



Hello, Columbus – by John Allard

Loosely based on Just Flight Cargo Pilot® - Microsoft Flight Simulator experiences....

Chapter 1 – Cargo

The guy's late – again! He's always late. Along with the co-pilot and our line chief I stood quietly in the aft bay looking out through the open cargo door. We watched the light rain make circles in the puddles on the concrete apron. The daylight is fading quickly. The big ramp lights up on the poles are on already, but aren't yet adding much to the natural daylight remaining. That will change in a few minutes as the real dark creeps in. I look again at my watch, for maybe the hundredth time in the last half-hour as I watch a King Air touch down. He'd just appeared out of the goo a mile or so out at about a thousand feet AGL and made a nice final approach on to 36. Not at minimums for the ILS, or even near it, but still enough to keep you on your toes. Nice work, buddy. Too bad you're not who we're waiting for.

It'll be fully dark by the time we finish loading and launch now, even if our delinquent driver were to show at this very minute. Earlier, I'd hoped for a bit of daylight for our climb out, but it's not in the cards tonight. That door closed for us about an hour ago.

We're waiting for the last of our cargo, the bulk of it, really. This run would barely pay for the gas without what's still coming – hopefully still coming, that is. He'll show, of course, I think sarcastically. He always does, sometimes an hour or more late, and with another nearly incredible cockamamie story about why he wasn't here when promised. Oh, he'll show, but there are times I wish he wouldn't.

And so we wait, not talking much, the three of us, under the overhanging aft end of the hulking old C-123. The line chief, Charlie, is a piece of work. He pretty much runs the ground operation here at Ocala; managing the aircraft maintenance, the warehousing, the loading and unloading of the aircraft and the trucks that come and go, the logistics, why he even has his hand in making the office end of things run smoothly, though my wife would never admit it. He doesn't look the part. Fifty-ish, balding, a little paunchy, and very deliberate. He has the habit of stopping to consider what he's about to say before he says it. That's an unusual quality, if that's the right word. If you ask him a question, he cocks his head a little to one side, gets that thousand-yard-stare going for a second or two, and then delivers what is usually a reasonably accurate answer.

Joe, the co-pilot is quiet too; he's always that way. He's young and reasonably competent, but just isn't the gabby type, not by half. Joe's just a kid really, with a

commercial, multi-engine ticket, no military experience, a year and a half out of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. He wasn't picked up by the airlines immediately out of school, so he took a job with us to build hours and gain some real-world flying experience. He's got type ratings in all our aircraft now, including the Provider, so he gets plenty of hours. I don't expect him to stay around much longer. I'm pretty sure he's scratching at the door of the air carriers' Personnel departments - - - excuse me, Human Resources departments - - - regularly, but that's his prerogative, I guess.

I know Joe prefers flying the right seat of our jets, or one of our lighter turboprops, but he drew the short straw to co-pilot for me tonight. He's stuck with me and the C-123's thundering, vibrating, oil-leaking Pratt & Whitney R-2800s for this flight, and I'm stuck with him. I can't help but wonder who got the worst of the bargain. Him, I guess. Apart from his inability to fill a silence, uncomfortable or otherwise, there's little to fault. His flying's OK, he does what he's told, and sometimes a little more. Tonight's an example. He doesn't have to help load the aircraft, but he will. Charlie sent the rest of the ramp guys home a half hour ago at their scheduled time, even though we still had cargo coming. Ours is the only flight scheduled until early tomorrow morning. Charlie hates guys standing around drawing overtime almost as much as my wife does, and she's paying the bills.

"Joe," I address the co-pilot, "when he shows up, maybe you'd better go on in and dial up the Flight Service Station and have them set our flight plan back by however much it's slipped. His stuff is palletized, so we can load it, run the weight and balance and be ready to go in, oh, say fifty minutes from the time he hauls his sorry ass in here." Joe just nods. I smile inwardly just a little, knowing that I've just caused him to have to actually talk to somebody, even if it's not me.

To be fair, Joe does talk whenever it's required. He handles the radios when we fly, for instance and does it well. He'll read a check list aloud, or respond when I'm reading one. Not an extra word, mind you, but he does talk from time to time.

Charlie asks about fuel. We don't know our final payload weight yet, and the flight is a medium-long one. There are about 5,700 lbs. of fuel aboard and the planning sheets I'd looked at earlier said that would be enough to cover the flight plus the required reserves. I like to have more than enough though, and Charlie knows my habits. "We don't know for sure how much cargo he's bringing, so until we see his load sheet, we won't know our gross", I answer. "It's going to be close, but we may have room for a few hundred pounds more. We'll just have to see where we are when the dust settles. If there's room to add some gas we'll do it after we've finished loading." I didn't want to guess now and end up overweight. This thing's enough to haul off at max gross and I won't overload her. I surely don't want to add fuel now and end up having to pump some of it out later to get back legal.

Charlie gets the thousand-yard stare in his eyes for a second, then nods and makes a non-committal noise in his throat.

We're headed North tonight, as most of our flights out of Ocala do. You can't go too much further South from here, unless it's to be an international run. We're bound for KLCK, Rickenbacker, on the South side of Columbus, Ohio, about 700 nautical miles. We'll be loaded heavy and making a night landing as well. Not a milk run, but it shouldn't be a problem if we just do things by the numbers. Rickenbacker is a former military field, now a mixed use facility with civilian enterprises sharing the turf with an Ohio Air National Guard squadron. It's mainly a cargo terminal serving central Ohio. It has good nav aids, nice big runways and ample ramp space, which we won't even make a dent in. There's not much in the way of air carrier traffic there, but lots of big jets without passenger windows, if you get my meaning. It's the kind of place an old freight dog loves – the only thing missing is radial engines, and we'll be bringing our own.

After staring for what seemed hours with my mind wandering, I noticed with a start that our wayward truck had just pulled up to the gate in the fence. "There he is.", I said to the others, unnecessarily. Joe started toward the office, predictably without a word. Charlie muttered, "About damn time!"

Charlie stepped off the end of the ramp and headed over to direct the truck driver where to park. This guy was well known to us and Charlie wanted to make sure that he didn't get a chance to use our airplane to dent his truck, a not entirely implausible possibility for this character. We'd use a lift truck to ferry the pallets of cargo from the truck to the plane, and a hundred extra feet wouldn't make much of a difference.

I stepped down, and headed for the driver, who was coming toward me on foot waving a clipboard, Charlie trailing along behind looking a little disgusted. "There's more than we thought" the driver said with a half-shrug that hinted embarrassment. "I had to wait for the shipping guys to get the last of it boxed up and palletized, that's why I'm late. You know how those shipping department guys can be."

"And how much extra is there?"

"Well, it says right here..." He shuffled through the sheets on the board and squinted his eyes to read the fuzzy 5th daughter of an NCR original under the harsh ramp lights. "...there's twenty-six hundred pounds more, almost. Twelve thousand, seven fifty total."

This was not good news. I ignored him as I did some quick mental arithmetic. We already had some six thousand pounds of mail aboard. That was going to fly, no matter what. It's a government contract, hard to get, easy to lose and oh-so-profitable, though not enough in itself to make this flight a paying proposition

in this aircraft. Given that, I had serious doubts we were going to be able to accommodate all of this additional cargo. I'd have to run the numbers to be sure, but it was going to be tight at best. I had a moment to recall with satisfaction that I'd held off on loading that extra fuel. Good thing.

Three quarters of an hour later the pallets, were loaded, secured and netted - all that were flying tonight, that is - and we were bidding a not-so-fond adieu to our truck driving friend. "He wasn't happy about only part of it going." Charlie observed, as the truck headed for the airport gate.

"No, he wasn't, was he? They told the office this morning they'd have just over ten thousand pounds for us. That's what we planned for. If we'd known, we might have made other arrangements for some of that mail, or scheduled a bigger plane, but it's too late to lay on another flight tonight. He and his boss are just going to have to live with the fact that we can't take all of it in this load."

I thought for the moment about our customer, the wayward driver's employer. They were a medium sized local manufacturing firm, making of all things, tail light assemblies for all sorts for trailers. It was a niche business, but apparently a prosperous one, judging by the amount of stuff that they shipped by air. They were a good customer, at least from a revenue point of view, one we'd hate to lose. The bad news was that they were a bit disorganized most of the time and they often ended up being the tail that tried to wag our dog. The chronic late deliveries were examples; ditto the ton plus of extra payload they'd dropped on us without warning.

Finishing the thought aloud, I told Charlie, "First thing in the morning you'll have to get the office looking at what to do with the part of the cargo we couldn't take." Charlie had already fork-lifted the four pallets that would have put us over our maximum gross weight into the warehouse.

"OK", he responded. "The boss won't be happy though."

"No, she won't", I agreed.

He referred, of course, to my wife. She was the love of my life, and, coincidentally, the president and CEO of our little air freight business. Not so little any more, I reflected. Though we'd started small and did our share of struggling, we'd finally achieved a measure of success. Not that the Board of Directors of UPS were losing any sleep over us, but still, not too bad. We had leased freight terminals at over a dozen airports in the Southeast and Mid-west and operated a fleet of nearly 20 aircraft. Most were tired 727s and 737s, plus a handful of Caravans and an almost new Beech 1900 that we managed to pick up at a once-in-a-lifetime price...and our trusty old Fairchild C-123. The Provider was my pride and joy, but a burden to bear for almost everyone else in our company.



The fact that we have that plane at all is, pure and simple, a case of my wife indulging me. We both pretend it's a good business decision to own and operate the forty year old relic, but we both know that it's pretty much a break-even situation most months. She doesn't rub my face in it and I work hard to make it as much a revenue generator as possible, but we both know. Even when it makes money, it's still a burden as it is so old and so different from everything else we fly. Its capacity and range do fit a gap in our other capabilities however, and the huge aft loading ramp offers a definite advantage over even the cavernous Boeings when there's a vehicle or other bulky freight involved. Occasionally this beast is just the right tool for the job.

Thus my flight tonight. This morning, the cargo headed for Ohio had looked like a custom fit for the old Provider. The mail plus the trailer lights shipment would make, at that range, a near-perfect load. Rather than send it in a half-empty Boeing we scheduled the hop for me and my aluminum pacifier. All looked good until the extra 2,600 pounds of cargo darkened our door less than an hour ago. Charlie was right, she wouldn't be happy in the morning, and I'd already be in Ohio. Sometimes, things just work out. Life is good.

End – Chapter 1