

# 'Leave It to the Machine'

By John Mazor, Senior Communications Specialist

*Most of the articles in this 75th anniversary edition of Air Line Pilot look back to the past to build on the future. But with this cautionary tale, we skipped over a history that fortunately didn't happen and ask you to imagine what the future might have been like without ALPA.*

The shrill beeping of the Crew Alert Locator strapped to his wrist slowly but inexorably dragged Tom Killebrew out of his snoring stupor. More asleep than awake, he buried his arm deeper into his sweat-stained pillow and closed his eyes. No luck. The wailing harmonics of the beeper, tuned to perfection by sleep scientists, were guaranteed to rouse the human brain from anything short of a coma. The only way to stop it was to answer the call. He pressed his thumb over the fingerprint scanner.

"Mmm... Killebrew here."

"Good morning, Capt. Killebrew!" chirped the gratingly cheery voice of the crew scheduler. Technically, at 0332 hours local time, you could say it was morning for Killebrew, even though it was afternoon in India where she was calling from. "I have a trip for you; are you interested?"

Killebrew knew better than to take that as a question. "Sure. When, where?"

"Flight 9477 out of O'Hare West, departs Dec. 24, 2019, at 0517 local time. Gate 2417."

"Right. Where's it go?"

The scheduler's chirpiness dropped a notch or two. "Now, now, flyboy, you are holding me up here, I have 87 more calls to make before my tea break."

"Please? I just want to know whether to pack for an overnight."

"Oh, you won't be leaving the destination airport. The computer predicts a 92 percent probability that by the time you get there we will have another leg for you to fly."

"Roger." Killebrew cut the connection and headed for the shower, after which he spent a few precious minutes primping in the bathroom mirror and applying some skin lotion. *Gotta keep the "right stuff" look, Tommy boy.* Killebrew wasn't the vain type; he was just protecting his job security. Although discriminating against employees because of physical appearance was illegal, he long ago had noted that no homely pilots, male or female, were in the employ of airlines.

In his opinion, many of them had more looks than brains,

but he kept those thoughts to himself. When the company had fired 150 captains for trying to organize an in-house union, one of their demands had been elimination of the unofficial physical appearance criteria. *Yeah, right. Like marketing ever would let them get away with that!*

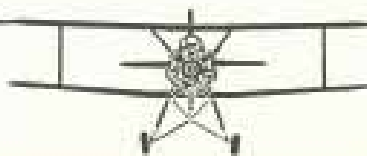
The short notice on the scheduling call meant that he barely had time to get to O'Hare West, but no sense complaining. Besides, he was glad to get the airborne time plus the implied promise of another leg after that. Now, nearing the end of the month, he'd only logged 90 hours in the air. After taxes, that was barely enough to cover his apartment, groceries, monthly FAA certificate fees, and airline proficiency checks.

Killebrew had managed to snag a good 6 hours of solid sleep before the call came, so he felt refreshed and alert by the time he checked in. Many's the time he had had to make do with much less sack time.

Killebrew swept his right arm over the security scanner at the entrance to the operations area. The scanner read and duly registered the RFID transponder implanted in his wrist, mandated and paid for by the Department of Anti-Terrorism and Homeland Security. After he passed through the full-body CAT scan, explosives sniffer, and Automated Tactile Inspection probes, a green light flashed on the security console. The security attendant didn't even look up. Why bother? In the 18 years since 9/11, there had never been another terrorist attack on domestic airlines, let alone a pilot trying to hijack or crash an airliner.

Stifling an unexpected yawn, he fed a \$20 coin into the vending machine, retrieved his McPilot crew meal from the slot, then shuffled over to the crew kiosk and punched in. *Destination, SFO. No problem, been there hundreds of times. Weather, check. Fuel, check—as long as the weather holds, anyway. Airplane, check... hmmm, one of the new Dash 2000 models.* He hoped that the 20-minute online "differences training" that the company had provided him would be enough to avoid any major miscues.

Once Killebrew settled in the cockpit, he fell into the familiar routine of interacting with the Flight Commander computer modules. *Preflight button, pushed... all greens on the diagnostics and prestart. Flight profile, entered and verified. Blue button to request ATC clearances, pushed. Oops,*



*the ATC button on the Dash 2000 Flight Commander is orange, go figure. ATC clearances confirmed.*

Being the only person in the cockpit, Killebrew took it upon himself to recheck the weather and fuel load. Once upon a time, cockpits had two and even three qualified pilots to cross-check everything. Despite the awesome capabilities of the Flight Commander computer control system, Killebrew wasn't quite comfortable with the conventional training philosophy of "leave it to the machine." He made a few quick mental calculations, then keyed the company frequency to ask if he could have another 1,000 pounds of fuel loaded. The dispatcher's tone of voice wasn't exactly pilot-friendly.

"Killebrew, you've got more than enough fuel to get you to SFO."

"Yes, but the weather looks pretty iffy. You know what the Bay can be like at this time of year."

Over the radio, Killebrew could hear the dispatcher punching some commands into his computer. "Killebrew, this is the third time this year you've requested excess fuel. If I do it, you know I have to file an Excess Fuel Loading report."

Which would go right to the desk of the Executive Chief Pilot. That would definitely put Killebrew on management's "watch list."

"Never mind. I'll just keep an eye on the gauges." Captain's authority wasn't what it used to be, at least to hear the old-timers talk about it.

*Punch the yellow button to initiate pushback, and away we go!*

The ramp supervisor offered the traditional salute, which Killebrew returned, even though he knew that the ramp super couldn't see him through the minuscule windscreen. The nearly useless windscreen, like the salute, was a vestige of a bygone era of aviation, left there more for marketing purposes than utility. Cameras and synthetic vision feeding to CRT displays provided most of the visual information for the pilot.

Now that he was rolling, Killebrew punched up the departure profile that had been downloaded from ATC. "Depart Runway 36, immediate left turn to 260, ascend to optimum fuel-burn altitude, cleared direct SFO."

The north departure caught him by surprise. The usual runway for this profile was 9R with a right turn to the west. *The company must have gotten a variance from the FAA. Well, let's hope the controllers are on the ball. They're routing me right across the congested east-west air corridor just north of the airport.*

Not for the first time, Killebrew wished that he had some kind of on-board anti-collision warning system, but after 40 years of bungled R&D programs, the feds still relied on ground-based air traffic control to keep airplanes from running into each other. *And they want us to use "see and avoid" with the Mark 1 Eyeball as a backup. Like I can see anything at all out of this dinky excuse for a windscreen. My bathroom window is bigger than this.*

On taxiing out, Killebrew caught himself with a sharp "No, go *there*, dummy!" and had to flick his side-arm joystick to redirect the airplane. Taxiing was one of the few pilot responsibilities that hadn't yet been automated. It had too many variables for the computer to handle. Unfortunately, local political pressures had forced the designers of the new O'Hare West companion airport to be extremely "creative" in laying out the runways and taxiways. Budget overruns meant that the designers had to skimp on the signage and markings. No matter how many times Killebrew had flown out of there, he always muttered a relieved "Eureka!" when he managed to negotiate the twisting path to the proper end of the appointed departure runway.

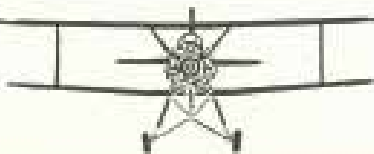
Once he reached cruise altitude, Killebrew settled back in his seat. *But don't slack off too much, Tommy boy, the Cockpit Video Holographic Recorder will show every twitch and bead of sweat if something goes wrong* And if something did happen, well, Killebrew couldn't remember the last accident that hadn't been blamed on pilot error.

Truth be told, though, piloting wasn't too hard at this stage of the flight. Oh, the instrument displays could be a bit hard to figure out (what the heck did "System Error #871, reset auxiliary download bus" mean, anyway?), and the airplane's computers usually would ignore manual inputs from the side-arm joystick that had replaced the cumbersome yoke control, but what else could you expect when cockpit design was the exclusive domain of electronics Ph.D.s in white lab coats? Once you verified the flight profile and punched the right buttons, it was mostly a matter of watching the lights blink. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why the old-timers always erupted in laughter at the dozens of silly hangar jokes that invariably ended with the punch line, "What's it doing now?"

"Mega 9477, you are cleared for final."

Killebrew peered through the swirling mist and rain, alternating with an instrument scan that lingered over the airspeed reading. The FAA had certificated the slow, multiple-offset approach to SFO that had quelled the local residents' demands for noise abatement, but every time he shot this approach, Killebrew was half expecting a stall warning.

A sudden but mercifully brief encounter with windshear



almost caused him to break off the approach. *Why can't they see how dangerous this stuff is? You'd think they would have a way to warn us! And where are the pireps? Hello?* Killebrew suspected that at least two or three of the accidents that had been written off as pilot error were really caused by these crazy wind shifts at low altitudes. The aircraft manufacturers and the FAA swore that it was impossible for "wind gusts" at the outer marker to cause a plane to crash, so no one had ever bothered to look into it.

By the time the encounter was over, Killebrew was sure that half of the 744 souls in the back were reaching for their barf bags. *If they knew what I'm seeing from up here, they'd be reaching for clean underwear instead.*

**T**he Flight Commander resolutely plowed ahead, oblivious to their windblown, jinking flightpath to the ground. About one-third down the runway, it finally executed a three-point landing: *Clunk!* Right gear down... One thousand one... One thousand two... One thousand three... One thousand *dunk!* left gear down... One thousand one, two, three, four, and five, *bam!* and the nosewheel banged down.

It took nearly 15 minutes for Killebrew to taxi through the congested holiday traffic to the gate, although that was of no concern to the company accountants. A nosewheel squat switch had automatically clocked him out as soon as they had touched down, just as it had put him on the clock at rotation. A pilot's airborne pay was precisely calculated to the nearest tenth of a second.

Killebrew dutifully bade, "Thank you for flying Consolidated Pan Asiatic, European, and North American Airlines" to the slightly green-faced departing customers. At the counter, he asked the gate agent to check for any new flight assignments that had been posted for him.

"No sir, nothing except a message for you to wait at the airport for further instructions."

*I hope they find something* One of the things that the fired union organizers claimed that pilots deserve was partial pay credit for layover time. *As if! And even with the 80 percent employee redeployment fare discount, deadheading's a bummer when you don't get paid for it.*

Killebrew headed for the McDonald's stand. It wasn't hard to spot with all the pilots lined up for cheap eats. After the industry's last round of "preemptive cost reductions"—bean-counter jargon for "Yes, we're making tons of money, but who knows when the next 9/11 will hit, so we have to hammer costs down"—he didn't know many pilots who could afford better. Even the international drivers seldom splurged for anything pricier than IHOP or Denny's.

Fifteen hours later, after six coffees, another Big McSoyBurger, and reading *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the local airport rag from cover to cover, Killebrew dragged himself to the crew lounge, inserted a \$10 coin into the last available reclining lounge, and chained his flight bag to the security hoop. *Not a word out of Scheduling Betcha the assignment computer caught another virus and forgot I'm here. May as well try to get some rest.*

At precisely 0024 local time, the Crew Alert Locator went off.

"Killebrew here."

It was the same maddeningly perky voice at the other end that had called him some 21 hours earlier.

"Good morning, Capt. Killebrew! In fact, I believe it is now the morning of December 25 in your part of the world. That is what, your Christmas holiday? Yes, Merry Christmas! We have a flight for you. And as a special Christmas present from the company, it will take you nonstop right back to your domicile. No deadheading. Are you interested?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, I surely am."

"It is Christmas. You do not mind working on your big holiday?"

"No, ma'am, not at all."

"It is a red-eye departing in 59 minutes, which means you have 14 minutes to report in, but you are already at the airport, so that should not be a problem, right?"

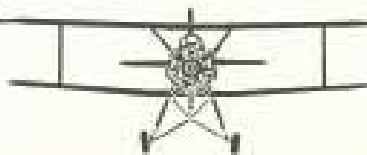
"Oh, no problem at all, ma'am. I always keep a fresh shirt in my bag, so I'm ready to roll."

"Very good. It is nice to work with such fine, happy pilots that you have at your airline."

"Thank you, ma'am, and a Merry Christmas to you, too. Bye."

**O**ut on the ramp, snow was falling. Killebrew hoped he wouldn't have to request deicing. He already had exceeded "systemwide nominal average" for the year, and he knew what the Executive Chief Pilot would have to say about that.

Over in the corner, a dozen or so old-timers were clustered around a screen playing an ancient black-and-white Christmas movie on the Seniors' Channel. Something about a banker with a Midwest accent who talks to angels and gets in trouble when he loses all the bank's deposits. The old-timers were loving it. Killebrew just didn't get it. Why were they so fascinated with a sappy story about some do-gooder who wished he had never existed? *Pure fantasy, wasting time over what might have been. What we see is what we get. You geezers must really live in a dream world.*





Killebrew unchained his flight bag and sprinted for the operations area. From the TV, he heard the sound of a bell tinkling. The old-timers applauded. Killebrew didn't bother looking back. 🌀

*The above, of course, is strictly fictional, a dystopian aviation take on the Christmas classic, It's a Wonderful Life. What if, like Jimmy Stewart's George Bailey character, ALPA had never existed? What if airline pilots had no voice, no strong organization to protect them and promote their labor and safety interests? What if line pilots were subject to pilot pushing and arbitrary work rules and the whims of management? What if no one*

*with the necessary political horsepower had lobbied for TCAS, airport markings, pilot input to aircraft design, and unbiased accident investigations, not to mention dozens of other critical safety improvements? What if "captain's authority" were just a punch line to wistful hangar jokes?*

*Thankfully, you don't have to think too hard on those questions, because this is not what happened, and it never will.*

*As you have read in the previous articles in this issue, about ALPA's many accomplishments, let us celebrate the fact that the Association does indeed exist, and look forward to the next 75 years of continued ALPA strength and unity in service to the airline piloting profession.*

## Airline Pilots in Popular Culture

We hope that the horror story described in our speculative fiction tale, "Leave It to the Machine," never gets into a movie or book. However, over the decades, airline pilots have been a subject of interest to the purveyors of popular culture. Overall, that has proved to be a boon to the profession, although it has had some mixed results.

As a case in point, Steven Spielberg's movie, *Catch Me if You Can*, based on the true story of a compulsive impersonator who passes himself off as an airline pilot, doctor, and lawyer, may not be the best example of the genre from a pilot's viewpoint. Nevertheless, by equating pilots with doctors and lawyers, it at least illustrates that the public's image of people who fly airliners is on a par with other prestigious occupations. (Okay, no lawyer jokes, please!)

A more sympathetic view of pilots came out of the TV series *Wings*, not because of the relatively few aviation scenes, but because good writing and good acting made the characters human and likeable. TV owed pilots this one after the funny but clownish character of Howard Borden, the airline navigator who was always getting lost on *The Bob Newhart Show*. The very first episode of the series was titled "Fly the Unfriendly Skies," but the Borden character was gone by the end of the third season.

Perhaps the archetypical "pilot's movie" is *The High and the Mighty*. Who can forget John Wayne taking charge as only the Duke could do when an airliner developed engine trouble on a transoceanic flight? True, "captain's authority" really took it on the chin, but this iconic flick, written by the equally iconic avia-

tion writer, Ernest K. Gann, is unforgettable both in the original and in the parody version, *Airplane*. Quick, now—how many lines can you rattle off from that one? Surely, you know them all by heart!

Well, maybe that's what happens when you leave it to Hollywood. As might be expected, airline pilots have fared much better in literature. Nor is it surprising that airline pilots as writers have produced some of the best stories about flying. In addition to the prolific Ernie Gann, former ALPA activist Capt. Bob Buck (TWA, Ret.) (see his essay "Reflections," page 38) has produced some of the best reading for both pilots and the public. Capt. Buck had his own interesting brushes with Hollywood, but you'll have to read his latest book, *North Star Over My Shoulder*, to get the scoop on Howard Hughes, Tyrone Power, Bob Hope, and other Tinsel Town connections he made over his career.

The Internet has sprouted dozens of professional and amateur websites devoted to aviation. It also has opened new channels for writers such as Patrick Smith, the furloughed airline pilot who "explains it all" to the public in his salon.com column, "Ask the Pilot."

Stretching the definition of "popular culture" a bit, we should make a brief mention of airline pilots in the news media. The public still holds a considerable reserve of respect for pilots and a fundamentally positive image of the profession. Overblown reports about "pilot error," however, stick in pilots' memories; but for every one of those, ALPA has been party to dozens of articles in print and in broadcast, drawing upon the positive perceptions and images of airline pilots to get the Association's stories out to the public.—John Mazor

