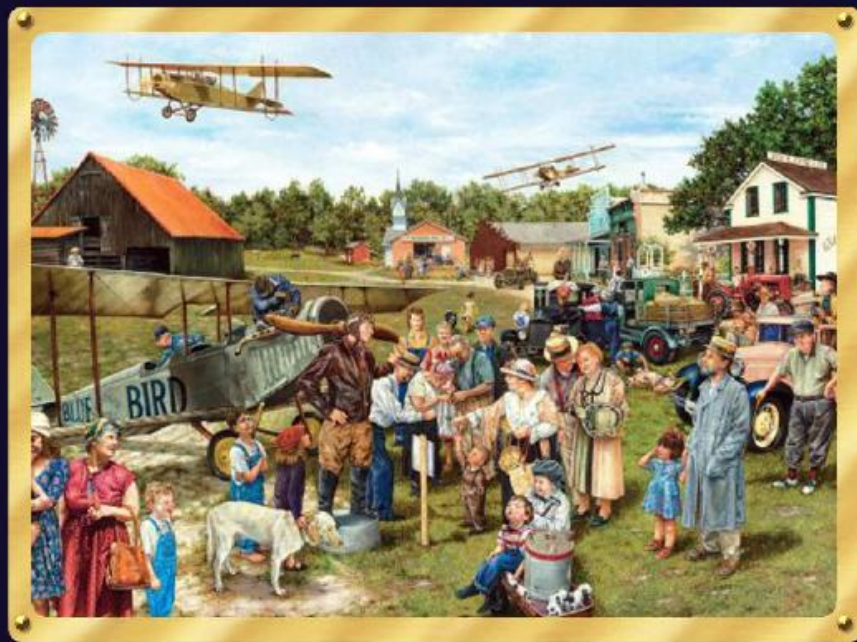


LIFE OF AN AVIATOR

SHORT STORIES

by
Robert Novell

The Hercules Pilot from Queens





The Hercules Pilot from Queens

Part One

(The Miami Oyster Bar)

I do not recall if Mateo was third or fourth generation, but I do remember him telling me that his family had immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1900s and that his father's family owned, and operated, a few apartment buildings. He was a true New Yorker who loved his city and had a passion for the science of language and its development in different cultures. Mateo spoke English, Italian, German, and French; he could get by, when necessary, speaking Spanish and Portuguese. So, how does a talented linguist, or polyglot, like Mateo suddenly abandon his first love to pursue aviation?

It started when he was offered the chance to become a Marine **Aviator** just prior to graduating from NYU. He wasn't quite sure why he chose aviation, but I think it had something to do with the gold wings and the Dress Blues----not completely sure about this but I can confirm that he was a slave to fashion and perhaps the gold wings on a set of Dress Blues would have been an attractive addition to his wardrobe.

Mateo finished boot camp, Officer's Candidate School, primary flight training in Pensacola, and ended up being assigned to fly the A-4. It was not long before Mateo opted for the comfort of the Hercules cockpit and was assigned to an active squadron at Cherry Point, NC. Funny how fate would have him in the Hercules, instead of the A-4 Skyhawk or the A-6 Intruder, because it is the Hercules that would control his future after the Marine Corp...an interesting twist of fate.

I first met Mateo when I was working in South Florida flying the Lear series aircraft. I first ran in to Mateo a Friday evening at an oyster bar on Miami Beach. When I arrived, and sat down at the bar, it just so happened that Mateo was sitting five stools down from my chosen seat telling the bartender a joke that must have been good because the bartender was still laughing when he walked down to take my order. I asked for a cold draught beer and asked the bartender to share the joke with me once he recovered. The bartender then turned to Mateo and said, "Tell this guy that joke you just told me because no one can tell a joke like you." Mateo smiled, got up from his stool, walked down to the barstool beside me, and had a seat. Mateo told me the joke he had just shared with his friend the bartender and while the joke was funny, Mateo's mannerisms when telling the joke were priceless. Now I know why the bartender wanted Mateo to tell the joke. Mateo laughed, I laughed, and the bartender started laughing again when he heard us laughing. OK, I would share the joke with you, but I have always had a problem remembering jokes regardless of how good or bad they were. That having been said, Mateo, and I began a conversation, and as luck would have it, airplanes were mentioned and suddenly a two-minute joke turned in to a two-hour conversation. Mateo and I talked about our past jobs in aviation, the type of aircraft we had flown, where we wanted to be in five years and -- the most interesting part of the conversation for me -- Mateo's current employment. He was working for a small company in St Lucia, an island in the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean, flying the Hercules. Since my interests in aviation were moving toward long-range transport aircraft so that I could expand my horizons beyond the continental US, I began to interrogate Mateo about the possibility of employment.

Mateo then revealed to me that he was ready to jump ship and move to a new company because of issues with the owner over a change in his crew base and pay. He was originally hired with the understanding that he could live anywhere he

wanted, which of course for him was Miami Beach, but that had changed. He was being told to move out to the island, which is an expensive place to live, and was not being offered an increase in his base pay. Mateo had an apartment overlooking Miami Beach, so he was not too keen on the idea of moving but when he was told about his base pay not increasing, he knew it was time to go.

The conversation then turned to his future employer, Southern Air Charter, and what he would be doing. It turns out that he was being hired by a third party to work for Southern Air and would continue to live in Miami Beach but be on call to perform on-demand charters in to Central and South America. Not a bad deal considering he was getting five thousand a month base pay for a fifty-hour guarantee and one-hundred dollars an hour for every hour he flew over fifty. He was told to expect 50 to 100 hours a month flight time but there would be some months where he would just sit. I then asked if he had to bid his position with the other crewmembers and he advised that he, and three others, were exempt from that requirement.



Pilots are always looking for another job with better pay on bigger airplanes. I have heard many different stories about people's employers, but this one was a bit far-fetched. Mateo saw that I was not buying off on his story and said, "I am not sure but I think there is a three-letter government agency sponsoring this program because they requirements were specific in that you had to be a prior military **Aviator** on the Hercules, have a Top Secret clearance, and be available on short notice 24/7. I met the requirements, and they especially liked that I was single with no ties to slow me down." OK, and then I asked, "Are you sure that what you are being asked to do is legal?" He then simply remarked that he did not believe a FAA-Certified Air Carrier would allow their airplanes to be used in a way that

would jeopardize their position with governmental agencies. I responded with, "Let me know how it turns out and remember if you have a contact at Southern Air I would like to get an interview especially considering they are going to start operating the Boeing 707." Never hurts to ask, right? Mateo and I finished a few more drinks, decided to call it a night and promised to stay in touch.

It was maybe six months later that our paths crossed again. Same oyster bar, I think the exact same bar stools, and the same conversation about airplanes and future expectations. It was not until we had finished our first beer that I asked the question of the day, "How goes the new job?" Mateo paused for a moment, had a sip of his beer, and said, "I was hoping you had forgotten about that conversation." I could tell he was uncomfortable, so I simply asked how much beach time he was getting. "OK, let's get this out of the way," he said. He then proceeded to tell me that the money was good, the people involved were difficult to deal with, he did not particularly care for the type of flying he was being asked to do, and the customer for the cargo was too demanding. He went on, "Now, if you ask me anything else I will simply give you the same response so let's talk about the job interview I have next month with Tower Air."

Part Two

(Bonzo, C-123s, and Tower Air)

Wow must not be his cup of tea I thought. OK, "Tell me about Tower Air and can you get me an interview too?" Mateo laughed and said, "I think I better get hired first before I start asking for favors from the Chief Pilot." "Fair enough," I said, "But tell me about Tower Air."

Tower Air is a New York based carrier that primarily competed with EL AL, the Israeli airline, on routes in to Europe and Israel. They had their own terminal at JFK, and they were expanding service to Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and San Juan Puerto Rico. I think Mateo told me that they only operated the 747 -- I could be wrong -- but I knew for sure, there had to be a New York connection in there somewhere. So, I asked Mateo to share with me the connection that got him the interview. "I can't tell you that but what I will do is introduce you to the guy over in the corner and later I may share a little more with you about Tower Air. " OK," I

said, “But remember that I need your Southern Air connection because I would like to have an opportunity to fly the 707. For sure, I would like to be part of a 747 operation if you think Tower Air would consider hiring an unattached Lear pilot from South Florida who wants to continue to live in South Florida.”

As we moved from the bar to the table where Mateo’s friend was sitting, I noticed that this gentleman was on the phone. I asked Mateo if we should wait and he said, “He is always on the phone; no problem.” So, Mateo took a seat, signaled me to take a seat, and then said, “Bonzo this is Bob, and he wants to know your life story.”

“Like hell he does,” Bonzo responded as he looked me over---“How goes it Mateo and how is flying in Central America?” Mateo shrugged his shoulders and responded by saying, “What’s up with you old timer?” Bonzo looked at me, extended his hand, and said, “Who are you?” I replied, “I am just a lonely Lear pilot looking for a better job, flying a bigger airplane for more money.” Bonzo stared at me for a minute and then said, “Have you ever flown a C-123?” “No,” I answered. Bonzo immediately shifted his focus back to Mateo and asked him the same question and received the same answer.



Bonzo then shared with us that he had to pick up an airplane -- I assume it was a C-123 -- in Arizona and take it south. However, he had told his contact that he had in fact flown this type of aircraft, but the reality was that he had not. Bonzo then paused for a moment and said, “JJ...I am going to call JJ and get him to go with

me. If he can get the engines started, and I suspect he can considering he is one of the best damn Flight Engineers ever produced by the Air Force, I can fly it. OK, I am going to call JJ, so you guys need to give me a little privacy. “

That was obviously Mateo’s cue to get me and leave. We did. I left maybe 15 minutes later, and I never saw Bonzo again. I would ask Mateo, from time to time, if his friend Bonzo was still making deals to fly airplanes he had never flown before and he would always shrug his shoulders and say, “I don’t know and I don’t want to know. Next question please.”



Mateo went to fly with Tower, continued to live on Miami Beach, and we continued to run in to one another from time to time. Mateo did in fact pull some strings and got me an interview with Southern Air, but I ended up working for a company in the panhandle of Florida before Southern called me with a class date for initial training. Now you would think that this would be the end of my story, but it is not. The next time I saw Mateo, about a year after moving to the panhandle of Florida, I was in Brussels, Belgium at the Sheraton and guess who was checking in at the same time I was checking in?

Mateo and I had dinner that night and he brought me up to date on his life. Turns out Mateo had stayed with Tower for a year or so, upgraded to Captain, and then started shopping around for something better. Tower had been a good experience for him -- he had flown a lot -- built a lot of time in the 747 as well, but Tower was not an up-and-coming airline, and he was not going to wait for the doors to close before he started shopping for his next job.

Mateo had become good friends with a German pilot at St. Lucia who was now flying for Cargolux. His friend had married a young lady from Luxembourg, received his citizenship, and a family friend of his wife got him the job at Cargolux. Now he was ready to pull Mateo across and Mateo was ready for a change.

In Luxembourg, they speak German, French, English, and Luxembourgish. Mateo was at home speaking all of the languages except Luxembourgish, which he was studying, had the necessary experience in the 747, and was ready to leave his Miami Beach apartment behind which meant there must have been a considerable pay increase involved.

Mateo had already had the first interview and was returning for the final review of his qualifications, to meet the President and a few other required officials, and get the handshake. I wished him well even though I knew it was a done deal, and told him to let me know how things turn out.

It was about six months later, when I was in Miami on vacation, that I ran across a mutual friend of ours in my favorite Oyster Bar. He advised that Mateo was living in Luxembourg, flying as a first officer on the Boeing-747-400 for Cargolux, and loving life in the cold country. I tried to contact him by email, but I never received a response. I assume that he has found a new home, and he is not going to get me an interview.



My best to you Mateo, and hopefully one day when you revisit your old stomping grounds around Miami Beach you will stop by and buy me a beer. By the way, I am working on my French, and my Spanish is getting good so if you have connections in France, Spain or South America let me know.

Remember: Pilots are always looking for a better job, flying bigger airplanes, and making more money. If you are ready for a change, then strike up a conversation at your local watering hole with the person a few stools down. You may be surprised where it takes you and remember - if they have oysters, order enough for you and one more.