

DELTA SIGS FLYING THE FRIENDLY SKIES

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Schwartz speaking. Thanks for flying with us today... Flight time will be 1 hour and 30 minutes wheels up to touch down. Before I sign off, I wanted to say, YITBOS!”

What? Did he just say YITBOS? Is he a Delta Sig? With the amount of Delta Sigs flying the friendly skies as commercial airline pilots, it wouldn't be as odd to hear something like this as you might think.

On Tuesday, January 8, a number of Delta Sig pilots got together at the Hilton at O'Hare Airport to talk about their career choice – a meeting that opened our eyes to the amazingly complex world of pilots.

It all starts with an interest in flying

for a living. Most of the brothers who were in attendance were not aviation majors, or aeronautical engineers like you might think. In fact, most were business majors who decided that being a pilot was what they wanted to do.

So how did they become commercial pilots? Many of the brothers mentioned that they were interested in flying from their childhood. It was a dream of theirs. According to Neal Schwartz, *Duke '96*, who flies 737s for Continental Airlines, “I was interested in airplanes since I was about three, and started flying at age 16. I flew throughout college, and worked at the airport since I was 16. After college, I flight instructed for about a year in California, and then went to

Continental Express, where I spent six years. I got with Continental two years ago.”

This is the usual career path of a commercial pilot, but there are others. For Richard LeBlanc, *Michigan Tech '54*, a retired pilot of United Airlines, and Mark Nickman, *Michigan Tech '87*, a pilot for American Airlines, they took another route to becoming commercial pilots – by working for the military. For LeBlanc, he went to work for four years after college in the military's active duty, and then waited two years to be hired by United.

Today, in order to even be able to fly commercially, you must have a commercial pilots' license, and must have a minimum of 250 flight hours before being considered. According to Jeff Huguenard, *Purdue '92*, a pilot for Delta Airlines, “After getting the commercial license, most pilots flight instruct other people trying to get their private pilot license. By doing this, they are able to build up their own flying hours while getting paid to do it... although the pay is usually very low.”

After flight instructing for a year as Brother Schwartz did, pilots have enough hours to be able to begin flying for a regional airline (i.e. United Express) as a first officer. After building up time as a first officer, they can then become a captain of a Regional Airline, which is one of the few ways to be able to begin flying for a major carrier. Again, according to Huguenard, “Most major airlines like to see at least 1,000 hours as a captain

Jeff Huguenard, *Purdue '92*, Jim Pratt, *Duke '90*, and Neal Schwartz, *Duke '96*, are three of the brothers flying the friendly skies as commercial airline pilots today.



on a jet powered aircraft and at least 4,000 hours of total time. Since the FAA maximum flying time in one year is 1,000 hours, this can take several years to get this experience.”

From the pre-training before they even get into a plane for the first time, to the scheduling process once they are licensed to fly, commercial airline pilots have a great deal of work to do to learn not only the instruments within the plane, but a whole new language used in flying.

Before new hires even get into the cockpit of a commercial airline, they must go through a number of training programs, including aircraft systems training, cockpit procedures training, and getting into flight simulators with exams after each. The final step is actually flying for 25-45 hours in the plane with passengers in the back. This is the first time that commercial pilots actually land a real aircraft during their training. However, remember, by this time they already have their license, and have been flying other aircraft for well over 250 flight hours.

The progression above is to be trained on one kind of plane. To get trained on another aircraft, pilots must do all of the steps described above, which would take about a month and a half, and would give them a higher “type rating” that would allow them to continue to fly the larger aircraft.

So what is the life of a commercial pilot like?

“Pilots show up an hour before the flight, you meet the crew who you’ll be flying with, and you print the paperwork, do your due diligence on whether everything is ready, and you begin your sequence, which could be a turnaround one day or as long six-day trip. Everything is checked prior to taking off, and usually the pilots are the second people to take a look to make sure everything is ready,” said Jeff Blalock, *Illinois* ‘75.

The work schedules of commercial pilots vary widely, and they can last

anywhere from a day on the road to as long as six days depending on whether it is a domestic or international sequence. According to Brother Schwartz, “I fly the 737, which is predominantly a domestic airplane. We do what I call ‘soft international’ which includes the Caribbean, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica – you know, the easy stuff. Tomorrow I do a two-day trip, and I fly three flights each day. That’s 15 hours of flying in two days, and pilots like what we call productivity – as many hours as we can jam in a day because we get paid by the flight hour.”

A rule of thumb used by most pilots is that they are on duty about twice as many hours as they are actually flying, and are away from home about four times as many hours as they are flying. So, if someone is flying 20 hours per week, they are on duty 40 hours, and are away from home about 80 hours.

While this doesn’t sound too appealing, due to FAA restrictions on flight hours per week (30) and month (100), Schwartz averaged 18-20 days off in the several months prior to the meeting. This was due to the fact that he chooses to fly as many hours per workday as legally possible, which insures that he will maximize his time of form work. That provides commercial pilots one of the best perks for them – the fact that when they leave the airplane for the day, their job is done and they are no longer thinking about work in the way that many people with traditional jobs do. This gives them plenty of free time to have a personal life.

In addition to the restrictions on flight hours per month, there is also a minimum amount of time off between flight sequences. Pilots MUST be off for at least 8 hours between flight sequences, but as Brother Huguenard pointed out, “Eight hours doesn’t mean that many hours at the hotel or hours of sleep. It means eight hours off.”

So, as hectic as the life of a pilot

can be and as difficult as the training to get started is, pilots ultimately are able to make it what they want. Time off at home is a great thing for pilots with families, and according to Derek Lee, *CSU Fullerton* ‘85, a pilot for Jet Blue, “I am able to have quality of life and fly the days I want. All in all it is a fun and rewarding job and I never get tired looking out my office window from 35,000 feet.”

Special thanks to all of the pilots who made this story possible by providing information. Specifically, thanks to Jeff Blalock, Jeff Huguenard, Dick LeBlanc, Mark Nickman, Jim Pratt and Neal Schwartz for attending the meeting and interview in Chicago.

▶ Did you Know?

- The first time commercial pilots land an actual aircraft during their training is with passengers in the back.
- Pilots are only allowed to fly for 90-100 hours per month, and labor agreements can shorten that time.
- Pilots are only paid for the hours that they are in the air, so if there is a delay, the pilots are as unhappy as you in the back of the plane are!
- Whenever you are able to see a pilot, he’s not being paid.
- Pilots must continually be re-tested and their certification must continually be renewed as they continue their careers.
- Pilots earn their seniority within their airline, and if they leave to go to another, they start on the bottom rung.
- If pilots average more than 83 hours per month throughout the first 11 months, they would not work at all in