

The Dubai Air Show 1995

It was late on a dark November night and I was crouched between our two pilots in the cockpit of a 777. The deck tilted as we made a wide bank onto the final approach to the Dubai International airport. Out the windshield, the runway lights stretched away in long straight rows of red and orange, and the tall downtown buildings sparkled in the nighttime light. There was an air of excitement on the plane. We were a fully loaded 777-200 with about forty people bringing Boeing to the Dubai Airshow.

I thought back on the events leading up to that great view on the approach to Dubai. The clear crisp days of October had slowly been heading towards a stormy Boeing machinists strike. I knew tempers would grow short; negotiations would break down, and there would be a strike. It seemed like every four years, like clockwork, there would be a walkout. These were never easy and it was stressful for everyone. Sometimes these strikes lasted two or three months and you never knew how long it would last or what would happen.

I was a flightline supervisor that year 1995 and managed a crew of nine or ten union guys, a mix of aircraft electricians, mechanics and avionics techs assigned to one of the planes. Usually there were a dozen aircraft on the test ramp and our flight test manufacturing group worked 24/7. Three managers and three crews per plane. Engineering Test Operations managed the schedule and Instrumentation managed the data system.

I'd get assigned a plane and crew and we'd put in the changes to be tested, fix whatever needed fixing, fuel the plane, preflight and launch it. It could be any Boeing model. Usually, we installed some racks of monitoring equipment, seats for a few engineering crew and some temporary wiring. We could be assigned a two-week program or it could be two years. Like most jobs, sometimes it was easy, other times it was hard. Strong personalities on the crew could make it easy or make it a challenge to manage, but the work was fast paced, hi tech, exciting and fun. On each new test, there was always hope for some travel because Boeing would pack up and fly to any part of the world to obtain the data they needed. Plus, we always got the VIP fast track through customs and immigration, private bus transportation, stayed at the best hotels, and we ate well!

The strike occurred as expected and as I arrived for work in the predawn light each day, it was ugly. Faceless angry people were in the street and waved signs in my headlights, someone banged their fist on my hood. It was almost frightening.

The local Machinist union had a loyal and sometimes militant following and the contract negotiations stirred up strong emotions. The local headquarters worked to make sure their members had the best pay and benefits, but Boeing didn't always agree. Management could be stubborn and with a heck of a lot more resources, things could drag on for months. I'd seen it more than a few times during my time with the company.

When a strike occurred, manufacturing management would huddle with test engineering and figure out some priorities. All the ongoing work was hugely disrupted, but that was the object. One high priority project would be chosen and managers would work it to death. We did the best we could during these times but eventually the strikes began to hurt the company's bottom line and it made our airline customers uneasy.

By 1995 the 777 had been certified by the FAA for two years and it was a huge success. This widebody had all the performance to cross the Atlantic or Pacific and then do LAX-Sydney. It boasted excellent gas mileage plus the wide body, fly by wire and advanced integrated electronics. By the start of production, the orderbook had 118 firm orders with options for 95 more from 10 airlines. It was a high-tech contender, every airline wanted them. This flying machine was the poster child of the nineties and Boeing wanted to show it to the world. Deliveries from the Everett factory were in full swing and the first of the model "WA001" was a little beat up from the flight testing but nicely painted in Boeing's current promotional livery. It was attending all the big airshows and flown around the world for airline demonstrations.

That fall, WA001 was slated to go to the Dubai Airshow and do a display, fly some circles and visit a couple of middle east countries on the way home. It was a big deal for Boeing to make an appearance at that airshow, one of four yearly international shows and a major place to display, demonstrate and sell our product in an international setting. The strike made it more complicated, but not impossible. All the test racks had been removed and there were several sections of nice seats and a brilliant upgraded interior. The aft zone was walled off and had an area for the crew to relax and spread out. There were some storage cabinets and a couple of airline VIP tables set up so people could work and have meetings while strapped in.

The ongoing strike seemed to have no end in sight and I suspect some contingency planning was being done upstairs in regards to the Dubai Airshow. The big boss called some of us together and said "you managers go and do the airshow".

He knew that a carefully picked handful of 1st line managers could safely service, launch and recover the plane on the trip and the group of us were pretty excited about it. Going on an international trip to Dubai was a great way to get the heck out of dodge, leave the hangar work and all the ill feelings outside the gate.

Over the past few years, we'd been through the sweat and tears of taking a fleet of test 777s from a pile of pieces on the factory floor to finished, flying products. The group of us had all managed crews doing the tough labor and pretty much knew these planes inside and out. The procedures to safely maintain the plane, preflight them and most importantly finding and fixing systems failures were well ingrained. I was elated to be selected as the avionics tech. The only possible problem was that we were all type A personalities, but it would be a huge adventure with just management and test operations friends. No employees to manage!

Boeing had contracted with United to hire a senior flight attendant to help on Boeing tours and I knew him from another international trip. Jeff Nouwens was smart, funny and could easily move from joking with the guys in the back to serving cognac to presidents. He was about six feet tall, athletic looking with an easy smile and a likeable personality. He got along especially well with the ladies.

I was happy to hear that he was going with us because he always had a lighthearted banter, was fun to be around and knew his job well. He'd make sure we had drinks, meals and snacks for the long flights and then happily work with the customer flight attendants who went on the demo flights. I think operations gave him a credit card and said "get anything you think the trip might need".

We landed at Dubai without incident, got parked in a far corner, everyone off and began to unload the cargo containers. We had a full cargo compartment, a lot of items and equipment for the Boeing booth that had gotten a "free ride". I looked up and a new USAF [C-17](#) was backing up into the stall next to us using only his thrust reversers. You never see that.

The Dubai Airshow was everything I had expected and more. On the first day, groups of Emirati robed sheikhs, their followers and bodyguards toured everything of interest. One guy had gold piping on his robe, I suspected he was the president of one of the [United Emirates](#). The next day the airshow opened. You needed a special pass to access the flightline so we only had vetted people touring the 777. Airshow security was visible and I noted the outline of a gunman on the rooftop of the exhibition hall. Planes, fighters and helicopters from all over the planet dotted the ramp, including the latest from Russia.

During the week-long show, the group of us would man the plane, parked among a sea of others on the tarmac. We answered questions, smiled a lot, gave tours, and handed out Boeing buttons and stickers. Each one of us would find a quiet time during each day to step into the flight deck, put on a headset and make a phone call to home on the satcom. These free phone calls were considered part of the testing! The 777 had been designed for ease of maintenance and it was true. We managers (now mechanics and electricians) had no problem maintaining the airplane.

I walked around and could not believe the sheer amount of flight and war hardware on display and for sale. Each day's acrobatic flights and six-fighter flyovers with colored smoke were spectacular. There was even a sandbagged camo trailer with a radar on top demonstrating a surface to air missile setup. I went inside and watched two guys operating the system, it was incredible. The exhibition halls were full of vendor booths selling everything from bombs and guns to rockets and satellite equipment.

On the last day, Jeff came up to me and whispered that there was going to be a little party after the demo flight. I stuck around and he had invited about five or six [Emirates](#) flight attendants to the back and have a social hour with some of the Boeing crew. He opened some champagne and we had a toast. These were beautiful middle eastern young ladies with olive skin and friendly personalities. One was from Sri Lanka. We sat around and made small talk and Jeff brought out more goodies, a bowl of caramel corn and some nuts. We had another toast.

Someone taped a cassette player to the PA handset and Elton John came booming through the plane. We had the APU running and the A/C cranked up, the back entry doors were open and someone was smoking a cigarette in the doorway. Suddenly the engineering manager Dennis appeared and he was not smiling. He was in charge of the plane and he told us that we were wasting company money (by running the APU, lights and air conditioning) and he was leaving. Everyone was having a good time and we just waved him away.

The next day was a free day and six of us jumped into a couple of taxis and went to a mall where there was a [gold souk](#) (a gold market) It was a covered mall about 50 yards long and had dozens of gold and jewelry stores. The mall overhead lights were dim and I remember there was so much gold displayed in the windows that it cast a gold glow on the sidewalks! One of the Emirate's flight attendants, Djamila went with us and we looked around. The gold and diamond jewelry were beyond belief. It seemed there was little markup from the going price of gold. Whatever you wanted, they weighed and gave you the price. Djamila helped immensely by negotiating for us. All the guys on the crew bought gifts to take home.

I couldn't believe all the gold, diamonds and jewelry. I bought an ID bracelet for my daughter Shannon and a tennis bracelet for my girlfriend Sue. The ID bracelet was whisked away to be engraved and back in an hour. Next, we went to a Persian Carpet merchant. As we stood around, the guy began to pull carpets out to show us. As I recall he was pulling out (one a minute!) and was adding to a growing pile of the finest Persian carpets I had seen. He went on and on talking about the quality and unique patterns. We each bought a carpet!

That night there was a Boeing party at the Dubai Athletic club. The group of us were invited and it was a perfect evening. It was getting dark and the temperature was in the low seventies and there were nearly a hundred people standing around in groups around a very nice pool. A small band playing light jazz in one corner next to an open bar and in the other corner was a spread of food like I had never seen before. There were guys cooking steaks and a very nicely set up buffet with about every kind of food imaginable. The prawns were the biggest I have seen. A little further down was a guy with an Alder fire going in a sand pit. He was cooking fresh NW Salmon fillets in the traditional native-planked style. I talked to him and he'd just flown in from Seattle with the fresh fish and a load of firewood for this event!

The next day we departed for Amman Jordan. We were met in the far corner of the airport by a group of government officials and airline dignitaries and after handshakes all around, the pilots, sales people and the Boeing VIPs were all invited to a guided tour of [Petra](#). Petra is famous for its sandstone-cut architecture and water conduit system dating back to the 4th century BC. Petra has been described as one of the most precious cultural properties of man's heritage. A military helicopter was sitting adjacent to us and they were all escorted over, got in and flew off.

As we shut the plane down, another group of government and airline officials approached us (probably at the airplane maintenance level) and invited us to tour the lost Roman city of [Jerash](#). Most of the ancient city was destroyed in an earthquake in 749 AD and was covered by the sands of time until the ruins were re-discovered in 1806 by a German explorer. Today it is one of the best-preserved Roman cities in the Middle East and a popular destination for those who would like to witness the majesty of Roman architecture. We spent several hours there and it was stunning. It had a sewer system, storm drains along the roadways and even marks that chariot wheels had worn into the pavers.

The next morning, we got the plane ready for a Royal Jordanian Airplanes demo flight. [King Hussein](#), a long time Boeing friend and commercial pilot was scheduled to fly part of a demo flight. We were working off the preflight items and the plane was operating perfectly.

We had about two hours before the flight and I was looking at the Flight Management Computer and realized that the navigation database was due to expire at midnight. Every thirty days we got a new database that came as a 1.44 Mb floppy disc. This "nav" database had every aeronautical navigation point and airport in the world and basically told the airplane where everything was. You could not fly without a current database.

I thought heck let's just update the database right now, get the plane updated and be done with it. You stuck the disc in the [maintenance access terminal](#) in the back of the cockpit, told it to update and after about 5 minutes, it was done and you were good for another 30 days. But this time the update caused the whole integrated avionics system (the "AIMS" system) to lock up and become inoperable. All of the cockpit displays went dark and I became more than a little concerned. This was the first integrated modular avionics system for Boeing and it consolidated the processing for 10 different aircraft systems and it was still a little finicky.

In the early days of testing this "lockup" happened a lot and gradually as the system matured, it happened less and less. We had developed a procedure to reset everything when this happened and it worked 90% of the time. You located the AIMS circuit breakers on the flight deck overhead panel and there were like eight of them, four for DC power and four for AC power. They were even marked in red at one point in the test program. You pulled all the AC breakers and waited 2-3 minutes and pushed them in and then you did the same for the DC breakers and everything came back to life.

Well, this time it didn't happen. I did it again and the other guys in the cockpit paused at their checks and looked at me. It thought sheesh, not good. I did the reset again, no luck and again, no luck. Everything partially worked now except the navigation system. I thought about the couple of small wars nearby in Syria and Lebanon and began to sweat. The plane needed to know exactly where it was.

As the flight departure time grew near, one of the pilots, Joe MacDonald, showed up and stuck his head in to see how we were doing. I stepped out and told him of the problem. His got this grave look on his face and he said "Fix It!!" and turned away. My mouth went dry. I went back in the cockpit and started to sweat. I did the reset for the fifth time and a sixth time and then it worked. Everything lit up and I verified the database was current and we were good to go. I had just dodged a huge bullet and breathed a sigh of relief.

We got ready to do the demo flight and all the Boeing guys that wanted to go, sat in the back work area of the plane, out of sight. I looked out the window and watched the sun-bleached cities of Jordan slide by below us.

One of the flight attendants came back and served us a glass of orange juice from a big tray. It was an unusual glass with some Arabic etching on it. I kept it for a souvenir. After the flight, there was a big ceremony and the Boeing sales guys presented the airline with a large scale-model of the 777 painted in Royal Jordanian livery. They in turn presented us each with a high-quality Longines watch with the king's crown on the face. I still have it.

The next day we flew to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The following morning we did a demo flight for one of the princes, probably one associated with the [Saudia](#) airline. Those of us who wanted to go sat in the rear zone and finished some paperwork. I looked out the window. During the demo flight, some official from the airline came back and started chatting with us, he wanted to be one of the guys and he had a big personality.

Ahmod was a transportation minister or something, of medium height, stoutly built with a small beard. We all chatted about anything and everything. He was wearing this headdress called a [keffiyeh](#) and after awhile we thought we knew him well enough to ask him about it.

He told us it is a symbol of Saudi Arabia. The local men wear it with pride and know its history and cultural importance. It's not exclusively Saudi Arabian but very typical for this country. He took it off, (much to my surprise!), and explained why the keffiyeh or ghutra is so important for Saudi men. He also showed us the different ways of draping this headwear, but most often, it is kept in place by a special accessory called "agal". It is a thick black cord, doubled, worn as a headband. Traditionally, the agal was a useful accessory, not just a simple adornment.

Men used it to padlock their camel's legs, because in the Middle East, camels were the means of transportation and status for a long time. They were expensive and people watched them carefully to avoid them from running away. Also, if you lost your camel in the desert, you wouldn't survive on your own. So, an agal was a super useful accessory. It was an interesting conversation and we all came away with a new understanding of each other.

After the landing and postflight checks we had a static display on the airline ramp. It was the usual hosting of an airplane open house for the airport and airline people. Like at Dubai, about six of us would station ourselves throughout the cabin and another one or two outside by the engines. We answered questions, gave tours, handed out stickers and promotional materials. When it was over, we got ready to shut the airplane down and leave for the hotel.

That was when someone noticed an amber light on the left engine parameters screen in the cockpit. We all went out to the engine and started looking around, doing some visual checks.

We understood the light was related to the thrust reverser. I couldn't do much as I knew relatively little about the engines but we had a guy with us Vince, who knew engines. He started going over the outside details while we watched. I went and got a ladder for him.

Finally, he found a lockout lever that had been moved. Apparently by someone who was "testing us". We had not roped off the engines for the display as was the usual procedure. Someone said that more people than we had expected and were getting close to the engines without supervision and this is what happened. We were lucky that it was just a lever. We started and ran that engine and reverser just to make sure, and all was okay.

The plan was to fly back to Seattle the next day, so a few of us went out to find a place to eat dinner. The streets and freeways were mostly deserted. We walked around the neighborhood of the hotel and found a Lebanese restaurant. We did not see any women. All I remember is that the hummus was excellent and we truly felt we were in the middle east. From the outside temperature to the people and to the food.

The next morning, we were up early to fuel and preflight the plane and everything went according to plan. We were to fly direct Dubai to Shannon Ireland. Refuel at Shannon and press on to Boeing Field in Seattle. It was going to be a 22hr marathon. We were somewhere northbound over Europe and it was almost dusk, and I was again sitting in the cockpit watching the pilots do their thing and chatting with them a bit.

It was almost sunset and the sky at 37,000 ft was a very pleasing blue-purple color. There was a contrail from another plane right next to us and looking at all three was breathtaking. One of the pilots motioned to me that another plane was approaching us a few thousand feet below. He said 'watch this' and he reached up and flashed our headlights on and off as the other jet flew under us. I wonder what that pilot thought.

On the long ride home, a few of us began to discuss the upcoming landing and the customs and immigration officer that would come aboard and process all of us back into the United States. We all knew that any expenditures over \$400 would need to be declared and the duty to be paid. And we all knew that each of us had spent a fair amount of money.

Unlike the gauntlet at major airports, the customs officer would come aboard and process each of us in a most informal manner. It was discussed: do we declare all of our purchases or keep mum, and keep going. The consensus was 'you do what your conscience tells you to do' We landed at Shannon Ireland for fuel and had enough time to walk through the terminal. The big thing there is [Waterford Crystal](#) glass.

The craft of Irish crystal making is an art form that has been developed and modified over hundreds of years, going back as far as the Celts. I looked at the airport gift shops and decided I didn't need any more gifts. Soon, back in the air, some of us pulled foam mattresses out from a big stack aft and laid down between the rows of seats. It felt good to be on our way home and the smooth rumble of the engines and quiet air quickly lulled me to sleep.

There was a rustle of activity as we got to Seattle. The incoming international flights were always directed to park at the main Boeing Field terminal which wasn't much of a terminal but a public place to do the official business. We opened the forward entry door and several people came up the stairs, the customs and immigration officer and two people from the USDA who took all the food that was left on board.

We'd all been monitoring the strike, and negotiations still hadn't decided the sticking points. Still ongoing, it was one for the record books, but finally two weeks later it was resolved. 69 days. Looking back, it wasn't easy, but we did it and hopefully sold some airplanes in the process. Nobody talked about their interview with customs and but I did see some gold chains walking around. In the end, the trip gave me an adventure I will not soon forget.

2/11/22 Rev F