



DEVAN A. NORRIS

CHIP SHOT

Perhaps it is self-delusion, but for years I believed that much of what we consider to be a sexist response to seeing a woman on the flight deck is merely a cultural reflex. It always seemed like the jokes and comments I heard and the physical reactions I observed were mostly the knee-jerk reactions of people who were confronted with something outside of their expectations

and they simply adjusted their assumptions going forward.

Apparently that belief was a little naive. People don't necessarily like to have their world view challenged, although most of the people who find women where they expected men (at least on the flight deck) will do a double-take and usually say something along the lines of "good for you." Most people—but not everyone.

Every now and then I am reminded that people don't like to be wrong, especially in front of their peers. Occasionally this results in a situation where people express themselves rather unpleasantly, and in a way you can neither justify nor make yourself believe the person was trying to be funny to cover an awkward moment. It was just such a situation where I was (figuratively) smacked upside the head with a bit of sexism. I'm not sure whether I handled it well, or maybe I did not handle it at all.

In a social setting, it can be easy to forget that male pilots may not immediately identify you as one of their own. By the numbers you are more likely to be accompanying a member of their group than to actually be a member yourself. A few months ago I found myself in exactly this scenario. A bunch of us were sitting around at an aviation-based social event, and naturally the talk turned to what our professions are. One man standing next to me said he was a pilot and flew for an airline on the A320. He then looked at me and off-handedly said, "Not that you know what an A320 is." Cue the awkward moment.

Anyone who has ever met me knows that I have no kind of poker face. At this comment, I just laughed and said I was (at that time) a captain on the EMB145 and actually had several thousand flight hours, and did indeed know what an Airbus is. The man gave me a hard look and shot back, "You know you have a big chip on your shoulder." This was like a cold glass of water in the face, and I found myself speechless. Looking back I am fairly sure that most of my response was "Really?" I shortly excused myself from the group with my face aflame and brain buzzing but having more or less not responded at all.

I doubt that man knew how his comments would prey on my mind. *Do I have a chip on my shoulder?* Should I have told him to go jump in a lake, or should I have been meek and simply looked at the ground? Most importantly—

would he have said any of that to another man? Looking back I have to say no. No to all of them. I'm sure that my defensive response was not the best way to handle things, but I do know that there is 100% of no chance he would have made those same comments to another guy.

By allowing my own injured pride to respond to a perceived insult—by firing back with my résumé—I had played into a stereotype and reinforced this one man's negative image of women in the profession. This is not to excuse his initial comment, but merely to remind myself as female pilots we are all representatives of

what is still a minority group. Many of us try to walk a pretty fine line when we explain what we do without putting another person on the spot. You don't want to make the other person appear foolish for merely thinking and acting according to the social parameters they know, yet you want to take pride in who and what you are. Definitely a tall order when someone is pushing your buttons—even unwittingly.

As time goes by the experience of encountering women in the cockpit will become common enough that it ceases to be of note. I need to remember that I may be the only female pilot that my passengers have ever seen, and as such may have the opportunity to make a lasting impression. When someone is provoking me my response can occasionally be a bit less polished than my uniform. I need to be better than that—more professional and more patient, using words as a tool rather than a weapon. If we are all able to meet off-putting remarks with dignity, reason, and grace, we will shape a more positive context for the culture—and the female aviators—of tomorrow. ➔

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