

The Journal Newspapers
Tuesday, January 11, 1994

SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME

Two Decades of Traffic and Still Flying High

By ELLEN CROSBY
Special to the Journal

If Dante had known about rush hour traffic on the Beltway when he wrote the "Inferno centuries ago, he almost certainly would have included it as one of the circles of hell he passed through on his descent from Earth to Nether Hell. More than 600,000 vehicles drive the 64 mile loop around Washington each day, resulting in miserably long traffic lines and murderously short tempers:

"There's been a change in public attitude in the last few years when it comes to driving," says Walt Starling, airborne traffic advisor for 94.7 WARW-FM, Washington's CBS oldies radio station. "People are willing to put everybody else's life on the line just to save time trying to get somewhere."

Starling has been flying above the nation's capital for nearly 20 years reporting on snarls, backups, and traffic jams, so he's in a good position to know.

"I guess it's the complexity of society today that makes people so reckless," he muses.

Fortunately, Starling and the city's other traffic reporters are there twice a day to help drivers navigate the daily expedition to and from work. Of all Washington's traffic advisors, Starling is the, only one who also does his own flying while he reports on the unfolding disaster below him, known to most of us as *The Commute*.

Starling operates out of Maryland's nearby College Park Airport, the world's oldest continuously operated airport, which has been in business since 1909. He's also a partner in Flying Machine Inc., the airport's only maintenance shop. The company keeps his plane, a Cessna 172, and the approximately 85 other planes based at the College Park Airport, in first-class condition.

The hangar he uses was built in 1929 and houses half a dozen planes in various stages of repair, since Starling and his team also restore classic and antique aircraft. A 1950s Bellanca Cruise Master is nearly finished; a 1941 Stearman open cockpit biplane without its wings looks like a metal dinosaur.

There is a heavy smell of varnish in the air.

Starling leaves College Park around 3:45 p.m. to begin reporting on the afternoon rush hour. But before taking off, he touches base with the operators of the two People's Drug Samaritan vans who work with him, alerting him on what to survey from the air.

Starling and the vans' operators regularly contact the police or call an ambulance. It is this opportunity to help that gives Starling the most pleasure in the otherwise grim task of reporting on the human misery and angst below.

In recent years, Starling has seen a growing network of informants among commuters who use their cellular phones to make him aware almost immediately of accidents and delays. The practice started one day about eight years ago when someone called Starling to tell him about a traffic problem.

"I mentioned the guy's name on the air and then the next day someone else called," he recalls, "It snowballed from there."

Starling invited me to fly along with him, to see for myself how my favorite stretch of I-66 – where I spend entirely too much of my life in bumper-to-bumper traffic – looks from the sky. My only previous experience in small aircraft consists of two vertigo-inducing cable car rides in the Swiss Alps. My nervousness shows when I ask if he can talk and fly at the same time but he confidently pats his head and rubs his stomach simultaneously and I am reassured.

We have to push the four-seater Cessna out to the runway and I am surprised at how light it is. He shows me how to attach my seat belt and hands me a set of headphones. The headphones hang below my ears and I discover I can't see over the instrument panel. He helps me adjust the headphones and slides his 12-year old daughter's booster seat under me.

As we take off, the stately red brick buildings of the University of Maryland, Starling's alma mater, are off to the side. As a student majoring in radio and television, Starling wrote a paper explaining how it would be cheaper to use an airplane rather than a helicopter to do air traffic reporting.

We begin to slowly circle the city as Starling checks in with Washington's other traffic advisors, his friendly competition. They are all obviously good friends and trade light-hearted banter while catching each other up on how the afternoon rush hour is shaping up.

Starling is the only Washington area pilot not to have joined Metro Traffic, a nationwide company that provides traffic information in 40 cities throughout the United States. "I like the freedom," he says.

We are traveling at about 110 miles per hour and flying at a height of 1,400 feet. It's surprisingly easy to see what's happening on the ground, but I'm having trouble getting my bearings. "Is that Georgetown?" I ask.

"We're in Virginia. It's Alexandria," he says gently. "Come on, we'll fly over your house."

But from the air, I am completely confused and can't figure out which way is which. "We'll find it," he says. "The street map is in your booster seat." Having already lost any chance of impressing him with my knowledge of Washington as an on-and-off resident for many years, I find myself turning the map around and around trying to sort out my lefts and rights. He takes the map out of my hands and points out familiar landmarks, including, finally, my house.

The plane more or less flies itself and the control wheel needs only an occasional nudge today. The traffic is light. We fly over the top of National Airport, and the brackish green Potomac snakes below us. WARW's afternoon DJ interrupts occasionally. "You're on after Lionel Richie, Walter," he says.

Starling keeps traffic details in his head, as he continues to swap information with his colleagues in the air. Our conversation is punctuated with a running itinerary of our current location ("I-270. Shirley Highway."), letting the others know our whereabouts and they share similar facts.

After all these years, Starling says he loves his job. He claims he still hasn't seen everything, but some of his more memorable sightings include people running naked along the highway ("particularly in summer; it really ties up traffic,") loose cattle, loose pigs, an

overturned lettuce truck, and an overturned egg truck. It's funny, he says, as long as no one gets hurt.

Starling's strong sense of civic responsibility comes through in his broadcasts. A few months ago he did a series on children's car seats at the end of his traffic reports. "A lot of people called the station to say thank you," he says, pleased. "I like knowing I can make a difference."

"Hey, Walt," says a voice in my headphones, "have you got a passenger today?"

Starling patches me in so I can be heard by the others and I am asked a series of questions about my flight. One voice asks me if I am going to the breakfast on Friday.

"The breakfast," it turns out, is a meeting of all Washington's traffic pilots and announcers; the gathering was originally Starling's idea and the group now meets quarterly.

The sky is slowly changing from pink to gray now that the sun has set. Below us, the sodium vapor lights make Washington glow a soft orange. Red and white lines of cars form paths to the suburbs. The traffic has been light and there is not much to report. Starling takes me on a nostalgia tour of places that have been important to me over the years as we slowly head back.

"Anyone left out there?" he asks, summoning his colleagues over the radio as we approach the runway. The radio is silent.

He walks me to my car at the now-deserted airfield and we discuss a nearby rash of car holdups by men posing as policemen.

"I forgot to mention that at the end of my report," he says, annoyed with himself. "I'll do it tomorrow. Now remember, if a policeman wants to pull you over, you can drive to a lighted area before you stop. "

I promise to remember and make my way back home through the remnants of the rush hour. As I edge back on to the Beltway, it doesn't seem so daunting this time. Tomorrow Walt Starling will be back up there, watching over me.