Reflections

By Capt. Robert N. Buck (TWA, Ret.)

Sixty-eight years ago, TWA hired me as a copilot on DC-2s and DC-3s. One of the first captains I flew with said to me, rather gruffly, "Join ALPA right away."

"What's ALPA?" I asked.

"It's our union—join it!"

I did and have had no regrets through all the years.

ALPA, at that time, was basically a negotiating organization, with Dave Behncke running the show. He was a tireless worker, and I can think back to him sitting at his desk in a second-floor office on Cicero Avenue in Chicago, late at night, poring over papers or writing them. In negotiations—and I witnessed some—he remained relatively quiet until, generally late at night, the opposition was punchy with fatigue. Then Dave would seem to gain strength, come out of his quietude, and achieve a favorable agreement. He was a master at this.

But we weren't just a bargaining organization. Ted Linnert, an engineer who once worked for Matty Laird, a famous pilot from the heyday of air racing, got ALPA's Engineering and Air Safety Department going.

We started as a whistle-blowing outfit regarding anything we felt unsafe. We were involved in many confrontations. I remember well the battle to get radar, but gradually the manufacturers, the FAA, and the airlines themselves recognized that ALPA's Engineering and Air Safety Department gave valuable advice and approval. It was part of ALPA's becoming respected.

In the beginning, airline flying was something between barnstorming, and the advance of technology.

I started in DC-2s. The appellation "All-Weather Airplane" was attached to the DC-2, but it was far from what one could call "all-weather." However, pilots believed it and flew in just about any weather out there.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Capt. Bob Buck

Who Is Bob Buck?

Pilot, author, *éminence grise*, aviation legend—Capt. Robert N. Buck (TWA, Ret.), now 92, living in Vermont and writing his eighth book, is one of those elder statesmen of ALPA and the airline industry who has been everywhere, seen and done it all, and known everybody.

In 1930, newly licensed at 16, Bob Buck set a junior transcontinental speed record in his Pitcairn Mailwing open-cockpit biplane. He went on to set other records, but a newspaper reporter urged him to find a steady job as an airline pilot so he could afford to get married.

At the age of 23, he went to work for TWA as a copilot on DC-2s, which were more transitional than today's pilots might realize: the airplane leaked like a sieve, and its pilots spread ponchos on their laps to protect the paperwork while flying in rain.

Two years later, F/O Buck became Capt. Buck. In 1943, he began a brief 1-year stint as TWA's chief pilot—brief because he wanted to return to line flying and weather research. For his weather research flying in the B-17 and a beefed-up P-61 Black Widow night fighter, U.S. President Harry S Truman presented him, as a civilian, with the Air Medal, and ALPA honored him with the Association's Air Safety Award in 1963.

Capt. Buck retired in January 1974 as TWA's senior B-747 captain, ending an extraordinary flying career in which he never scratched an airplane. His favorite airline flying was the B-707 era, when pilots enjoyed the astonishing performance and reliability of the new jet airliners, the service to passengers was still gracious, and the skies had not yet filled up.

Today he still flies light airplanes and gliders with his son, Capt. Robert O. Buck, recently retired from Delta.

Capt. Buck's classic *Weather Flying*, now in its fourth edition, graces many a pilot's bookshelf. His autobiographical *North Star Over My Shoulder*, published by Simon & Schuster in 2002, is a must-read for every pilot. Written in a captivating style as easy-going and graceful as the man himself, *North Star* chronicles a life of adventure and discovery, plus the enormous changes from radial engines, rag wings, and contact flying to today's jet fleets and satellite navigation.

Air Line Pilot asked Capt. Buck to contribute some reflections on ALPA's 75th anniversary and his 78 years in aviation.—*Jan W. Steenblik, Technical Editor*

A Salute to Today's Pilots

"Part of the flavor of early aviation was its heroes, performing deeds that seemed impossible in their time; the history book is full of names, some deserving and some not, as lucky one-shot stunts put a few people on the front pages. Some of the great names I look up to for their skill and courage. But my heroes are the unknown, unheralded airline pilots who fly without incident or accident, making decisions, stopping potential disasters before they happen, flying all night to see dawn through scratchy, tired eyes; fighting bad weather in all seasons from ice to thunderstorms; away from home and family for at least half of every month. You see him, and now her, walking through the airline terminals, wheeling their black brain bags and overnight cases, unnoticed except for the uniform. They will retire and disappear into the world of senior citizens. They have taken thousands of people safely from one place to another, across continents and oceans, but few know them or bestow on them the laurels they deserve—these are my heroes.

"I do not include myself in this category, because our days were so different; while they were scary at times, they were never dull. We had fun, and the flying never felt like drudgery. Pilots of recent times have a tougher job, harassed and intimidated by a multitude of regulations, the overpopulation of the skies, and the lack of freedom. We were explorers, but those who maintain their concentration and command in today's conditions are heroic in ways that are all too easy to ignore."
—Capt. Bob Buck, *North Star Over My Shoulder*

We didn't turn around and surrender to a line of thunderstorms. The pilot's task was to find a way through, and all kinds of theories existed: "Go where the rain is heaviest…Go where the rain is lightest, ditto for lightning…Study the tops and go where they're the lowest." There were many theories. But willy-nilly, we went through, and we had some wild rides.

Many years later, when I was researching thunderstorms in a B-17 and a P-61, I'd fly right through the ugly-looking things. Most interesting to me was that I never flew anything in the B-17 or P-61 any worse than thunderstorms we had flown in DC-2s and DC-3s.

Navigation was via the A-N, or aural-null, radio range. We listened in our headphones for the Morse code for A (• –) or N (– •); when we were on the beam, the dits and dahs cancelled each other out. Static from snow and certain types of rain blocked out the signal, so when you picked up the signal again after losing it, you had to find out where you were. The off-course area contained two A quadrants and two N quadrants, so when reception resumed and we heard an A or N, the question was, Which quadrant are we in? We used various procedures to solve the problem, but the A–N range was a navigation system with inherent ambiguity, and it could lead pilots astray—sometimes with fatal results.

After World War II, the start of international flying, and four-engine aircraft, bargaining became tight-lipped. The 1946 TWA pilot strike brought it to a head. The strike was settled with an arbitration agreement, and few today realize the importance of its outcome to all pilots. Copilots should know that TWA's strike and arbitration in 1946 gave them their proper role.

The agreement called for a board of three—one from TWA's management, one from ALPA, and a neutral appointed by the Labor Department. The management man, George Spater, was a lawyer, and a fine gentleman. I became, with much misgiving, the pilot representative. Judge Frank Swacker, placed by the government, was a fine old gent, with many years of experience behind him.

We had 13 items specifically set for us to settle, but the one that had deep importance was, What should copilot pay be? This wasn't simply a matter of money, but principle. TWA management tried to establish that the copilot was an apprentice and therefore should receive paltry pay. ALPA argued that the copilot was no longer an apprentice, but a necessary and valuable part of the flight crew. Some of management's evidence was nasty in their attempt to demean copilots.

Judge Swacker told Spater and me to go off and settle as much as we could, and come back to him with anything we couldn't settle. So Spater and I retired to a room at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago and negotiated.

Spater's principle was that neither side should give or get all, and that a settlement we could live with was to the good of the future. On copilot pay, he made an offer—not what I would have liked—but not too bad. It was sufficient to destroy the apprentice concept.

After some up and down, back and forth over pay, we signed off on the copilot issue. The important point was, it made certain that copilots were necessary crewmembers, a big step for the future. I'd have liked to have gotten more money for the copilots, but I felt strongly that Swacker, being old-school, would support the apprentice idea, and I'd better take what I could get.

Later, when we met with Swacker, we showed him our agreement. After reading it, Swacker looked up at me and said, "Bob, you got him there—I'd never have given that much." It was one of my life's most wonderful moments of relief.

Now long retired, I look on ALPA as an important and respected part of the airline industry, with memories of past conflicts resolved, and an assurance that ALPA will cope with the turbulent future, because current and future generations of pilots will rise to the challenges of their day as my and other generations of pilots have done.