

Regrets by Joe Reeves

Introduction to “Regrets”

After World War II the scheduled airlines pilots were mainly ex-military pilots from the war. Years after the war, this condition persisted. However there were restrictions. In the 1950s, 60s and well into the 1970s, you could not be hired by the “big seven” scheduled airlines if you were over 30 years of age. That was because the pilots union’s rules prevented it. That meant, if you were a well-qualified ex-military pilot, with lots of experience, you were probably well over the age of 30. Military pilots, approaching the age of 30, had to make up their minds about leaving the service and apply for a scheduled airline job. Lots of experienced pilots that had been in the military for 20 years or more couldn’t apply for an airline job when they became civilians. In 1978, the Airline Deregulation Act opened up the pilot hiring practices. However, most of the WWII pilots were over 50 and well started in their second careers. It was too late. During the decades in the 1950, 60s and early 1970s, when well qualified pilots quit their military careers and they were over 30, there were several flying careers they could pursue: non-scheduled airlines (freight carriers), corporate flying, flight instructors in schools, becoming an FAA pilot inspector and pilot for a big flying club.

In the 1960s the airlines were transitioning from props to jets and they were selling their prop airliners cheap. People joined groups and bought the airliners, mostly DC-6s and DC-7s. Often more than a thousand or more people made up a flying club and would fly often to resort destinations. These ex-airliners would hold around 100 passengers.

You have read about Walter Keys in “Diverted” (on the Metro Bridge Club website). When he finished his military career in the late 1960s, he was in his early forties and could not apply as a pilot for the scheduled airlines. He eventually found a job with a flying club based at Baltimore, Maryland. Here is a fictional short story about Keys and his 2nd career.

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Walter Keys, Wanderer’s Flying Club DC-7 captain, dialed the Farmington, New Mexico, visual-omni range (VOR) into the receiver’s control unit mounted just above his pilot’s seat. In order to focus on the numbers he was trying to dial in, he found it necessary to lean back and to the side placing his eyes farther from the unit. When he could see well enough to rotate the controls until 115.3 was displayed in red back lighting, he resumed a normal sitting posture. Keys couldn’t remember having trouble focusing on the overhead panel before and he’d been flying the airplane for over two years. Damn it all to hell, he thought, I’m probably going to need glasses one of these days. What a pity, in my early forties and going blind already! The doc hadn’t mentioned a thing to him two months ago when he took his semiannual Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) Class One flight physical but these civilian docs don’t check near vision that close, he realized. Read the 20/20 chart with either eye and that’s all that’s required. Not exactly like those annual U.S. Navy flight physicals where they expected you to stay forever young.

“Hi Captain.”

Keys turned a bit in his seat and looked in the direction of the female voice addressing him from just behind the cockpit. It was Madeline Schubert, one of the ninety-seven Wanderer Flying Club members aboard the former airliner. She was smiling. Dick Small, the copilot, glanced toward her for a moment then quickly returned his attention to the cockpit. Small’s face became expressionless.

“Oh - uh - hi Madeline, how are you this morning?” Keys replied politely.

“Fantastic.”

She smiled and reached toward the cockpit. For a second, Keys thought, she was going to put a hand on his shoulder but she placed it on his metal seat frame with her fingers close enough to touch him. He eased aside an inch

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or two, trying to avoid contact. Keys smiled, trying to be courteous but businesslike in front of the crew or any other club members who might be nearby. It was difficult because, only a few hours ago, he and Madeline had been totally naked and engaged in some very intimate sexual acts in his hotel room. In fact, they had spent the last three nights doing it. One problem was that it was against the club's policy. The rules of the Wanderer Flying Club, which owned the DC-7 and was Keys employer, strictly prohibited any fraternization between club members and flight crews. Another problem for Keys was that Madeline wouldn't go away.

"Where are we Captain?" Madeline asked, still smiling.

"Uh - why uh - we're over New Mexico and uh - we'll uh - be over Farmington in about ten minutes."

"How high are we?"

"Fifteen thousand feet."

"How fast are we going?"

Keys caught on that she just wanted to talk to him. If he kept answering she would keep asking.

"Two hundred and seventy-five knots," he replied. He turned his attention to the cockpit, adjusted the autopilot and tuned some radios. He dialed the ADF receiver as though busy tuning a radio facility. If he had found one he wouldn't have used it because the VOR and distance measuring equipment (DME) receivers were providing more than enough information to track eastbound on Victor Airway 210.

Keys realized that he had let this affair with Madeline get totally out of control. She was trying to take over his life. If he had known that she was going to be this way he wouldn't have become cozy with her in the first place. Someone in the club would soon get suspicious and start asking questions. Maybe they already had. Small knew everything but Keys wasn't worried about him. He selected the copilot for each trip himself and Small wanted to hire on for additional trips so he wouldn't say anything. Small wasn't the type to blab anyway, Keys judged. However it was only a matter of time before this thing between himself and Madeline got out. It was a shame too because, in his two years with the Wanderers, this was the only the third time he'd been careless with a female club member. It hadn't been easy staying out of trouble though because he'd been propositioned many times, by some pretty good lookers too. Madeline caught him in a weak moment on the club's Bermuda trip two weeks ago. She was blonde and pretty, had a nice body and appeared to be in her upper thirties. Just a few pounds extra here and there, Keys observed, with a delicious looking set of knockers and nice legs. She had invited him into her room after a swim and he hadn't been there five minutes before they were in the shower together. She let him know that she was "fixed" and he could do whatever he wanted. After three days in the sack they finally came up for air. Then the flight returned to Baltimore. Just as he had always done, Keys wanted to avoid any lasting relationship. He'd had fun and was ready to move on but Madeline had other ideas and made sure she was aboard the Las Vegas trip.

On the first night in Vegas, Keys had tried his luck at the craps and blackjack tables with no success and was going to turn in about midnight but was too restless to sleep. He decided to do a few laps in the hotel pool then soak in the hot tub to relax. He did the laps and had just stepped into the spa when Madeline appeared and took a seat in the hot water. The bikini she wore didn't leave much to the imagination. He had known she was on the passenger

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manifest but didn't talk to her on the flight west having decided to keep his distance. She had said hello earlier that evening in the hotel bar but he was on his way to the casino. They soaked in the spa and talked a while but when Keys started to leave she did too and asked him if he could help carry some of her things. She had a towel and a folding chair and a sack of other stuff. He had decided earlier that evening that he would resist her advances but now his willpower weakened. Maybe it was because she looked good in the bikini. He could see everything through the wet cloth. When they got to her room, which was on his floor, he opened the door for her and she asked him in for a drink. He suspected he was making a mistake but stepped into the room anyway. He put her things on the floor and she poured two glasses of wine. They sat on a sofa and talked then she excused herself and went into the bathroom. A moment later she came back into the room wearing nothing but a smile. Keys had to admit that she was great in bed.

Keys got back to the room he shared with Small before daylight. He slept a few hours before the phone rang. It was Madeline again. Small answered the phone then grinned as he handed it to Keys. Keys didn't want to chance being seen visiting her room any more so Madeline came to his. Small, who was being only partially reimbursed for his expenses, moved to another room. Keys wanted to keep his copilot happy and told him he would personally make up the difference in Small's cash outlays when the trip was over. The copilot, who was between regular flying jobs and anxious to be hired by Wanderers on a trip by trip basis, accepted Keys' arrangement without protest.

Keys managed to keep the affair more or less under wraps for the remaining two days in Vegas even though Madeline spent both nights with him. He worried about how to break it off with her before being found out and without invoking her wrath. If he got fired he could probably find another flying job with one of the non-scheduled airlines but it wouldn't be like the Wanderers. He'd been working for them for two years - ever since he finished his twenty and got out in 1969, all except for the month that he worked as a copilot on the Partyboy DC-9. That would have been a fantastic job but it didn't work out. Partyboy sold the airplane and he was out of a job almost before he started.

Keys found out about the Wanderer hiring through Chuck Gert, an old friend of his from years ago in a Navy transport squadron. Gert called him in Muncie, Indiana the same day that they told him he'd be out of a job with Partyboy. Chuck said that he was the Wanderer's captain on their DC-7 but was quitting to take a job with the FAA as an examiner and offered the job to Keys. Keys had never flown a DC-7 although he had an airline transport rating in one. When he got type rated in a DC-6 five years before they had stamped the DC-7 rating on it also.

"Nothing to it," Gert said over the telephone, "its just an oversized DC-6 with Constellation engines on it and you have flown Constellations. You come to Baltimore and I'll check you out in an hour. Better hurry though because I'm leaving next week."

Keys had wasted no time. He was in Baltimore next day. Gert acted as copilot while he made a few takeoffs and landings and familiarized himself with the DC-7 which the club had purchased from Worldwide Airlines in 1966. Gert had been their captain for three years and now that job was Keys.

There were over two thousand people in the club. A hundred members made a flight to somewhere about twice each month, sometimes more. It was a life style that Keys liked. They always chose the best vacation spots. In winter

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they liked to fly to places in the Caribbean or South America. He'd made the flight to Hawaii twice and they hit Las Vegas several times a year. Keys knew a few guys he could call on for the copilot slot and the club had hired two full time mechanics for maintenance. One of them acted as flight engineer on trips. Keys could see the handwriting on the wall though. Club membership had begun to dwindle, airline fares were decreasing and the DC-7 was starting to show its age. The job definitely wasn't a lifetime proposition. Keys had thought about looking for another flying job. He'd even considered going up to Alaska to become a bush pilot. Its something he'd always wanted to do. In fact, going to Alaska might be the best way to shed Madeline.

Keys saw the VOR indicator flip from "TO" to "FROM." He leaned forward and rotated the course indicator to 057 degrees to track outbound from Farmington on airway victor 210. He looked back toward the cabin but Madeline had returned to her seat. He checked his watch. It was already three p.m. in Baltimore. They'd probably arrive around eight or nine o'clock. Madeline had asked him to drive down to her apartment in D.C. and spend the night but he could tell that he was going to be really tired when they landed. Three nights in the sack with Madeline had been about all that his forty-three year old frame could take. He was going to have to end it anyway. Madeline had begun to talk about "their future together" back there in Las Vegas. They'd had one hell of a good time but as far as he was concerned the party was over.

Hours later, Walter Keys stepped into his car at BWI airport and drove to his apartment in Ellicott City. He unlocked his door, flipped on the lights and got a cold beer from the refrigerator. He made a sandwich then watched the late news on TV before going to bed. Keys awoke at three a.m. He had been dreaming again. The same dream that he had experienced off and on for twelve years. He was on the beach at Waikiki with Nancy Fellows. She had gone too far out and was drowning. In these dreams he was always swimming toward her trying to reach her but he never could quite get there. He never went more than a couple of weeks without the dream. Sometimes, when he didn't dream, he awoke in the wee hours of the morning and she would be the first thing on his mind. He thought maybe he might eventually stop having the dreams. If he could go back in time and do it all different he would but it was beyond anyone's power to do so.

Keys laid awake thinking about it. All those years as a pilot flight examiner trying to head off guys screwing up in the cockpit. His life devoted to one purpose - trying to keep people from killing themselves in airplanes. He knew beyond any doubt that he had been successful. There was no way to know exactly but he was certain that between himself and guys like Jim Grovnor, Zeke Lang, Sam Reagan and a few others, hundreds, maybe thousands of people were alive that would have been killed in airplanes. Although they would receive no credit, the effects might be felt for decades. Many of the first pilots to qualify in the new jet airliners had been screened by them. How could he have been so conscientious about his job while being so careless about this woman he had cared for so much?

He and Nancy had a glorious three months after their first meeting, almost thirteen years ago in Hawaii - the one Carlene Hawkins, wife of the Operations Officer in the squadron, had arranged. In fact, he had moved into Nancy's apartment in San Leandro right after that flight. It had been like heaven. That is until she told him she was pregnant. He said he wasn't ready for that; all that responsibility - kids and all. She didn't want to but he thoughtlessly urged

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her to get it “taken care of.” She must have gone to the wrong doctor. They botched it up. She became infected and died within a week.

Even now, after more than a decade, there were times like tonight when the pain in his heart was so intense it was nearly unbearable. Tears ran down his cheeks and wet his pillow. He remembered her last few hours as though it had happened only yesterday. She was passing in and out of consciousness that last day. He kept hoping she would snap out of it but she kept getting weaker. Toward the end, he thought he might have waited too long to tell her something he hadn’t said before or since to any woman. He had wanted to tell her for weeks but hadn’t been able to bring himself to do it. Then - what he said - and the way she answered - well - it was almost like they were being married by God. He had bent over her hospital bed and whispered.

“I love you Nancy Fellows”

He thought maybe he had waited too long. She didn’t move. He wasn’t even sure she was breathing. Then he felt her squeeze his hand ever so weakly. He put his ear near her lips and waited. Her last words, barely audible, would stay with him for life. “ . . . and . . . I love
. . you too Walter Keys ”

The end



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