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Be an Airline Pilot — for a Weekend

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It's early Saturday morning and you're in Houston, Texas. Today you are going to be an airline pilot! You're here to participate in one of the most unique training programs in all of aviation: ATOP.

That's short for Airline Training Orientation Program. ATOP gives pilots, especially those considering an airline career, a taste of what the training and career style will be like. It's open to U.S. citizens and aliens cleared by the Transportation Security Administration who have at least a student pilot certificate and 15 hours' experience in an airplane.

The program is intense: 10 hours of Boeing 737-800 systems training on Saturday followed by three hours total in a realistic cockpit procedures trainer and a full-motion 737 simulator early Sunday morning. At \$26 million, the simulator will be a heck of a ride!

ATOP is the brain child of Wayne Phillips, a type-rated 737 captain and FAA examiner. He is the principal instructor and you will spend the next two days with him at the Continental Airlines Pilot Training Center. This is the real deal.

Saturday means systems

You meet at 8:15 a.m. in the lobby. The discipline begins immediately: You want to be early, not just on time. You dress conservatively: business casual with long pants and collared shirts, no sandals or sneakers. You will be mixing with Continental crews, instructors and management. You want to look professional, and again, this is the real thing.

Wayne is right on time. He is tall, personable, deep-voiced, and hails from Detroit. He asks each of the 10 students to introduce themselves. Their experience ranges from novice pilots to experts. They're a mixed bag, but since no one has piloted a 737, that creates something of an even playing field.

You travel as a group to the Training Center. It is neat as a pin, ultra-professional, and conveys an immediate message: "Serious business done here."

After a brief tour, you settle into the training room. Boeing 737 cockpit diagrams adorn the walls. An ocean of switches and dials, many unrecognizable to a general aviation pilot, causes some apprehension. Can you really learn all of this in a day?

Of course not. New-hire 737 training lasts 12 to 16 weeks. Wayne's challenge is to convey the

essentials in just 10 hours. It's going to be "drinking water from a fire hose." Welcome to the world of the airlines, where time is ever so much money.

Wayne proves equal to the task. His presentation is orderly, concise, rigorous, omits nothing and leaves no loose ends. He uses excellent analogies and is a big fan of simple explanations. His drawings are crystal-clear.

He starts with a broad introduction to the Boeing 737-800, then quickly ramps up to the good systems stuff: fire protection, trim, flaps and leading edge devices, and avionics. After a break, Wayne continues with more systems: electrical and caution, lighting, and fuel.

Your class sits silent in rapt attention. You are all trying to absorb every word, every concept. Questions become fewer once the class realizes that Wayne usually beats them to the answers. It is obvious that he has done this before — since 1993 — and, with more than 4,000 ATOP "graduates," he is a veteran.

Lunch is boxed and at your seat as Wayne continues with still more systems: pneumatics; anti-ice; engines including start procedures and power management; hydraulics and flight controls; and the forward cockpit panel for dessert.

Switchology 101

By now it's 5 p.m. Everyone is a little glassy-eyed, so Wayne redirects your focus to the 737 cockpit management trainer (CMT). The CMT helps students learn "switchology": where all the switches and dials are, and how to get the "flows" down. Here, "flow" means an orderly turning of switches and settings to accomplish a given task, such as a safety check or an engine start.

There are bunches of switches and bunches of tasks, so there are bunches upon bunches of flows to learn. New-hires spend three to four hours practicing for each hour in the CMT or simulator. They put everything on index cards and form study groups. Lacking teamwork, surviving new-hire training is nearly impossible.

Thus ends Saturday's session at around 7 p.m. Exhausted, you return to the hotel. Later some of you migrate next door to the pizza joint and compare notes. It's a lot of fun to swap stories with others like yourself afflicted with the aviation bug.

But it's a short evening. You set your alarm for 3:30 a.m., because simulator sessions begin at 04:30. No one complains.

Sunday morning: It's simulator time!

Despite short sleep, the best part of the course is here. You take your seat on the left, surrounded by semi-familiar dials and switches.

Wayne briefed you on the flight profile: Take off from San Francisco's runway 28 Right straight out to 4,000 feet, then make a right turn to north. Acting as air traffic control, Wayne instructs a left turn (yes, left) to east to set up for an instrument landing system (ILS) approach to the same runway 28R from which you departed.

In the airlines, the first officer (FO) really does a lot of the work while the captain flies. As the “pilot monitoring”, your FO sets the power and autopilot, announces necessary call-outs and can make the captain look very good — or very bad — if he or she is not on the ball. It works the same way in reverse when the FO is flying.

With help from your FO Wayne and the autopilot, you ride the ILS beam right down to the runway and make a safe landing. No one is more surprised than you! You take off again but this time Wayne tosses in a few emergencies — like a failed engine or hydraulic system — just to spice things up a little.

Your second landing, in zero visibility, can be hand-flown or performed using the autopilot: It's your choice. You opt for the autopilot, a procedure called a coupled approach. For this, both autopilots on the flight deck must be used, since one backs up the other. You can't see a thing until the airplane is 50 feet or so above the ground — just enough time to pull back the yoke and land. You now realize the skill and cool nerves it takes to do it in real life.

Suddenly the course is over. Wayne signs your logbook, you all have a nice brunch and go your separate ways. But you will never be the same. You were an airline pilot, even if for only a weekend!

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