

**Transcript of a speech by Jon Casello, FedEx 777 Captain at the Ross Willner Memorial
November 18, 2023**

Hi, I'm Jon Casello. Ross and I were colleagues at FedEx. We were good friends. There was a time I was trying to figure out what's going back and forth. I'm sorry, I don't keep logbooks anymore, but I tried to go back and look at some old ones and I found a few interesting facts.

There was a time when Ross was a captain on the MD-11 and I was an FO, that we flew together 10 out of 12 months. So I think we saw more of each other than we saw of our families, we saw of anybody else. In fact, there was a time after Max went off to college, I used to live up there in that room for a good period of time.

So I got to spend a lot of good time with Ross. We all have numbers that we remember. The code that unlocks our cell phone, our birth date, our wife's birth date, or significant others, and I have this number. Now this number means, I can tell by the smiles, means a lot to some of the people in this room. But I know this number and will never forget it, ever, no matter how hard I might try. I could not forget that number.

The first time Ross and I met was on the 11th of October in 2003. I was a fairly new MD-11 first officer. Then Ross was a captain and I'm sure there are a few of you who know how it works. But at FedEx, we go to Operations, we all gather together at a meeting point before a flight. The folders are there with flight information, that's kind of where the pilots meet many times for the first time. Sometimes you might have flown with somebody, but generally that's where we meet. This is the first time that Ross and I had met. I remember walking up and seeing a tall guy with a big mustache and I figured it can't be all bad. We talked a little bit, but for those of you, the first time you meet Ross, at least in my experience, watching him with other people, Ross was very, very quiet at the beginning. He would kind of stay back and take in the measure of another person. Sometimes for extended periods before he would actually really engage. And that was the case, kind of, with Ross and I for ten days. We had a very transactional relationship flying the airplane, we did our jobs, but Ross was not one to talk much while we were flying. To contrast that with other captains I'd flown with where before we got to cruise flight, you knew this guy's whole story. I mean, you knew more about this guy than you ever wanted to know. But Ross kind of kept to himself, he would read a book. We did all kinds of fun things later on, but (at the beginning) it was just very professional. We got to a city and we went someplace, and I think we might have a meal or two together, but generally it was not very much. Ross obviously had his own thing that he was doing. Come to find out years later, we're both going through a very interesting time in our lives. We were both post-divorce or approaching a divorce, and we were, kind of, there was a lot of licking our wounds going on, and I think that probably had a lot to do with it. For several months, we shook hands at the end of the flight, said "thanks very much", went on our separate ways, and several months went by. Pardon me for my notes here, but I really did kind of did a deep dive here.

(It was) February 11th of 2004, so October and November, so about four months later, I saw that I was flying with Captain Willner again. And both flights, interestingly enough, we went from Memphis to Paris, and then from Paris to Subic. Subic Bay in the Philippines, Krosse, I can feel you smiling back there. (laughing) Subic Bay in the Philippines was a great R & R spot for pilots. We usually were there for a couple of days. It was an old Navy base. We really were pretty much the only game in town. We had little cafes that we liked to go to. I mean, it was a very, very comfortable situation for FedEx

pilots. And on the flight, I think it was from Paris to Subic this time, Ross pulled out a Sony Ericsson Z525 flip phone. You remember that one? (laughing) This was my introduction to Ross as what's been related so many times already today as just fascinated with tech and tinkering in tech.

And you know, that also, that spilled over into the way he flew an airplane. One of the things I noticed about Ross immediately is that he flew the airplane very elegantly.

And what I mean by that, and maybe the other pilots in the room will understand that, there's a way to just fly where you brute force yourself through the procedures. And there's a way to find how to fly with the fewest keystrokes. The most elegant, smoothest way to fly it. And that's not what they taught you in the schoolhouse. That was something that you only gained by wanting to find out more. And the MD -11 was an airplane, to those who flew it, that was so far ahead of its time. The tech in that airplane for that generation airplane was phenomenal. If you knew how to fly that airplane, you could literally make it do tricks. That's in contrast with the new airplanes today like the 777s that are meant to be flown by third world countries, and they're very straightforward in their approach.

One of the things that I also benefited by is another theme that we've heard today. If I had to come up with a word that summed up Ross, it would be generous. He was generous with his time. He was generous with his resources. He just could not (be generous). If he had it and you needed it, he would give it to you. If he didn't have it, he'd go get it and he'd give it to you. And one of the ways I benefited from him was he encouraged me to learn really how to fly airplanes. If we, there was something about it in the airplane where particularly in the triple seven, when we were finding out something new about it, seemed like every time we took it out when it first showed up, I'd ask Ross. I'd say, "What happens when we get to here and it says this?", and typically his response would be, "I don't know, let's find out." And he would (already) know, but he wanted me to see it happen. He wanted me to experience it. Because you know, someone telling you about something, and you seeing it happen or doing it is a whole different kind of learning. That was also part of Ross's mentorship of me. I have so many tricks in my bag that I pull out as a captain that I got from Ross.

And one of them is just his incredible curiosity with how things work and his generosity of time and spirit to pass that on to somebody else. So whether he knows it or not, and I'm sure he does, that gift to me is continually paid forward. Hopefully there's young first officers at FedEx that will be doing this for their first officers that Ross did for me.

Another thing that Ross taught me was he taught me about the airline life. I had a military background. I flew fighters for a bunch of years, 22 years, before I came to my FedEx job, and of course as a standard single seat fighter pilot, I thought I knew everything and couldn't be taught. Well, Ross showed me differently. Some it had to do with flying, but others were how to live this airline life. The international life is tough, wear and tear, really tough on you. Changes in time zones, coming back, your body somewhere in the Middle East, but your kid's got a recital or whatever else they were doing, you had to be in the present. He really taught me how to lean into that.

But when we were on the road, he taught me how to take advantage of what this airline life offered us. A lot of guys were looking for the nearest McDonald's.

All they were doing was they were sleeping as much as they could. They were trying to stay on Memphis time, which always escaped me as a way to do things. But Ross was a hit the ground running kind of guy, and he knew more back alleys, restaurants here. I've got a little book of the places that we went to, places to get your laundry done in Hong Kong for, I mean, just an incredible wealth of corporate knowledge that he brought with him from Tigers, he'd gathered when he was at FedEx, and he showed me all of it,

and I knew at first, well, Ross again, he wants me to be downstairs in an hour, shit, we just flown for 12 hours, but he was ready to go now, and it was always someplace fun or exciting. He heard that so -and -so and at a stall down in Olongapo, Philippines, had the newest version of the Sony Ericsson, whatever, Ross was on it, he wanted to find out that stuff. He'd have it apart on his desk in his room before the end of the evening. That's the kind of guy he was. He showed me these places. He taught me these places. He'd say go ahead, eat the local food. And you know, sometimes it would agree with you. Sometimes it would not. There was nothing that we wouldn't go out and try. And he was so generous, not only to me, but he'd bring our relief guys along. He'd be buying dinner. He'd be buying drinks. And he would just say one thing to us.

He'd tell us to pay it forward. Just pay it forward. And so I tried very hard to do that. And I continue to try hard to do that.

It's not a question of what should I say about Ross. It's a question of what should I leave out. There's just so much stuff. I'll close though with (something) Mark asked me to talk about, Ross's finny (final) flight. As I approach mine more rapidly than I care to admit, I can't imagine what was going through Ross's head as he was approached in '65. I mean, I've been flying for a long, long time. And by the time Ross got to my age, he'd been flying 10 or 15 years beyond that. His life was defined professionally by flying. What do you do when you come to the end of that road? Not the road, not the end that you chose, but that somebody chose for you. It must have been a very melancholy, kind of empty pit of the stomach feeling. And as is traditional in the airline business, the finny flight of an airline captain is kind of a big deal. They generally have fire trucks come out. They do a big arch of water and the captain taxis in under the arch for his last flight. Ross wanted none of this. In fact, leading up to his birthday, Ross told me before I could even say anything, "Don't you dare arrange any of this stuff." Of course, Karen and Mark and the boys and I talking about it, we all knew that that was shit. So we made a bunch of phone calls and set things up, and through the course of that flight, I flew his last trip with him as it had to be, really. And he kind of tried to pretend that it was just another flight. And there's a tradition in the airline business as well, particularly FedEx only. I don't know if it exists elsewhere. But the captain who owns the airplane and everything goes on, typically gives every other landing to the FO. So the FO gets opportunity to fly as kind of the first pilot, if you will. That's how you learn. That's how you get better. That's how you become a captain. And Ross was always, you know, if there were an odd number of landings, he'd give me the odd one. And in this one, as we were going back and forth, it turned out we had an even number. Ross usually started off every flight, if he didn't give me the choice. And it was supposed to be my leg coming into Memphis.

And I thought that was really odd. And I said something about the beginning, and he goes, "No, why change stuff now." And we were walking out to the airplane on that last flight. And Ross said to me, he goes, "You know," he says, "I think I want to take this last flight." Which, of course, you do. And he says, "You know, you don't mind do you, which was a ridiculous question." But I could see on that flight back, I think we came back from, I'm sure we came back from Liege in Belgium. And everything that we did on that flight was just more thorough, more, it's like he was savoring every single thing that we did. We'd done it together hundreds of times. There were times when we, it's like we had, they talk about a shared mental model, Ross and I had flown together so much, we had a shared mental model, we didn't have to talk about it, and everything was so slow and so deliberate, and he was savoring it, and we came in, we were taxiing in, a long parallel taxiway to the north heading toward the FedEx ramp, and as we turn the corner, he sees the fire trucks, he sees they start up the thing, and he just looked at me and said, "you asshole" So we pulled in, we taxied in, Mark was there, Karen there, the boys was there, it was, it

was quite a celebration, and at that time, for the last time, the first officer on FedEx flights is responsible for a number of other go-for activities, is the paperwork that has to do with the flight, where we went. At times, back in the early days, Bill and Krosse, it was written out, but in later days, it's all electronic, and after we shut down, after Ross shut down the last engine, I filled in for the last time his employee number on the form. Ross was the captain of record on this flight.

It was so fun (today) because I don't know any other way to get into this house, except through the garage, that's just the way it works, and the garage door was closed and everything, I'm sure, anticipating everyone showing up today, and just out of, I was wondering, maybe, maybe (as I entered his employee number into the keypad) and the garage door opened.