

Why Airline Pilots Should make \$200,000 (or more)

By Jack Fearneyhough, DAL 767 Captain

For all of you jealous pinheads out there who whined about the labor struggle occurring at Northwest Airlines, and soon several others, listen up:

The airline business is an equal opportunity career field. Airlines, including Delta, American, United, and Northwest are hiring loads of pilots right now. You, too, can find yourself in the cockpit of a 767, 727, A-300 or any other commercial aircraft out there in the skies. The airlines hire regardless of race, religion, age or sex. They are literally the epitome of the equal opportunity employer. All it takes is enough intelligence to obtain an application, fill it out and send it back to personnel for consideration. That's it!! Then you may be offered an entry level position as a pilot with any of the airlines, at a starting pay of \$25,000 - 28,000 per year. Congratulations.....You're on the start of your flying career.....Or are you????

Let's see, the current qualification requirements, to even be called in for an interview, are as follows: 4 year college degree (no problem, if you have a home computer in order to participate in this cyber dribble—then you've got that); physically able to pass an FAA Class 1 exam (assuming that you don't spend all of your time sitting on your brains at the computer, then maybe you'll be able to pass.); and oh yeah, you've got to have completed the Flight Engineer written exam, have multi-engine, commercial / instrument ratings and it wouldn't hurt to have the Airline Transport Rating (typed in something larger than your Lazy Boy recliner). Generally speaking, the current averages of new hire pilots at the airlines are: 3,300 hours total flying time, 2,700 hours multi-engine/turbo, with 1,200 hours pilot-in-command. (Sorry, sitting on your sofa, eating pizza and surfing the channels with your TV remote doesn't count as a single minute of Instrument time!)

What??? You don't have the minimum qualifications to even be called in for an interview????!! Well get off your lazy can and go get qualified. Remember, age is not a factor. You can be 60 years old and still get hired as a Flight Engineer - sorry the federal government says you can't fly past age 60, but you can be a "plumber". Over 95 percent of the pilots at Delta Air Lines have military backgrounds. That's all you have to do.....join the military, go to pilot training and spend 9 years on active duty flying airplanes. You'll be able to build the hours of experience necessary to qualify for the airlines, get paid while you're doing it and get to see the world at the same time. What???? Can't get selected to go to pilot training because of the incredibly stringent requirements to get through the door????!! Oh, don't want to PAY THE PRICE of having to serve your country, subject to "the needs of the service" and move every 2-3 years. Even then, you don't know whether or not the airlines will be hiring when you finally gain enough experience and complete your contract with Uncle Sam!

Just what are those high entrance standards? Let's see. For every pilot slot there are approximately 50 who apply. From those selected, they enter a flight screening (aka washout) program that eliminates half of the group. From there you go on to Undergraduate Pilot Training (for the Air Force, the Navy has a similar program under a different name) for an entire year. Work hard, because only two out of three that enter graduate. Let's do some quick math. You are in a room with a group of people who all want to become military pilots. In fact, there are 150 of you. Guess what? Two years later only one of you will get to walk across a stage and get your wings pinned on. Ouch.

Then you get to hit the operational side. Whoa, first you've got to get through RTU (Training unit, about a 5% washout rate here). Now, you are off to the real world, training to fight or flying operational missions. Now, after nine years of this, the airline career is ahead of you. Wait a minute, I just glossed over one minor area. You see, you have to SURVIVE your time on active duty. Let's look at one squadron and the facts. This squadron of 40 pilots lost one pilot a year for four years. I know these numbers are correct because I was in that squadron. Do the math and you see that the odds of simply surviving a four year tour is approximately 90%. Those odds don't seem so bad, unless you are the one whose life depends on it. Those might seem like just statistics, but go to a few funerals, see the widows and children, and that 90% takes on a whole new meaning. And guess what, those numbers don't even take into account a real live war, and I'm not talking about the wars the stock traders talk about in the stock pits. They use real live bullets in this shooting match.

Ah, no problem, if you can't or won't make it via the military route, then you can always go the civilian path to the airlines.....

Remember those hours of experience???? If not, your short term memory is in doubt which may be a factor in your abilities to fly airplanes and make life threatening decisions - reread four paragraphs previous. Those average of 3,300 hours don't come free on the civilian side of the equation either. You'll probably need to start flying as soon as you get your driver's license in order to build those levels of hours before your life times out on the mortality tables. It'll cost you at least \$2,000 to get your basic flying license: single engine, land; capable of avoiding clouds, weather less than clear and a million miles visibility, severe crosswinds and minimum night. Now, congratulations, you've got about 40-60 hours towards that 3,300.....get going, you've got a ways to go. Start paying for some more flying time, sport. It'll cost you 30-40 dollars per hour to rent a single engine Piper to fly your buddies around and look at the corn fields. Figure it out genius, it's going to be expensive to build several thousand hours. And don't forget, even if mom and dad are footing the bill for you, 3,000 hours of Piper Cherokee time won't get you through American, United, Delta or anyone else's doors for a peek at the application stack!!

That's right, you're going to have to get those other ratings. No problem. You're a smart person. Just buy some more Instructor time, study some more stacks of books, go to more ground schools, shell out several thousand more dollars, spend thousands of hours studying some more, get that dual instruction time, take more tests, pass more physicals and you'll get that Instrument rating - maybe in that same Piper Cherokee. Congratulations! But guess what.....that's right, you still aren't close to being qualified. You now have somewhere around 200-300 hours; enough to have the minimum necessary to go for a Commercial license. So, you pay, study, fly, study, pay, pay, pay, fly, pay, study, test, fly, pay, pay, fly, study, test.....and finally get your Commercial ticket. Great!! Now you can be paid to fly - that'll help. But you still only have 300 or so hours flying, not enough (remember 3,300 hours) to land a seat with the Big Boys. Don't give up yet, oh Mr/Ms Wannabee, you're on your way. If you want it bad enough, you'll keep going. If you don't want it bad enough, YOU'LL QUIT, SIT BACK AND WHINE ABOUT THOSE THAT SUCCEED!!! Not you though, you press on....

Get out the check book, buy some more time. You've got to get that multi-engine experience in order to get hired by some civilian company so you can build your time. You study, pay, fly (multi-engine now - so double the hourly rate), pay, pay, fly, pay, study, fly, pay, study, pay, pay some more, fly, test, study, fly, pay and finally - you've got that multi-engine rating. So, with all those ratings now, multi-engine, Instrument and the all important, Commercial ticket, you can get a job flying airplanes. Oh, not for the airlines; hell, the commuters won't even touch you yet. But you might land yourself a job hauling canceled checks for some company. That'll be working the boneyard shift - midnight to 6 a.m. But you'll get paid minimum wage to fly (and build those hours). Remember, you're determined to get qualified for the Majors!! Or maybe you'll get hired to fly parachute jumpers. That'll get you a couple of hours per day. It's probably not turbo prop time, but it counts towards the total. No matter, if you work real hard, fly all the time (you do have to have some minimum rest as required by the FAA) you may be able to build 1,000 hours per year! At some point in time though, my future aviation professional friend, you've got to get that turbine / jet engine time. Yep, pay, pay, study, fly, test, pay, fly, test, pay, pay and more pay.

Finally, you've beat through the "trenches" of aviation to get enough hours and experience to qualify for a position flying as a co-pilot for one of the commuter airlines like ASA, ComAir, American Eagle or United Express. You apply, interview and get hired!! Again, congratulations - you've made another hurdle. Now you're building that commercial aviation experience. Oh, by the way, you're only making \$14,000 per year starting - if you're lucky!! You'll get to do this for at least 2 -3 years to build that 3,000 hours of experience and at some point in time, move over to the left seat to build that pilot-in-command (PIC) time. Looking at the years of struggling to this point, you're probably wishing you had gone the military route - of course, you didn't choose that option!!

So you press on....

Now, regardless of whether you went the military or civilian route, there's been some substantial risks. Throughout your career you've been subjected to annual physicals (in some cases, every 6 months) that could have easily disqualified you, forever, from your chosen aviation career field. On top of that, guess what, the FAA has been closely watching you every step of the way. Fail to pass the writtens - you're history. Fail to pass the orals - you're history. Fail to pass the flying tests - you're history. No pressure. There's more....your FAA friends have a whole stack of books of regulations governing your life as a pilot and the operation of every single airplane you lift off the ground. Here's the risk: **SCREW UP ONE TIME, JUST ONCE, AND BREAK AN AIRPLANE, HURT SOMEONE, OR JUST COME CLOSE - AND THEY TAKE YOUR LICENSES AWAY FROM YOU. FOREVER !!!!** They don't care how many years and thousands of dollars you spent getting to this point in your career.....they don't care how badly you want to become a commercial airline pilot,you can beg, plead, get down on your whiny knees and cry.....**THEY DON'T CARE !! YOU'RE HISTORY!!!!** Congratulations, your lifetime of work has just been trashed for a simple mistake. Unfortunately, there are no big margins of error in this business. Unlike working at MacDonal'd's, or as a marketing rep selling coat hangers, or some computer geek writing software or selling shoes at Macy's, when you screw up, you stand the risk of **KILLING PEOPLE!** This ain't no **PUSS GAME!!**

But it's okay, you knew the risks, the requirements, the qualifications. **YOU KNEW THE PRICE YOU'D HAVE To PAY!!** And you also knew how easily it can all be jerked out from under you. So you've chosen to spend your **LIFETIME** studying to remain highly qualified and to get eligible for another step in the professional aviation ladder. It goes with the territory. But there are rewards commensurate with your choice. For one: you love to fly! That's why you're here. Second: there is a chance that someday, if all goes well, you may make it to the Majors and earn a good living, again, commensurate with being a professional pilot. And besides, if this were easy to do, **EVERYONE WOULD Be DOING IT!!** The requirements to "cut it" in this business make it such that it automatically weeds out the sniffing wannabees. You either have the mental and physical abilities coupled with the desire and **DETERMINATION** or you're sitting on the sideline -**WHINING!!**

After 9 years on active duty in the military, or the equivalent on the civilian side, you've gotten the licenses and experience qualifying you to apply at the Majors. Unfortunately, the major airlines aren't like Exxon gas stations: there simply isn't one on every street corner hiring someone to pump gas. Any one airline is probably hiring no more than 1,000 pilots per year - and that's a really big year. You may think you have what they're looking for, but guess what, so does every other pilot applying for that position. So the competition just elevated to another notch higher. Odds are more in favor of you **NOT** getting hired than of getting hired!! After two or three airline interviews, you might get lucky and get hired by a startup carrier - paying less than a person on the UAW assembly line. No problem, you'll keep applying to the other carriers even though you generally only have one opportunity. A "NO" is generally a no for the rest of your career. But you'll keep trying.

Even if you do get lucky and hired by a Major, there's more years of dues to pay, studying, hard work, long days, short nights and hurdles to cross. The FAA not only watches you on paper, they sit on your jumpseat and watch over your shoulder. They analyze, criticize and evaluate every move you make. They're there for your orals, writtens, simulator checks and rating rides. They show up unannounced any time they choose. They check you and recheck you; sometimes two days in a row from different examiners. One big error now, sport, and you don't get bumped back to the "Minors", you get bounced out on your ass!! You again accept the fact that you've chosen to live a life in a profession that with any mistake you are **AUTOMATICALLY GUILTY UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT!!**

But it's okay, because the risks are high, therefore the standards must be even higher!! You're no longer talking about dinging in your little Cherokee with your buds on board. We're talking about anywhere from 100 to 400 passengers (depending on the airplane) on board who are betting their lives that you **MEET OR EXCEED THOSE HIGH STANDARDS**. They're betting that when that engine fails, the hydraulic system quits or the flight controls stop working that you have the knowledge, experience and highly trained skill to safely land that airplane on a short runway, in weather that you wont take your Honda Accord out in to buy your pizza.

Therein lies the blessing and the problem: passengers. Since deregulation, the prices for tickets have become increasingly competitive. In fact, the cut throat marketing schemes of some airlines have caused tickets prices to be so low that it is now cheaper to fly than to take the Greyhound bus. Hence, the business takes on the look and feel of mass transportation. More competition, lower ticket prices, more passengers. Through the

process we've lowered the standards. Average tickets prices down, thus reduced revenues, and consequently a huge reduction in the standard of service. The simple fact of the matter, people, is that you cannot expect to get 1st class service for below Greyhound prices on your tickets. You don't go to the Cadillac dealer and expect to pay Yugo prices. Here's an economic question for you: when you go to the grocery store, the gas station, make a long distance telephone call, buy a new modem or a new pair of shoes, do you think you pay LESS for that product or service than what it costs the business to SUPPLY it? Nope. But the marketing gurus in the airlines business sell seats for less than it costs to produce them.

So costs are out of sight. Gotta lower the overhead. We'll cut back on our service: no meals, minimum number of flight attendants to provide service, fewer agents, etc. In fact, we'll "out source" everything we can to lower costs. We'll lay off tens of thousands of dedicated and loyal employees so we can contract with outside companies to fuel our planes, clean em, handle baggage and even work the gates. Those companies hire at minimum wage and with no benefits. So guess what, there is no employee loyalty, dedication or commitment. If it's a rainy, cold Saturday in Chicago, the minimum wage ramp workers wont show up for work. What's the contractor going to do, fire them and hire more minimum wage employees with the same dedication? So your bags get lost, or stolen, or just don't get put on the plane. The flight is late because there's not enough fuelers to fuel the airplane. You're pissed because the flight's late and it never crosses your mind that it might be because of your \$79.00 round trip airfare from Chicago to Miami. You don't apply the same "you get what you pay for" logic to your airline ticket that you do when you go shopping for a new automobile. You expect to have your ass kissed for the \$39.50 for that flight segment. Hell, you can't buy a hooker to kiss your cheek for that amount of money!!

Guess what you think you can do for your \$39.50?? You feel like you have the constitutional right to defecate, urinate and vomit in the seat; leaving it for someone else to clean up. You throw your trash on the floor and walk away from it. You'll change your baby's diaper on the tray table, wad up the pamper full of baby crap and leave it in the seatback pocket. And then you whine that you're paying too much for your ticket, the plane's late, or that seats are too cramped. Guess what?? I wouldn't ride in your car and treat you that way - why treat the professionals in the aviation community that way??!! Because - YOU DON'T CARE !!!! You want the most you can get for the least you have to pay for it!

Unfortunately, the airline managements have cut back their services to the point that they can't cut anymore. So they look to the only other source of cutting - employee salaries and benefits. For the non-contract (non-union) groups it's easy to scalp. They don't have any protection from irresponsible managements who are only interested in the bottom line. But if you happen to be fortunate enough to have the protection of a professional organization (unions like ALPA or APA) then it's a little bit tougher to slaughter. You see, even though management has reduced the standards of the products they sell, the standard by which professional pilots are subjected to have not been reduced!! The price pilots have had to pay is still there. The risks and the requirements still remain. Passengers may want the most they can get for the least dollar, but they still want those pilots to have the experience/qualifications commensurate with requirements of operating aircraft, full of passengers, in an intense and risk-filled environment! I hate to tell you this, sport, but that doesn't come FREE!! If you want it, you've got to pay for it!!

Now let's fold in record profits being reaped by airline managements. Not to mention huge salaries and bonus for executives at the airlines. Without exception, the salaries of professional pilots throughout the business have not kept pace with the cost of living for the past decade. Simply put, airline pilots are making less than they were 10 years ago, yet you keep charging more each year for that new color TV, automobile, gallon of milk or tank of gas.

So, after 25 years of flying experience, tests, physical exams, simulator checks, military service, etc., etc, I finally reach the left seat of an airplane in the service of a commercial carrier. Yep, I also get a 6 figure income. Tell me, why shouldn't I??? If anyone could get here, then this profession wouldn't have the added benefit of a nice salary. It doesn't require a doctor the same number of years to get to 6 figures, yet, no one denies that surgeon is worth every penny when you're laying on the table with your chest sliced open and a rib splitter making a hole large enough to reach through. And a surgeon only kills them one at a time when he screws up!! I don't hear you whining about stock brokers getting 6 figure incomes. You don't seem to have any problem with paying \$100 to take your family to a professional baseball game to watch a 19 year-old play ball for \$1 million per year!! But for some reason, you are pissed off that professional airline pilots are eventually compensated with a 6 figure income.

And you want to whine about their retirement? Statistically, only 1 out of every 3 pilots entering this profession will ever make it to retirement. That's a 66 percent chance that I'll never see the lump-sum numbers that you want to bitch about. And guess what, if it weren't for collective bargaining, contracts, unions and federal regulations, reckless managements would be robbing those retirement funds like Jesse James. Thank goodness there are unions out there protecting the earned benefits of professionals.

So why shouldn't the pilots at American, United, Delta or any other union carrier, fight for the survival of their profession. Obviously managements have forgotten (or selectively forget) what it took to get in the pilot's seat (managements are predominately non-pilots) and what it takes to remain there for a full career. Executives would like to ignore their own high salaries, bonuses and benefits and rather ignite the public and fellow employees against the "6 figure salaries" of the professional pilots.

So you, in your ignorance, jump on that bashing bandwagon without being armed with the facts. The fact of the matter is this: If you, or any other living, breathing, whining non-achiever wants to make the 6 figure income of a professional pilot - it's an open door that's available to you. I've laid it out for you. It's there for the taking. All you have to do is go for it. You can't sit on the sideline and whine though. Whining wont get you into the Captain's seat on a B-767. You also can't leap from your Piper Cherokee into the left seat of that MD-11 or B-727. There are no short cuts!! But you can get there; many have made it. So can you. But if you don't want it bad enough to pay the price, or you don't have the commitment, dedication, enthusiasm or determination to get there.....then STOP YOUR BITCHING.

Because, you see, just as much as you obviously don't care what it takes for an individual to make it to the left seat of a B-747 with 400 passengers on board, we don't give a rat's ass that you don't care !! We'll do what we have to do to protect our profession, careers, benefits and salaries. It wasn't a cake walk to get here.....that's obvious because you're not among those that have SUCCEEDED.

Have another slice of pizza, flip to a different channel and stop bashing those who chose a tougher career.

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DON'T COMPARE MY JOB TO OTHER JOBS

Lot has been said and written in the press concerning pilots' salaries and compensation. We have been told about how much it will cost our company, our job has been compared to others, and various subtle and not so subtle threats and intimidation tactics have been hurled at our group. In light of the current situation, please allow me, a pilot to give you a small glimpse into my world...

DON'T COMPARE MY JOB TO OTHER JOBS

- ..How many boardrooms explode over Long Island Sound?
 - ..How many meetings conclude with hundreds of dead bodies?
 - ..How many trucks cost \$82 million dollars?
 - ..How many doctors spend half the month away from their families?
 - ..Do the children of media representatives cry when Daddy puts on his uniform to go to work because they know he'll be gone for a week?
 - ..How many salesmen lose their jobs because they have high blood pressure?
 - ..How many lawyers spent Christmas alone in a crash pad?
 - ..When your wife is watching TV and the program is interrupted by a news flash of an aircraft accident, does she momentarily freeze in fear for what she might hear?
- There is not another profession in the world where the consequences for mistakes are so catastrophic and unforgiving.

THE PRICE

- ..I pay the price when somebody loads full oxygen containers in the cargo hold
- ..I pay the price when a terrorist has a bone to pick
- ..I pay the price when loaders forget to set the locks
- ..I pay the price when engineers design a fuel pump not quite correctly
- ..I pay the price when Mother Nature decides to shift the winds...

YOU SPEAK OF THE COST

- ..Ask the CEO of Value-Jet the cost of a DC-9 buried in the Everglades...The Cost..
- ..Ask Fred Smith the cost to scrape a DC-10 and MD-11 from the runways at Stewart and Newark...The Cost
- ..Ask Korean Airlines the cost of a 747 that didn't quite make the runway at Guam... The Cost
- ..Ask Fine Air the cost to clean up a DC-8 off a Miami Street... The Cost
- ..Ask Bob Crandall the cost of a B-757 impacting a Columbian mountain...The Cost
- ..And if not for their Cool, Calm, Professionalism, what could have been the cost of a UPS B-727 that suddenly went dark and silent four miles above Chicago? How much were they worth to you that night? Industry standard or 25 % below? The Cost

WHEN YOU TRY TO INTIMIDATE ME, REMEMBER

- ..It was I who flew Cobra gunships in the jungles of Vietnam while you worked on your masters degree
- ..It was I who sits alone at the tip of an F-18 in the silent instant before I am catapulted over a cold, dark sea, while you slept peacefully in your bed
- ..It was I who, one night watched my wings grow heavy with ice, miles from the safety of the nearest airport praying that I had enough fuel to find clear skies, while you watched Monday night football
- ..It was I who flew a C-130 into Panamanian gunfire, while you decorated your Christmas tree in 1989
- ..It was I who faced head-on the fourth largest army in the world over the deserts of Iraq and brought it to its knees, while you watched it on CNN
- ..It was I who landed an A-6 on a floating piece of tarmac no bigger than your backyard, while you mowed yours
- ..It was I who orbited in unarmed tankers over enemy territory to replenish others sworn to protect you
- ..It was I who watched missiles and bullets blossom in my face, yet didn't turn and run, while you watched the flowers in your garden blossom
- ..It was I who buried a friend
- ..It is I who knows a little boy who will never play catch with his Dad, so that you may play with your grandchild

Sir, please don't try to intimidate me

I am not your enemy, I am your asset, an asset that has experienced and accomplished things few others dare to try. Realize this and there a few obstacles we can't overcome.

Author Unknown