

Making *Dreams* Pay the Rent

by Steve McCabe



Digital art by GREG SMITH

I turned down a job offer recently. This might not sound too remarkable; people do it every day; but for me this was far from a simple decision, because it was an airline job I turned down.

Yes, that's right, I turned down an airline job. And not just any airline job—this was an actual, for-real, honest-to-God pilot's job with an airline, a Part 121 scheduled carrier. And I turned it down. I had emailed a résumé many months ago, promptly forgot about it, and then received a phone call from Hawai'i. Would I like an airline job? Of course I would. Would I like to live in Hawai'i? It is hard to believe there is anyone alive who would *not* want to live in Hawai'i. Would I like to fly for an airline? Pope, Catholic, bears, the woods, etc.

I listened, and learned a little more about the job. It involved puddle-jumping around the islands—this sounded like fun. Flying single-engine airplanes—not quite ideal, but the single engines were turbines, and turbine time on a résumé never hurt anybody. It involved living on Maui—I've never been there, but, well, it's Hawai'i; how dreadful could it be? Then suddenly the credit column stopped filling up, and one large entry showed up on the debit side of the page: "We pay \$1,000 a month."

I picked the phone up from the floor, brushed off the coffee I'd spilled in my lap, took a few deep breaths to control

my hyperventilation, and offered the only possible reply: “I beg your pardon; this must be a really bad connection. Did you say \$1,000 (one thousand dollars)?” (It’s not easy to pronounce brackets over the phone, but I’m a trained professional, so don’t try this at home.) I was convinced I must have been making a mistake. “I’m sorry, I must be mishearing you,” I replied when he confirmed the number, “but it sounds like you’re saying you pay \$1,000 a month—on *Maui*.” (At this point, getting the italics in the voice was hardly a challenge—keeping them out would have been more of a trial.) How, I enquired, did pilots manage to live on this kind of subsistence wage? “Oh, most of them apply for public support.”

So I declined, as politely as I could without laughing out loud, and began thinking about exactly what this kind of job implies. Quite frankly, I work very hard as a flight instructor. I do this without complaining (was that Deborah McCabe in the background saying, “Oh, really?”) because it is the only way to pay my dues, to manoeuvre myself into a position where I’ll be qualified to apply for my dream job of airline pilot.

That is the job I’ve dreamed of since I’ve been *this* high (and trust me, that’s not very high). I’ve paid sums of money equivalent to the GDPs of some smaller Third World countries in order to build up my qualifications. I’ve been lied to, ripped off, cheated and abused by more flight schools, FBOs, and instructors than I really care to think about (but I will think about them for this column—the things I do for my readers...). I’ve flown with students who, quite frankly, really shouldn’t be allowed near airports in case their utter lack of aeronautical ability is contagious.

I’m close to being ready to make The Jump. I’m nearly ready to go to the Show. I’m prepped for the Big Time. (Well, *I* think so. But I’m having a slightly harder time convincing many chief pilots of this.) I’ve paid my dues, both financially and figuratively. And I’m ready to assume some quite astonishing responsibilities. When—I have to keep telling myself it’s *when*, not *if*—I find myself in the right seat of an airplane with jets, not pistons, on the wings or rear fuselage, when I find myself flying aircraft that use flight numbers instead of ‘N’ numbers, I will be at least partly responsible for transporting hundreds of people—and the way the regional jet market is going these days, it looks like my first job could involve triple-figure passenger loads—and operating millions of dollars of equipment. And yes, I realize that I’ll be only the co-pilot, and the captain will be ultimately responsible for the flight; but if things go wrong, neither our passengers nor I will be any less dead for that detail.

Given, then, that in addition to being saddled with debts which make the national one look paltry in comparison, I shall be assuming quite enormous risks and liabilities every time I fly, is it not reasonable that I should be able to look for compensation beyond a wage that would leave me not only eligible for, but indeed, dependent upon food stamps? Clearly not. While the Maui carrier pays a pittance, it is not the only one to do so. Starting pay for first officers at most regional airlines—the traditional entry-level position for pilots like me—is rarely much more than \$1,500 a month.

Of course, we are not in it for the money—at least, not

many of us are, and certainly not the ones at the bottom of the pile. Flying, by and large, is not a career, not merely a job. It is much more than merely a way of paying the bills. Pilots, we like to think, are a breed apart. We fly not because we want to, but because we have to, because we know that if we don’t, our lives will be lacking something quite important. And so we work. We work hard. We teach, even those of us for whom teaching does not come too easily (anyone who has taken flying lessons from these instructors will understand what I mean).

I have a memory of sitting in Terminal 1 at Tokyo-Narita, waiting to fly to Hong Kong on Cathay Pacific Airways. Slowly slipping a beer, I watched the flightcrew walk to the airplane. No, that’s not right. They didn’t walk. They marched. The captain was late in his fifties, six feet (1.83m) and then some tall, silver-haired, and possessed of an air of confidence such as I don’t ever recall seeing, either before or since. It wasn’t a swagger, it wasn’t arrogance. An arrogant strut is what you see in the young pups who *think* they can fly. But this was different. This man walked with the calm, quiet confidence of one who *knew* he could fly, one who had clearly spent many years working to perfect his craft, to master the *discipline* of flying. He exuded presence, inspired confidence—or maybe it was only the silver hair. At any rate, I felt comforted knowing that it would be this man steering my aircraft between the tenements of Kowloon on the way into Kai Tak.

So what is the connection between us young, food-stamp-collecting junior pilots and this man? Maybe the laughable salaries of the first few years, the months or years spent flying reserve, the desperate hoping that the furlough won’t reach *too* far, are just part of the selection process. To reach the ranks of airmen who inspire this kind of confidence in their passengers takes more, so very much more, than a mere handful of licenses and ratings and hours in logbooks. As those of us who have done it—or are trying so hard to do it—know, aviation is not simply something we do for fun. We aviate because we have to. It’s going to take a lot more than years of grinding poverty, of not knowing when the next half-way decent night’s sleep is coming, of spending half of what little we are paid on caffeine (in any form—we’re really not that fussy, nor can we afford to be) to deflect us from doing what we *know* we were born to do. The real reward comes in making the move to the left seat, or in stepping up to the ship we’ve always dreamed of flying (mine is the Boeing 747-400, but, again, I’m really not *that* fussy and, I suppose, would be willing to bite the bullet and slum it in a Dash 200).

Of course, it would be dishonest of me to pretend that the enormous salaries commanded by captains of the serious metal aren’t at least a part of the motivation. Yes, I’ll be very happy when I secure the job that will pay me in a month what I currently make (or would make if the weather held up) in a year. But I’ll do what it takes to get there.

Just for the record, yes, I would have taken the Maui job if I could have afforded to. I spent about a week discussing it with my wife, kicking the idea backward and forward, trying to figure out a way we could afford to move. I didn’t turn it down because I didn’t want it. I *did* want it. But I need to find a way to make my dream pay the rent. ✪

