



# IS AIRLINE FLYING FOR ME?

A REALITY CHECK FOR THE ASPIRING PROFESSIONAL PILOT

By Sam Weigel

**The sun is shining and the fish are calling, but it's online catch-up day on *Windbird*. We spent the past week at beautiful, isolated Conception Island, Bahamas: No people, no internet — it was heaven on earth. The news headlines that greeted Dawn and me upon our return made us wish we'd stayed a little longer, but at least my current task of responding to reader email is a pleasant one. This often includes correspondence**

from prospective professional pilots, and today there are two such inquiries in my inbox. One is from a 42-year-old private pilot and potential career-changer, and the other from a young woman in her junior year at my alma mater, the University of North Dakota. They both want my take on the regional airline industry today, and one's chances of advancing to the major airlines in an expeditious manner.

Ask 10 airline pilots about such matters and you'll likely get a dozen different responses. Mine is but one opinion, and not necessarily any more enlightened than anyone else's; I get asked for it merely by dint of writing a column that often deals with aviation careers. Mind you, prospective pilots who reach out are doing the right thing by establishing contacts and asking questions early on, a practice that will serve them well throughout their careers. That said, my opinions are inevitably tinged with the biases inherent to my own career path and the post-9/11 era in which I built my time and paid my dues.

I sometimes wonder if we — meaning myself, other aviation writers and the flight-training industry — do prospective pilots a disfavor by focusing so much on the airlines. True, that's where many of the best-paying flying jobs are, and it is retirements at the major airlines that are driving turnover and hiring throughout the entire industry. But airline flying and the airline lifestyle aren't for everyone, and there

are a lot of other great ways to make a living in and around airplanes. A square peg will never be happy in a round hole, and I suspect that basic incompatibility has been responsible for most of the unhappy co-workers I've encountered. Before committing to an airline career and heading down that particular path, I think the prospective pilot needs to take a really honest look at what is actually involved, as well as their own personality and preferences.

## THE FLYING

Airline flying is, by design, usually fairly unexciting. The initial thrill of flying a large high-performance, complex jet fades after the first few hundred hours; it eventually becomes as comfortable and routine as flying a Cessna 172. The airlines expect and enforce absolute adherence to procedures and checklists, so you and most everyone you fly with will be repeating the exact same actions, flight after flight. After your first year on any given fleet, most airports you land at will be familiar, and you'll know your airline's hubs like the back of your hand. The main variance in your workday

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comes in the form of inclement weather — usually more of a source of frustration rather than welcome variation, not because it makes the flying more difficult but because it tends to screw up the airlines' highly orchestrated ground operations.

Which isn't to say you'll be bored. I and many other airline pilots still enjoy our jobs and get a thrill out of the flying, no matter how scripted and constrained it is. But it's not for everybody. Here's a good test of your compatibility: If you could be happy flying that 172 several legs a day between the same dozen airports, 180 days a year in various weather conditions, maintaining strict checklist discipline and adhering to standard procedures, then you'll enjoy airline flying.

### THE TECHNOLOGY

In today's airline industry, frankly, it's best if you're a bit of a geek. Virtually all aircraft used by U.S. Part 121 carriers feature flight management systems and flight guidance panels. The two latest generations of airliners, including regional jets like the Embraer 170/175 and Bombardier CRJ900, have highly integrated

glass cockpits. Many airliner cockpits feature next-generation technology, enabling required navigation performance approaches, Cat II/III approaches hand-flown via head-up display, and text-based ATC-pilot datalink communications. Most airlines have now replaced their Jeppesen charts and paper manuals with tablet-based electronic flight bags. Lately, they've developed inflight apps that depict real-time Doppler radar, predict clear-air turbulence and more.

Most corporate and crew communication has moved online, and virtually all bidding and scheduling adjustments are done via computer software, some of it quite complex. Mastering these programs will have a huge impact on your quality of life. Almost all ground training is now computer-based and done on the pilot's own time; long gone are the days when expert instructors patiently explained aircraft systems to a classroom of attentive new hires. If you're the kind of person who can lock yourself away with your laptop and emerge three days later as a walking encyclopedia on your chosen subject, you'll do great!



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### THE CREW

For most civilian pilots, their first airline job is also their first multi-crew experience. I don't include flight instruction as a crew environment, although flight instructors will find that some of their experience translates to a crew environment. As a crewmember, and *particularly* as a first officer, people skills are at a premium. You have to strike a balance between being attentive and bringing attention to errors and omissions, while avoiding being a know-it-all nag that ego-driven pilots tune out. You might fly with a different pilot every week, and you'll need to quickly get in tune with their personality and adapt accordingly. You'll fly with the nicest people in the world, but you will also fly with complete jerks who will sorely tempt your patience. You'll have to bite your tongue, be professional and stay engaged. All this goes double for flight attendants, whom you will deal with less than your cockpit crewmate but nevertheless have a lot of power to make your life pleasant or not.

### THE LIFESTYLE

The airline lifestyle is completely unlike the 9-to-5, Monday-through-Friday existence of your average office worker. Some people love it; others end up hating it. Forget working regular hours. Forget having a set sleep schedule. You will spend long stretches away from home — especially if you choose to commute. While still junior, you'll be away from home when you most want to be there: weekends, holidays, birthdays and anniversaries. This is a tough industry for significant others and children. Having an independent, supportive spouse is an enormous advantage. You'll spend a lot of time alone on layovers; sometimes you'll enjoy the company of fellow pilots and flight attendants. This comes with its own joys, temptations and potential pitfalls both personal and professional.

On the plus side, you will have much more flexibility and control over your schedule than most, even while junior. When you are off (11 to 18 days a month), you will be *completely* off — no being tied to a pager, no checking email. Being able to string together long stretches of days off will give you the opportunity to take advantage of your new travel benefits. Overall, extreme flexibility is the name of the game.

### THE CAREER

Because times are good right now, it seems like many prospective pilots are weighing an airline career based on the best-case scenario: being hired at a regional airline right at legal minimums; enjoying shortage-inflated wages, a quick upgrade to captain and rapid accumulation of turbine PIC time; and getting hired by a major airline with a great contract and tons of crew retirements, resulting in rapid advancement. Some people will indeed enjoy such an enchanted career. All throughout the turbulent history of this cyclical industry, pilots born under a lucky

sign have been hitting the jackpot. Perhaps it will even become the norm for a while. But you'd be foolish to ignore other plausible scenarios that are quite familiar to anyone who's been doing this for more than a couple of years.

A terrorist attack; a global virus outbreak; a major recession; the mandatory retirement age gets raised or abolished. Furloughs; downgrades; long stagnation; base closures or realignments that necessitate uprooting your family or commuting. Concessionary contracts; bankruptcy courts slashing pay and benefits. Seeing the airline you've worked at for decades suddenly close its doors. Starting all over again at regional FO wages. These aren't imaginary threats. Most airline pilots of a certain age have lived through several of these scenarios in their careers, and I've even flown with two or three unlucky souls who experienced *every single calamity on that list*. You may well escape them, but an honest appraisal includes thinking through a few plausible scenarios and contemplating how you would handle them. If your career suffers turbulence, will you still consider your investment in training worthwhile? Would you be able to retain your positive outlook and sense of humor and love of flying? Would you stick with it or bail? If you go into it hoping for the best but expecting setbacks and preparing yourself for any eventuality, you'll do a lot better at coping with an industry in which the only constant is change.

If, having thought through the above factors, you conclude that you and the airline industry were made for each other, then great — go for it! It's a heck of a way to make a living. If you realize it's not for you, that's OK too; there are a lot of other cool things you can do as a professional pilot. In the coming months, I'll be writing about some of these alternate career paths, and my friends who have made a go of them. ☘