# Paradise is a personal thing

Richard Bach

Whether I saw them sauntering out across an acre of concrete to their aircraft, black-leather cubes of flight bags in hand, or silver-flashing at the point of a four-streak contrail way on up at forty thousand feet, I always thought airline pilots the most professional aviators in the world. And “most professional” means highest-paid and that means best. I could never lay a claim to becoming the best pilot alive if I did not fly an airline transport, and besides, the money … It is a logically painted portrait into which many a man has walked.

After holding out for years against what I feared would be an exercise in aerial bus driving, boring as sin, I decided that perhaps I was unnaturally prejudiced against airlines. If I am truly excellent in my knowing of flight and sky, I thought, the only proper place for me is on some Boeing flight deck, and the sooner the better. I applied at once to United Air Lines. Gave them all my lists of flying time and certificate numbers and types of aircraft flown, and gave them in full confidence, because I know that if I can do anything at all, I can fly an airplane. I planned to buy the Beech Staggerwing and the Spitfire and the Midget Mustang and the Libelle sailplane all fairly quickly, on an airline captain’s pay.

The examinations for the job included one that tested my personality.

Answer yes or no, please: Is there only one true God?

Yes or no: Are details very important?

Yes or no: Should one always tell the truth?



Yes or no. Hm. I puzzled a long time over that test to become an airline pilot. And I failed it.

A United-pilot friend chuckled when I numbly told him what had happened.

“Dick, you take a course for that test! You go down to a school and pay them a hundred dollars and they tell you the answers that the airlines want, and you give the answers that way and you get hired. You didn’t answer those questions on your own, did you? ‘True or false: Blue is prettier than red?’ You answered that by yourself?”

So I planned ways to get around that test. There was not the faintest doubt that I would be a magnificent airline captain, but the test was a tripping stone laid in my way. Just before I paid my money for the answers, though, I idly asked about the life of an airline pilot.

Not a bad life at all. You feel guilty, after a couple of years, taking home a paycheck that size for doing something you consider the best-possible fun. Naturally, you should be a good company man, that’s only right. Your shoes are shined and your tie is tied. You follow all regulations, of course, and you join the union, and you keep your hair cut per company policy, and it is not wise to suggest improvements in flying technique to pilots longer employed than yourself.

The list went on, but about that time I began to feel strange little gnawings from within, from the inner man. Why, I could have the greatest attitude in the world for learning the airplane and its systems, I thought, could strive harder than anybody to train uncanny abilities in controlling the machine, could fly it with absolute precision. But if my hair wasn’t policy-short, then I wouldn’t be quite the perfect man for the job. And if I refused to carry the union card, oddly enough, I wouldn’t be a good company man. And if I ever told the captain how to fly …

The more I listened, the more I found that United had been right. There was more to it than stick and rudder, instruments and systems. I wouldn’t make a good airline pilot, after all, and with a born suspicion of all company policies, I would most likely be a terrible airline pilot.

The airlines had always been a misty sort of Valhalla to me, a land that would always need pilots, that would always yield that diamond paycheck for taking a few hours each month to fly an elegantly-equipped-perfectly-maintained jet transport. And now my little paradise was out the window. They aren’t the best, after all. They are company pilots.

So I returned to my little biplane and I changed the oil and started the engine and taxied out to fly, collar unbuttoned, shoes all scuffed, hair two weeks uncut. And up there, perched on the edge of a summer cloud looking out from my cockpit over a peace-green countryside all sparkled with sunlight and washed with limitless cool sky, I had to admit that if I couldn’t have an airline pilot’s paradise, this one would do till something better came along.

