

# PROLOGUE

## A VALUE-ADDED EXPERIENCE



I have always been thrilled with airplanes and aviation. Looking back, my journey seems a little like the flight of a butterfly that can't travel six inches in a straight line—yet somehow, mysteriously migrates thousands of miles and arrives at one specific destination that was always there, waiting.

I believe we are all subject to and helped along by kindness during our journeys. I see how many others added value to my life in many ways, but maybe most clearly in my career as a pilot. I realize how this help and kindness from others *uplifted* me toward something greater than I could have become on my own.

I believe life is a “value-added” experience. We all start with something—things given us as at birth. At the very least, we were given life itself. I don't know why some of us seem to have won the deluxe versions, with all the bells and whistles, while others seem to have been blessed with lesser gifts. I do know, however, that what we choose to do with what we're given not only makes a major difference in how our lives turn out, but also affects everyone around us, either directly or indirectly, for better or worse.

All of us have gifts and opportunities or challenges in life—for no apparent reason—for nothing we deserve. Where do they come from? How do any of us account for these starting points?

I once built a recreational aircraft from a kit. I was searching for help in an online forum one day. Someone used the term “scratch builder,” suggesting perhaps that his method—building the airplane from raw plans and not from a factory-supplied kit—made him a superior builder. I couldn't resist the bait—and promptly asked him what his method was for home-smelting aluminum. Where did he mine his bauxite ore? How did he fabricate his bolts, nuts, rivets and fasteners? How about his drills and other tools? Did he build these too?

I was obviously making the point that even if some builders—the so-called “scratch builders”—start working from a point closer to the beginning of a project, they are only one extremely small step earlier in a complex chain. We are merely adding value to the preceding accomplishments of others upon whom our society has risen. We should never take for granted the basic knowledge, the infrastructure and underlying organization that forms the foundation for all our subsequent endeavors.

Today, all aircraft designers build upon what went before. They can look up tables of specifications for the strength and capabilities of various materials. Then they can accurately determine the parameters for all components of an aircraft, ensuring each part will be strong enough for the stresses involved. They can calculate these stresses because of the development of theoretical and practical mathematics we all depend upon. Or, more likely today, we punch the data into a computer that does the complicated math for us. A computer that was also conceived, designed, built and programmed by many others. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before. Then, if we are lucky, we too might contribute just a little to the growing pool of knowledge, experience and accomplishment.

When I read how Wilbur and Orville Wright built and became airborne in the first successful, controllable flying machine, I am in awe of their inspiration and determination. They too were building upon what came before. They could only build a successful aircraft because the science and technology of their day had advanced to the point where they could find the needed materials, tools, ideas and information about previous failed attempts. Then, after a lot of reading, talking, thinking, trying and failing, they solved the problems and designed a flying vehicle that could be continuously controlled in three dimensions. Next, even more remarkably, they climbed on board and taught themselves how to fly it—without killing themselves.

By contrast, I have always stepped into well-proven aircraft. I benefited from experiences of instructors, mechanics and others as I studied and practiced to become a pilot. I survived thousands of hours in the air—sometimes through very challenging conditions—because I was taught and mentored by so many great men and women who poured their efforts into my education and helped me become successful

at my chosen field. Thankfully, later on in my career, I was able to pass on some little bits of what I'd learned to younger colleagues who followed me into the *flight decks*.

I hope to share my experiences with many who would have loved to have my job—but could not for various reasons. I've met a lot of people, pilots and non-pilots, who for one reason or another are working at jobs they don't really care for. Many of them became pilots, hoping to follow a similar career path to mine, but the timing didn't work out. When they were ready, the airlines were not hiring, so these folks had to move on. I hope they can glimpse some of the joys and challenges of airline flying.

Many could not take the gamble I took, investing tens of thousands of dollars and years of effort toward qualifying as a commercial pilot on the unlikely prospect that upon finishing a job might await. They could not commit to the years of striving to gain the required experience and then survive on meager pay and poor working conditions—and hope. Hope that eventually, they would catch the golden ring—the title *Captain* at a stable airline.

For every individual who successfully navigates their way through this labyrinth, hundreds of others must choose other paths. Yet they are curious about the life of an airline pilot. This is one reason flight simulation software is consistently on the best-seller list for home computers. Even though airline travel has become so normal and even mundane, the dream of sitting in the “pointy end” remains alive—flight controls in hand and the best view in the world surrounding you. For fans of aviation, I hope to share some of my adventures.

I don't know why I was the lucky one for whom the dream came together. I don't understand how life works and chance events come together for some of us, but not for others. It does fascinate me and gives me pause to wonder and question what life is all about. I guess that's why, to this day, my favorite aviation book is the classic *Fate is the Hunter* by Earnest K. Gann. You'll find a few other of my personal favorites listed near the end of this book.

My stories are usually drawn from looking back over my career, which has thankfully been fairly routine. Trust me: when you are flying on a commercial airliner, boring is good. You wouldn't like exciting. Consequently, my stories are not often about engines exploding, wheels

falling off and airplanes catching fire. Though that kind of stuff goes on, thankfully it hasn't often been my experience. My stories are the more mundane things—the little things that inhabit real life.

My stories are true. Or at least I remember them happening. Given all we know today regarding the unreliability of human memory, while the underlying events and principles are probably accurate, some of the details may not be, and I've reconstructed the dialog for best literary effect.

My stories are not limited to any one airline. They are universal, so I do not mention which company I flew with. The characters in my stories are based on actual people. Sometimes I describe them in more detail—as far as I knew and understood them—but sometimes they are composite characters, representing a cross-section of the many intriguing individuals I've worked with.

The thoughts and opinions expressed are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of any other person, airline or entity.

I hope you enjoy reading my stories and meanderings as I retrace some of the steps in “this pilot's journey.”

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