

# First Day Back

By Pat Lambe

Three weeks off. Tan, rested and ready. I had forgotten what an asshole my partner could be.

“At least you don’t smell like you spent your ‘vacation’ in a beer keg.” His first words to me, post suspension.

I had discovered eighteen-year old Scotch in my spare time. Found it meshed much better with the delicate eco-system that comprises my constitution. Look Ma, no hangover.

“What the hell is that?” He leaned in close, examined the fresh growth on my jaw, chin. “And this?” He pinched the rayon between his index finger and thumb.

“It’s called a soul patch. You must have seen the show.” They had aired it on a cable station a week ago. *A Day in the Life of an Air Marshal*, or *How to Kill an Air Marshal and Influence People* as we were calling it. “I’m undercover from my undercover job. With all our secrets in syndication...”

The show was a great documentary, very thorough. Explained our dress code, how we board and operate on a plane. They even had an interview with one of our supervisors. He gave a tour of the shooting range. 30,000 feet up in a hollow tube with no way out and thousands of gallons of fuel aboard. Now every friendly neighborhood terrorist looking for his Mecca in the sky has our playbook. The last thing I wanted was to be a pimp for seventy veiled virgins in Jihadville. Virgins make lousy whores, but I guess someone from a repressive sexual background wouldn’t know the difference.

“This is the kind of shit that got you suspended in the first place.”

The guy - looked like a business man, smelled like a Kennedy at Mardi Gras - walked down the aisle of the plane, pointing: “You could be an air marshal, you could be an air marshal, you couldn’t be an air marshal...” It took two skippers in addition to my partner to drag me off of him.

He was pretty accurate though. Neither my partner nor I could have had a better average. And this was before the cable exclusive. The only reason I hadn’t been fired was because he was an executive at a large Texas based company that didn’t have too much faith in the bidding system. Eighty percent of the higher ups in the hierarchy were drawing their first pensions from the Secret Cervix. It was best for all concerned to keep it quiet. So I got three weeks to reflect on my attitude, work on my golf game. I actually took a day and did the patriotic tour: Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, the kind of things a native only does when guests are in town.

“We’re not supposed to draw attention to ourselves.” Our dress code - public knowledge; just turn on your TV or check a web page. Business casual; button down shirt, blazer, dress-shoes, slacks, clean-shaven. Normal travel attire for first class. No way we’d stick out, say, in 1961.

My ensemble, first day back: Hawaiian shirt (oversized to conceal my Sig) jeans, footwear Chuck Taylors - right pure white, left American Flag- beard growth; standard wino, three days. Destination: Philadelphia. Departure: Miami.

“Al Qaeda gets CNN too.”

My cell phone rang, the double secret business one. I hadn't heard from her since before my suspension. My badge bunny. The last thing I told her was 'never call this number again'. I hadn't given it to her. She had hit the 'my number' feature one morning before I woke up next to her in a hotel room in LA. I don't remember the official reason for the 'don't fly the friendly sky rule'. Apparently, the pilots were complaining. They had hired something like 3,000 of us at once and we were cutting into the available herd. She'd also called the secret number at the office. My boss loved that.

My partner took out his Palm Pilot, began writing. Asshole that he was, at least he was up front about his unofficial log of my activities. He had started it after the first 'incident'. It was before we could breeze right through security without getting anything checked. The TSA screener had confiscated my toiletry kit. I had a razor and a pair of toe clippers in there. The Sig 229 concealed under my double-breasted business jacket was OK though. I said some words, suggested he had chosen a wrong career. Told him he should have been a skipper. The TSA guy had taken offense. I took some diversity courses. My toilet kit disappeared. Without my razor, I had broken our dress code for the first time. I was still waiting for the reimbursement to appear in my direct deposit.

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This girl I know; I've been trying to sleep with her for years. She says sleeping together would ruin our friendship. I see her in my local bar in South Phillie two, three times a month, act like I'm listening to her for an hour (or as long as it takes me to get a buzz) hit on her. Listen to the speech about friendship. I'd want to ruin that special relationship?

She once told me 'guys in Hawaiian shirts never get laid'. I wished someone had told that to the skippers. This one was particularly persistent. Insists he knows more about my sexuality than I do. The time I'd be having if he had been right. We call them skippers because they skip down the aisle, fluffing up pillows, dispensing makeup advice. They love me for some reason. I can't beat them off with a stick. My nickname with the other guys is 'Little Buddy'.

My partner smiled, adjusted his tie. Told the skipper what hotel we were staying in the City of Brotherly Love. Emphasizing 'Brotherly' and 'Love'. Mentioned my room number. Invited him to stop by for a friendly drink. Asshole. I'd been planning on staying at the hotel on the Government's tab while my apartment got renovated. Now I'd have to drive an hour, fire up a space heater, spread out a sleeping bag on the floor.

My partner had come from the military. Marine. I'd say ex but there's no such thing. Said he'd been a supply officer. Missed his opportunity to smoke some Arabs the first time around; killing time as an Air Marshal waiting to get called up out of the reserves for round two. The guy was by the book, never found a rule he didn't like. Me? Police Officer, Philly. His reasons for a career change? We didn't talk about it too much. I suspected a misguided sense of patriotism. Mine - better pay, free travel, stewardesses and lonely woman looking for a little company between flights.

It hadn't worked out exactly like that, the part with the woman. Just once so far. My badge bunny. I sat down next to her in an airport bar six months back. Can't remember which bar, terminal or city. They're all the same after a while. Fucked her for the first time in a hotel room. Generic; both the fuck and the room. Just like the bar

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She rang me again while we were meeting the crew. They didn't look too enthusiastic about my new fashion statement. I excused myself, told her to call my other cell phone, my private one. I got lucky, different carriers. My personal phone was out of range.

My partner pulled me aside. "You've got to shape up. You can get fired for giving out your work number. We've got to fit in. With all the trouble you're been in already you don't want any more attention from the bosses."

I flipped him the bird. "Put that in your palm pilot."

He took my advice, fished it out of his suit pocket and made an entry.

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My usual prayer, as I noted everyone coming down the aisle who could possibly be Middle-Eastern: please let her have the ticket for the seat next to me, please god, sweet baby Jesus, just this one time, the girl, ticket, seat next to me. God's usual response: there's plenty of room in your aisle, skinny guy that you are, let's fill up the space with someone who needs it. Someone who's so longwinded and boring you won't even get a chance to tell them your cover story.

I was going with a fresh one this time, to match my new wardrobe - 'Jingle Writer' for TV commercials. Poet laureate of the cathode generation. The one about the genital warts crème. You've heard it before: the catchy tune that rhymes clap and mishap. Yeah I wrote that one, not based on any personal experience mind you, but it's the one I'm best known for. Wrote it on a flight as a matter of fact, just like this one.

She was alternating between her ticket and the seat numbers, wedged between a guy who I recognized, guard with the 76ers, and the guy I knew was destined for the window seat. Well-dressed, cleanly shaven. He was the only other guy on the flight dressed well enough to pass for a Marshal, besides my partner and the 76ers guard. If he lost a hundred pounds and took a shower once in a while.

The girl stopped in front of my aisle, looked down at my smile (look at that, maybe I should try jingle writing for real, part time; till I make a name for myself). I got up to give her space to reach the window seat. Made a mental note to go to church at least once this year. Maybe Christmas, Easter.

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She was a senior in college, just turned twenty-two. Anthropology. Spring break, back home in Society Hill with the folks. She had a boyfriend there, hadn't talked to him recently. Wondered where their relationship was going. Her dad was picking her up at the airport.

I ordered a beer, Sam Adams in a bottle. I could practically hear my partner maneuvering the stylus around on his Palm Pilot. He was behind me, towards the demarcation between first class and the unwashed masses

I looked at the beer, imagined how it would taste going down. My father had a beer with his lunch every day of his career: Pabst, in his lunch cooler, next to his

sandwich. He says it calms him down, relaxes him. My reasons were more pragmatic; we weren't supposed to drink on the job. The TV show had told the whole world. I would empty it out on a trip to the bathroom without taking a sip. I was beginning to see my father's wisdom. Then again he wears a tie to work every day, clips it to his button down shirt before he starts his shift. He's a mason.

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The girl was getting nervous. The fat guy who I had thought destined for her seat had been drinking airplane bottles straight until the skipper had cut him off. Now he was standing in the aisle, demanding to speak to the pilot. He'd unbuttoned his blazer, loosened the tie.

"I wish someone would do something," she said.

I already had. I'd written a note and passed it to the skipper. Philadelphia police, FBI, this guy was in for quite a party when the plane landed.

"I wish there were some Air Marshals aboard."

This little incident was out of our jurisdiction. When we got involved, people died. Period. I stifled an urge to squeeze off a couple of rounds anyway. It's hard to hold a conversation when your go-to-girl's distracted by a fat drunken slob.

He grabbed some food off the serving cart, threw it towards the cabin. The skipper looked over at me. I nodded my head once, side to side. He walked over to the fat man. "Sir, I insist that you return to your seat." The fat guy pushed him aside, not too hard, upturned the serving cart.

The 76ers guard, he'd been seated a couple rows behind me, passed my aisle. Arms out before him, talking to the guy in low, firm tones. "Sir, if you'll just calm down." The guy who shot him in the back mustn't have been a sports fan because he said something after he pulled the trigger. I couldn't quite make it out, but I definitely heard the words Air and Marshal and die.

I pulled my Sig, kept it out of everyone's sight. Got my breath. Realized this was really happening. I made eye contact with my asshole partner to see if he was truly in this. He was.

I rolled out of my seat, low. Fired straight down the aisle. I later learned I got off three shots, not the two I thought I had let loose. I turned around after I had dropped the shooter. The fat guy, the decoy, had his hands up, but I could see the gun in his belt, imbedded in his belly, the flap of his loosened blazer barely covering it.

My partner shot him once. I guess he wasn't as much of an asshole as I had thought.

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The 76ers guard - their star. They probably weren't going to win any championships this year anyway, even if he was capable of playing. With the right amount of therapy, some luck and few good draft picks, maybe next year.

The girl - putting three bullets into someone tends to put a damper on social situations.

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The debriefing lasted more than twelve hours. The next day would be longer. My attire, my attitude, first day back from suspension; if not for the famous person who took a bullet for me, I think I'd be looking for another job. Maybe writing jingles full time or stacking up bricks side by side with my old man.

As it turned out, some of the guys put together an information package about the rules we were working under. Sent it to the hospital with a bouquet of flowers and a bottle of Chivas. Of course the Sixers Guard was interviewed extensively. Talked about what heroes we were. Let the public in on our grievances.

We always knew it would be a screaming death from 30,000 feet or a Congressional Medal of Honor, a night in the Lincoln Bedroom. We're still waiting for the President's phone call. Our policies are under review. I'm toying with the concept of a full beard. I'd never had one before and I figure I'll have some leniency with the dress code with the boss's new hands off policy regarding my partner and me.

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We must have been exhausted after they cut us loose for the day. I was too beat to drive the hour to my freezing apartment. I threw my travel bag on the hotel bed, unplugged the phone. Ran a shower.

It was only after I had opened the bag that I noticed it wasn't mine. My partner had been busy: bricks of Cocaine, a folder on top of them. I rifled through the folder. Papers, most of them in Spanish but enough in English that I could figure out the boys from Texas had their plans in motion for when Castro finally joined Stalin in the great Kremlin in the sky. He has a brother, more hard lined than he is. If he wasn't around to take over, Cuba becomes America's favorite playground again.

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