

“HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM”

May 28, 1989. Flight 235 was to be my seventh flight to Honolulu that month. It had been a great month and the previous flights were, as usual, uneventful. We were scheduled to leave Los Angeles at 9:45 in the evening and arrive in Hawaii shortly after midnight. We'd have an entire day in Waikiki before flying back to Los Angeles the next evening, plenty of time to sun our buns on the beach or else just rest or shop. Checking in for the flight, we met Phil Ridgeway, a check captain who would be riding along that evening for an annual line check that all crews were subject to. Captain Joe Anderson would ride in the left seat while I would be on board as his co-pilot in the right seat. Three four stripe captains on the flight deck along with our career flight engineer, Dick Brucker, totaled a lot of experience. We introduced ourselves to the service manager and the rest of the cabin team and briefed them with the assurance that it would be a routine flight once again.

Baggage loading, mechanical checks and air traffic conflicts delayed our departure until a quarter to eleven, an hour later than scheduled departure time. So much for the routine flight...Passengers were loaded, doors closed and we were on our way with approximately ninety-eight thousand pounds of fuel in our two wing tanks and two main tanks. Our passenger load was probably in the neighborhood of one hundred and fifty or so; not a full airplane exactly for an L-1011 but at least it paid the bills. Climbing out of LAX, we headed west, still seeing the faint twilight glow that signaled the earlier setting of the sun. While we'd be racing in that direction, we knew that we would never catch up to it. For the next thirty minutes or so we step climbed to an initial altitude of twenty-eight thousand feet as assigned to us by Los Angeles center. Quantas was above us, also on their way to Honolulu, and obviously they were on time. We were hoping to get flight level 350 (thirty-five thousand feet) for our cruising altitude but it soon became evident that Quantas had already laid claim to that. We had to stop two thousand feet below them and realized that thirty-three thousand feet would be our final altitude for the next five hours. No matter,



we had an ample supply of fuel and burning more at a lower level posed no real problems; reserve fuel would account for any slight irregularities encountered in flight.

The flight to Hawaii, like other flights all over the world's oceans, entailed various fixes where required position reports had to be given. The first fix was an intersection two hundred and ten miles from Los Angeles, called 'Dinty' intersection. This fix was an important one as it enabled us to check the accuracy of our inertial navigation system while still in range of the radio navigational facility at Los Angeles known as a VOR. Everything checked out fine with the exception of our fuel quantity; the gauge was showing about a thousand pounds less than what we should have had. Since we were flying at a lower altitude, the increased fuel burn could have caused that decreased amount of fuel. No cause for concern, we had plenty and would keep an eye on it during the course of our flight.

The distance to Honolulu was twenty-five hundred statute miles although in aviation terms it was actually 2180 nautical miles; mileage and speed in the aviation world being expressed in knots. Our next two fixes were routine reporting points; estimated time of arrival in Honolulu, time to next fix and fuel remaining. We were showing two thousand pounds low on the gauges at 'Dopps' intersection, our next fix; still no problem. We could see the strobe lights of the Qantas flight ahead and two thousand feet above us. Obviously, we were both on course or else we were both lost! We were inclined to believe the former. Two and a half hours elapsed from takeoff at Los Angeles; we had eaten dinner and were now nearing the ETP or equal time point as it was called.

Hollywood, various books, and early oceanic flights in the past had referenced this as the "point of no return," a somewhat ominous term that served, no doubt, to instill suspense in the reader or movie patron. This point was computed prior to departure and accounted for the winds at the altitude that a plane would be flying at. It was the point at which a plane was equally distant, in flying time over water routes, between departure and destination airports. After you reached this point it was more expedient to proceed to the destination rather than return to the closest land airport. There were never any winds aloft to speak of on the Pacific flights and so our ETP was basically half the distance to Hawaii near a fix called 'Dialo.' I always thought of it in terms of Diablo, the devil in Spanish. No one ever

seemed to care when I called it that on prior flights and the mis-pronunciation was no doubt lost to all. Approaching that fix, it was noted that our fuel was now five thousand pounds lower than our flight plan called for, not normal in our opinion and especially in Dick's opinion as well. We performed a ten minute fuel burn check and, while the individual engine gauges showed that we were burning a normal total amount of 15,000 pounds of fuel per hour, the totalizer gauge actually showed that we were going through 23,000 pounds each hour. By this time, we had already passed our half way point. We turned the wing lights on while Dick went back into the cabin to see if anything unusual could be observed outside the plane. He returned in a short time with a somewhat somber and uneasy look on his face...

Dick informed us that he could see what he perceived to be a vapor stream coming off the left wing, near the number one engine. The check captain went back as well and confirmed that yes, we did have a fuel leak. A quick calculation showed that we would run out of fuel a few hundred miles short of Honolulu, not exactly a good scenario! My swim suit was in my bag, as it always was on those flights but still, I had no desire to go swimming at night nor did anyone else, I'm sure! Coincidentally, I had experienced a similar fuel problem a year earlier while flying in another L-1011 to New York from Los Angeles. We were over Missouri when a United pilot called to tell us that he could see fuel streaming out of our wing. Fortunately, we were over land and, after shutting down the affected engine, I proceeded to land at Kansas City, our maintenance base. This time however, there was no land beneath us with a myriad of airports to choose from. Déjà vu a year later...

Hilo, on the big island of Hawaii, is actually one hundred miles further east than Honolulu, as the islands run southeast to northwest. I immediately programmed that airport into our computer and a quick check showed that, even though it was closer, we still wouldn't have enough fuel to make it. It was at that time I believe when Dick said something like "we're screwed." He probably voiced what all of us were thinking. While Joe was trying to figure a solution to our problem, I was on the radios. I don't know why but I thought of the Apollo 13 crew and their famous line that went "Houston, we have a problem." When I initially talked to the controlling air traffic facility, my first words were "Center, this is TWA 235; we have a problem." We declared an emergency and I explained the situation to them after being asked for information including amount of souls on board. I really didn't like that

word; we were still living, breathing people and not souls! They said that they'd get back to us...

Four minds working together for a solution to the problem, an emergency that wasn't covered in our manuals. The first step was obvious to us; we had to shut the number one engine down or else face the possibility of a fire. Uncontained fuel next to a source of ignition was never a good combination! We accomplished that but noticed that while the incessant flow of fuel from the wing had seemingly slowed down, it still hadn't stopped. Pulling the fire handle for that engine helped as well to stem the flow although we were still losing fuel from that side. Now what... The gauges and further calculations showed that we'd arrive over Hilo with zero fuel. We requested a change of course to Hilo and were advised that all traffic would be cleared from our path and that any altitude was at our discretion. They also said "good luck" even though we knew that luck alone wouldn't solve our dilemma; we'd have to decide our own fate. Captain Anderson came up with what seemed like a logical idea and decided to use the fuel remaining in the affected tank to feed the remaining two engines. We'd burn from that tank until it got too low and at least by doing that, the fuel wouldn't be wasted by its streaming overboard. We all concurred that this was a good idea and the only solution. Meanwhile, at four hundred miles or so out from land, Joe started a gradual, fuel saving descent. We recalculated our fuel use and realized that we'd have just enough fuel to land straight in to the runway at Hilo. That was encouraging news although no doubt we were all still somewhat apprehensive about a successful conclusion to our flight.

The service manager, who was in charge of the cabin and the flight attendants, was aware of the problem. Joe called him back to the flight deck to further explain that there was still a chance that we'd have to ditch in the ocean. He was to brief the rest of his crew and to review the ditching procedures. Meanwhile, the passengers were informed that we had a problem and that we'd have to divert to Hilo instead of landing at Honolulu. I suggested that we fully explain the problem to them and to tell them to locate their life vests and to prepare for what could possibly be an ocean ditching. Joe opined that he didn't want to scare them unnecessarily, a decision that later came back to haunt us to some degree after we had landed in Hilo. Still, he was the captain of that flight and the one to sign the paperwork.

The Coast Guard dispatched a rescue C-130 and it wasn't long before they came on our radio frequency and assured us that they would do whatever they could to help. Of course, they also wanted to know how many souls were on board. Soul mates, soul train, soul food; what's with this word? Why couldn't they just ask how many people were on board? They gave us information regarding the best heading for an ocean ditching while also relating to us that the ocean was fairly calm. Somehow, I don't think that any of us were overly reassured by that admission; especially Dick the flight engineer as his concern and nervousness was becoming more apparent. Two F-15s, Air Force fighters, had also been scrambled from Hickam Field on Oahu and they were now visible on each side of our wings, their red beacons providing some degree of comfort with the knowledge that we weren't alone in that black sky. I never did understand the reason for this fighter escort although I suspect that it provided a good training opportunity for them to practice a night intercept!

At some point during the descent we finally sucked out what fuel remained in the left wing tanks, fuel that would most likely have misted into the night sky had we not chose to do what we did. Once more, a fuel check was accomplished by everyone and, no doubt, multiple times by Dick, the flight engineer. Sitting at his panel behind our seats and looking at the fuel gauges that were gradually starting to indicate zero fuel was, I'm sure, not very comforting. His anxiety was certainly understood by the rest of us, especially by me. Having spent a fair amount of time at the engineer panel, I knew how helpless one can feel when you're relying on two pilots to get you down safely to the ground and you're unable to do anything yourself. Joe was a very capable pilot; easy going, and hard to rattle. He was calmly focused on flying the plane while I served to back him up by cross checking everything that he did and by communicating with both the Coast Guard plane and the air traffic control center.

The Coast Guard relayed the latest weather to us for the airport at Hilo. Visibility was good below a solid overcast of clouds at three thousand feet with just a light wind blowing. While the airport was closed due to the late hour, we were assured that the runway guidance system (ILS) was working okay and that the approach lights for that runway would be turned on for us. Normally, the pilot had to turn the lights on himself when an airport was closed by clicking the mike a set amount of times. The thought occurred to me that doing this at

the last minute was not something that we should be doing ourselves and Joe agreed. Making an approach to a runway at night and not being able to see it was not exactly a pleasant thought and so I made it a point to remind the C-130 Coast Guard plane that it would be their responsibility to insure that the lights were on for our landing. They knew all too well the serious nature of our problem. I was also hoping that they knew how to turn the lights on! Was that four, five or six clicks of the mike...

We were now slightly over five hours into our flight and descending to a lower altitude where we would begin to receive the localizer and glide slope signals for the runway we would land on. The Morse code signals for those electronic beams identified the runway as the right one and we continued on into the night. I told the C-130 that we were on our final approach and they responded with "Roger TWA, good luck; the runway lights are on." Once more I thought about luck and the fact that it had nothing to do with the course of actions of our ill fated flight. I also thought of the word that I used with reference to our final approach and realized that 'final' was probably not what our engineer wanted to hear! I didn't want to turn around to look at his panel as I knew what he was already seeing, yellow caution lights all over the panel indicating that our fuel supply was approaching a critical state. We were also seeing caution lights on the center pilot panel but paid no attention to them; there was nothing else that we could do. No doubt Dick was getting even more anxious; who could blame him...I thanked the 'Coasties' for being with us during this latter stage of our flight and assured them that we appreciated their being there for us and the comfort that they provided with their presence. I'm sure that they were also relieved by the thought that they could go home instead of having to orbit over a floating cruise plane!

The checklists were read and now those invisible beams of radio energy radiating from the runway were settling down and unwavering. We were on the runway extended centerline as well as on the glide slope that guided our descent down to the runway. I don't recall if Joe had the plane on autopilot at that point but more likely, with one engine shut down, he was hand flying it. If it had been anyone else besides Joe, I might have been a little uneasy but I knew that he was more than capable of flying an L-1011 as good as or even better than most pilots. It wasn't long before we entered the solid mass of clouds that prevented us from seeing the runway, that under cast that seemed to taunt us; would there actually be a runway

visible once we broke out of those clouds or just black space...We were locked onto the glide slope and also locked into the realization that we'd have just one shot. There wasn't enough fuel left for a missed approach type go-around; we'd have to land, period.

Descending through those clouds, a quiet calm ensued as the four of us stared intently at the ILS display while alternating our fixation out the windshield for that first sign of pulsating lights that would denote a runway somewhere in front of us. The tranquility of the flight deck seemed all too surreal and, for whatever the reason, I started to think of the movie "The High and the Mighty" with John Wayne and especially the haunting whistling tune that served to lessen the drama that was taking place in one scene of that epic film. That movie, while fictional, also involved a flight flying across the Pacific but in the opposite direction as ours, from Honolulu to San Francisco. I started to hum the tune from that movie, as my mouth was too dry to whistle, but soon came to the realization that maybe no one appreciated my macabre sense of humor. I also thought that it could have been distracting. Chances are that Joe was too concentrated on the approach to even notice my attempt at levity although humming that tune just seemed like the right thing to do at that time. I continued to repeat that haunting music in my mind...

As advertised, we broke out of the clouds close to three thousand feet and there in front of us appeared the bright approach lights and associated runway lights; as sweet a sight as we had ever seen, at least that night. Joe stayed right on the centerline and glide slope and soon we were fifty feet off the ground and flaring for our landing. The main and then the nose tires of the L-1011 gently caressed the concrete ribbon in front of us and Joe applied reverse thrust and brakes to slow the forward roll of our forgiving plane. I'm sure that we all breathed a silent sigh of relief, especially the flight attendants in the back of the cabin, alone in their jump seats and no doubt occupied with their own thoughts of what the final outcome would be. Once again in my career I had cheated death; hopefully I was destined to lead a long life!

There were no personnel at the airport except for one TWA agent who was, I'm sure, hastily woken up from his sleep to attend to our needs once we landed. We pulled up to a jet way and turned the seat belt sign off. The passengers were now free to walk about the cabin

although they couldn't go into the terminal since it was closed. It was now going on one-thirty in the morning and most of Hawaii was asleep. There was no power for us to plug into and so we had to run our auxiliary generator, known as the APU, so that we could provide lighting and air conditioning in the cabin. The aircraft auxiliary power unit obtained the fuel for its operation from the aircraft fuel tank and, after about three hours, the fuel was totally depleted and the APU shut down. We had ground power at that point so at least we had lighting on board. We had landed with less than four thousand pounds of fuel, an amount that would have enabled us to stay airborne for no more than an additional ten to fifteen minutes at best but not enough for a missed approach since that type of maneuver consumed a lot of fuel. There was no need for my swim suit, whew! Days later, mechanics discovered a rupture in a fuel line that passed through the number one engine pylon. An engine pylon is basically an aerodynamic appendage that hangs below the wing to which the engine is bolted. A leak in that area was definitely abnormal and rarely happened.

We all had some interaction with the passengers while air transportation was being arranged for their continuing on to Honolulu; it was hard to escape them in that small, confined terminal area that finally became accessible to them. Some were grateful that we had landed okay while others complained bitterly over how they were being inconvenienced by the delay. This is where Joe missed the boat in my opinion. Had he told them of the seriousness of our problem, they would all have bowed down to him and kissed his feet after our safe arrival. As it was, very few knew how close we were to turning our L-1011 into a cruise ship. I had a couple of conversations with a few passengers who weren't unduly mad over the diversion and they proceeded to question me somewhat about what had taken place and how serious our problem actually was. I explained rather factually that they were extremely lucky to be on the ground and if it were not for the skill of Captain Anderson, they very well could have gone swimming or, in the very least, an opportunity to sing 'row your boat' while in a life raft. Their attitude changed considerably at that point with one man shaking my hand and offering to take the entire crew out for dinner in Honolulu. It was a heartfelt gesture and nice to know that someone at least appreciated what the 'overpaid' crew had accomplished to insure their safe arrival. A music rock group of sorts, also on board the flight, later complained to the press that their experience was "like being held hostage in your own country" because of the inconvenience they had to endure while being

confined to the terminal gate area. There are and always will be some people who don't know when to be grateful that they're alive.

The passengers were all finally boarded on Aloha flights and continued on to Honolulu as did our entire crew. Having contacted our union rep, we were advised not to say anything to the press and that was fine with us. Our only interest was in getting some sleep after a very long night and then meeting for dinner later on that evening. A few of us were approached by press people in Honolulu after we finally arrived there and still in our uniforms but they became frustrated with our lack of knowledge and cooperation. "A TWA pilot; no not me, I'm a United pilot." It was almost comical! The news of our flight became buried on the back pages of the papers both in Hawaii and Los Angeles. After all, there's no sense in giving too much press to an incident that didn't involve loss of life! We met for dinner that night and all of us posed for a group photo in the hotel lobby, a memento of that night that is now among my collection of favorite photos. I know that dinner that night was fun and I'm also pretty sure that Captain Joe picked up the dinner tab for everyone. It certainly would have been in his nature to do just that! We had another day in Honolulu and then boarded a TWA flight to deadhead back to Los Angeles, riding in first class all the way. Life was good.

Prior to turning in our document envelope, as required for all oceanic flights, Dick and I obtained blank fuel and Pacific plotting charts. We knew all too well that both the company and, especially, the F.A.A. would be going over these forms with a fine toothed comb for any errors in calculations. Regardless of whether the fuel leak was a mechanical malfunction or not, the feds always zeroed in on pilot error first whenever an investigation took place. This was automatic for both accidents and incidents as well as for any declared emergencies. We were determined to place accurate records in the flight folder as well as neat ones without the 'chicken scratches' and erasures that would have raised a few eyebrows! We also made sure that the crew statement that we all filled out correctly reflected what was written on both the fuel log and the navigation map. A few questions were actually raised but eventually, common sense prevailed and everyone involved in the limited investigation came to the conclusion that pilot error was not a factor after all...

The aftermath of our flight found three of us, the operating crew, being nominated for an annual award of excellence, an honor given out each year to employees in the various departments of TWA, with pilot crews from each of four crew bases sharing in that distinction. The award ceremony was to take place the following May in New York City at the Waldorf Astoria, definitely a prestigious, first class hotel. We were told that there would be a hospitality room for all the award recipients set up for our arrival on Friday evening and fully stocked with whatever libations we wanted, including an endless supply of champagne. Somehow, four bottles of that bubbly with the Waldorf label on them found their way into my bag for the trip home on Sunday! We could also sign for whatever food we desired during the course of our weekend stay, a perk that we took extreme advantage of. My wife Connie was with me as was Dick and his wife along with Joe and his girlfriend and we assembled for dinner after a few happy hour drinks in the hospitality room. Four of us, including Joe and his friend, sat at one table while Dick and his wife and another couple shared another table. I can't recall exactly what we had for dinner but I do remember that no thought was given to the prices on the menus; it seemed that everyone went for the most expensive appetizers and entrees, foods that we wouldn't normally order in a restaurant if we had to pay for it ourselves. Caviar and other appetizers, filet mignon, lobster; it was all good. After over indulging ourselves with the dinners, along with fine desserts, wines, and after dinner drinks, the waiters brought our checks and we signed them. To the best of my recollection, the bill was somewhere in the neighborhood of seven hundred dollars for the four of us at our table and that didn't include a very generous tip to the waiter! Then again, Carl Icahn was paying for it and it was our way of getting back at him in a small way for ruining our airline after his takeover.

Dinner the next evening was a semi formal event with at least two hundred TWA employees in attendance, most of whom were invited in recognition of their exemplary service during the prior year. The perfunctory speeches were given by various management people and dinner was served. The dinner was delicious although it didn't compare to what we had the night before and then dessert was brought out. I believe it was at that time when Carl Icahn gave his talk to all present. We had expected to hear words of congratulations from him in recognition of all the TWA employees assembled there and his thanks for what all those employees had accomplished in the previous year but that was not to be. Instead,

he launched into a diatribe on how badly things were progressing within the airline and the admission that all employees had to do more to ensure the success of TWA. There was never a word of thanks to those present and the end of his speech was acknowledged by a silence that one would expect to find at a wake. Then again, I think most of us that evening felt that our beloved company was in fact already showing early signs of death throes. I know that I wanted to walk out on his speech and no doubt quite a few other employees felt the same way. I realized though that my over imbibing had a slight physical effect on my ability to walk and, rather than embarrass myself by possibly tripping over my feet, I remained seated.

After Ichan's tirade, the announcement was made as to who would receive the president's award for that year. This was an award given to an individual within the company who was considered to have gone above and beyond what was expected for whatever the reason and deserving of special recognition. It came as a surprise to Joe, Dick, and me therefore when our names were announced as the recipients of this award for that year. I wasn't used to receiving any honors and so the accolades given to us were totally unexpected. We received nice, cut glass Lalique paper weights for the award of excellence and then each of us received a medal for the president's award, actually a little on the tacky side, along with a check for five hundred dollars (less taxes!). My medal reposes somewhere in a box in my den collecting dust...So ended the saga of flight 235.

Twenty years later I joined a TWA senior's club organization in San Diego and attended a lunch near where we lived. There were about twenty people in attendance including pilots, flight attendants, and ground personnel, all retired from that once renowned airline. Coincidentally, Connie and I were sitting across one table from an attractive woman who looked vaguely familiar to me. She confirmed that yes, she was a retired flight attendant and yes, I looked familiar to her as well. It was then that we both realized that we were both on that Hawaii flight twenty years earlier. It wasn't long before we were comparing stories about the good old days while flying for TWA. Time might have taken away some of our youth but certainly not our fond memories of that now defunct airline nor the memory of that fateful night when the two of us, along with everyone else on that L-10, thought about what fate had in store for us. Unlike TWA's fate, ours that night was favorable...