

Ivan Anzellotti

A PILOT'S STORY

FROM THE RUINS OF ALITALIA
TO THE DESERT OF QATAR



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*Dedicated to my colleagues in Alitalia who lost their jobs
because they believed in the long-term strategy of our unions,
and to all crews around the world
who work with passion and sacrifice
in a profession rich in history and tradition,
hoping companies will reinvest in human capital,
an indispensable resource for the safety of passengers*

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

More than fourteen years have already passed since Alitalia grounded its entire MD-80 fleet and laid off hundreds of pilots in one day – myself included – and reading the news today about our beloved former Italian flag carrier airline, it seems as if time has stopped in that distant year of 2008, when the accounts were in the red and cash reserves were just enough to keep the planes flying for a few weeks only.

Not even the so-called “heroes of the country” appointed by Berlusconi or the emirs from Abu Dhabi, not to mention ITA Airways, the new company founded in 2021 that discarded the iconic Alitalia livery in favour of the new, controversial blue livery, could get the company back on track.

They have managed to worsen the situation of the Italian airline to such an extent that it is getting closer and closer to death, miraculously surviving month after month while awaiting a phantom buyer.

As I write these lines, Lufthansa seems to be the final solution to keep what is left of the old Alitalia assets alive. It made an offer to the Italian government to buy the company a few days ago.

Who will benefit from this deal is hard to say. Hopefully the employees, who may get some assurances about the future of their jobs, although at the moment they are the worst paid among their competitors, including the low-cost airlines, but for sure Italy will lose its flag carrier forever, as the promise to keep the airline nationalised, made by both right and left parties every time on election days since the first collapse of Alitalia in 2008, has not been kept.

In all these years, I have been an observer from afar, but I have never stopped cheering for Alitalia’s success, even though I did not intend to return to it. I have not always remained silent, as I did not in 2008 when I took to the streets to protest. I used my social media accounts to draw

attention to this disaster, through posts and articles I wrote, through publications, and through my book, which made its first notes in 2009 in a small red leather-bound notebook I bought at a street market in India.

It was then that I discovered my love for writing, and so writing became a way to make sense of the new world around me. They say humour is the best medicine. I hope you enjoy some wit that I used to describe some experiences that were completely new to me.

If you live on the other side of the world, seeing the tri-coloured tail at an airport makes you feel close to home, but over the years these sightings became more and more rare, it was like seeing a rare bird species on the verge of extinction. After my experiences with Alitalia and Qatar – which I cover in this book – my misadventures in aviation were not over; they took an unexpected turn that led me to move around the world, living and flying in many countries that were quite far apart.

But I do not want to give too much away, so as not to spoil your pleasure of reading the second book to be published under the title *A Pilot's Story 2 – From Low-Cost Airlines to How the East Was Won*.

With this new edition and with the help of Diego Meozzi, founder of Cartabianca Publishing, I would like to reissue my first book in a revised version and with a new, extraordinary cover designed by the excellent Alessandro Gurrado.

It was not easy for me to revise the text, because each page brought back vivid emotions when I remembered the many moments on board the mythical MD-80, the passion I experienced in the days of protest, trying to save something unrecoverable and remain part of the “Alitalian” family, and then the unimaginable adventure I lived in Qatar, which I hope will inspire you when you read the next pages.

You know, life goes on in unexpected and surprising ways: very often it requires a lot of effort and sacrifice, and also a pinch of luck, but for those who are determined to achieve their own goals and never give up, it can be an inexhaustible source of emotions and rewards.

Unfortunately, at the very moment I am writing these lines, aviation is in the midst of the biggest crisis in its history, an unpredictable event that crippled many industries around the world, with aviation taking a

hit just when air travel was experiencing exponential growth in passenger numbers and new airlines were springing up in every corner of the world.

This was the moment every pilot had looked forward to, the chance to find a job easily, anywhere: all you had to do was choose where you wanted to go!

Then suddenly, with Covid-19, all that enthusiasm was dashed: airlines were cancelling flights on a massive scale, grounding aircraft and laying off thousands of employees who will have a hard time finding new jobs quickly.

This includes many of my friends and colleagues from the many airlines I have worked for, and I myself will probably join this undesirable club at any time.

It is not for me to judge whether the countermeasures taken country by country are correct to reduce the risk of contracting the virus, but the high number of families facing the economic constraints of these measures is undeniable and not only in aviation.

I wonder, therefore, whether those responsible for making the important decisions are considering that the damage caused by the anti-covid measures could be even worse than that caused by the pandemic itself.

Like all major crises that have afflicted aviation in the past (think of 9/11), we will overcome this one: Aircraft that have been grounded will fly again, and I hope that all personnel who have lost their jobs will return to their places, but when and – more importantly – under what contractual terms, remains to be seen.

In the spirit of never giving up, I would like to dedicate the new edition of my book to all the people who work in aviation, with the wish that they all find a new professional and personal path, as I did after the events of 2008.

Ivan Anzellotti
February 2023

PREFACE

From the moment I first set foot in Qatar, it was immediately clear to me that the adventure I was about to begin and that my survival of the death of our flag carrier Alitalia should not go untold. Therefore, I fantasised about the possibility of writing a diary or making some notes to capture the most important moments.

So much has been written about the downsizing of Alitalia, from the financial problems to the political solutions, but no one has ever considered the point of view of the people affected, the anxiety and fear they experienced in those long days towards the end of 2008, when thousands of families were affected by a mass lay-off.

For this reason, I have decided to share with you the human dimension. I decided to tell the story from an employee's point of view, to present our feelings and our concerns, rather than provide another sterile account of events.

As time passed, my thoughts grew and the turbine of conflicting emotions often suddenly assaulted me and caused many sleepless nights. It was during one of these sleepless nights that these pages came to life: Around 5 a.m. I was still wide awake, thinking about my whole life spent in Alitalia – which suddenly ended with no expectations – and an uncertain future in Qatar. I turned on my PC and started writing the first pages that had long been gestating in my mind.

I wrote the first lines instinctively, without following a precise order, to follow the inspiration that seized my thoughts at that moment; I had absolutely no idea that I would finish my story, but now I hold in my hands the final draft of the book. It took me three years to finish, because throughout my stay in Qatar, I kept editing, adjusting and adding chapters.

I hope, however, that you will develop a keen interest in the series of events-not only mine, but that of hundreds of other people who lost their jobs one fine day in December 2008, which they thought was all but impossible – and that you will appreciate the perseverance of many people who have tried in every way to help the layperson understand the death of Alitalia was nothing more than a fraud – passed off as the rebirth of a bankrupt company that was put back on its feet by a few heroes, but was in fact a complete disaster for the entire country.

The employees are the soul of an airline, with their passion and commitment to their work; but nowadays, they are the ones who pay the highest price for the short termism of the management, which considers people as a cost and not as a long-term investment.

The key to aviation safety is experience gained through years of learning, training, and moments of fear in the air. The future of aviation is uncertain because many airlines are breaking with the tradition of passing this valuable knowledge from experienced captains to young cadets introducing unsafe practices, such as grounding the most experienced captains, thus reducing budgets through pay cuts.

I have written this book to draw attention to the difficulties that the world of aviation is going through and to describe in more detail the reality of the flight personnel and their families who suffer year after year from the penalties of this profession.

I count myself among the “lucky” ones: After a few months, I got a new job with Qatar Airways, so I could fly again, albeit far from home and in a completely different and not always friendly environment.

Qatar is a country full of contradictions, prosperous for the locals and a gilded cage for expatriates, often treated more or less like slaves, depending on their profession.

My experiences have not been positive, but please bear in mind that things may have changed since I left Qatar in 2011 and that what I share with you in the following pages is my personal opinion.

By the way, I recommend you visit Qatar, perhaps just for a few

days, to discover for yourself what is going on in this particular country and compare it to what you'll read here.

After such a long time spent there, I still have many doubts, and that's why I decided to write down my impressions to read them again, to reflect and maybe find new perspectives.

A special thanks to some of my friends, whose names I cannot reveal, who read the first twenty pages and encouraged me to continue writing and finish the book, and to my brother Antonio, who with great patience read all the pages over and over again: without their support this book would have never been finished.

Ivan Anzellotti
February 2017

THE MAGIC OF FLYING

I had seen this huge grey plane with “Qatar” written on the fuselage for years.

It was usually parked on the tarmac of the airport, right in front of the area where the aircrews wait for the bus to take them to the plane. Every time I saw it, I fantasized about this exotic, mysterious little country that doesn’t even exist on the map of the board game Risk, which was my first exposure to geography.

Qatar is one of those names that sticks in the mind; it exerts a fascinating oriental charm. But when it comes to locating it on a map, things get tricky, and most would settle for the description “somewhere in the Persian Gulf.”

While these thoughts were running through my head, the bus arrived.

I climbed aboard still lost in my fantasy and began the sequence of actions that allow a plane to depart. Basically, it’s a magic trick! I don’t mean the take-off itself, which was explained in detail back in Leonardo’s days.

I am talking about everything that happens before the actual take-off, which amazes me every time. From the moment the crew gathers in the briefing room, to the preparation of the aircraft, the boarding of the passengers. The passengers are the real target of all our efforts: to get this heterogeneous group of people from A to B on time and in complete safety. Like I said, it’s a magic trick!

It sounds so simple, but it’s not. As far as safety is concerned, the pilots and flight attendants are responsible for that. We take care of it, and I can add that we do it pretty well. In fact, something dangerous rarely happens (we keep our fingers crossed, of course), and when it does, all those years of study and constant training, especially the many hours we spend practicing in the simulators for emergencies, prove to be very useful.

It takes a lot of sacrifice, study and passion to do this job. Occasionally a passenger will thank you, but most of the time passengers are never satisfied and complain about the bad weather as if we are responsible when it rains.

We do not really mind anymore. It's only when we keep reading in the media about the ongoing crisis, the bad economy and the resulting privatization of everything, including the air we breathe, that we start to think about the bigger things.

And yet, everything is fine at Alitalia. Yes, I know the company has been struggling with financial problems for the last 20 years, but they will surely find a solution. Does anyone fear that our airline might actually close? Of course not, that is impossible.

Flying is a wonderful feeling and also very practical: you can reach any destination in a short time without having to sit in a traffic jam on the highway. And the view from high altitudes is breathtaking. That's why I always sit in the front row; I choose the seats with the windows right in front of me!

Lost in my thoughts, I did not notice that the bus had arrived under the green, white and red tail of my MD-80. It was time to get off the bus and board, get everything ready, wait for the boarding procedure to be completed and depart for another flight around Italy.

We "MD-80 pilots" are the cornerstone of the airline. There used to be 90 aircraft, now there are only about 70, but so what, only the U.S. has more MD-80s than we do.

Besides, we love our short- and medium-haul flights, because as soon as you try to activate the autopilot, it's already time to make a nice, continuous descent towards the destination airport.

Which procedure should we choose: VOR¹, ILS²? No, it's a beauti-

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1 VOR – Very High Frequency Omni Directional Range: a system for flying aircraft. It works like a beacon for ships, but instead of using light to show the way, it uses radio frequencies by visualizing the direction to be followed on a special device in the cockpit.

2 ILS – Instrument Landing System - a very precise system for directing aircraft to their

ful sunny day, and the Gulf of Palermo is directly in front of us, we turn off all automatic devices, take a strong hold of the control column and off we go... Straight towards the airport. Then we turn at 2000 feet to align the plane, and we're on a perfect path: the runway is right in front of us, waiting.

Sometimes, however, it's not that simple. Let's say, on average, it's a few challenging flights that earn us a year's salary, and it's in those circumstances that our continuous training and experience make all the difference. Weather forecasting is serious business, and I'm not talking about the daily broadcast on TV. It's important to know the precise weather conditions, to respect them and to understand to what extent it's possible to venture. Especially in Italy, the challenging coasts and mountains are like a school of hard knocks for us pilots.

There isn't a single airport that doesn't have its own peculiarities: wind shear³, short runways, and many other hurdles. First-hand experience makes all the difference when it comes to dealing with them. We arrive on the tarmac sweaty on those gruelling work days, but that's ultimately part of the daily game we play differently on every flight. We defy nature, which didn't create us with wings, and which unfortunately reminds us of this every now and then very unpleasantly.

We all know that flying is the safest way to travel, but after a lifetime in the air, I am still amazed when I pull the yoke towards me and the big iron tube leaves the ground.

It seems to be a magic trick that has nothing to do with all the theories you learn in school. It's a kind of magic that only works if you believe in it, like the fairy tales you tell children. In fact, I feel like a child who keeps looking up and being enchanted by the clouds, except that I look at the clouds from above.

Sometimes I am afraid that if I discover the trick behind this mag-

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approach route. It consists of two indicators, one for vertical control and one for horizontal control, which the pilot must keep centred.

3 Wind shear – a change in wind direction and speed between slightly different altitudes, especially a sudden down-draft.

ic, its effect might suddenly disappear. Then I look down at the tiny houses and the cars on the street, which seem like microscopic dots and imagine that someone is looking up and watching the white trail in the sky, without having the slightest idea that it is I who am leaving it. Such a beautiful thing, and I am the reason for it.

There are many places I have seen and many people I have met. On every flight there is a different crew. Alitalia is big and there are so many of us that you rarely fly with the same people twice. It's not like a normal job where you only see your colleagues from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon.

Throughout the shift, which lasts three to four days (lately even five), we spend a lot of time together, not only on the plane but also after landing, which is not mandatory. So, we often exchange our stories over dinner, because everyone has their own world to tell, you just have to give them the opportunity.

That is our greatest good fortune: we have the opportunity!

And so, we learn about unimaginable interests and hobbies hidden behind the uniform that makes us all look alike. There are gourmet chefs, gardeners, philosophers, musicians, mechanics and even a guy who dresses up as a "UFO Robot Grendizer⁴"... oops, that's me!

The crew becomes your family during these long days away from home. We chat, give and take advice, share secrets, and then we return home where our true family is already waiting for us. It was not easy for them to cope with our absence.

Imagine living with a parent who regularly disappears after three or four days, only to reappear after the same amount of time, or even longer!

How do you explain such a routine to your children, especially when they are very young? One day a colleague told me that her son detested her uniform so much that every time she came home, he

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4 Grendizer – a Japanese animated film from 1975, is still very popular in Italy and inspired generations of kids with a story full of friendship, teamwork and love for human beings and nature.

tried to hide it, hoping that would be enough to make his mother stop disappearing so often. Another colleague told me that as soon as she put on her uniform, her daughter would burst into tears, and with this “soundtrack” she always made her way to work.

The life partners of crew members also have a hard time adjusting to our rotating shift duty and all that comes with it. Their lives are characterised by relationship-disrupting elements such as irregular attendance, repeated departures, the need to solve every problem that arises on their own, and a limited social life, as well as a willingness to give up the time crew members need to study or rest at home. Worst of all, they are the ones who always have an ear to the news and whose hearts start pounding at every piece of bad news.

God bless cell phones and Skype! They have made the world a smaller place and distance more bearable. Of course, it’s not like having your loved ones close by, but being able to call them and see them on your computer screen is something that anyone working “on the ground” cannot appreciate enough.

Once I did a survey. For an entire month, I counted all the couples who broke up in every crew I flew with during my shifts. Oh my god, no need to use statistics, the results were clear. Finding a couple that has been married for a long time is very difficult, and when you find them, it’s a great joy. The immediate question is, “What is your secret?”

I haven’t found an answer. Fortunately, people continue to amaze me, and the best is yet to come.

A lot of time has passed since Liala’s novels⁵: There were handsome pilots always ready for fascinating love affairs, wearing intriguing dark blue uniforms, and girls dreaming of becoming flight attendants, the only profession that allowed them to travel around the world back then.

Are we better or worse off today?



5 Amalia Liana Cambiasi Negretti Odescalchi a.k.a. Liala – a famous Italian novelist of the 20th century, fascinated by the world of aviation.

It's a question of perspectives. It's better because today everyone can afford to fly and travel, but it's also worse because the poetry has been taken away from this profession, which is a passion first and a job second. Because not only do I work as a pilot, *I'm a pilot*, it's part of my identity, or at least I thought so.

In this fantastic and poetic world of 21st century aviation, money seems to be the only thing that counts, and that is why the goal of airline CEOs is to put two people in the cockpit at the lowest possible cost. If they're then also able to control this "flying object", that is a plus.

This trend is really scary!

Then you hear about the incident in New York when U.S. Airways Flight 1549 went into a climb after take-off and both engines suddenly and simultaneously failed. In the cockpit was Captain Chelsey Sullenberger, an ace pilot who performed an impossible emergency landing. For weeks, the media praised the high level of professionalism and exceptional flying skills of the pilots and their crew.

This is American journalism. If it had happened in Italy, they'd have focused on the captain's inability to prevent passengers from bathing in the river and highlighted the pilots' many privileges and high salaries.

But that's another story and one written by journalists.

Yes, nowadays history is written by newspaper articles and newspaper articles are written by journalists who are men and women like us who also have to earn a living. So, what do you do when "someone" asks you to write or not to write about a controversial topic? Do you risk getting fired for the sake of telling the truth?

This is not the age of heroes, because all the heroes have already been awarded medals and are dead. The fight against misinformation continues and thanks to the Internet it now has a strong ally who is able to sneak through the ranks of the enemy and attack their headquarters.

When the crisis hit the airline, employees did their utmost to provide accurate information. They wrote on both specialized and general websites and took their protest to YouTube. They also used Facebook, the newest medium of communication, which has proven to be very effective in gathering support. Could this be the reason why politicians are

currently fighting with all determination to limit its use? Who knows?

After all, the most effective weapon of dictators has always been a state of blessed ignorance in which the majority of the population lives and survives. It is useless to tell people not to read newspapers because they are all biased. They believe that if it is in the newspaper, it must be true, and if they hear it on TV, it is even more believable!

In this country, critical thinking is homeless. We are not taught logic in school, so it is very difficult to develop a line of reasoning that makes sense.

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