

Memories Of A Wet Christmas

By Sam Longo AME A&P

One of the bleak realities of working for the airlines is never ending shift work. Full coverage, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year means that for most employees, Christmas is just another workday.

It was always the luck of the draw, working in a union environment, whether you worked the holidays or got them off. Booking off vacation time was out of the question unless you had close to 100 years seniority. Unfortunately in the early '80's I had about five whole years under my belt, so I was destined to work whatever schedule I was assigned. In those days, Line Maintenance worked a six/three rotation, of six days, six evenings and six midnights, each separated by three days off. Not exactly designed for a happy, stable, circadian rhythm, but hey, that was part of the deal, while working for the nation's airline.

Over the course of my ten year stay at Air Canada, as luck would have it, I worked seven Christmases, most of which were uneventful regular workdays, however there was one particular year that I will never forget. I was of course scheduled to work the midnight shift, and was planning to join my family for Christmas morning festivities right after work at my parents' place.

It had been abnormally mild that year in Toronto leading up to the Christmas season, and as I drove to work the rain was coming down with a foreboding fury. With temperatures hovering just above the freezing mark I secretly hoped for a warm secure night in the heated hangar, with perhaps a short nap thrown in late in the shift as a comfy Christmas bonus. Unfortunately fate was not planning a festive fairy tale, but rather a nasty numbing nightmare.

As often happened at Christmas, the Air Canada base in Montreal decided to give Toronto its usual Yuletide gift, diverting as many aircraft as possible to YYZ for overnight storage. With three times the usual number of aircraft on station we were swamped, with airplanes parked in every nook and cranny of the ramp. The shift foreman rapidly fired off the names encompassing most of the mechanics on our crew and sent us packing for our "ramp in the damp" evening entertainment.

It was a long cold wet night, with the thought of the warm hangar a distant memory, as we worked on aircraft in the freezing rain ensuring that they were repaired, inspected, heated and cared for in preparation for their morning departures. Returning to ramp headquarters at gate 91 towards the end of our shift, three of us were summoned and assigned a last minute tow job from the hangar to the ramp. We reluctantly climbed into the maintenance van for the ride back to the hangar and subsequently hooked up a Boeing 727 dragging it back with us to the already overflowing ramp. Jubilant that our ordeal for the night was finally over we hopped into the tow tractor and headed back to the hangar for our 8:30 departure. As we roared down Golf taxiway bound for freedom we were met head on by a company DC8 under tow. In his haste for our imminent departure, our driver, wet, tired, soggy and groggy decided to go around on the tarmacs grassy edge to clear the DC8's wingtip and within seconds was instantly cognizant of his error in judgment. The heavy tug, weighing many thousands of pounds, was instantly buried right up to its axles and going nowhere fast.

We were now working overtime as we slogged through the mud to the edge of the taxiway. Cold and fed up we flagged down a ramp truck and hitched a ride back to the hangar. Then, after securing some heavy-duty tow chains and another tug, we returned to the scene of the crime to retrieve our crippled sunken treasure. By the time our rescue attempt was complete, after spending yet another hour in the unrelenting rain, we returned to the hangar, too cold, tired and muddy to care. We didn't even bother to claim any overtime. As we cleaned ourselves up and changed in the now deserted locker room, someone miraculously produced a bottle of Brandy. We each downed a healthy shot of the fiery hot liquid, instantly warming our frozen innards, while toasting to a very Merry Christmas. Later that day, thoroughly exhausted, I fell into a deep sleep after feasting on turkey with family and friends.

Now that I am retired, that "ramp in the damp" ordeal is but a distant memory. Still, I can't seem to forget that cold miserable Christmas night in YYZ and often think of the thousands of other airline employees still out there working 365 days and nights of the year, so that we might fly away to visit the people we love. As the Holiday Season approaches, I raise my glass to each and every one of those workers. May your midnight snags be few, and all your Christmases warm and dry! Cheers.