

UNFORGETTABLE FRIENDS FROM AROUND THE WORLD
BILLY JAY MARION—DEDICATED AIRLINE PILOT
BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA

In this series, SGI President Ikeda has recorded his impressions of the many friends he has made in his travels for peace. In his New Year's poem in the January issue, he states: "I will continue to knock on the doors / Of diverse cultures and civilizations, / Seeking out the humanity that is vibrantly alive / At the heart of each, / Believing that sincere dialogue/In search of our shared humanity / Will build a rainbow bridge linking the world."

Last year[1996], during my visit to the United States, I was flying from Denver to New York, a 1,600-mile journey that cuts across the North American continent. From the air over Denver, I bade farewell to the sheer cliffs of the Rocky Mountains. The flight was uneventful at the start. Then, suddenly, it began to rain in torrents. Outside the window it was pitch-black. We were engulfed in heavy clouds and the plane had to slice its way through sheets of rain.

After a brief announcement, the plane began to descend. We landed at Indianapolis Airport, about two-thirds of the way to our final destination. The rain was still falling hard and we could hear thunder rumbling in the distance. Captain Marion explained why we were making a layover: bad weather in New York was delaying air traffic. "If we were to arrive at our scheduled time," he said, "we would find ourselves circling the field until the backlog of waiting flights had been cleared. I am concerned that we might not have enough fuel. Though I am fairly certain we would be all right, I don't want to take even the slightest chance and expose you to risk, so I decided to land here and refuel."

He chose the way of absolute safety. Here, I thought, is a great pilot. In the field of aviation, they say that a great pilot is not someone who can escape from the most dangerous situation, but someone who takes care to ensure that he or she is never in danger in the first place. When asked if he had ever been in a life-threatening situation in the air, Captain Marion replied, "No. I have never been in a situation in which I thought there was a possibility I might die." And when one inquired as to what he thought was the reason for plane accidents, he said, "Human error. Sometimes a pilot makes an error in judgment, and there are other mistakes as well. The human factor is crucial. You can't blame accidents on the weather."

Statistics in fact show that eighty percent of all aviation accidents are caused by human error: Important details overlooked, failure to communicate, overconfidence in technology, problems in human relations, and the simple assumption that since everything has been okay doing things this way up to now, it will always continue to be so. An instant's carelessness can have disastrous consequences. The smallest lapses can result in the most tragic accidents. Every detail is important in flying. For example, the plane's wings can lose five percent of their lift simply because the front edges have accumulated as little as a quarter of an inch of ice. In a pinch, that five percent can mean the difference between life and death.

In addition, no matter how carefully a plane is checked and serviced, the possibility of malfunction can never be completely eliminated. Good pilots have to think of everything, including every possible random occurrence — and think about them with tenfold seriousness. Once the plane has taken off, there is only one acceptable result for them: the safe landing of all their passengers. If you fail in a life-and-death struggle, any excuses are meaningless. The pilot and the copilot don't even eat the same food on the plane, just in case one of them gets food poisoning. The cockpit, despite being equipped today with sophisticated autopilot technology,

remains a very human place.

Captain Marion was born, he says, “in a poor farming family” in North Carolina. Though a pilot is a very elite profession, he confesses: “Actually, I never graduated from flight school. I learned a lot on my own.” Before becoming a pilot, he worked in a local tobacco processing plant. One day, a coworker announced that he was going to become a pilot, which would, of course, be very difficult. Still, that coworker, who was three years older than Captain Marion, attained his goal.

“If he can do it, I can do it!” decided Captain Marion. Although he was married and had a family to support, he decided to change jobs. After two years of training, which he began at age 27, he succeeded in becoming a pilot. Such availability of opportunity is one of the good aspects of American society. His very first instructor, incidentally, was that friend from the factory. “I was very lucky to know him,” Captain Marion says, “because otherwise I would never have even thought of flying.”

The gentle pilot became a flight captain at forty-two, in 1979. Now he is a veteran. One of the crew members remarked that Captain Marion always landed the plane very smoothly, even on snowy days, when landing is especially difficult. He also tried to keep his flights as smooth as possible. “Of course, I try,” replied the captain. “That’s my job. But just being able to ensure a smooth flight doesn’t necessarily make a good captain.”

When pressed as to what he felt the traits of a good captain to be, he responded: “Well, first there is technical ability. Then there is the ability to keep a large group of people working well together. Flying is teamwork, requiring the cooperation of many different people — the ground crew, the air controllers and the flight crew. The captain bears the final responsibility, but it is a shared responsibility. The job of the captain is to create an environment in which everyone can do his or her best.”

True leadership encourages teamwork. For example, some captains may think it is rude to check the work of the crew, and sometimes the crew may notice something is wrong but decide not to bother the captain with it — and, as a result, accidents have happened. Both attitudes are examples of the failure of true teamwork, of a lack of true unity between captain and crew.

When I praised Captain Marion’s flying skill, he replied: “Thank you, but I’ve done nothing special. Of course, I did my best, but I am an average guy and an ordinary pilot, nothing more.” This humility may be the secret to his ability to bring out the very best in his crew. A leader who entrusts things to others encourages independence and a spirit of initiative among them, and helps create a sense of teamwork and joint responsibility that leads to the goal of a safe landing for all.

Genuine leadership is neither based on arbitrary judgments nor does it give way easily to compromise or cave in to pressure. Leadership that encourages everyone to work together toward a shared objective, each in their best capacity, with the leader working right alongside them, gives rise to real harmony. Under such leadership, the force released is not simply the sum of the abilities of all involved; there is an exponential effect. Instead of $5 + 5 + 5 = 15$, we get $5 \times 5 \times 5 = 125$!

When we took off from Indianapolis, the sky was beginning to brighten, and under the expert piloting of Captain Marion, we arrived safely in New York.

I still wear the baseball hat that the captain gave me. I feel as if we are flying the skies together.