few days before, my wife and I had experienced deep joy and happiness as we looked forward to a bright future together. Now, on this dark March morning, I was a pilot on a flight unlike that made by any three pilots I had ever heard of: we were at the controls of a commercial airliner with innocent passengers on board, and we were intoxicated.

We were flying drunk; and Federal officers had already been alerted. Everything that could go wrong was about to.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people thank.

My wife and children were the underwriters of this effort. My kids asked, “Mom, what is wrong with Dad?” during the time I wrote about being in prison. Deborah is a special woman. As a newlywed, her life as she knew it fell apart, yet she found it in herself to support me, stand by my side, and endure many years of pure, emotional Hell and doing without. She is an angel, and I am fortunate to love her and have her as my wife.

For three years I lugged around my manuscript and wrote in hotel rooms, libraries, parks, airplanes, and the dungeon. The dungeon is where Deborah sent me. It is also (now) sacred ground. I was banned from the house due to the cacophony of papers I continually left strewn all over our living room. It was my idea to get two giant card tables and put them together against the wall. That straw did it, and the camel was toast. I finally moved into the workshop-basement office, where it is cold in the winter and warm in the summer—but it was all mine. It is here that I experienced the pain, loss, and suffering all over again. I also felt deep joy, elation, and gratefulness, realizing over and over how blessed I am in my life. I reached a place of forgiveness and understanding, and only wish for others to do the same.

My family beyond Deborah and the kids is incredible. My mother wrote me a letter or sent me a card every day I was in prison. My father, in spite of impossible odds, continued to encourage me to pursue my dreams, as he always has. My sister Barbara has been my mentor and friend in recovery, and helped guide me back along some of the treacherous roads I had

traveled. My sister Brenda and her husband Dick have also been great supporters, and were there for us when the chips were way down. My brother Jim and his wife Annie remain encouragers, and help to keep me focused on what is important in life.

Buddy Stockard was my first sponsor, therapist, and now good friend. He found me at the lowest point in my life, taught me how to live sober, and accept life on life's terms. He is the best example of what good sobriety can do. Buddy has served countless others with his wisdom, giving away with love what he knows to be true.

I have the deepest gratitude and appreciation for all the fine people who took time out of their lives and drove several hundred miles to visit me in prison on Saturdays. The Boshiers of Nashville—a true aviation family—were my staunchest supporters. Geoff, Carole, Hailey, Jeff, Robin, Antony, Tracy, Kurt, Tony, Tish, Mac, and all my family members who traveled such great distances to warm my heart in the shadows of the pen, your kind gestures will never be forgotten.

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My friend and mentor Captain Stan Smartt and his wife Marcia have been exceptional supporters of my spirit, and have provided me with unlimited counseling and gentle, patient guidance through the lowest valleys a man could walk through. He took me fishing when I had nothing else but pain and rejection to look forward to. Stan has been telling me for years to write this book, and he will receive the first signed copy. I named my son after him.

Dr. Audie Davis has dedicated his life to helping pilots recover from alcoholism and drug addiction. As Chief Aero surgeon for the Federal Aviation Administration for more than thirty years, he helped save countless pilots' lives, and then aided them to return to the cockpit healthy and sober. Davis is a leader in the field of recovery, and his encouragement, support, and kind words written in the Foreword of this book motivate me to reach out to others who still suffer.

Thanks also to Chris Morton, my new friend in East Tennessee. I didn't know how to do much with a word processor, and Chris got me started. Daniel Burnham in Dallas printed the first part of the book and helped me believe in the story I was trying to tell. Dr. James Milam, author of *Under the Influence*, directed me to my first editor, Cliff Carle. I owe Cliff a great deal

of thanks. We edited this book five different times, and each time he brought out more from me than I ever knew I had. He was great to work with.

Someone once told me that finding a good publisher is like running around outside hoping to be struck by lightning. I was struck by Theodore P. “Ted” Savas, of Savas Beatie LLC. He read my manuscript, called me on the phone and exclaimed, “Joe, what a story!” The passion in his voice was everything I hoped it would be. A mentor of mine, Francine Ward, author of *Esteemable Acts*, told me, “Joe, you need to go with the person who is passionate about your story.” She was right. The Savas Beatie team is passionate, tireless, friendly, and hardworking. Ted assigned Captain Rob Ayer, a professor at the US Coast Guard Academy as my editor. Rob helped developmentally edit the manuscript and worked closely with me on the final edits. He really made the book flow smoothly and quickly. Marketing director Sarah Keeney, together with marketing assistants Veronica Kane and Tammy Hall are setting up a great campaign. I am thankful for all the help and hard work that Sarah, Veronica, and Tammy are doing for me.

I would also like to thank Oasis Audio for producing an audio version of *Flying Drunk*. Val Laolagi, web designer and artist, has done a great job on my website, which is located at www.flyingdrunk.com. I hope this site will point people in a positive direction to change their lives.

My friend, mentor, drum judge, and fellow Cavalier Gary Moore is the author of the simply outstanding book *Playing with the Enemy*. Gary encouraged me to pursue a great publisher—his own, Savas Beatie—and offers endless advice and encouragement for my success whenever I need it.

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Family and friends are really all that matter in this life. God has blessed me with a family I love, a profession I love, and the best friends in the world. I pray that you will enjoy this book, and share it with someone you love with the greatest hope, that they too can make a change in their lives.

SPLOOIE!

Joe Balzer