

# The glory days are over

**I** have been agonizing over the topic of this column for a few years, not knowing if I should publicly air my personal thoughts. Not to do

so, I finally concluded, would be intellectually dishonest. So at the risk of attracting flak, here goes.

I was hired as a pilot by Trans World Airlines in 1964. This was during the glamour years that began after World War II. Airline salaries were rising, working conditions improved with every contract renewal, and airline pilots earned approval and respect from every quarter. On international flights, airline pilots were treated like royalty.

No one working for Pan American World Airways or TWA during this period could possibly have anticipated the demise of their airlines. These were cultural icons of the twentieth century. At one time, TWA's logo was the second most recognizable in the world (Coca-Cola's was the first).

The death knell for this era sounded on October 24, 1978, when President Jimmy Carter signed the Airline Deregulation Act. The merits and demerits of deregulation aside, the long-term result for pilots was etched in stone. There would be an erosion of wages, working conditions, pensions, and job security.

Things got worse after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Because of the need for additional security, airline pilots are locked in their cockpits behind bulletproof doors and suffer the indignity of coordinating trips to the lavatory with flight attendants.

The glory years are gone.

I could not have been prouder when my son Brian was hired by TWA in 1989. Although conditions had declined since the airlines were deregulated, being an airline pilot was still a great job. He upgraded to captain on the Boeing 727 11 years later. Although thrilled to be in the left seat of a jetliner for a major carrier, he worked harder and earned a smaller salary than I did many years previously.

TWA was assimilated by American Airlines in 2001. During the next two years Brian went from left seat to right seat to the street. He had been furloughed and eventually found a job flying Learjets for a Part 135 operator. He now flies as captain of a Canadair Regional Jet for a commuter carrier.

Like thousands of others who have been furloughed from the majors, he has no idea when he will be recalled. Considering that American is reducing its need for pilots by contractual increases in pilot productivity and outsourcing many of its shorter, thinner routes to commuter carriers, it could be many years before Brian again sees an American Airlines' flight deck,



Barry Schiff retired from TWA in 1998 after a 34-year career with the airline.

Another of my sons, Paul, began to satisfy his desire to become an airline pilot in 2000 when he was hired by Trans States Airline, a company that operated TWExpress, US Airways Express, and AmericanConnection. Paul bounced between all three and discovered after 9/11 that he was not making headway in accruing seniority.

After four domicile changes, he opted to leave Trans States and obtain a more promising position with United Express. He worked there for three years, during which he had as many changes in domicile, and discovered that the most he had earned after six years as a commuter pilot was less than \$30,000 per year. He again foresaw little potential for a career like I had and with great mental anguish opted to change professions.

Paul recently started a pet-supply company (www.wholesomepetsupplies.com), gets to spend every night in his own bed, and has an opportunity to develop a social life. As an airline pilot gone from home 21 days a month, he had little opportunity to meet someone with whom he might like to share a future. When he did meet someone, he had neither the time nor the money for dating.

Paul says, "It is relatively easy to get a job with a commuter carrier, but not because these carriers are losing pilots to the majors; they are not. The attrition rate at the regional level is high because so many pilots reach their limits of endurance and quit. They find it too difficult to live on starvation wages [especially those with families]. There usually was nothing left in my wallet after shelling out for commuting and crash-pad expenses."

Although these are anecdotal experiences, my frank and personal discussions with numerous other airline pilots corroborate my feelings about the state of the airline industry. I can no longer encourage aspiring airline pilots without first ensuring that they understand the treacherous and daunting journeys typically required to reach for such lofty goals.

Do not misunderstand. Coping with the challenges of weather, communing with nature in a way that only pilots can appreciate, and maneuvering a sophisticated aircraft from one place on Earth to another remains a stimulating and gratifying endeavor (although I think it was more fun with less automation). It is the price one must pay to get there that is so discouraging.

I frequently am asked for advice about becoming an airline pilot. The best advice I can offer those determined to endure the rigorous hardships often required is to simultaneously develop a sideline vocation that can be used in case of emergency. A pilot should never get into a position that is totally dependent on income from an airline.

Does the end justify the means? Does becoming a captain for a major airline justify all that must be endured to get there? Perhaps, but surviving long enough to get there is the problem. **AOA**

Visit the author's Web site (www.barryschiff.com).