

Ivan Anzellotti

# A PILOT'S STORY 2

FROM LOW-COST AIRLINES  
TO CONQUERING THE EAST



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*A bad manager  
gets exceptional employees  
then destroys them,  
drives away the best  
and demotivates those who remain*  
Anonymous

# PREFACE

My earlier book, *A Pilot's Story – From the Ruins of Alitalia to the Desert of Qatar*, ended with a sentence from St Augustine: “He who does not travel reads only a page from the book of his own life”.

Perhaps I took that a little too literally, but after the first book I began to travel so much that my life turned out to be more like a travelogue than a book, and I am not talking about the trips that were meant to be holidays, but the many moves I had to make in search of the ideal place where I could settle down, work in peace and raise a happy family.

The world of aviation has changed rapidly since the Wright Brothers first succeeded in emulating birds, realising a dream that man has pursued since he first appeared on earth. Technological progress has enabled us to reach unimaginable milestones year after year, to fly higher and faster and even to reach other celestial bodies in space.

However, even though visionaries like Elon Musk have invested their personal fortunes to advance the development of aviation in the context of space adventures, there are unfortunately also managers who use aviation to exploit the dreams of the many people who work with great dedication in the world of aviation.

I have met many such managers in my career as a pilot, and inevitably my relationships with them have not been long-lasting.

The story I am about to tell you will take you to the many countries I have lived in or visited during my flights, but most of all it will show you the – possibly wrong – decisions I had to make to escape the selfish managers who were always ready to abuse their employees in a way that ruined their careers and endangered the future of their families.

The profession of pilot is still fascinating and in the following pages I would like to share with you the emotions I felt and some of the most surprising situations I could never have imagined on the day I lost my job at Alitalia on 7 December 2008 and decided to leave Italy.

The life of a pilot is not only about breathtaking sunsets at high altitude and wearing Ray-Ban aviator glasses like in *Top Gun*: there are also very difficult moments when you are afraid that family relationships will break; when the future looks bleak and the light at the end of the tunnel is actually the train coming towards you.

My story is not meant to be demotivating for young people who have their heads in the clouds.

On the contrary, it is meant to help them keep both feet firmly on the ground when it comes to fulfilling their passion in the hands of greedy entrepreneurs by highlighting the harsh reality of the modern aviation industry, which all too often looks different from the photos posted on Instagram or Facebook showing the fascinating places where pilots spend their free time after flying.

The long journey that took me across three continents to Asia would not have been the same without an extraordinary passenger: my wife Maya, who supported me during the difficult times and who had to endure the worst of life with a pilot.

That is why in this book you will also find some personal reflections from her about the events that happened to us.

So I dedicate this book to all the family members of aircrew who make the greatest sacrifices for certain reasons related to their profession.

***Ivan Anzellotti***  
***December 2019***

# THE MUCH SOUGHT-AFTER SERENITY

The alarm clock rang. In the darkness of the night I reached for the snooze button and tried to turn off that infernal noise. It's four o'clock!

Another cruel wake-up call that forced me to open my eyes long before dawn. Since I've been doing this job I've become used to not having a schedule, to sleeping when I can and not when I need to, even though the human body should follow the rhythms set by the laws of nature.

The advantage, however, was that since I worked for a budget airline, I no longer suffered from jet lag and night flights. You work in shifts: either all morning until early afternoon or early afternoon until evening, and you can always go home and sleep.

I had reached a point where I started to loathe hotels, with their nondescript rooms and the silence of solitude, while life goes on in an environment that is not as warm and cosy as your own home.

I tried not to wake my wife as I got out of bed and went to the bathroom.

I tried not to disturb her or interrupt her dreams, to which I think she has a right.

The pros and cons of living with a pilot. At least she did not have to put up with me disappearing for days at a time, and was only alone when I was working, like any normal wife.

When I left the Middle East, I deliberately chose a budget airline so I could spend more time with her.

Apart from the fact that Portugal is a fantastic country and Lisbon is a great place to live, the quality of life here is not remotely comparable to what we had in the middle of the desert.

As I stood in the shower, I thought about the day ahead. It was go-

ing to be a long day anyway.

I had four flights on the schedule and the last landing, if there were no delays, was scheduled for five in the afternoon. We work hard, but that's the price you pay to keep costs at a competitive level and always have a full aircraft. It's a fact you have to accept when you weigh up the many benefits of choosing to work in Europe again.

Finally it was time for a coffee. As much as I tried not to make a noise, my wife woke up and prepared it for me with infinite love. She always makes my breakfast and never lets me leave the house without eating it with her. So we drank our coffee in the darkness of the night and enjoyed a *Pastel de Nata*, a typical Portuguese treat made of puff pastry and custard cream that you enjoy warm. It is delicious!

When I decided to leave Qatar and return to Europe, I was supposed to work in London, but as my new company has offices in many countries, I was offered a transfer to Portugal on my very first day of introduction course, to the new location that had just opened.

It did not take me long to make a decision. My wife finds any temperature below twenty degrees freezing, and the climate when we arrived in London in mid-January would not have sustained her for long.

The thought of being the pioneer of a new adventure for my dynamic company appealed to me. New routes were being planned, new destinations were in the pipeline, and as everyone had told me in the few days I had been working in London, there would soon be many career opportunities.

The base was going to be increased rapidly from the two aircraft originally planned, and a large number of captains were needed.

With the experience I had, I would not have to wait long to get a fourth stripe on my uniform sleeve. At least that's what I was told.

The supervisor who offered me the transfer was overly enthusiastic about my acceptance, which should have been a red flag for me. However, the reputation this company had earned over the years did not raise any suspicions. Relations with pilots and professional associations had always been respectful and cooperative, and I knew I could trust them.

When I looked at the first draft of the contract, I immediately no-

ticed that it did not exactly look like the best contract in the world, and besides, I was told that I only had until the end of the week to decide whether to accept the transfer; I was not allowed to wait until all the details of the agreement were worked out. Who knows why?

The salary would be almost half that of my colleagues at the other bases, but I had been assured in a company circular that the terms of the contract would be reviewed after the arrival of the fourth aircraft, as had been the case in the past with the opening of each new base.

This is normal at the beginning: it is necessary to get operations started and limit the risks. But at least I was promised a permanent contract directly with the company, whereas in London I would only have been given a temporary contract through an employment agency for at least a few years.

In today's world (and not only in aviation), a secure job is more important than a good salary. For this reason, together with a group of Spaniards, I decided to move to the South West, where I could finally start a new chapter in my life and regain the serenity I had lost almost four years earlier when I was made redundant by Alitalia and had to emigrate.

# THE MOST BEAUTIFUL JOB IN THE WORLD

I kissed my wife goodbye and made my way to the garage.

I got into my car with the same enthusiasm as always and took the road that would take me to the airport car park in about thirty minutes. Damn, it was pouring with rain! Luckily, I read somewhere that Lisbon is the European capital with the most sunny days a year!

Do you know why flying is dangerous? Precisely because you have to drive to the airport – and today is one of those days when I have to be extra careful, otherwise I will not even get to fly at all.

The road is flooded to an extent that I have only ever experienced when I was in India on my flights from the Persian Gulf. I am forced to reduce my speed drastically to reach my destination safely, and I predicted that this day would not be easy in the air either: Thunderstorms were expected everywhere, and if the winds are strong here in Lisbon, flying becomes a challenge against Aeolus to land unscathed.

Today's technology helps us immensely by equipping planes with all kinds of devices that make flying safer: weather radar, wind shear<sup>1</sup> warnings, computerised maps that show obstacles on the ground, anti-ice systems. But unless you have years of practise that have taught you to understand and be in harmony with the elements of nature like a sea wolf, there is no aircraft in the world that can land in one piece under certain extreme conditions.

When I finally reached the car park, I was able to relax for a moment. The adrenaline I had got during the drive helped me wake up; I



**1** Wind shear – a sudden change in wind speed and/or direction that affects the airspeed of an aircraft during take-off and landing



did not need another coffee, so I took the bus connecting the two terminals and reached the briefing room under a heavy hailstorm. There I met my crew with whom I would share this long, exciting day.

Working on a small base with only two aircraft has many advantages. The biggest of which is the number of colleagues. There were only a few of us, so we all knew each other and often flew together.

Here in Lisbon, there was a very special working atmosphere – perhaps because of the cheerful and optimistic nature of the Portuguese – which made us seem more like a group of friends meeting for a night out than a flight crew.

The flight attendants were impeccable. They were professionally well-prepared and highly qualified in human terms, so that we pilots rarely had to deal with problems that can arise when preparing a flight that are not just to do with piloting.

Since I left Italy, I have rarely felt so relaxed on board when welcoming passengers.

And outside of work, friendships were made immediately. We went out together, we chatted, and no one who looked at us would think we were colleagues who had known each other for such a short time.

The inevitable hierarchy between us did not matter, and it did not even affect our jobs because our mutual respect went beyond the stripes on our jacket sleeves.

It seemed like a dream, but it was reality: I had finally found the perfect place to work again, with wonderful people who made me happy to go to work every day, even on the day I already knew would not be a walk in the park.

# LET'S GET AUTOMATED

Careful analysis of the flight plan is essential to the safe conduct of the flight, as is investigation of the weather conditions and the loading of the aircraft to ensure that the weight of passengers and baggage is evenly distributed. The most problematic areas of the job are raised in the briefing room, even before we get airborne, so that we can focus on how to minimise the risks.

Many people who are not familiar with aviation talk about the “routine” of our work, but that is not the case at all – every flight is unique.

That day we were preparing for the round trip flight to Madrid, from where we would take off for Paris and return late to Lisbon. Yes, that’s right, this is a typical day for a crew of two pilots, but please do not tell that to the passengers on the last flight to Lisbon, or they would feel prompted to bring gallons of coffee from home and offer to provide beverage service for the crew instead of receiving it.

The thunderstorm over our heads was moving north, forming an insurmountable barrier that would force us to deviate from our planned route and extend the journey. We were also expecting severe turbulence for much of the journey, and I could already see the look on the head of cabin crew’s face when I broke the news to him.

If you travel by air, you may have noticed that flight attendants remain seated during turbulence and do not serve food or drink. This procedure is put in place to make sure they do not get hurt, but also to prevent a hot cup of coffee from falling on a passenger’s lap.

Unfortunately, on low-cost flights, where everything has a price and the sandwich is not included in the ticket, part of the flight attendants’ salary is a percentage of sales, so the more turbulence there is, the smaller the paycheck at the end of the month.

As pilots, we regret this, but safety first. Whenever possible, we try to help them by waiting as long as possible before ordering them to sit down to extend the time allotted for sales, but sometimes it can happen that we deploy the landing gear while our colleagues are still standing in the middle of the cabin trying to sell the last teddy bear or lottery ticket.

When the briefing was over, we ran across the apron to board, but of course we should have to throw our uniforms away up there because they were soaked. None of us crew members have a reserved aisle to protect us from the rain: one of the many “downsides” of working for a low-cost airline that I mentioned earlier.

The plane we flew on was a modern A320, the first “fly by wire” aircraft, which means that instead of cables and pulleys, electrical impulses are used to connect the flight controls in the cockpit to the moving surfaces of the wings and tail, and it is controlled with a joystick, like in video games, instead of the classic control yoke (but do not call it that: the Airbus company would be offended, you have to call it “sidestick” because it sounds more professional).

The whole system is controlled by a series of computers that process the data sent by the pilot through the movement of the sidestick and other controls, with added protections that limit the range of manoeuvres and prevent the aircraft from performing unwanted and dangerous manoeuvres.

For a pilot used to a traditional aircraft where you can feel the changes of attitudes “with your butt”, it is not easy to get used to a machine that, although with the noble intention of protecting the occupants, actually limits some of the control and delegates it to cold computers. If you have read my previous book, you will remember how difficult it was to get used to this machine during the training in Toulouse.

The new philosophy of technology in favour of heavy automation has led to much recent debate between those in favour and those who would prefer to leave more control to the pilots. Having flown in various aircraft for several years, I have formed my own opinion.

Ideally, the increased reliability of automation facilitates control and allows for a gradual reduction in flight crew numbers with the natural

consequence of huge savings – a goal that airlines always strive to achieve.

However, some serious and unexpected accidents – notably that of Air France Flight 447, which sank in the Atlantic in 2009 because the pilots reacted incorrectly after the speed measurement systems failed – have highlighted the limitations of this model, in which the pilot no longer leads, but is only responsible for checking that the system is working.

Earl Wiener, a professor at the University of Miami in the 1980s and later a researcher in human-machine interfaces (NASA), explained that introducing excessive automation into a system reduces workload when it is already low, but increases it when it is high.

This is exactly the phenomenon that occurs with the Airbus A320 (I hope I do not get my licence revoked for criticising this): As long as the aircraft works wonderfully, it is easy to fly, but the degradation of the automatic systems is not always so intuitive for the pilot, forcing him to interpret information with which he is no longer familiar and to intervene with flying skills he has since forgotten.

After taking the passengers, who were also drenched by the rain, on board and starting the engines, we began taxiing to the runway. The big thunderstorm that had passed over Lisbon in the morning had moved further north, leaving mostly blue sky over the airport.

After take-off, I did not immediately switch on the autopilot, as has unfortunately become common, but flew “manually” as much as possible to practise my flying skills.

The aircraft worked perfectly, it took off powerfully from the north-eastern runway and we continued the climb to cruising altitude. As expected, after a few minutes the turbulence set in, but the situation remained under control, we were still flying out of the clouds that were waiting for us in the distance, almost as if they were challenging us.

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the preview of our ebook

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