

Wheels of Winter

by SAM LONGO, A M E , A & P

The winter wind howled and the snow drifted high around the desolate DC8 parked at the far end of the East Hold at Pearson International Airport . . .

It was midnight, and while most people slept comfortably in their warm beds, we were about to spend the night battling the elements. This particular airplane was all ours till morning.

It started out as a routine midnight shift for all of us on Crew 21. Despite the brutal winter storm, we all managed to dig out our cars and report for work at Air Canada's line maintenance hangar. Secretly, I'm quite sure, we all hoped for a cushy gig doing a couple of service checks on DC9s in the warmth and security of the hangar, but the reality was never certain.

The midnight shift was always busy, with the hangars jammed full of aircraft, all requiring our attention, with the ultimate goal of having them all serviceable and sitting on departure gates for the morning flights. However, on this particular night, fellow mechanic Garth Twitchell and I drew the short straws and were re-assigned to work the night for Ramp Operations.

This was a necessary evil of running a maintenance operation; anyone who called in sick on the ramp was ultimately backfilled with mechanics from Hangar Line Maintenance. We all took our turns. Sometimes it was a welcome change, but often, as on this particular night, no good would come of it.

Garth and I each grabbed our ramp boxes and were shuttled down to Gate 91, the hub of Ramp Maintenance in those days, and reported to Greg Lewis, our foreman for the night. Greg was a great guy, but whenever he complimented you first, you knew you were in trouble: "Hey guys, you're looking really good," were the first words out of his mouth followed rapidly by: "Could you help us out and change five main-wheels on a DC8 parked on the East Hold?"

It may have sounded like a question, but of course our response was not optional, we had our assignment for the evening.

We dropped into the adjacent tool room and picked up all the necessary equipment, including a couple of snow shovels, and climbed into our assigned ramp truck to survey our evening's work.

Wheel changes are one of the most common maintenance tasks performed on transport category aircraft, and certainly not in the realm of rocket science. Had this job been assigned to us in the warm glow of the hangar, we would have considered ourselves lucky. Now that we were faced with the blustery, cold task at hand, lucky was not the sentiment that came to mind.

Working by the light of the truck's headlights, we bundled up and started to shovel the tarmac clear around the left main gear. We soon got into a rhythm: remove a wheel, hop in the truck, warm up, back out, install a wheel, back in the truck, warm up, then start the whole process again. We also took a slightly longer than normal "lunch break" in the terminal restaurant, somewhere in the middle of this ordeal – just one of the perks of working in a union environment.

By morning's light, the DC8 had five new shiny main wheels. Cold and exhausted, we packed up our gear and headed back to Gate 91 for our welcomed, warm shuttle ride back to the hangar.

Working outdoors for the airlines was a blessing and a curse. As related in this story, winters could be brutal. Moving aircraft and getting equipment to work in sub-zero temps always tried our patience, with additional levels of grief accompanying every job.

However, at the other end of the spectrum, springs and summers could be wonderful when the weather was nice. Towing an aircraft back from the terminal on a warm summer evening or working with a gentle breeze blowing through the open hangar doors could make any job more pleasant. Mother nature threw it all at us, and we soldiered on. The airline continued to fly while we groundlings did whatever was necessary to make that happen. It just became part of our everyday (or every night) routine.

The DC8s and DC9s are long gone now, likely sweltering somewhere in the heat of an Arizona bone yard. And happily my current winter operations consist of shoveling the short pathway to my little, heated, motorcycle workshop. Retired life is great, and I really can't complain.

Garth has moved on as well. After a long successful career with Air Canada, he retired and is now Toronto Base Manager for Innotech-Execaire. I wonder if he ever compliments his young mechanics before giving them some undesirable maintenance task. He may be sitting behind a desk now, but like all good managers he never forgets the struggles of his early days. That warm office chair was earned by working cold nights on desolate airport ramps for many years.

We all have to pay our dues in this business, and sometimes, if we are smart and lucky, changing all those "wheels of winter" can pay out great dividends. ■