

Budget Airline

Can jets be fun and easy?

During a time when major airlines were going bankrupt, including our national carrier, Air Canada, it seemed impossible to find any kind of airline job. After all, thousands of other pilots had more flying hours than I, and, more importantly, they had friends working for airlines who could recommend them. I had a few hours of jet time and a type rating on an obsolete airliner, so I went calling and ran into the usual array of desperation deals.

I was desperate enough for a flying job that I was happy when I found a honest and reputable company that offered me a well-paid job...on fire patrol with a light twin aircraft, fixed-gear, in northern Saskatchewan. I started packing to move to their sub-base, a tiny airport with two aircraft (one for me) and a town of a couple of thousand people. The temperature was -35 C in blowing snow with a wind gusting to 35. I did not care. I needed a job; I was going.

As I was packing my arctic clothing, a wonderful airline from Atlantic Canada called me up for an interview. What could I do? Before I went to the interview, I had to tell the honest and reputable company in Northern Saskatchewan what I was doing. After all, they seemed so open with me, I could not spend their money on a checkout, then leave them. So, it was a gamble whether I would again end up with no job, after having accepted a perfectly good one. I was highly motivated at the interview. From the very beginning, the good old boys from "down home" in Atlantic Canada kept things friendly and non-stressed. First, this being a discount airline, one captain laid out the salary and benefits, which were perfectly acceptable to me as a single person, but could be a problem for a recently-unemployed Air Canada pilot who might be used to the same amount of money, but on a monthly, rather than yearly, basis. In other words, \$22 000 CAD (\$14,000 USD) during training. Then the friendly captain said "Well, do we need to do the rest of the interview?" They could have paid me anything in training. Who cares? Training is over in a couple of months; you are not going to spend a year at that salary. I just wanted to fly the Boeing 737s they had. Maybe that is why big airlines are going bankrupt. People like me are willing to fly for discount airlines for modest salaries, which allows for modest ticket prices, which puts major airlines out of business.

Working for an East-coast discount airline, there are benefits. Sure, the training pay was less than I was receiving from employment insurance, but the only base they have is in a semi-rural location where housing is just about the cheapest in all of Canada. Modest houses can be had for \$50 000, and cottages within an hour drive can be had for \$30 000 CAD. Being in Atlantic Canada, the weather never gets exceptionally cold and there are plenty more things to see and do than in Northern Manitoba. There were a few technical questions on the interview-alternate minimums, holding speeds and so on, which I answered, but the main point I wanted to convey was that I really, really wanted to work there.

From the interviewers' standpoint, they were mainly interested in seeing whether I got along with people who I flew with. Typical questions to bring out the bitterness in a

candidate are along the lines of "tell us about an occasion when you had a conflict with a captain", "tell us about someone who you disliked flying with". This is the time for the socially maladjusted to start rambling on about what a bunch of idiots they are always stuck with, followed by assurances that the new company will be just fine; they will be happy here, even though they have complained about everyone else they have worked for or with. My theory is that people are people, some rational and some otherwise, regardless of the company, the industry or the country you are dealing with. You have a choice to get along and be happy or to take issue, argue and attempt to impose your opinions on people with different viewpoints from your own. Think about it! What kind of person would change their unreasonable attitudes simply because someone presented them with a reasoned and logical argument to do so? Only a reasonable person would do so, which by definition means that their attitudes are reasonable to start with. Everyone else needs either a long time or traumatic events like divorce, death or near death experiences to change attitudes. You are not going to change your colleagues' opinions about gay marriage, American foreign policy or euthanasia over the course of your crew pairing, so why do you not just quiet down and change the contentious topic to the familiar favorites in the cockpit? Those favorites would be sex, salary and seniority, in that order. Fortunately for me, with all the nice guys who happened to be chief pilots at my previous companies, my references were just superb. I called to confirm that the airline guys had actually checked my references, and to say thanks. I would like to claim superior social skills, but the reality is probably that I have been fairly lucky to work with people who I happen to consider reasonable, simply making it appear that I can get along with anyone.

Since the Experimental Aircraft Association's convention in Lakeland, Florida, was going on and I was now unemployed, I figured this was a great chance to go, especially after receiving a free credit of \$300 US from Delta airlines for missing my flight out of Atlanta a year back (completely my fault; I was eating Chinese take-out as the plane was pushing back). After taking the wrong bus from Tampa airport, getting stuck in Plant City, Florida and spending a night in a tent with a dozen mosquitoes, I checked my voice mail the next morning and found out I had a job offer! The Boeing 737 could be mine IF I would fax my acceptance back in. Have you ever been to Plant city? It is not big. But their chamber of commerce had a fax machine and I had a job. Off I went to beautiful Atlantic Canada.

This airline training experience was radically different from the first airline. It was so pleasant. What was going on? The ground school was easy. There were hardly any numbers to memorize: the instructors actually insisted on us using the red radials on the instrument dials rather than memorizing a series of numbers representing oil pressures, exhaust gas temperatures, and engine speeds. The whole focus of the training seemed to be to instruct us on how to fly a Boeing 737, rather than evaluating us for possible firing if we did not make standard.

Was it just me finding it easy because I already flew similar jets? For a reality check, I asked the other 6 people in ground school and they all had high marks for the method of instruction and said they had great respect for the training process. That is just about the exact opposite to what everyone I talked to at my last airline said about their training process. A typical comment at the new airline was "boy, these guys sure are trying to make us feel confident about flying the 737". No, it was not just me who thought that the training was made easy for us.

Was it the simplicity of the 737 that made it easy? Well, perhaps, since the Boeing 737 is like a Boeing 727 with one less engine and all the ugly engineering fixed up and automated. There is no doubt at all that the B737 is one of the best designed planes in existence. After all, it is the most popular jet airliner of all time. Something must have been done right on it.

Perhaps the simulator training was so enjoyable because of the location of the simulator: Miami, Florida. For some Canadians who were working the Arctic, Miami with its Art Deco district and topless models on south beach is just about as close to paradise as we could possibly hope. Every day I went swimming in the outdoor pool or the ocean, which just is not reasonable in northern Canada. After picking up some coconuts and mangos from the ground and having them along with the outdoor grill we fired up each day, I was considering moving to Florida for retirement. I just need to find a way to keep my Canadian medical plan. Yes, the location definitely beat Pittsburgh, my last sim base.

Maybe it was the excellent quick reference handbook that the airline borrowed from USAir. Thousands of people had used and modified this quick reference handbook, optimizing it over time so that it was a model of simplicity and functionality. There were practically no memory items, with the checklists being an excellent balance of minimalism and thoroughness. I think using procedures from a large, successful company that has an excellent safety record is a good idea. A big company can afford to have people spend a lot of time specializing in quick reference handbook refinement. A little bush airline with a training department comprised of people who are flying their first jet aircraft just does not have a chance of producing the same kind of slick product. I wonder why my last airline did not also borrow procedures from some longtime jet operator? It seems to me that they spent a lot of time re-inventing the wheel, creating labor for themselves as they endlessly refined checklists. Since the aircraft we were flying were popular models that were just about obsolete, many other people had already gone through the process of checklist refinement for over thirty years on exactly the same aircraft. Why not use their accumulate labors and save your own? My present budget airline agrees: they do things the easy way.

At the end of the day, though, what really made the training experience optimum was the instructors. The training department was comprised of people who actually seemed to enjoy teaching and had some training as professional instructors. They understood that students would make mistakes during training, and it was no big deal, just a part of the training process. I did a couple of wild gyrations on the engine failure in the go-around exercise. It was a non-event. We simply reset the simulator and tried it again, and it worked fine. There were no raised voices or threats of washout. After a couple of successful tries the instructor actually asked "you want to try it again?" Imagine! Feedback, rather than just threats that we better "get better" without specifying how. There is more than one way to train a pilot, and I think I have just experienced the right way.

The initial simulator check ride was a standard, out of the book event, with a non precision approach to a go around with an engine failure, a single engine precision approach, a hold, some steep turns, stalls, and finally a visual approach in clear conditions--but with no trailing edge flaps. For fun, on the last approach, I coupled the autopilot and let it fly as I looked out the window. After all, after doing all the hard

instrument work, of course I would mess up a visual approach in clear conditions, so why not let the autopilot try?

After the check ride and the trip home through the empty and security-paranoid US airports, out we went for three circuits back home in the Maritime provinces. Each circuit clicked off 2000 pounds of fuel, so it was encouraging that our landings were indistinguishable from landings on line as a passenger in any 737 I have been in. The Boeing 737 is an easy airplane to fly, and easy to land as well. Voila! I was a type rated Boeing 737 pilot.

Out on the line, the flying was just the kind that I wanted: lots of takes and landings, with fairly short legs to keep boredom away. Leave the 747-400 with automatic everything for later, when I have lost interest in actually flying the aircraft. All the routes are daylight hours, so even though there are early mornings, there are never nights that start at 2100 and end at 0900 the next day, like I had been doing with night cargo. There are overnights, which are great fun in places with spectacular scenery, like St. John's, where you can hike up signal hill to see icebergs in the Atlantic, or if you prefer more urban entertainment, Toronto, where every vice, legal or otherwise, is available a short distance from the airport hotel.

Line indoctrination was another surprise. I expected a lengthy debrief after each flight, then volumes of writing in a confidential folder at the end of the flight, just like my last job. No such thing! There were just a few hints on how to do things better, rather than observations of the obvious when things were less than perfect. At the end of a series of flights, the check pilot actually wished me a good day and walked away, leaving me with my line indoctrination paperwork to pass to the next check captain. It said "minor points debriefed", then listed a couple of pointers on how to improve my game. Where was the lecture? This was fantastic! I made up my mind that when I became a check pilot, I would say less rather than more, and what I did say would only be constructive things to improve the candidate.

At one station stop, I was treated to a first-hand view of how the budget airlines are succeeding against much larger and entrenched full-service, unionized airlines. I was waiting at the gate for our plane to arrive. Since we do half-hour turnarounds everywhere, any time that the previous flight is late simply cuts down on the time available to do a walk around, get a clearance, set up the navigation aids, and calculate a weight and balance report. So, I usually wait outside the gate, so that I can start my walk around right after the engines are shut down, as the turbines are still winding down and the passengers are just starting to file out of the plane on to the bridge and the incoming crew is just starting to collect their possessions on their way out of the cockpit. There is no waiting around involved. I could see our little 737 on approach as an Air Canada A330 taxied up to hold short of the apron area. I assumed that he was waiting to use the gate occupied by another Air Canada flight on my right, rather than the vacant gate on my left. But he was blocking the taxiway to the apron, so that our plane would have to taxi further around to get to our gate. I mentioned this to one of the 5 Globe ground crew who were waiting around and he said "Nobody but an Air Canada lead hand can marshal him into the gate. We are all waiting here, the gate is empty, but the lead hand is occupied over there." He was waiting for a gate that was already empty! Only union rules prevented him from moving forward a hundred meters and unloading. This huge jet was sitting with its engines running, hundreds of people were waiting a

hundred meters away from an empty gate, and there were competent ground crew from a local contractor that does work for Air Canada, all in place, and all waiting for the unionized lead hand to be free from a late push back from the other gate. He was still waiting as our jet pulled in, I started my walk around, the contract baggage company started swarming over the plane and the incoming flight attendants started cleaning the cabin, ready for our incoming passengers in 15 minutes. Obviously, the union agreement that only a company man can be marshal in the aircraft was meant to protect union jobs from being contracted out. However, these rules have created inefficiencies that only a monopoly can sustain. With a free market, competing companies have found cheaper ways to deliver the same product. When the captain finally did ease the big jet into the gate, none of the crews seemed to be in any rush at all to get things done--people sauntered up to marshal the plane in, the ground crew parked their equipment, then disappeared, while getting paid twice as much as I do. I thought to myself that if Air Canada keeps this up, I have a bright future here at my discount airline.

I was ready to live in northern Saskatchewan in order to fly fire patrol. By the grace of God, I landed in a great town with a wonderful company flying a plane that I have always wanted to fly. I think there is a God, and he is watching over me.

The first recurrent simulator came and went, and the little airline made plans to be a bigger airline, with new leases on more fuel-efficient Boeing 737-500 series. The future looked bright for me to be in the left seat in a couple of years. Of course, a couple of years in the airline business could bring all kinds of changes, including buyouts and startups of any number of airlines. At least there was the promise of growth at the budget airline company. The Arctic airline was still laying off people and buying jets out the 1960's to replace their jets out of the 1970's. Things were definitely looking up in the airlines and the economy in general, though.

The day to day line flying started to feel really comfortable. It used to be that weather at 200 ft and 1/2 mile visibility really grabbed my attention as in "hey, the weather really dropped!" However, after a number of flights where the weather was 40-knot fog with a ceiling of 100 ft, 200 ft and 1/2 mile seemed positively benign. All that is necessary is to follow the rules of fuel and alternate airports: you make as many approaches as you can with the fuel you have, then you proceed to your alternate, where you know the weather to be acceptable because you checked it before beginning the approach at your destination. Bad weather is nothing to be afraid of; just respectful. You do not have to go to your first intended destination, nor do you have to stay around in heavy ice conditions.

The thing that concerned me most was running of the end of a slush-covered runway, which is easy to do in a jet, especially if you land with a tailwind. My former colleague did this, providing a maintenance school in Newfoundland with a complete 737-200 (minus engine) to practice on. Not to worry: like many people who have accidents; he got a job at Transport Canada. Apparently the government regulators like to hire people who have real-world experience breaking airplanes. My theory is that government work is kind of boring, so to cut down the turnover, they hire pilots who have some kind of accident record that prevents them from getting hired away.

Being old aircraft, things break on the 737-200 on a regular basis, which provided some variety in the routine. What went wrong? Well, to me, many things: pitot heat module cooked, pressurization systems failing the auto mode, anti-ice systems not working, leading edge flaps not indicating, landing gear linkage binding, hydraulic accumulators failures and autopilot failures. Oh yes-and two engine replacements. We never shut the engines down since we were landing right away anyway, but once we were on the ground, maintenance told us to deadhead home while they got another engine. Most of the time, some old electrical component has a bad connection. The 1970's era autopilot and heating control systems are the most suspect of all the systems on board. This is not counting the airborne communications and reporting system (ACARS), which has regular fits, but has almost no effect on our operations since we just use the radio instead. The most exciting thing was probably the engine failure on takeoff from Toronto. Yes, I can report that the rate of climb is really, really slow on one engine on takeoff on a 737-200. The engine failure was not really that stressful, though, since the weather was nice. The fuel control unit had failed, so the engine shut down nice and gently with no damage, just like shutting down at the gate. We just followed standard procedures and came back to land, not much of a story. We wrote up a voyage report as a crew. Nobody in management even called me!

For an aircraft that is just about as old as I am, though, the Boeing 737-200 must have been designed amazingly well to be running economically even today, three decades after manufacture. Sometimes the failures were human induced, such as the oil cap that bound up the thrust lever linkage on the takeoff roll, prompting a rejected take off. Most of the malfunctions are caught on the ground. A fun event was the complete loss of B system pressure in flight, allowing me to actually call for the quick reference handbook, just like down at simulator. My moment of glory was short lived, however, since we quickly discovered that the captain had selected the hydraulic pumps off when I had called for the engine anti ice to be turned off.

Variety was added by the various other personalities for crew members. The days were seldom boring. Sometimes the Ground Proximity Warning System went off on approach over the rugged terrain leading up the airports in Newfoundland, triggering an avoidance maneuver in instrument conditions until the captain shouted "disregard! disregard! I should have warned you about that on this runway...the cliffs come up fast...it always does that." Most of the pilots were born and raised in Atlantic Canada and following the laid-back east coast tradition, they are very relaxed to fly with. Sometimes, maybe, a few of the guys are a little too relaxed: once I called for anti ice to be turned on before descent into the clouds, then found it was already on. This costs a bit of extra fuel, which is annoying after we have been cruising along in the clear air for the last 45 minutes. The captain had turned on the anti ice without saying anything, then forgot about it. Another time, the autopilot seemed to be holding a lot of aileron in order to keep the heavy wing up. One wing can be heavy if the fuel is imbalanced; that is, there is more fuel in one wing than the other. The fuel can be balanced again by opening the cross feed valve and turning off the fuel pumps on the light wing. Of course, if you start a cross feed without saying anything to the copilot or using a timer, then forget about it, a large imbalance will occur, which of course was what the captain had done. He just never told me about it! Following the standard operating procedures, we would never run into confusion. Not that I want some kind of rigid, Nazi-style fanatical dedication to the more esoteric semantics of our SOPs; it would just be nice to share what you are doing with the other pilot. On the other hand, it livens life up a bit when the plane starts banking all by itself on autopilot, just like it did when the autopilot failed the last 2 times.

The captain had decided to switch to heading hold mode and use his heading bug to steer. Now that I was awake, I could start steering again. Thinking positive, I resolved to remember my copilot days when I became a captain. As captain, I promise to announce every change in aircraft configuration or navigational input, no matter how incompetent or unresponsive the copilot appears to be.

If the other pilots get predictable, then there are always the flight attendants to provide a never ending source of entertainment. Typical flight attendants are young ladies on their first real job, or young gay guys. A straight male flight attendant is an exceedingly rare bird, but they have been spotted. It seems that whoever is hiring flight attendants wants beautiful, as well as bilingual, people to be the face of the airline. In fact, some the customer service agents and flight attendants are so pretty that our advertising department has started using them on posters advertising our airline. Given that these young ladies are both beautiful and young enough to be impressionable, there are all kinds of opportunities to start having a romance or three with them, even if you do run the risk of a sexual harassment complaint and losing your job afterwards.

I was recently thrilled when one flight attendant, upon delivering our snacks to the cockpit, informed me that another flight attendant was quite infatuated with me. Intrigued, I asked "well, is she married?". Unfortunately, the reply was "Did I say "she?" Did you hear me say the word "she"?" A man!?! Who? Maybe it was the gay guy the company fired for smoking dope in his hotel room, then sharing that information with his fellow crewmembers.

A couple of the pilots took it upon themselves to start a little committee to ask the boss for more money, given that we were the lowest paid airline pilots in Canada. They had my full support and respect just for attempting to do such an unrewarding task. In my experience, any pilots that attempt to negotiate wages and working conditions get abused by their fellow employees. After all, everyone has their personal wishes and pet causes to pester the representatives with. Management generally sees a nascent pilot union starting and considers the representatives to be pinko-communist agitators incubating a revolution. There is just no war like civil war to tear a country or company apart. Nevertheless, after a few years of meetings and untold personal struggle, taking abuse from both fellow employees and management, generally some kind of contract is signed just before the company is sold or shut down. Unions have a place; especially when the boss is abusive as well as being cheap. The budget airline boss was very pleasant; not abusive at all. Besides, she was pretty as well. We all agreed to the conditions upon being hired. My feeling has always been that everyone, at any company, has one way to vote if they do not like things, and that is with their feet.

It seems to me that profit sharing is an excellent vehicle for remaining competitive, which is probably why so many budget airlines use it. That way, wages can be rock-bottom, yet employees are motivated to do everything possible to save money to increase their profit share. Companies where the employees are enthused about profit sharing and stock options are going to bend over backwards for their customers. It is the little things, like actually smiling at a passenger, helping them with their bags, or going personally to sort out some concern of theirs, that make an airline successful in ways that multimillion dollar advertising campaigns never can. Passengers talk; they tell their friends about their experiences, both good and bad. I hope that people's experiences with me have been good.

A year later, the chief pilot called myself and 7 of my closest friends and asked us if we wanted to fly the new Boeing 737-500...why yes, sure!...or whether we wanted to stay on the 737-200 and possibly qualify for a faster captain seat. Well, there is no salary increase on the new aircraft, but the left seat does have a 20k increase. For me, the choice was easy: stay on the Jurassic jet and try for Captain sooner. The choice was not so clear though, since 4 of 8 pilots chose the new plane and 4 took the chance on becoming captain sooner.

Becoming a captain is not a "slam-dunk, 100% guaranteed" procedure at our airline. Although the checking and training department are very fair and excellent teachers, anyone can get stressed out and mess up a simulator ride or line indoctrination. There is no way the flight examiner can pass you if you do not actually show him that you meet standards! For a few people, that meant waiting for another chance--or even becoming discouraged and trying another airline. It seems that there are more problems with judgment and poor attitudes towards training suggestions than there are with physical manipulation of the controls. In other words: you are a student once again when becoming a captain. Take the advice of the trainer. Consider it. Wait until you have some experience in the left seat before publishing your views on how things are to be done. It was with this attitude that I went in to the captain training progress at this great budget airline that gave me such great opportunities for personal growth and advancement. I succeeded; I became Airline Captain Walter.

End of the Airline-again

I liked flying at Canjet so much that I was reluctant to leave, though I knew that the company was destined to be short lived. After all, history repeats itself and the boss had started and ended 5 airlines: why should this time be any different? All the same, it was with hesitation that I left, with the company still growing and myself in the captain's seat. Eight months after I left, the budget airline shut down, only to be resurrected a year later with all salaries reset and the union minded employees de-selected from the re-hire list. Good thing for me that I was flying Boeing 777s by this time.