

The Education of a Ramp Rat

One Saturday morning in the early 1970s, when I opened the hangar doors at Lakeland Regional Airport in Florida, a spaceman was on my ramp. Dressed in a silvery pressure suit with a helmet and air-conditioning suitcase like the ones the astronauts used, Kingswood Sprott was about to attempt a new high-altitude record for hot-air balloons. The ramp was covered with media types, who cluttered the flightline with cameras, candy wrappers, and cigarette butts. (If I recall correctly, burner problems prevented Sprott from succeeding that day.)

This sort of thing is what made lineboy the best aviation job I've ever had—including my grown-up job as an airline pilot.

I never knew what to expect when I opened Lakeland Flying Service every day. One morning there were 15 Huey helicopters on the ramp that had come from MacDill Air Force Base to buy fuel on Double Green-Stamp Day, when the office doled out twice the normal number of S&H Green Stamps per gallon of fuel purchased. Another time, I slid open the hangar doors to see a Boeing 727 bearing an angry presidential hopeful, Hubert Humphrey, who couldn't get off the airplane at the forward exit because our little airport didn't have airstairs for such a large airliner.

From the time I opened the hangar at 7 a.m. until the owner and another lineboy showed up around 10, I more or less owned the airport. Once the doors were open and I had brewed the coffee, my kingdom was serene—until a swarm of Cessna 182 and Piper Tripacer drivers and pre-solo students descended on the office asking for their aircraft to be pulled out of the hangar or for a fuel top-off.

Most pilots were proficient, professional types. Only the idiots stand out in memory. Like the Cessna 411 owner who jumped into his airplane and started the right engine while I was still behind the propeller, adding engine oil. I scurried under the wing to safety as he taxied away. He needed all the power he could get to break free because the airplane was still chocked and tied down. He took off with tiedown ropes trailing from both

sometimes one loaded up with Coors beer, which my boss had ordered. Back then, Coors was not available in the east. He sold it to the college boys in Lakeland for \$5 a can, which probably covered my Braniff ticket as well as the fuel I burned to get the Cessna back to Lakeland.

In the days of the three-martini lunch, business jets weren't used to "contain costs." They flew executives to Florida for a round of golf. As a lineboy, I was happy to see them—both for the half-cent-per-gallon fuel bonus I got for filling their tanks, and for the tips their crews handed out. The Philip Morris crew always tipped us with a carton of smokes.

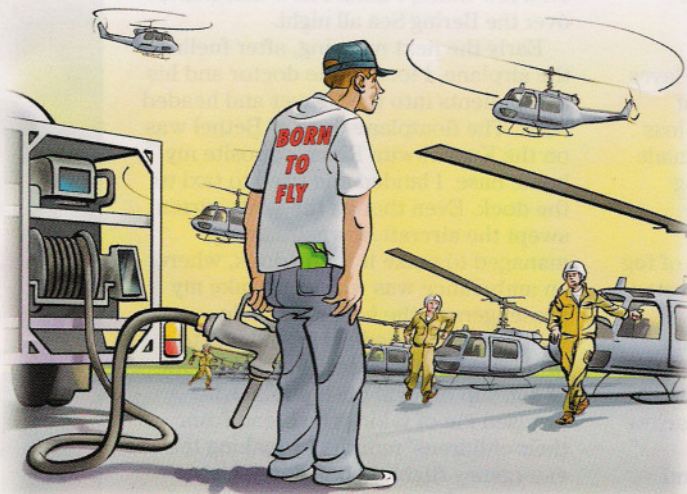
Another perk was free flight time in the Cessna 150s. In the twilight hours after closing time, we flew in formation and engaged in mock dogfights. Gas for our motorcycles and cars was free too, if you didn't mind the 100-octane clogging your sparkplugs every other week. We could audit ground school, when they held one, as long as we sat in the back. (After a 12-hour day in the August sun, we

didn't smell very good.)

As a lineboy, you learned everything by doing. We worked in the shop, painted chocks, loaded patients into air ambulances, clambered over P-51s and Corsairs, and learned other, more practical things, like how to empty a Convair's toilet without getting showered with its contents.

Gently tugging at their tiedowns and rocking in the evening breeze, the airplanes were more calming to me than a cowboy's herd of lowing cattle. I think of the Boeing 767s I fly today as animate, but I've never had a conversation with an airliner quite as gratifying as the ones I had with those little Cessnas.

—Kevin Garrison



wings and an oil can poking out of the cowlings. Or the owner of a Luscombe who thought tossing lit cherry bombs at the fuel truck—while I was refueling a DC-3—was a lively way to celebrate Independence Day. Two of the little bombs exploded on the top of the truck's 2,000-gallon tank. (Luckily, nothing else exploded.)

We lineboys got perks that even the airport's professional pilots never saw. Flight instructors and charter pilots couldn't be spared to pick up new Cessnas from the factory in Kansas, but we lineboys could. Several times I flew Braniff (Tampa to Dallas to Wichita), carrying a change of clothes in a grocery bag, to pick up a new airplane—