

Nothing but gray skies . . .

New world for pilots of pay cuts and fatigue

By Matthew L. Wald

WASHINGTON: Within the world of aviation, airline pilots used to be one step down from astronauts. Now they feel one step up from bus drivers, at least in the United States.

With half the seats in U.S. airliners run by companies either in bankruptcy or limping out of it, even the pilots at the pinnacle — the ones who are within a few years of the mandatory retirement age of 60, flying the big planes and earning top dollar — are facing a new world.

Their pay and pensions have been cut, and they work more hours to earn it. In another concession to the airlines, their days are interrupted more than ever by long hours of unpaid idleness.

They say they try hard not to let these things break their concentration or interfere with their work, flying passengers by the scores or hundreds, flawlessly, around the country and the world. They have piloted their planes to 40 million safe takeoffs and landings in the United States in the past five years, whether the airline was solvent or bankrupt or just squeaking by.

Some factors hurting American carriers, like high fuel prices, affect airlines elsewhere as well. But the extreme belt-tightening and wave of bankruptcies have been largely limited to the United States.

There, the boardroom blues are

working their way into the cockpit.

"My philosophy right now is, I just go to work," said a US Airways captain who, before his company's troubles, always loved to fly. He recently flew a 6 a.m. flight from Newark, New Jersey, to Miami, then piloted a plane from Miami to Los Angeles the next evening, then a flight back to Newark, accumulating 15 paid hours for three days.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration limits commercial pilots on domestic flights — measured from pushing back at one gate to arrival at another — to eight hours a day, 30 hours in seven days, 100 hours a month and 1,000 hours a year. The airlines do not exceed those limits, but many now schedule much closer to them.

The FAA rules do not address the amount of time between flights, so a pilot could be in uniform 12 hours or more to accumulate the day's hours. There is a requirement for eight hours' rest time every 24 hours, however. And pilots acutely feel the difference between getting in a month's work in 14 days, compared with 18 days.

"They kind of bleed us out," the US Airways captain said, on condition he not be identified for fear of losing his job. Pilots for major carriers said they expected to be fired if they were publicly candid about the new conditions of their jobs.

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Nothing but gray skies do top pilots see

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A veteran United Airlines captain, who laments that when he retires in a few years his pension will be about one-fourth what he expected, said he had to shut it out of his mind to prevent the distraction from affecting his work.

After a recent takeoff from California for the long flight across the Pacific, that was all his first officer wanted to talk about. But the captain said he snapped back: "You know what, can we not talk about United Airlines? All's it does is cause me frustration and anger, and there's nothing I can do about it. It churns my stomach."

So the two talked about a hobby they have in common, flying single-engine planes on their days off.

The dissatisfaction at the top has not changed some basics of the field: Young people still dream of flying, and people who fly small planes still aspire to fly bigger ones. Legions of laid-off pilots hope to be hired back, even at reduced pay levels.

"They must love it," said Arnold Barnett, a professor of management science at MIT's Sloan School of Business, who said that airline pilots were reacting with more fortitude than other professionals might in the same circumstances. "I cannot fathom how faculty would react if MIT abolished tenure, increased teaching loads and cut salaries by 35 percent because 'market conditions' had changed," he said.

But senior airline pilots, in dozens of interviews, spoke about feeling depressed and struggling not to let it affect their performance.

Academics have noticed a change. "The pilots are not a happy group right now," said Paul Fischbeck, a professor of Engineering and Public Policy at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Fischbeck, who flew in the navy and has colleagues who went on to fly for the airlines, said the change in financial circumstances and job security were good reasons to be unhappy.

But Fischbeck and others pointed out that the industry culture is such that they must face the hardship on their own. Other workers with health plans might seek professional counseling. With pilots licensed by the FAA, however, "as soon as you sign up for it, it's on your record, and you're toast."

A US Airways pilot echoed that sentiment: "If it gets reported to the FAA, you can forget it, you're not coming back to work, until you go through a lot. The system requires us to deal with it ourselves. That makes it very difficult to go through what we just went through."

Maxine Lubner, director of the Aviation Institute at York College, at the City University of New York, said that morale, along with problems like "the distraction of not knowing where your pension is," certainly could not help safety.

But she conceded that there was as yet no empirical evidence. Statistically, the airlines are in one of their safest periods ever, with about one fatal accident for every 15 million flights.

Airline executives say they do not know how to measure the effects on morale. At US Airways, a spokesman, Carlo Bertolini, said, "No one's going to deny that US Airways employees have been through a tough time, with layoffs, changes in work rules and steps lowering costs. A lot of these sacrifices came from employees."

But, he said, "We all have a stake in the safety of the airline. We're definitely confident that all employees always have safety at the top of their mind."

Pilots say the same but add that the change in schedules often means more fatigue.

"You can feel yourself getting to a point where you're beginning to make more little mistakes," said a senior captain at US Airways. "Most of the mistakes are caught very quickly, and most are very minor errors," he said. But, "at that level of fatigue, after weeks or months of this without a break, it's easy to make major mistake."

Not everyone agrees that the longer working schedule is a problem. "It's hard for me to feel sorry for them," said Jeffrey Hefner, the safety chairman of the union that represents pilots at Southwest Airlines, who have always flown longer hours than pilots at older airlines.

"They're a bunch of spoiled brats," he said. "Historically, this has been a really cushy job once you get to the majors. You make a lot of money, and you don't have to fly a lot. But there had to be a market balancing at some point."