



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Airliners Are Airplanes, Too

Big or small, we love 'em all

BY JEFF SKILES

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CAUTIOUS in my writing for *Sport Aviation* to not introduce too much of what I most commonly fly to this column. Mostly this is because I wrote a column or two early on about experiences that happened to occur in an airliner and received some, shall we say, “honest” feedback from a couple of readers. The stories weren’t even about airline flying per se. I just happened to be in the seat of an airliner rather than that of a Cessna, RV, or Waco when the observations I related occurred.

I have never understood this antipathy toward our largest aircraft since an airplane is an airplane no matter how large or small. As our founder, Paul Poberezny, shared on more than a few occasions, they’re all airplanes — and he loved every one. Paul was the quintessential ambassador for aviation, though. Whether they be antique or classic, warbird, or homebuilt Paul flew, designed, built, and/or restored them all.

BOEING PLAZA

Airliners do seem to be an attraction at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh. Whenever JetBlue or American Airlines flies in an airplane for the day, EAA members line up on Boeing Plaza to march through the cabin. This is a practice that I find amusing since a number of these people had to have come to Oshkosh in an airline cabin and will go

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home in similar fashion. A couple of years ago I approached a gentleman who had been standing in the hot sun for a long time waiting to stroll down the aisle of the new Airbus 350. His answer to my query regarding how he came to be there that day was “United to Chicago, and then rented a car.” I can’t imagine why he would think the inside of an Airbus — granted a brand new 350 — would be significantly different than the United workhorse he flew in just a few days before. But, such is the appeal of large aircraft that he stood in line all the same.

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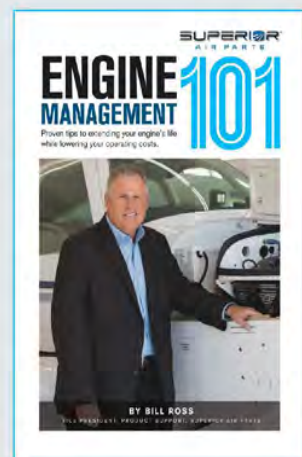
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All this leads me to believe that there is a quiet majority out there who believe as I do that airliners are airplanes, too. So, I'd like to let you all in on a secret. There really isn't a whole lot of difference between a Quad City Challenger and an Airbus A380 — that pretty much defines the spectrum of aircraft I've flown. I even did a touch-and-go in the A380, albeit with the able assistance of any number of Airbus employees to reset the controls, flaps, and trim. After touchdown, I just stood up the Airbus' four thrust levers to keep it rolling and waited for their signal to advance them further to takeoff and go-around (TOGA) thrust. The plane leapt back in the air quicker than the Quad City Challenger, and I kept it in the pattern — crosswind, downwind, base — for a full stop. No difference.

NO PULL START!

Full disclosure: The Airbus A380 does have the advantage of not requiring you to pull start its engines like my lawn mower. A really nice feature! The Challenger people need to work on that. It is hard, though, for the Airbus to create that hanging out in the breeze feeling of the Challenger. Flying an airliner with the windows open is highly discouraged.

Many of the Douglas DC-9s and Boeing 727s I have flown in the past would be old enough to qualify as classic aircraft and therefore suitable for parking in Vintage camping at Oshkosh. That would truly be seeing the show in style, camping in your very own stretched Winnebago. Might have a little problem taxiing in the grass however. It certainly would be a sight coming in with the Vintage parking crew riding their scooters at the wingtips.

LANDING FLOAT

The Airbus 330 I fly today weighs in at slightly more than half a million pounds and yet will float in the flare just like — dare I say it — a Piper Cub! Just chop the throttles and hold it off, hold it off, hold it off. It will float right off the other end of the runway if you let it. Of course, the flare is accomplished a bit higher off the ground. In a landing attitude the pilot's eye level is maybe 40 feet in the air when the rear main gear trucks brush the pavement. Forty feet! That's like standing on the peak of the roof

of a two story house. A flare that high is hard to judge so we cheat. When you hear the radar altimeter call "50" you flare — that's 50 feet below the gear trucks. When you hear "30" you chop the thrust levers. Of course, to avoid floating off the airport property the flare is only a few degrees. More of an assume-the-proper-attitude affair than a hold it off for a full-stall landing. Other than using the radar altimeter's assistance, the technique is remarkably similar to what Van's Aircraft recommends in its training manual for landing the RV-12: Throttle idle, a slight pitch-up attitude, fly it on.

While an Airbus has all that gee-whiz stuff like fly-by-wire controls, auto-throttles, and autopilot, you can hand fly it like a Cessna, too. In fact, after years of teaching us that the use of automation (auto-throttles and autopilot) enhances safety, the FAA has now realized that raw flying skills have suffered a bit as a result. Now we are encouraged to shut off the auto-flight systems and just fly the airplane.

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THE DIESEL NINE

It kind of harkens back to my DC-9 days of yore when descent below 10,000 feet was generally marked by the audible warning of the autopilot being disconnected. The altitudes below 10 on both climb-out and descent were reserved for hand flying by most pilots, and the DC-9 didn't even have auto-throttles installed. It was a bone

stock VOR to VOR airplane. In fact, I saw my first fancy GPS navigation unit in a Cessna 172.

Which prompts me to share a little secret about airliners. You may well have better equipment in your RV-8 than I have in the Airbus A330. Airliners are produced in generations rather than model years. To keep our cockpits absolutely standardized, the airplanes that are being purchased today are effectively the same as the first of that type acquired perhaps 20 years ago. They might have been state of the art then, but progress outstrips their charms rather quickly.

SYNTHETIC VISION? WHAT'S THAT?

We do have glass cockpits, but they look pretty archaic compared to the displays available from Dynon or Garmin today. I show magazine ads of Garmin displays with synthetic vision to my fellow airline pilots and witness what it must have been like for cavemen to see fire for the first time. Yet, every new RV-12 special light-sport aircraft comes equipped with such technology.

At one time people called the Ford Tri-Motor monstrous. The tip of the spear in airborne technology. Compared to airliners of today, however, the Ford seems rather petite and unimaginably simple. Of course, size is relative. When I go to London Heathrow, the land of the giants, the half-a-million pound, 296-passenger A330 I fly looks like a light twin in the takeoff lineup with all the 747s and A380s scattered about.

So, whether you're in a 1.2 million pound A380 or an ultralight, you're flying an airplane. Big or small, short or tall, they're all just as fun to fly. Airliners are airplanes, too! *EAA*

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