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## Skyhawk Aviation Aviation Career Guidance

My friend and colleague, Captain Walter Waldeck, who works with me at South African Airways, has written this career guidance document. Like myself, he has decided to become re-involved in General Aviation, and has established and runs a flight school – FTC George – as a means of returning some of the skills and training back to the grassroots level of aviation training. This is gratefully reproduced here with his kind permission.

- *Captain Mike Gough, Director, Skyhawk Aviation.*

I have included this section to help explain the opportunities available to those students who continue to Commercial Pilot level with some advice on the way forward from this point.

*Right: Airbus A340-600 - The largest and most capable version of the A340 family.*



Too often newly qualified professional pilots and their parents are dismayed at the lack of career guidance from some of the general aviation flight schools. These schools are happy to take your money, but can offer precious little help or advice after you qualify. This isn't difficult to understand if you check the backgrounds of most of the management and instructors of these so-called "professional flight schools." In making this rather candid statement you can deduce that it would be a good idea to carefully check the school you choose to attend. The money you spend there will be comparable to a bachelors degree.

I started my flying career the same way as most civilian trained pilots, but unfortunately during a period when there were very few job opportunities in the industry. Medically, my eyes weren't good enough to join the Airforce so I resolved to qualify privately. Considering that I didn't have the money, this was to prove a major challenge in my life, but nevertheless, a route that was to teach me resilience and determination over the following years. Thankfully it also brought me into contact with some very kind and generous mentors to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude. A debt that can never be repaid - only passed forward. In essence this was the reason I helped start FTC (George) in 1999.

### **About the industry**

Aviation worldwide is a cyclical market and like any business is affected predominantly by economics and politics. Other factors such as deregulation in the USA and Europe had a serious affect on airlines in the 1980's and 1990's resulting in many new companies starting up, but just as many closing down from excessive competition.

9/11 had a negative impact on the airline industry internationally, while ironically, in South Africa tourism picked up, and all the local airlines and charter companies fared rather well. Considering that for years South Africa was the political polecat of the world - what a turnabout! Just goes to show how times and circumstances change!

On the other side of the globe, India, China and the Far East are experiencing huge development and are constantly on the prowl for experienced aircrew and are therefore actively head-hunting expatriate pilots from less attractive airlines.

China Airlines, Asianna, Korean, Singapore, Eva Air, Nippon Cargo, Kingfisher, Jet Airways, Air India and Cathay are all in the market for more aircraft and therefore more pilots. Likewise in the Middle East, companies such as

Qatar, Gulf Air, Etihad and Emirates are expanding at such a rate that they literally can't keep pace with their pilot requirements. All of these companies recruit worldwide because they cannot find sufficient crew from within their own countries to meet their requirements. Aviation is one industry that truly is global and where your qualifications and experience are in great demand internationally!



All over the world you will find airlines crewed by foreign pilots, not because they won't hire their own nationals but because demand exceeds supply.

*Above: Number nine for takeoff from New York's JFK Airport*

That's not to say that you need to become an expat airline pilot to succeed in this profession. Not at all. It's simply an indication of the opportunities and mobility a flying career offers you. (Personally I believe flying for one's own national airline is not only the top job but also the ultimate honour!)

"That's all good and well," I hear you say – "but how do I get to be one of those pilots?"

Firstly - you must have the passion! Who wants to spend the rest of their working life doing something they're not passionate about? This is a tough and expensive profession to get into. Apart from the money, it's going to take a huge amount of work and dedication from your side. You are going to need to be very passionate and hard working if you want to succeed. Like any profession you don't simply qualify and hit the "big time." If you'd studied law or accounting instead, you'd still have your articles to serve after you qualify. Likewise a doctor his housemanship.

The same is going to happen here. After you get your Commercial Pilots Licence - before most companies will even look at you, you are going to need at least 500 flying hours in your logbook. That's not because the employer doesn't trust you, it's because their Insurance Company won't cover you in their clients zillion-buck aircraft! The toughest part of your internship will take place here. (And don't even think of cribbing your logbook. Any employer can tell within 5 minutes if you've really got the experience.) Getting those hours is going to become a very effective indication of your experience. All your training records and hours are on file with the Flight School, CAA and Aircraft Operator and are available to employers for a background check.

Naturally there is only so much you can learn from the theory books. Some of our students have been lucky and found jobs within a week of qualifying, but this can be attributed as much to whom you know as being in the right place at the right time. For this reason we stay in contact with our ex-students who alert us to vacancies becoming available in the industry.

Having unrelated skills or qualifications can often help - as in the case of Uri Moll, one of our students who's ability to speak 5 languages got him the job flying foreign tourists in Namibia - a week after qualifying for his Commercial Pilot License! Likewise Andrew Turton, who's skill with a video camera made him highly sought after, flying American and German big-game hunters around Africa on safari, and Ken Geldenhuis whose business expertise not only got him the job but also ended up in him owning the whole company!

But in my case – as there were no jobs - I chose to study further and became a flying instructor. During this period I also dropped parachutists, ferried aircraft and towed gliders for free, just to get the flying hours. All these aspects develop your flying skills and decision-making ability and expose you to aviation at large. In the case of instruction, there is no better way to know a subject than to teach it. Also, you're getting paid to do it! Some schools have a "go-fer" program where you do the menial jobs around the school in return for free flying hours.

But while you're busy with all this, don't forget to continue your studies! It's much easier to keep learning while you're still in a flying school environment than when you're out there struggling to earn a living. Get the academic side behind you as soon as possible – the flying side will bring along its own challenges soon enough.

Once you've got your CPL it helps to do a conversion onto an aircraft that's popular with the charter companies you're aiming at. Having a Cessna 210 on your license may help get a job flying tourists in Namibia or the Okavango Swamps. Likewise having a twin-engine aircraft on your license may make you attractive to the companies having those aircraft on their fleet. As you gain experience you'll become eligible to fly their larger, faster, more sophisticated aircraft. If they don't have any, then it's time to send out the CV once again. This is how you climb the ladder. Slowly improving your experience and qualifications – gradually making you more attractive to the bigger operators.

If you have the money it may be worth paying for a turbine conversion onto something like a Beechcraft King Air or Cessna Caravan. Organisations such as DHL, FedEx the United Nations, the World Food Program and Red Cross all fly these particular aircraft. But before you go to the expense, first check their insurance requirements. Some of these companies will only consider you after you have at least 1,000 hours total time with the type rating.



My brother was fortunate to land a job flying a King Air 1900 on contract in Africa and the Middle East - straight after he'd paid for his own conversion. He had 3,000 hours total flight time – and almost all of it was as a flying instructor on small single engine aircraft! Incidentally, he was 43 years old, having come into professional aviation a little late in life. Ironically some companies favour older pilots, as there's less chance of losing them to the major airlines. Training costs in any flying organisation are enormous so they prefer to invest in pilots whom they are more likely to retain for a while. For this reason some companies require you to sign a training bond before they're willing to spend the money converting you onto their larger aircraft. This can be anything up to 3 years with a stiff financial penalty if you decide to resign before the end of your contractual term.

Obviously it's better to get into this job at a younger age, before you have the added strain of family and commitments. Many of my airline colleagues studied for their tertiary education part-time after they qualified as commercial pilots. I delayed university till after I was established in my airline career. This luckily ensured that I got into an airline at the earliest possible opportunity. The seniority system is peculiar to airlines the world over and for this reason (assuming you are aiming at an airline career) the earlier you join, the better your seniority number will be.

This number will dictate your progress in the airline, and will be one of the elements governing your promotion and hence your salary. Most airlines have a bidding system for the various fleets they operate. Likewise you can bid for the specific routes you wish to fly and the dates of your annual vacation. This is all based on your seniority number, so you can appreciate how important this number is going to be! Should you resign from one airline to join another, your seniority starts again from scratch! For this reason job-hopping at airline level is not a good idea unless future prospects in the new airline are really worthwhile.

### **Cadet Programs**

Many airlines have a cadet scheme aimed at training up their own nationalities. South African Airways predominantly aim their program at previously disadvantaged groups while Singapore, Quantas, and Lufthansa need to invest in their industry because their traditional supply of pilots from the military has all but dried up. Airforces are also tending towards signing their pilots to lengthy training bonds to safeguard their massive investments. Consequently, most airlines rely heavily on recruiting civilian-trained aircrew to fill their vacancies.



Expansion coupled with attrition from retirements and resignations far outpace what the military and cadet schemes can supply. The retirement age for most international airlines is 63 while some domestic carriers and freight operators extend it to 65 - much the same as other professions. Recently though there has been talk in some national airlines of extending the retirement age to stave off an impending pilot shortage. This is inevitable and although delaying promotion in some airlines, it will have the benefit of increasing the experience levels of the junior pilots before the seniors retire.

It's worth doing some research to see if you are eligible to join a cadet scheme in your country's national airline. This will save you and your parents a lot of money. Not all airlines have a training bond for this program but undoubtedly those that don't will reconsider that policy shortly. In any case, signing a bond in this case is definitely worthwhile. Bear in mind that all cadet schemes have their own selection criteria, along with academic and medical requirements.

Unless you particularly wish to become a career military pilot it generally isn't worth signing such a lengthy contract (on average ten years!) in exchange for what essentially amounts to limited hours on commercially unmarketable military aircraft. On average, civilian pilots tend to fly far more hours than their military counterparts. Also, civilian salaries are usually higher than the military's. More importantly though, the lengthy contract will delay your entry into an airline and consequently negatively affect your seniority number. You can buy yourself out of

these contracts, but this is usually at an enormous price.

## Outside the airline

Not all pilots choose an airline career. I speak of it simply because that is the specialty I am currently involved in. There are many other specialties just as rewarding. Other areas available are crop spraying, although I don't recommend it if you intend going the airline route. Same goes for Geophysical Survey flying. This is because although the flying is incredibly precise and challenging - it is a single crew operation in an informal environment.

Airlines prefer hiring pilots with multi-crew, multi-engine experience from structured environments. Nevertheless – it is well paid but obviously seasonal. Some crop sprayers alternate their work between northern and southern hemispheres to work all year long.

Charter allows you the freedom to operate a variety of different aircraft to a multitude of destinations the clients require. It's extremely challenging as the routes and requirements are never the same. Although enjoyable the demands make it more of a young mans job and hence a stepping-stone towards an airline career.

Corporate Aviation involves operating a company jet at their behest. Depending on the company it could involve international routes and often involves dealing with VIPs and the company's directors on a personal level. Many large companies internationally have their own flight department. The only drawback is if the company shares take a dip it's usually the jet that's sold off first, leaving you without a job. But still – good work if you can get it.

Contract flying. Extremely challenging as the company you fly for will place you wherever the need arises. This could involve anything from delivering food aid to an impoverished African country to ferrying UN personnel in the Middle East.

Helicopter flying. A specialty of note. This could involve anything from flying off the oilrigs in the North Sea to fire fighting and rescue work. This is predominantly the domain of the ex-military pilot as although you can qualify privately, the extreme costs involved in getting experience ensure that ex-military helicopter pilots are more likely to get the good civilian helicopter jobs. Unfortunately it's not as well paid as fixed wing jobs, as in this area supply does indeed exceed demand. (For the foreseeable future anyway!)

Flight Instruction – my old favourite. For those predisposed to it, instruction is the most rewarding of all the disciplines. Also the most challenging. There will always be a demand for trainers within any company. Whether at abinitio level in flight schools or at an advanced level in the airlines, the challenges and rewards are ever present. Flight instruction at primary level in the flying schools is very demanding as your students are in the developmental phase and require much more time, effort and input.

Airlines have their own training staff and the job involves converting experienced crew onto a specific aircraft fleet. Extensive use of simulators is required for this task. The new pilots are transitioned by training captains and pilot instructors in the simulator, and then paired off with a training captain for tutoring en-route. At this level, each aircraft type is a specialty, and the process takes upwards of three months to complete. The training department in an airline is usually a separate career path from the 'line pilots' – the staff all being active airline pilots selected into these training positions by the department. To be eligible for selection the candidate must hold a valid instructors rating - hence the reason I encourage my prospective airline pilots (who have the aptitude), to study for their instructors rating. Having this rating could benefit your career prospects within ANY company.

Your own business. Lots of potential here. Many guys I started flying with are their own bosses today. Without exception, they've all done extremely well. Two were used-car salesmen who ended up owning their own airlines in South Africa. You may have heard of them – Nationwide and MillionAire. Another was an old charter colleague - Gavin started 1 TIME airlines. An old scouting friend started Air Aquarius. Another started a charter company that today services the top businesses in SA. Yet another tendered for UN contracts in Africa and today is a multi millionaire.

Several have their own flying schools. Some specialise in inter-continental ferry flights for aircraft manufactures. Several went into aircraft sales and insurance. Another started his own freight airline. The possibilities are endless if you have the flare for business.

## What it takes

Contrary to popular belief, not everyone has the ability to become a professional pilot. In fact, some people shouldn't fly at all! Not because they can't fly well - but because they can't think well!



Cocky, over-confident, egocentric pilots are not desirable and tend to be short lived in this job. The saying "there are old pilots and bold pilots – but no old bold pilots" is true. With the responsibilities and consequences involved, you naturally need to be supremely confident in your ability to do the job - but not to the point where ego exceeds ability.

Mental attitude is everything. Throughout your career, confidence must be tempered with humility. One never stops learning in this game and you must have the ability to learn from others' mistakes. You won't live long enough to make them all yourself.

Under-confidence is just as dangerous as overconfidence - so good self-esteem is essential. These are the reasons most companies require a psychometric evaluation before they'll consider employing you. Flight Training College offers an optional psychometric evaluation at the beginning of the course to help students determine their strong and weak points as well as a personality analysis for career guidance purposes.

Medically, many impediments that were an immediate disqualification years ago are now acceptable, as long as they can be corrected. Eyesight for example.

The air force still has more stringent medical standards for their recruits but that's because their financial investment and risk is greater. Should you lose your medical while employed as a professional pilot most company's have a Loss of Licence Insurance to cover you until you're fit to fly again, or even a lump sum payout if you're permanently boarded. Several insurance companies are happy to insure individuals under a similar policy and it's obviously advisable to have this cover if you're self-employed.

Academically, it obviously helps to have Maths and Science to Matric (Senior) level but even if you haven't, there's nothing to stop you taking extra lessons to get up to scratch in these areas. Good English is obviously vital as it is the international aviation language. (Geography is another very useful subject although not mandatory.) In South African Airways the minimum requirement is a Matric with Maths and Science – that's obviously in addition to your flying qualifications. Although only a Commercial Pilot Licence is required to be eligible for the interview, if you arrive without your ATP (Airline Pilot Licence) you are unlikely to be selected; given that most other candidates will already have theirs.

Remember; you will be competing against the "cream of the crop" candidates for the top job, and the more attractive your qualifications and experience are, the better your chances of being selected. Airline selections are conducted on a point system and you will score points for experience and qualifications. Having an ATP, Instructors Rating, Multi crew, Multi engine, Turbine endorsement, all count for big points. Another factor is the age/experience ratio. Obviously the older you are, the more experience the airline expects to see you with.

One small tip – guard your reputation well! Airlines do their homework meticulously. Internationally this is a close knit community and if you are prone to slovenly behaviour or have a reputation as a heavy drinking Casanova or a flamboyant show-off, you can be assured the selection board will know about it before you arrive for the interview. Better have some answers ready!

## Remuneration

Obviously this is a difficult subject to generalise on as salaries vary extensively around the world.

Crop spraying is renowned as being a well-paid job but this will be cyclically dependant on the season and whether you are prepared to work in outlying areas and switch hemispheres as required.

Charter likewise depends on the local economy and its practitioners can do very well indeed during the fat times and less so during the lean.

Contract flying is usually dollar based with good salaries and allowances while working but only a retainer between rotations. Rotations are usually 6 weeks on 4 weeks off.



Generally, corporate and airline jobs pay the best with some Middle Eastern jobs paying in the region of 6,000 to 22,000 US dollars per month tax free, depending on your rank, seniority and qualifications. Inducements include a company sponsored pension plan. In addition housing, education and medical aid is usually free. European airlines, Easy jet, Go Airlines, and Ryan Air pay substantially less and without the fringe benefits, hence their turnover of pilots is higher. One cargo airline in the Far East pays their Captains in excess of 20,000 USD / month tax-free. Co-pilots earn around 12,000 USD. And that's not counting allowances!

In the USA salaries are generally not very good in the lower echelons. And only once you become a Senior Captain in a major airline will it be comparable. (In most major airlines this could take 18 years!)

Historically pilot salaries in South Africa were on the low side until 1994 when many South African pilots left for greener pastures overseas. This turned the tide and forced the airlines and consequently the whole industry, to re-evaluate their remuneration packages. With the current exchange rates, South African pilots are favourably remunerated in comparison to some of their Middle Eastern counterparts, although unfortunately without the fringe benefits and inducements and definitely not tax-free!

So where do you go from here?

To sum up: Once you are certain flying is what you want to do, make the effort in finding a good school and even if you're NOT certain this is what you want to do - don't worry - you'll find out soon enough after you start! The "flying bug" will either bite you or not. Don't be concerned if you're a little frightened of flying in the beginning - that's quite normal and has happened to most of us at some point during our training.

After you've enrolled at a flying school and complied with the administration procedures, the induction course, the medical and a few exams you will be on your way to getting your Student Pilot License. You will need this license in order to complete your First Solo flight. A milestone which will take place when your instructor assesses you as ready - normally between 15 and 25 flying hours. Thereafter you will have to complete the rest of the academic subjects and flying curricula before you will be ready to undertake your Private Pilot Flight Test (at a minimum of 45 flying hours.) With your PPL you are now legal to carry passengers in your aircraft (but not for hire and reward.

To be legal to fly as a professional pilot you will need to qualify for the Commercial Pilot License. This is an arduous continuation of the course and will require much more study and flight training before you will be ready to undertake your CPL flight test (minimum 200 hours total flying time) and the Instrument Rating flight test (absolutely essential to fly in cloud.) After that you will most likely do a conversion on a twin-engine aircraft or some other complex aircraft in order to develop and hone your skills as a pilot. Congratulations! - You are now legally employable. But as I mentioned before - not likely to be - until you have accumulated a considerable amount of experience. Hence the reason for continuing with an instructors rating as I mentioned earlier.

Once employed you will naturally be paid as you accumulate more experience. After you have passed the Airline Pilot License exams and logged a minimum of 1500 flying hours, (encompassing certain minimum requirements in terms of hours of night flying, pilot-in-command time and instrument flying and navigation experience) you will be eligible for the ATP flight test. This is the "Masters Degree" of flying qualifications and will take you several years of study and hard work to achieve. With this qualification the "doors start opening" and you will become eligible for airline interviews and other sought after flying jobs.

This is typically the progression you can expect in your civilian flying career. And the progress never stops. Because within the airline or company you fly for, you will find a whole new career path. Depending on the airline, you will join the company as a "Second Officer," meaning that you will be the third pilot on the flight deck, helping the primary crew with "in flight relief" on the long range routes. Later you will advance to co-pilot (First Officer) then Senior First Officer and eventually to Captain and Senior Captain. This takes many years. The detail varies, and some pilots achieve their goals quicker and more fortuitously than others, but it's a good summary of the way it works in the aviation business everywhere. It's a tried and tested system and ensures that the people on the flight deck of the world's airliners are the best-qualified and most experienced pilots available for the job. And that of course is good for FLIGHT SAFETY! And ultimately, that is the most important part of this job!

And now lastly, the million-dollar question: How do you pay for all this?

Well, if you're lucky perhaps your parents will consider paying for flight school instead of university. Depending on what you would have studied at university, the costs will be comparable to a five-year degree course. Alternatively you can try the banks. Although most South African banks won't give you a student loan for flight training - they will consider a loan if they hold some type of collateral or guarantee in return. As far as bursaries go: In South Africa it is the Sector Education Training Authorities (SETA) intention to sponsor flight training through the Transport Education division of the Training Authority. (TETA) The finance will effectively come from the National Skills Fund (to which all SA companies contribute) as a training bursary to selected South African students, to be used through approved flying schools. Not all South African flying schools are SETA approved so you will need to check with them first before applying for a bursary. Contact the Government Transport Education Training Authority or the National Skills Fund for more information on this scheme.

Well - in the words of Forest Gump, "that's all I've got to say about that." I hope this chapter goes some way in helping you make an informed decision about your future.