

# Jumpseat: A Reminder of Why I Chose My Career

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***A Lockheed Electra from the 1960s***

It's easy to forget one of the reasons I became an airline pilot in this age of aviation technology that includes FMS, RVSM, ADS-B, RNAV/RNP, ACARS, VNAV and CAT III, plus the effects of 9/11, bankruptcy, retirement plan terminations, contentious contract negotiations and the normal stresses of a professional aviation career. Not that I completely forgot, but rather I was pleasantly reminded just recently. I'll tell you how in a moment.

First, you have to promise not to discuss this month's column with my editor-in-chief; my primary mission is to provide nuts-and-bolts airline pilot insight and not drift too far in the direction of general aviation flying. But I'm going to deviate slightly off the centerline with insight that's not so much operational as it is airline pilot introspective.

At the age of 6 in my hometown of Syracuse, New York, I climbed into the passenger cabin of a Lockheed Electra with my mother. Wide-eyed, I was offered a tour of the cockpit. As a reward for my visit, I was given a certificate signed by the captain. The certificate stated that I could appear for an interview with the airline's chief pilot 20 years from that date. Despite my parent's expectation that the idea was a child's passing fantasy, I took it seriously.

I marched into the airline recruitment office 20 years later to the day and requested my interview. Unfortunately, my timing was a bit off. About 500 pilots were on furlough. Undaunted, I pursued my dream until I was hired about 18 months later.

In the process of that pursuit I remained focused, unconsciously casting aside the memory of just how enjoyable the act of flying an airplane really is. I had goals, after all: obtaining a private pilot's license at 17 years old. Commercial license. Instrument rating. CFI rating. Multiengine rating. Enduring the rigors of college and the aviation program. Finding the best first aviation job to build flight time appropriate to the airlines. Filling out applications. Keeping my eyes and ears open to any hint of hiring.

On one notable day, an opportunity to slow down and smell the roses was thrown in my direction. This is a day I remember with great fondness and a big smile. A friend had presented the opportunity. I have since lost touch with this friend, but I am forever grateful. If you're out there, Mike Townsend, thanks.

On one of my slow days as a 20-year-old flight instructor, Mike taxied a brand new Super Cub onto the flight school ramp. He was the chief of maintenance at our FBO. The FBO was a distributor for Piper, and we were taking deliveries of all airplane types from Cherokee 140s to Navajos. The Super Cub was an anomaly thrown in with other airplane orders. Mike pointed at the blue-and-white taildragger and said, "C'mon, get in. I'll teach you what flying is really about."

I snickered and, with a sarcastic grin, studied the airplane for a moment. The Super Cub was a toy. What the heck could that thing offer in pursuit of my airline career? Mike climbed in the back and gestured at the empty front seat. Reluctantly, I slithered in.

My first lesson was, of course, the necessity to hold the stick back into my lap. Mike shoved the control firmly into my groin, adding emphasis to the task. When did the fun part start exactly?

Taxiing was the next lesson. How could one remain on the yellow line when the vision ahead was totally obscured by the airplane itself? And heel brakes? That was like patting your head while rubbing your stomach. Geez ... I hoped the experience would be short-lived. It couldn't have felt any more awkward.

Our clearance for takeoff presented new issues. Push the stick forward instead of pulling back? Really? With Mike's guidance, and his own grip on the stick, I managed to achieve flight in surprisingly short order. Mike kept shouting something from the back regarding more right rudder. I didn't understand the fuss; the turn coordinator ball was off-center, but it was at least a cat's whisker away from full deflection. Well ... if he insisted.

As we set out on a course westbound to nowhere in particular, I began to relax my death grip on the stick. A white-knuckle grasp was something I told my own students not to do. Glancing from the left side window to the right side window, I took in the scenery. It wasn't long before my entire body began to release its tension. Maybe this was fun after all.

A while later, Mike suggested a heading that would take us to one of the local grass strips. He began a dissertation on how to get the Super Cub on the ground. I half-listened, assuming that any friend with intelligence would certainly have enough self-preservation instincts not to allow a taildragger newbie to be responsible for his own demise. Fortunately, I was correct. I landed with some occasional assistance during the approach.

The whirl of the Cub's wheels rolling out on the grass runway is a sound that I love to this day. The serene quiet after shutting down is a memory that has remained a part of my psyche. At that very moment I became addicted. This was what flying was all about. Where had I been?

Mike and I flew for a good part of two hours that day, landing at various other grass strips. My addiction continued. I got the official checkout and flew the Super Cub on my own. The experience re-energized my ambitions.

As anticipated, time presented me with opportunities to advance my career aspirations. When I was offered my first airline-related job flying a Beech 99 for an Allegheny Commuter in the Northeast, Super Cub flying took a back seat. But hand-flying an airplane never did.

My early career, involving the Beech 99 and later a Twin Otter, did not include an autopilot, let alone a flight director. The 727 freight carrier that I was hired by always considered hand-flying as the primary method for maneuvering the airplane, and unless marginal weather dictated otherwise, hand-flying the 727 at my current airline was the norm.

With the introduction of the 767 and the 757, a new culture emerged. Flight management systems were able to integrate automation with operational efficiency better than a human. As pilots, we were trained to utilize the automation in almost every phase of flight. Initially I found it awkward, rebelling on a handful of occasions during the training process. Eventually I made peace but never completely trusted the machine.

Once the 777 became part of my career, I had to accept the notion that hand-flying really wasn't. I was just the catalyst that moved the control wheel, sending electronic signals to the appropriate flight control computers. Regardless, it hasn't stopped me from disconnecting the autopilot. The act of flying is still part of my DNA. Some might consider me more of a systems manager at this point, but at the end of the day I'm still a pilot.

So when my Cherokee 6 became a money pit and hadn't been flown nearly enough to justify its ownership, I reluctantly sold it. In its place, I bought a Decathlon. No, I'm not an aerobatic enthusiast, but the airplane is a robust taildragger, and now I don't feel guilty about just boring holes in the sky, especially if a grass runway is involved.

Which brings me to an old airline pilot story. For those that have never heard the tale, it starts with a young, ambitious airline pilot wannabe learning to fly in a J-3 Cub. (Please substitute any airplane of your choosing.) The wannabe eventually becomes envious of the pilot flying a Navajo. The wannabe qualifies on a Navajo and then becomes envious of the pilot flying a King Air. The wannabe qualifies on the King Air and then becomes envious of the airline pilot flying the 737. Once hired as a real airline pilot on the 737, the new hire becomes

envious of his colleague flying a wide-body 747 ... and so on. (You can include space shuttle aspirations if you'd like.)

The crusty old 747 airline pilot catches a glimpse of the taildragger from years gone by. The envy now works in reverse. The airline pilot contemplates what it would be like to once again fly a real airplane.

So, with a grin as I wheel-land my Decathlon on our local grass strip, I have officially completed the airline pilot cycle of life. I now own an airplane that reminds me of a reason I chose an airline career. Way cool.