

## Rhett was my Copilot

My copilot, Jerry, breezed into the cockpit at push back time plus five and threw down his flight bag. “Sorry I’m so late -- I somehow screwed up my schedule and didn’t even know I was supposed to fly today.”

That sort of thing happens from time to time and there isn’t much you can do about it. Even with the most expensive and complicated calendar systems, reminder notes, PDA’s, computer schedules and whatnot, if you put your schedule in wrong you are going to mess up no matter what system you use.

That is the nature of a screw-up. You can’t predict them because, after all, they are a screw-up which by definition means they can happen anytime.

Anyway, I’ve done the walk around, made all the “noises” (GPWS, etc) programmed everything signed the logbook and made the coffee. Besides, it looks like we’re going to have a gate hold for New York again today, so relax. Just plug in, sit back and chill, my man... it’s all taken care of.

“You’ve been around for years and years and years,” Jerry said. “I’m sure you’ve had your share of no-shows and late sign-ins.”

I’ve had a few. The worst one was also the only unexcused one that got me a letter in my personnel file. It involved my dog, Rhett.

“You no showed because of a dog?”

It appears from looking at the latest ACARS message about the gate hold that we have an hour to kill so I guess I’ll tell you about it.

Rhett was a Border Collie that we adopted as a six week old abandoned puppy back in Tallahassee during the latter days of my FSU experience.

He was a sick dog at the time – eaten up with fleas, worms, all sorts of skin diseases and malnutrition. He was the perfect dog for a newly married couple just starting out. I found him wandering around by himself in a park. I bundled him up in towel and loaded him into my 1968 Rambler American for the ride to our apartment.

As he grew into a less flea bitten and larger version of himself, he developed into quite a friend and business partner. While other college dogs would sit outside of the classroom building waiting for their owners to come

out, Rhett would go in with me and sleep beneath my feet during classes where I wished I could sleep. You have to remember that these were the wild and wooly seventies. Hair was long, kids could smoke in class, and your dog was welcome if he or she didn't poop or make a fuss.

You may be wondering what my dog Rhett has to do with an aviation story and more importantly, an airline no-show. I'm getting to that, but first, you have to know what kind of dog Rhett was.

He was the kind of dog that would eat the carpet of your apartment, claw up your "Wings Over America" album (which, in retrospect, was a blessing) and get the whole place rife with fleas and ticks. He was also the kind of dog that could catch a Frisbee, outrun the other apartment complex dogs, swim like an otter, hump like a whale, and dig like a homesick mole.

He was the kind of dog that looked out for his homies.

One night, a burglar tried to come through our front door uninvited very late at night. Rhett attacked and bit the crap out of him. He was very protective of my wife and I was never under any illusion as to which one of us he would pick to protect in a fire fight. If it came to that, I knew I was on my own, but I was cool with that.

Rhett was never the kind of dog to get Timmy out of any kind of well, but knowing he was around and looking out for us was always a comfort. Besides, I'm sure he would have regarded Lassie as a pussy and an incredible brown-noser.

Because of his tendency to destroy our one bedroom apartment, I started taking him to work at the flight school. He started his aviation career as a tied-up cur outside the office, but later was invited inside to sit by the fan and stay cool.

Once, on a whim, I stuck him in the back seat of a 172 I was taking out with an instrument student. It turned out that he was born to fly. From then on, whenever I could wheedle him into whatever airplane I was flying, he came along.

These flights included the all-nighter canceled check flights I sometimes took after a full day of instructing. He kept me awake and was good company. Sitting curled up on the right hand seat of whatever Aztec or Navajo or Baron I was using, he gave me somebody besides myself to talk to. Also, during the three hour nap I got in the airplane in Atlanta was more restful for me knowing I had my protector right beside me.

Rhett enjoyed the status of being "first dog". By that, I mean that we had him at a time of our young lives when we really had time for a dog. Where ever we went he went. You occasionally still see younger people with their first dog. The animal usually has a big grin in its face and some sort of

bandanna around its neck.

Time passed, airlines beckoned and kids arrived. Rhett saw us through it all. The one bedroom new-hire apartment, the cheap rental house in the big city and the three or four moves that junior airline pilots are wont to take.

He never got to fly with me again after the airline hired me. For some reason that I still don't understand to this day, the airlines don't let pilots take their dogs with them. That was okay with him because he was very busy raising our two kids and keeping the Chicago neighborhood we lived in under control.

We didn't notice at first, but he was getting a little slower and a little grayer around the muzzle. Sometimes he didn't jump up and run to the door when we came home and there were times when he just didn't want to chase the Frisbee or kill the squirrel that was running across our subdivision sized yard.

After you have a few dogs in your life and you have some experience with them you realize that they have a shorter life span than you do and that they won't last forever. This isn't true with your first dog. They are supposed to last forever.

It was an early Sunday morning. The wife and kids were off to church and I was almost ready to load myself into the car for the ride to O'Hare and yet another trip as a 727 engineer.

I had my black polyester pants on as well as my white pilot shirt with the wings that had no star, because I was only the second officer. My bags were packed, my coffee was in my "White Hen refillable insulated travel mug" and I was ready to head out the door.

Rhett wasn't in his usual spot by the exit where he usually literally got his "licks in" as I left. Where was he?

A search of the house for him came up empty until I went into my baby daughter's room and found him curled up under the crib. He was panting. Not healthy dog pants, but sick little shallow desperate gasps. He looked up at me and for the first time in his life he looked scared.

I scooped him out from there and it didn't take long to see that he needed to go to the Vet, right friggin now. Even though I was upset, I did have the presence of mind to call crew scheduling and tell them I might be a little late for sign in.

"You're going to be late because of what?" an incredulous scheduler asked.

"My dog. He's sick and I'm taking him to the vet."

In the wide expanse of good excuses to be late for a trip, I knew for a fact that having a sick dog wasn't one of them. Tough titty. I wasn't going to

leave Rhett when he was like this. And we were operating in a pre-cell phone world so I couldn't page the wife at church.

We made to the vet but it didn't make any difference. Rhett died on the cold metal vet table, wrapped in my embrace and looking up at me with now calmer, accepting eyes. He was twelve and had a good run as a dog. I was proud to be his owner; glad I was with him at his end and would have missed a dozen trips in order to be by his side at that moment.

I'm not that dedicated now and I'm a lot more cynical about my job, but back then I knew I had to go to work. I left a message about Rhett with the next door neighbor so they could tell my wife what happened.

Damn me. I should have gone home and told her myself. In order for one hundred and forty Florida tourists to make it to Tampa a half an hour earlier I let my young wife go home to an empty house and a dead dog. The tourists could have waited. Maggie loved that dog more than I did and when she left for church he was alive and happy. Coming home, he was dead and gone.

I finally got to O'Hare and we pushed back about forty five minutes late for our Tampa flight. I was covered in dog hair, spit and blood and I had been crying. It was one of the hardest days of my flying career. They give you a week off if you lose a human family member. When you lose a dog family member and show up late for sign in they give you a letter in your file and a stern talking to about crap like values, reliability and duty to the flying public.

I sat through the obligatory chief pilot lecture the next week but you know what? Screw the flying public and screw reliability. If I had to do it all over again I would have done it exactly the same way.

Later that year, when flying with another captain, I mentioned this episode and said something like: "well, at least Rhett is in dog heaven now, chasing rabbits and having sex with sultry Irish Setters."

With the perfect certainty that comes from being a jerk he said: "There is no dog heaven. Dogs don't have souls -- when they're dead they are simply dead."

He then went into an hour long Jesus talk that I mostly ignored because I refuse to believe in any kind of god that would allow a wastoid doofus like this guy go to an eternal reward while my dog -- a being with more soul in his left floppy ear than this guy could ever have would have no big grassy field with great smells to run around in until I could join him.

That is why I never discuss religion in the cockpit. Nothing good can come of it.

For many of my most harrowing flights when I was in my twenties,

God wasn't my copilot, Rhett was. Now you are, Jerry, and it is time to call for push-back.

Jerry picked up the mike and made the call with a look on his face that spoke volumes. Maybe he had a dog that he had lost. More likely he was telling himself to never, ever, ask me to tell a story again during our four day trip.

**To Order Clear Left, I'll Have the Chicken, an airline captain explains life**

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