

Losing your wings

How do we cope in difficult times like these?



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Pilot in the COVID-19 era

Being a pilot is not just a job. To many, it is a lifestyle, it is an identity. It becomes a way of defining ourselves, and even though pilots have a tendency to complain a bit, we love this job and cannot think of another job as being half as exciting, fulfilling, fun, and challenging. We begin to enjoy working weekends and holidays, because - hey, who does not need an excuse to miss that second cousin's birthday party? We enjoy having days off when everyone else is working, and we have time at home to relax and hang out with our (pilot) friends on a random Tuesday night for wine drinking and talks about... well, flying.

For most of us, the path to the real great airline job is fairly long. Many of us have commuted for many years. Personally, I flew in Africa for a decade, working two months on and one off. Fantastic experiences! But great to return home in 2014.



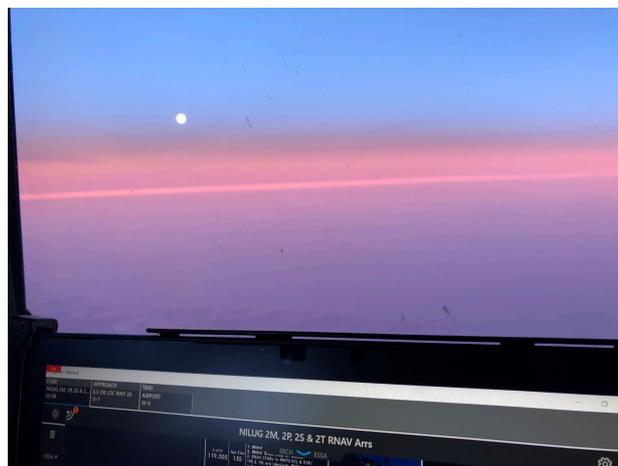
I returned home to Copenhagen to fly for the Danish company Jet Time, which operated ATR72-600 for Scandinavian Airlines. After less than three years, the contract was cancelled, the aircraft returned to the owner, and consequently the pilots were laid off. In 2017, there were many options when you had to find

a flying job, and I found it easy to choose my next career path - Norwegian. Once again studying for interview and later the B738 type rating, and then good to go! I was lucky enough to get home base (CPH) fairly quickly - and in spite of difficult times for the airline, things were really looking good.

Enter COVID-19. I had my last flight on March 20th to TFS. It was a beautiful, clear day, and there were hardly anyone in the CPH airspace when we returned home. Got cleared for a visual approach RWY 04L from a 50NM distance and my colleague and I agreed that if it were to be the last flight for now, this was a perfect way to go. Little did we know that it might actually have meant the very last flight. Not just that spring, as we anticipated. But in 2020? In a Red Nose aircraft? Ever..?

We do not know. And while the uncertainty has been almost unbearing, it is vital that we look forward and check the options for alternates. Obviously, we are all hoping that the aviation industry will return to normal, but it certainly does not look that way right now. "Normal" might happen in 2022, they said. Then it was 2023. Now we hear 2024.

Well, better check if we have enough fuel for that alternate. Fuel is time, and time is money. Going from a comfortable salary to zero is hard - especially if you have enjoyed life and not saved up enough cash for a rainy year.



So how do we find a new job where we feel the same fulfilment, get to see the most stunning sceneries every day, work with a fantastic group of diverse professionals, and make a comfortable income?

Friends and family told me that “You pilots will easily find a job as a manager in a large company”. Surely, we have experience as leaders. We can keep our cool during stressful situations, and we are used to working in a very dynamic environment. We are great at communicating, and we are hard working. But is that transferrable to managing people in a large company? I surely thought so! It just turned out that of all the jobs of the kind applied to, none of them ended up in an interview. Maybe because we are most likely to disappear as soon as the aviation industry opens up again? Maybe because we are not 100% motivated for another job? Does that show on our resume? Are we spoiled, because we are used to a job where we make decent money without working 70 hour weeks?

The fact is that many of us have been forced to take jobs we never thought we would degrade ourselves to take. And that is hard on our self-esteem and our self-concept.

I am a very optimistic person. Some people even find it a bit annoying. But keeping optimistic and excited about the future in these times has proven difficult for me as well. Surely, it is nice to have had the first, long summer holiday ever. It is great to be able to reply “Attending” to everything I get invited to. And pleasant to have time enough in the week to enjoy my hobbies and be with my family and friends.

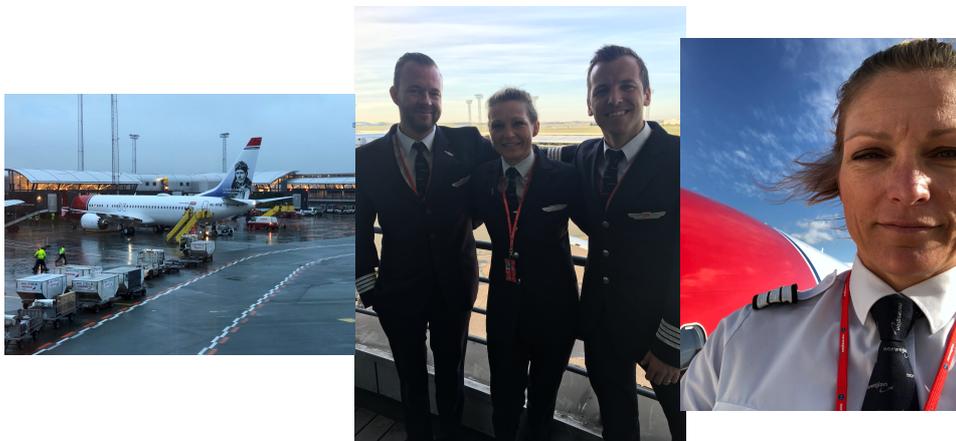


As the summer is ending and the darker nights approaching, we see our stress levels rise a bit again. Summer is over and maybe we have not found a new job yet. What are we, if not aviators?

And how do we get through this hectic time without losing our sanity?

It is of course very subjective. We talk so much about resilience in aviation, and this is our time to prove how resilient we are! Or is it...? Because no matter how much we have tried to live a healthy lifestyle, eat our veggies, exercise, sleep enough, meditate, skip alcohol and cigarettes, nothing could have prepared us for this situation. So stop beating yourself up for feeling sad, depressed or confused! It does not mean that you are not resilient.

My best advice is to talk to your network. Seek help from your friends and (former) colleagues. It is imperative that we are open to inputs, ideas, and new opportunities. And find a way to get through this until we fly again. We are searching for a suitable alternate for now. But we will eventually reach our destination. Because I do believe we will fly again. Maybe not as soon as we would have liked - but the day will come for sure!



I teach Human Performance and Limitiaons at a flying school, and it amazes me to speak with my students about the situation. They are so enthusiastic and have absolute confidence that the future is bright. For sure, they have not been through at least one bancruptcy and a retrenchment or two (like most of us “older” pilots probably have!). But let us try and keep our somewhat optimistic view of the future and see this huge bump in the road as a chance to try something new - a new, temporary job, a new skill, a new hobby.

I wish you all the best of luck and hope you find yourselves in a cockpit soon again.

