



LUNCH WITH LES

Welcome to the first in a series of interviews called Contrails. These interviews are part of a bigger idea I am designing entitled "Project: Build a Better Pilot." This series will go in depth with some of the most popular and well known aviation authors and instructors in aviation today. I hope to glean insights on how instructors can mentor other instructors. How CFIs can find more effective ways of instructing, and how our group as "teachers" can build a better pilot.

One of the first individuals I wanted to interview was a fellow pilot from my airline. A B-777 Captain, former Check Airman and well-known contributing editor to Flying Magazine, Les Abend. As I contacted Les and coordinated our first meeting weather intervened and altered our plans.



Both of us live in the Northeast, a quick one hour and 30 minutes flying time in my flying clubs Cirrus. After reviewing the weather and realizing that the aircraft had the capability to fly down in these conditions, the real question was "why". Sometimes that "complete the mission" mentality from my airline job can creep in my head.

We agreed that I did not want to become an "I learned about flying from that"



Welcome

I am excited to bring you this current issue of Instructor's Wing Contrails. A first in a series of interviews with aviation's movers and shakers.

I am also pleased to announce that selected articles in Instructor's Wings will now be published in NAFI's Mentor Magazine. Enjoy!

Tailwinds,

Ruben Alconero

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article in the next issue of Flying Magazine.

A couple weeks later the stars aligned and the weather Gods cooperated.

I flew down to Danbury CT, arriving fashionably late like our airline, we finally met in person and made introductions. Being a little hungry we chatted the Cirrus, jumped in his truck and made our way to a local restaurant nearby.

Much like an airline layover we got to know each other while breaking bread and sharing a meal.

We discussed our passion for flying, our respective early age we started lessons, and of course current news about our airline. Today was the day our company would announce retirements, there was another large group departing similar to the prior month. Our life, pay, career movement, etc are all based off of seniority. Moving up a "few" numbers put a smile on both our faces.

Being the outstanding Captain Les is, he kindly picked up the bill for his "First Officer" of the day.

Within a half hour we had completed a preflight on N8PY (Cirrus SR20) and comfortably seated ourselves in the cockpit. Les had yet to fly in a Cirrus, and I graciously offered to take him up for spending a chunk of his day off with me.

As a current CSIP (Cirrus Standardized Instructor Pilot) I explained the Cirrus philosophy of checklists, flows, and operations.

I gave a briefing on the CAPS (Ballistic parachute), how it operated in the event it was needed. A quick demo on completing our checklists on the MFD (Multi-Function Display) and a synopsis of how the avionics operated. As a current B777 Captain he caught on very quickly.

We were soon viewing the countryside to the North of the airport. Flying over Candlewood Lake he pointed out his humble abode. I really need to upgrade to Captain soon.

We settled back on the ground twenty minutes later and soon relaxed in a pilot briefing room located at the local FBO (Fixed Based Operator), it was time to start the interview.

IW-How old were you when you took your first plane ride?

LA - I was 6 years old, and it was an American Airlines Lockheed Electra. I was given a certificate that stated I could appear for an interview 20 years from that date. On March 10, 1983 I called AA for that interview.

IW- At what age did you start flying lessons?

LA- I started around the age of fifteen and soloed before I could drive a car, I then received my private license at age seventeen.

IW - What was your first job in aviation, and your first flying job?

LA- I swept hangers for flight time at a small airport South of Syracuse. I flew the Grumman American Trainers and eventually become a CFI at SAIR Aviation in Syracuse NY.

IW - Do you feel your time as a flight instructor has made you a better pilot?

LA- Certainly, a key being the ability to learn and hone communication skills with other pilots.

IW- Why did you want to become a Check Airman for your airline?

LA -Actually I was asked by a Fleet Captain. I had not thought about it, and it was not on my radar. I had been on the B-767/757 for almost ten years. Things were getting a little stale, and I was actually excited about doing something new. Coincidentally when I first checked out as Captain, I was asked once I had my initial five hundred hours of experience (in that specific aircraft) to apply. However a sluggish economy sent things

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backwards and I did not get that opportunity until years later. I thought that I would like retire and say "I did that once." I also knew it was a way to give back, and share my experience with others.

IW- What was one of the most rewarding aspects of being a Check Airman?

The whole thing was a fun experience. It increased my flying acuity. Not only was I responsible for conveying my experience to another professional pilot I was still responsible for hundreds of lives. It was a two mission program so to speak.

IW- What was the most challenging part of being a Check Airman?

Training pilots to a new division and seat. Particularly pilots coming from analog aircraft like the MD-80, flying Domestic routes transitioning to "glass cockpits" on long haul International routes. A lot of emphasis being placed on International procedures such as Atlantic crossings.

IW- I was going to ask if you were still active in General Aviation (GA), however after seeing your

Cherokee 6 up close I think I can skip that question. How many hours a year do you still fly GA and do you think that coupled with your involvement in the aviation community and writing for Flying benefits your skills as an airline pilot?

LA- I fly light aircraft about 100 hours a year, and yes it has benefited my skills. I have stayed engaged in many aspects of flying including soaring. I have not had an opportunity to do much of that lately, but I enjoy soaring. I also have float plane rating. This dovetails in to focusing on all aspects of aviation. It makes you a complete pilot.

IW- What would you recommend to new pilots wanting to gain experience as the best job to enhance their skills?

LA- Being a CFI gives you the opportunity to learn and convey the material. You become a lot more confident once you are able to teach it. It is one thing to be able to do it, and another in actually being able to convey it and make someone a safe pilot. That takes a lot of practice. Besides molding these new pilots it is very rewarding to see the finished product on my end.



As a Check Airman I signed pilots off to take a 408,000 lb airplane with 225 people onboard and I never questioned if they were ready to go. My final thought in signing a pilot off to fly is "I am good with my family getting onboard this aircraft with this pilot." That really is the way you need to approach it all the time, whether you are teaching in a Cirrus or a 767.

IW- Technology is ever changing and the advancements this past twenty years have been eye opening . How do you feel this technology has impacted training?

LA- The positive part of it is it has allowed us to obtain information on a more rapid basis. One simple glance now can give you all the information versus performing the old "T-scan". The negative side is it is reducing our navigation and flying skills. In some respects we have

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become too reliant on the "magenta line". I guess there is a reason we are now called "Children of the Magenta".

IW- A new concept I am designing is called Project: Build a better pilot. How can we enhance the training environment? How could we build better pilots in at the airline level or in general aviation?

The best analogy would be here is what you do for a soft field take-off and a short field take-off. Nine times out of ten it felt like the same thing. It wasn't until I used a grass strip that I really understood the difference. We need to have more real life based training, creating an entire training situation or scenario, in essence a complete training solution.

Ask the Instructor-

Do you have a question you would like answered in the next issue?

Please contact:

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Next Issue: Pilotage

With the advent of GPS, iPads, and "glass" cockpits basic pilotage and dead reckoning skills seem to be slipping away.

Join us as we fly a J-3 with a mag compass and sectional chart. Relearn the lost art of pilotage and dead reckoning while enjoy a scenic view of upstate NY in the Fall.

Till next month Safe Flying.

