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MOVING ON
By JEFF ZASLOW



SOME PEOPLE HOPE for a final workday like Ted Williams had: He hit a home run in his last at-bat. Famed jockey Jerry Bailey, who retired last week after a 31-year career and two Kentucky Derby wins, had a rougher farewell. His horse kicked him in the hip just before his final race. In pain, he still managed to finish second.

All US Airways captain Joe Spencer wanted was a few quiet handshakes and to slip away.

Last week, on a flight from Puerto Rico to Charlotte, N.C., his co-pilot came on the public-address system. She said Capt. Spencer was about to turn 60 years old, the mandatory retirement age for commercial pilots, and he was taking his last

flight at the controls of a [Boeing 767](#).

Capt. Spencer's final run -- on a 757 -- was set for a few days later. But Margaret Bruce, his co-pilot, wanted to publicly acknowledge what an honor it had been to fly with him.

After she wished him well, those of us in the cabin broke into applause. We represented the thousands of passengers Capt. Spencer had safely flown during his 29-year career. But the tribute made him uncomfortable. As he neared his final day, he didn't want too much fanfare. That is what he said when I congratulated him as I stepped off the plane.

Our society has always made a ritual of the last day of work. "It's like a wake for your career," says Mitch Anthony, who trains financial advisers on retirement issues. But retirees in past generations often had a more-relaxed sense of their futures when they accepted their gold watches or received send-offs from younger colleagues. Today's retirees -- living longer, worried about pensions and health benefits, and fearful that a life of leisure won't be fulfilling -- often struggle with uncertainty.

"Years ago, when people retired, they were tired. They had jobs standing on their feet all day," says Helen Dennis, a

lecturer at the [University of Southern California](#)'s Andrus Gerontology Center. "And once they retired, they were more willing to become peripheral. They didn't see themselves as change agents in the world. Today, retirees think, what do I do next? Where's my niche?"

Knowing they have more to offer can make a last day bittersweet. Like many pilots, Capt. Spencer finds the mandatory retirement age to be arbitrary: Are today's fit pilots any less qualified on the day after they turn 60 than the day before?

Another issue: Capt. Spencer will receive a far smaller pension than he expected, a result of US Airways shifting pension liabilities to the government. He calls the forced retirement and decimated pension "a double whammy." It is likely he will need to look for work.

Still, as his last flight loomed last week, he focused on the good memories -- "the privilege of flying," the colleagues he'll miss.

Because retirements today are often fluid affairs, with people returning to work as consultants, a final day isn't always final. Percy Arrington, 65, was an NBC News cameraman at the White House since the Ford administration. When he took a buyout and retired on Jan. 6, anchor Brian Williams mentioned him on the news.

Presidential aides considered bringing President Bush to the back of Air Force One that day to wish Mr. Arrington well, he says. But because he'd taken a buyout, they decided against it. "They didn't want the president coming back and doing the retirement thing, in case I showed up the next day as a freelancer," he says. He settled for a wave and a wink from the president.

Elmer Peck was a firefighter in Fond du Lac, Wis., for 32 years. During his retirement lunch on Jan. 20, a house-fire call came in. Mr. Peck and others rushed to the scene. No one was hurt, but Mr. Peck used an oxygen mask to revive a dog.

At the end of the day, following tradition, Mr. Peck was driven to his home in a fire truck. His wife was waiting with champagne. As the fire truck pulled away, he had an urge to hop back on. Instead, he says, "I stood on the front porch and watched it disappear. It took everything I had to hold back the tears."

This past Monday, Capt. Spencer was set to fly his last journey, from St. Maarten in the Caribbean to Charlotte. His colleagues had plans -- cake, a plaque, speeches, bagpipes. Flight attendants jockeyed to work the flight, and his wife and daughter were booked as passengers. Coworkers also arranged to have an arch of water sprayed over his jet when he pulled to the gate, a tradition for retiring pilots.

But the day before, Capt. Spencer was informed that the flight was being changed from a 757 to an Airbus, a plane he didn't fly. US Airways offered to find him a different flight, on a 757. Or he could just retire immediately. He had a heart-to-heart talk with his wife.

On his flight to St. Maarten two days earlier -- which was to have been his next to last -- he had considered the possibility that his final flight would be canceled. And so he indulged his emotions "just in case." He says he "spent more time watching the sun set" from the captain's seat, and after everyone left the plane, "I lingered. I stood in the doorway, just looking at the cockpit. I wanted to remember what it looked like."

He thought to himself: "If this is the last time, I'm OK with it."

And so he declined to pilot a final flight. On Monday, the new retiree took his wife to a quiet lunch and they began the rest of their lives.