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## A Tribute to Charles A. Tarpley: Mentor, Friend, Aviator, Lawyer, and Gentle Man

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**A TRIBUTE TO CHARLES A. TARPLEY: MENTOR,  
FRIEND, AVIATOR, LAWYER, AND GENTLE MAN**

JAMES D. STRUBLE\*

**W**HEN WE LOST Charles in April of 2020, we lost a dear friend, a fine aviator, a skilled lawyer, but most of all, we lost a gentle man. No one ever had a discussion with Charles without thinking that Charles viewed you, and not himself, as the center of his universe.

I first met Charles when I was a student at SMU School of Law. In 1990, I was serving on the *Journal of Air Law and Commerce* (JALC) staff and was working at my first SMU Air Law Symposium. Charles, the Symposium Chairman, heard that I was flying for Delta Air Lines while attending law school (Charles was then flying for Pan Am), and we soon began swapping war stories, fact and fiction, of our Air Force and airline careers. I quickly learned that Charles was a master of the King's English and well-practiced in the art of eloquent conversation. I always walked away from our conversations with a smile on my face.

I learned much more about Charles in 1991, as Delta acquired Pan Am's European route structure. I was then serving as Editor in Chief of JALC, and Charles dropped by to talk about the upcoming symposium. During our conversation, he casually mentioned that Delta would be hiring some, but not all, of the Pan Am pilots who, like himself, flew the European routes. As the conversation flowed, I quickly convinced myself (through Charles's Jedi-like dialogue) that a letter of recommendation from me to the Delta Chief Pilot was a great idea. To this day, I am sure my letter had no real effect, but Charles always graciously attributed his Delta wings to those efforts.

Fast forward to the late 1990s on a dark and stormy night flying over the Midwest.

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“Delta 4-2-1, descend and maintain one two thousand, expedite descent to cross Bradford at or below one four thousand,” came the Chicago Center clearance over the radio. I looked across at my First Officer and asked, “Can we make it?”

“Not a problem,” replied First Officer Tarpley as he brought the Boeing 727 throttles to idle, extended the spoilers, and accelerated from 250 to 350 knots.

I must mention here that while the Boeing 727 can descend quite rapidly in this configuration, it produces a “shake, rattle, and roar” unlike any other airplane. Like many pilots who had flown jets for over thirty years, Charles did not have the best hearing. So, for the next few minutes, as the wind noise drowned out normal conversation, I responded to Chicago Control over the radio and then used sign language to relay the clearance to Charles.

Charles grinned throughout the entire maneuver and, as we made the crossing restriction and slowed down, smiled as he turned to the flight engineer. He then calmly explained, “Son, you have just witnessed an SAD.” It was not until later, on the hotel bus, that Charles translated for the young flight engineer, “An SAD is a Screaming-Ass-Descent.”

Through the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, I crossed paths with Charles every year at the symposium in Dallas and often was able to sit in on one of his Delta Human Factors classes in Atlanta. Each encounter reminded me of Charles’s unique talent to make each person—be it a law student, pilot, or flight attendant—think that when they were talking with Charles, they were the most interesting person in the world.

The world was graced with the presence of Charles A. Tarpley, and all that knew him smile at the memory of this eloquent and gentle man.