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# PILOT PATRICK



My glamorously unglamorous  
life as a jet-set pilot

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# CHAPTER



**GLAMOUR FOR ONE,  
PLEASE—A TOTALLY “NORMAL”  
FIRST DAY OF WORK**

I had certainly imagined the whole glamour thing to be very different.

Pilot for a private jet airline—it was a job that promised new adventures every single day. Insights into the life of the rich and the beautiful, of the stars and starlets: Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Tom Ford or Karl Lagerfeld would have me fly them to Nice, London, or Paris. New encounters with the jet set every single day, a veritable *Who's Who* of society—and even if I were just their pilot, it would definitely be exciting and always new. This, roughly, is how I imagined my first job after completing the training.

Beautiful, high-quality things have always had an almost magical appeal to me, and in private aviation, that much was certain, I would meet the people who could afford such things. Because if you have sufficient cash to hire a plane and jet from one continent to another, for a weekend of shopping, glamour will also find its place in your life in other ways. The less varied humdrum work at one of the many scheduled flight providers was rather less appealing to me at the time. Instead, I preferred to fly “the celebrities” while getting a little taste of their world. It would somehow be very sexy, that first job of mine, I was sure of that.

So, my first duty was . . . pretty sobering. It had been a few weeks since I had signed my employment contract with a Berlin-based private aviation company. That's when the waiting game started—initially, waiting to finally have my license issued by the relevant authority. Then, having received this, waiting to be included in the new roster. Finally—unexpected and all of a sudden—the day arrived, at long last. I was woken by a call on

my cell phone at 6:30 a.m.; a first officer had gone sick and an immediate replacement needed to be found. How soon could I get to the airport? I decided to wing it. With little planning or organization, I threw whatever I could lay my hands on into my suitcase. I hadn't been told how long I would be away, so I didn't know what I was going to need. I quickly ironed my uniform—only to spend the whole trip to the airport trying to remember if I had turned the iron off. I'm sure that's a worry many people have in those kinds of moments. It's baseless, of course—it's just that we have too much time to think about it. And that doesn't necessarily change once you're onboard the plane. But this time, I would be in the cockpit, so would soon be otherwise occupied. (My house was still standing when I got back; I had turned the iron off.)

I met the rest of the crew at the General Aviation Terminal (GAT) of Berlin Schönefeld airport. There were three of us: the captain, a Polish stewardess, and me. I had seen the stewardess maneuvering a fully loaded discount store shopping cart along the tarmac on my way to the plane. She had obviously been tasked to procure drinks and other stuff for the flight. Yet, despite the champagne bottles I spotted in the cart, there wasn't a whole lot of glamour going on. Even the hangar outside which the plane was parked looked pretty cheerless, though the aircraft itself, a Cessna Citation XLS, was worth well over US\$11 million.

The captain seemed like the kind of guy who believed jumping in the deep end was the best way to learn how to swim: He cut straight to the chase to explain PF (“pilot flying”)

to me. As you might expect, this term means that I would be the one controlling the plane while he monitored. I knew this would be part of my “line training,” where you learn all the specific flight operation procedures, but was nevertheless quite surprised to discover it would be happening on my very first flight. The captain would of course instruct and assist me where necessary, as he was aware it was my first duty for the company. But it was still all a little unexpected, and felt like a giant leap of faith. I was both proud and nervous.

We would be flying from Berlin to Zurich—initially without passengers, as per the plan. This made the “stage fright” a little more bearable. I did, of course, know what I had to do once I took my seat on the right-hand side of the cockpit. I had practiced the procedures over and over again during my training. But it was still all unfamiliar to me. I wasn’t sitting in the good ol’ flight simulator, where, if in doubt, I could just press “Pause.” It wasn’t a case of going through the correct emergency procedures as we usually did in training. It was a regular flight from A to B, which was something I had so far—if ever—only practiced without any passengers or crew. Plus, we were late; our VIP client would soon be landing in Zurich, which was now our destination. Private aviation is not an industry where providers can afford to be tardy. In short: It was time to put my skills to the test. There was no room for error, and I was suitably tense. But I was managing okay in the cockpit. All the checks went to plan, and the plane responded to my actions and commands. Finally, ladies and gentlemen, we reached our scheduled altitude and set off toward Zurich.

## Short superstars and mountains of meatballs

Once at Zurich airport, we prepared the plane for our actual flight order. Abundant catering was ready and waiting at the GAT. But our client, a rich Polish woman—or should I say: the daughter of a very rich Pole—, kept us waiting. Oh well; at least I got to have my first celeb sighting: A lady with a long blonde mane, climbing rather awkwardly out of another private plane, turned out to be Colombian pop star Shakira. “Can she not walk?” I wondered. At first glance, you could have been forgiven for thinking she wasn’t totally sober, given the way she staggered across the tarmac to the terminal. But, looking a little closer, I saw that her main problem was most probably the giant platforms affixed to the bottom of her shoes (which easily elevated her above the 5’6” mark, even though she’s really only 5’1”). Shakira may not quite have been up with the latest shoe fashion, but still: It was thanks to her that I got a brief glimpse of a world-famous star on my first day of work. I was also shocked at the piles of luggage she was traveling with; a seemingly endless trail of suitcases and bags was being hauled out behind her. The plane was also a Cessna Citation XLS, so I was able to get an idea of what I could expect in future—because loading and unloading luggage was the crew’s job.

We were ready for our onward flight to Warsaw. The only person missing was our client. Along with the captain and stewardess, I waited for the lady who would be providing

me with my first glamorous assignment. The catering alone looked promising. It would have been enough for the entire crew. Mountains of attractive appetizers, including meatballs. Plus, canapés, a selection of salads, and a whole bunch of fruit cut into mini works of art. All for just one person and a 90-minute flight. I had to restrain myself from grabbing some. The champagne, which had also been carted onboard in crates, was of course already a no-go for us.

Finally, a call came from OPS (“Flight Operations”): The flight had been canceled for that day. While I was the one on my first duty, it was the client who had committed the rookie mistake that resulted in the cancellation: When booking her connecting flight from Zurich, she had done so for the same day as her flight from New York—without taking into account the fact that this first flight was an overnight one lasting more than eight hours. So, the connecting flight wouldn’t be happening until the following day. She had booked us twenty-four hours early. While we were waiting here, she was probably still supervising the staff in her New York penthouse, making sure they were packing her bags correctly. (As everyone knows, rich people always live in penthouses and have their bags packed for them. In reality, I actually have no clue what Madam’s living arrangements were.)

The 6:30 a.m. phone call, the panicked bag-packing and unnecessarily hasty dash, the flight to Zurich—it had all been for nothing. I then had someone ask me, in all seriousness, if I could help dispose of the catering. I’m always happy to help, but what did they mean by dispose of? Were all the expensive

canapés just going to be thrown in the trash? They certainly weren't going to be served up again the next day, I was told, and unless I wanted to eat them all myself, I should quit questioning, get to work, and start throwing them all out so we could finally head to the hotel.

And get to work I did. Thank goodness for throwing out all the good food. Like most of us, I was raised in a family where throwing out food was rightly frowned upon. I asked the captain for permission, then set about helping myself to the catering. I sat in the plane's comfortable cabin—a pleasure for which our clients pay around US\$4,500 an hour. I was just twenty-two years old, so my metabolism was in great shape. But it was still an ambitious undertaking, and neither of my coworkers was prepared to help out. They had seen all this luxury catering stuff before, and simply weren't interested. What I couldn't eat there and then, I mostly packed in plastic bags and took back with me to the hotel, where I later scarfed down more meatballs until I couldn't for the life of me fit in another mouthful. I hadn't flown any passengers, but there I was, sitting in my hotel room with a belly full of posh catering. I actually felt quite ill from all the food, and the whole episode didn't ultimately strike me as particularly glamorous. Our accommodation was super comfortable, though.

So, there you have it; my first day in a career I had imagined to be so glamorous: a hasty departure, an empty-leg flight, a canceled flight, and a solo assault on the cold buffet. As I said, I had envisaged it differently. At twenty-two, you not only



have a strong metabolism; you also have dreams. Over the coming weeks and months, I would learn what my coworkers meant when they said, “you might be sitting at the front in the cockpit, but it’s the ones behind you who’ve really made it.” Because, of course, we were simply the staff of the established upper-class and the nouveau riche, of politicians, rock stars, and Hollywood actors who didn’t think twice about ordering a plane to spend a weekend in the Mediterranean. We were like spectators of this glamorous lifestyle, doing work, and collecting a plethora of anecdotes along the way. Oh, and meatballs—did I mention those?

CHAPTER



**A ROLLER-COASTER DESIGNER  
AND OTHER MAGICAL CAREER  
ASPIRATIONS**

There are some professions where people constantly ask you how you ended up there. Milliners and foot surgeons, for instance. Jobs people tend to hear little about, and which don't necessarily figure in career-orientation programs. When it comes to pilots, however, most people assume you've been dreaming of flying since the age of four. It's one of those classic "dream jobs" little kids have, and many of my coworkers certainly did know what they wanted to do before they were even old enough to read and write.

My first career aspiration was to be a magician. I wanted to amaze people and blow their minds—and I definitely believed many of the tricks being performed at the time were the work of magic. My childhood idol was David Copperfield, who was such a prominent figure in the early '90s that he could afford feature-length shows on Germany's popular RTL television channel—genuine extravaganzas that would see him make entire trains disappear. What most impressed me, however, was a trick in which the master magician flew over the stage. Without any visible aids, he lifted off—just like that—, flew into glass boxes, and carried attractive young women up into the air in his arms. As a young boy in Frankfurt, I even had the opportunity to attend one of his live shows, and it was this particular routine that had a huge impact on me. It would be only a few years until the magician market was claimed by a bespectacled wise guy named Harry Potter. But I would probably have been a Ravenclaw at Hogwarts, or maybe even a Hufflepuff. And that doesn't really involve taking the lead; you're instead stuck in a completely insignificant support role for seven books and

eight films. (Let's face it: Flying on a broomstick is not exactly something you'd classify as glamorous, even if it is a Nimbus 2000. Not at a school named after skin growths on a pig butt.) So, my dream of becoming a magician eventually faded from the spotlight.

Back then, I wanted to do something creative in general. I wanted to let my artistic flair run wild. Later, my ideas for a professional career would center more on the talents and preferences that would actually earn me money on the job market. Like nearly everyone in my family, I had always been quite technically gifted and good with my hands. My father renovated and extended our house virtually on his own, while my grandpa was forever tinkering away at cars and motorbikes. Young Patrick was a constant presence, watching over the adults' shoulders and pitching in whenever he could. That was very inspiring for me. I decided I wanted to design roller coasters or cars. Probably airplanes too. After all, someone had to do it, right? I was incessantly drawing little diagrams to immortalize my ideas. This turned out to be an ideal way to combine my technical affinity and my creative streak. But when, a few years later, it came to thinking about how I could turn this hobby into a career, the prospects were pretty dismal and daunting. While I may not have lacked the necessary technical understanding, I was not one for prolonged, theory-based study peppered with numerous stints of work experience. I had always been more of a doer, and I wanted to see and experience the products of my work directly. People who design cars and planes spend a lifetime at the drawing

board, often not even being able to savor the fruits of their labor at the end of it all.

I have loved airplanes since early childhood, and had spent many a weekend at the airfields around Frankfurt with my family. We lived in a small town nearby, and there were often air shows or similar events that gave me the opportunity to see daredevil pilots getting into light aircraft and performing bold, gutsy maneuvers. We kids—my brother and I, and all the others—were absolutely mesmerized. Many of us naturally tried to imagine what it would be like to sit in the cockpit and dash through the clouds. I was fascinated but also sad, because I wasn't the one flying the planes.

It was my father who, years later, gave me the idea of training to be a pilot, which had been his dream job. His career ended up taking him in a different direction, and he today works in finance and software. But his simple, probably quite spontaneous suggestion of “Why not get your pilot's license?” resonated with something inside me. I was eighteen, and had almost finished my final school exams, so it was time to start making some concrete plans for the future. My father was pretty much preaching to the converted. It soon became clear that flying would be a good fit for me, and was something I'd like to try. So, I started researching into what pilot training involved, what the prerequisites were, etc. It's worth mentioning here that this “training” was not part of the usual apprenticeship process followed in Germany for “state-certified industrial trades.” Instead of completing the standard

three-year, part study / part practical apprenticeship, it is sometimes possible—depending on the type of training—to obtain a commercial pilot’s license in just eighteen months. (The term “obtain” is itself used rather loosely here, given that it’s naturally not something you can just go out and buy. But more on the specific requirements later . . .)

## A little crash-landing before takeoff: Finding a flight school

Anyone looking for information on pilot training in 2006 would inevitably find themselves inquiring with Lufthansa, which offered a financed program. This ran for around twenty-four months, and taught you the skills needed to basically fly anything from a hobby plane to an Airbus (with additional training required for the larger aircraft). To qualify for the free training, you had to sit a comprehensive recruitment test. I might only just have started my compulsory civil service at a kindergarten, but what did I have to lose? I registered for the recruitment test, which was to be held at the DLR, the German Aerospace Center, in Hamburg.

I knew very few of the candidates applying for the pilot training would have prior knowledge, but I’ve always been a determined person who never shied away from extra work or effort, so when I set my mind on something, I manically learn everything I can. I bought software (at the time still on CD-ROM) that had been developed specially for would-be pilots. Memory training, complex mental arithmetic and math,