

Inside Stories: Grounded Transcript

Scott Simmie: Hello there. If you could please leave any oversized luggage you might have at the gate, we'll store it below and ensure you receive it at your destination. Sorry. What's that? You're not traveling by air these days. Well, neither am I to be perfectly honest. Now don't get me wrong. I really do want to travel again, but just not yet. I love traveling perhaps you do too.

Scott Simmie: So you might think that forgoing air travel during the pandemic is tough, but I like to put things in perspective. Really it's a luxury. And so in the grand scheme of things, it's not a huge deal. At least not for me, but for my guest. That's another inside story. Today on Inside Stories, we're speaking with Richard now for a change we're not going to reveal his last name or the specific place where he works, but I can tell you this much.

Scott Simmie: I had an opportunity to work with Richard at an offshoot of the aerospace industry for a bit. And he's an interesting guy with a super fascinating job. Richard, thanks so much for joining us.

Richard: No problem.

Scott Simmie: Listen, the basics. Just tell us what you do for a living.

Richard: So I am an airline pilot. I've been in aviation for about 26 years and I got to the airline industry later on in my career. So only about five years now that's been in the large aircraft airline industry.

Scott Simmie: How did you start out? I mean, the obvious answer is at the beginning, but what got you into aviation?

Richard: I think I like mechanics, physics and technology. When I was in high school, that was something I was really interested in. And I was doing a cross country Canada road trip after high school, just for fun and ended up in Vancouver. And I went for something called a Fam Flight or a Familiarization Flight at the airport in Vancouver and just went up for half an hour, it was on a whim pretty much. And after that I was hooked so I came back from BC and started into my training right away.

Scott Simmie: Did you know when you started out I know you just a second ago was really only relatively recently that you're wound up in that high level commercial piloting. But did you know when you started out that would maybe be your end goal?

Richard: Yeah, I wasn't in a big rush. I know a lot of pilots have a real ambition to fly the heaviest or the biggest aircraft for me, I really enjoyed multiple different things I did. I've been a medivac pilot and I thoroughly enjoyed that because of the medicine science behind it. And the urgency of getting off the ground within 10 minutes of the phone call, that type of thing.

Richard: And for that was a very rewarding job. I really enjoyed it. I also flew in Africa with the United Nations, again, very different to experience, but hugely rewarding. And I don't think I would have traded that for another five years at an airline. I think that was important for me to do those jobs.

Scott Simmie: What kind of work was that with the United Nations?

Richard: We were based in the Congo and flew back and forth between Kinshasa, the capital city and a city called Goma. And it was bringing UN troops to the front lines in various conflicts that were happening around the Congo at the time.

Scott Simmie: Now, before the pandemic. And it seems so long ago now, what would a typical day when you're flying be like for you, could you walk us through the basics of what a day would have been like?

Richard: Yeah, so I was flying a fairly large aircraft at 350 seats or something around there. And we would depart Toronto where I'm based in the evening, usually anywhere from 7:00 to 10:00 at night or

something like that, and fly to multiple locations in Europe, that was the predominant route. So either the UK or even Athens, Rome, Spain, Portugal, multiple cities, and once in a while, down to the Caribbean as well, those were usually handled by a smaller aircraft.

Richard: So we get to work, usually pick up your flight plans and paperwork and meet at the crew room and then go over all the weather and flight planning, fuel planning for the trip for the crossing, and then make your way down to the aircraft and start the cockpit setup, which takes about anywhere from half an hour to 40 minutes to program the flight plan into the computers and double-check everything.

Richard: And then you start off with your briefings to the other pilots. You go through all the settings are double checked by both pilots, and then you start boarding the aircraft and shortly thereafter, your airborne and on your way to Europe.

Scott Simmie: And that process that you were talking about that takes place in the airport, that crew meeting, what happens there. And is that a detailed or time-consuming thing, or is it a fairly casual, fast process?

Richard: It's it depends. Sometimes it's a fairly simple flight. There's not a lot of weather concerns. You can talk with a dispatcher on the phone, it's a bit of a meet and greet with the other crew member. You may not have met that person ever because fairly large companies, there's a good chance you've never met a pilot before when you show up to fly with them, so a bit of a meet and greet and then a review of the flight plan.

Richard: So it can get fairly technical if there's issues like weather or maintenance issues or special passengers, things like that. And that can take a long time, but generally it's a fairly quick process.

Scott Simmie: You mentioned in the cockpit going through things and double checking, we've all seen movies where there's a brief scene in the cockpit and people are going through a checklist. What exactly is a checklist? And why is it so important? Why is it part of every single flight?

Richard: Aviation has learned through the worst possible methodology over time, which is crashes where everybody dies and that's really tragic. And so we take those lessons very seriously. And I would say a large portion of aviation disasters these days are caused by human error. And it wasn't until I'd say the last 15 or 20 years that the industry came to the conclusion that humans make errors. And there's no way to train someone or to just hire the right person or anything like that.

Richard: Everybody makes errors, experts, new people, it doesn't matter. So the way they control that is with something called an error trap. So when we make an error, we have two people in the cockpit. And one will notice the error or procedure will make the error present itself and our computer systems on board, there's lots and lots of checks and balances which will bring the error forth. And checklists is one of the methods that error traps.

Richard: So we do what's called a read and do, so that's one method. When you got a long list of things you got to do is you just read the checklist and then you do it, another way is to have a flow. So you go through the cockpit, there's hundreds of different switches that all have to be in the right position. And those are generally memorized by the crew members.

Richard: And so you have, for example, a Prestart Flow. Go through all the switches in a particular pattern, but in the right order. And then you go through a checklist of the critical ones that are going to cause problems later and read the item to the other crew member. And the other crew member checks that item and says, "Yes, that is in the correct position or check." That's what checklists do. And they're a very effective error trap.

Scott Simmie: How do you make it so that a checklist doesn't seem routine? I'm thinking, if there was something that I had to do at my job every day, it would be easy over time to just go, "You know what? I

know this." And to just not give it 110% of your attention, is it just simply because what you're doing is so important?

Richard: Yeah. I think there is well-documented cases again, where there's been a crash or a major incident, and it comes back to those human errors. And what you're talking about is something called SOP Drift or Standard Operating Procedures, drifting away from them. And that really comes down to the professionalism of pilots and also the culture of the company that they work at.

Richard: Many companies that have failed and gone through accidents, had a bad culture where different pilots would do the same task in different ways, because that's the way they wanted to do it. And that's really bad. As I said before, you could meet a pilot in the crew room and have never met that person before ever. And we get into a plane and it's like being a member in an orchestra, you have to play your part. So standard operating procedures are the only way to ensure everybody plays the right part every single time. And it's absolutely perfect.

Scott Simmie: I've read a couple of longer articles in Vanity Fair or New Yorker about airline disasters, where the journalist in this case, I think his last name is Longevits, but he is also a pilot. So he understands the technical procedures very well. And some of the investigations that I've read where human error has been involved, it's like there's been a lapse of judgment or someone made a decision because they felt pressure on them.

Scott Simmie: And I've read further that there's a whole area of this that's known as human factors in aviation. And could you just briefly explain what that human factors means and how we try and use what we know about human factors to prevent incidents from occurring?

Richard: Yeah. So human factors in aviation can have a wider application, but I think what you're referring to is what's generally referred to is called hazardous attitudes. So in Canada, we study some of the major hazardous attitudes that have led to incidents and accidents like machoism or resignation or impulsivity. These are some examples of them. In the past, a good example of a hazardous attitude was in the US there was a lot of military pilots pulled out of military service and then put into the airline industry.

Richard: And the captains tended to be very authoritative and they somewhat belittled the first officers in some other countries around the world due to social pressures. This is very common as well. So what happens is the aircraft gets into a situation, whatever gets it there is irrelevant really, but the first officer notices the problem, the captain doesn't and the first officer doesn't feel like he can speak up because the captain is being very authoritative or maybe it would dishonor the captain.

Richard: And the situation is allowed to progress to a very dangerous state before something is done, or in some cases, it progresses to the point where the aircraft is actually crashed and everyone was killed in the incident. So these are something that we try and study, and I go back to standard operating procedures, because it's very simple to identify a standard operating procedure for a given task.

Richard: And as soon as you step outside of that procedure, both crew members know instantly that you're in the gray area and you shouldn't be there unless there's a very good reason to be doing it a different way. So you removed that problem where people don't want to speak up because you just made it a rule that they have to speak up. And maybe the captain won't be offended because he knows it's an SOP and he's expecting someone to speak up. So again, these issues of being minimized to the greatest extent possible by SOPs.

Scott Simmie: When the pandemic hit really in March in North America, things happened fairly quickly. People were being told, don't travel. If you are abroad, come home. How quickly did you realize this was going to impact your work? And what was that like for you?

Richard: Initially? I didn't really think it was going to be that bad. And then we started to do repatriation flights where we'd fly somewhere empty and just bring people back then I knew it was pretty serious. And I remember my last flight was down to the Caribbean and back. And it was pretty shocking to realize that that's it. I think for a really large portion of the aviation industry, in the pilots anyway, piloting is carried in your persona somewhat and your identity and for the industry to have that just ripped from under them is being extremely hard for a lot of people.

Scott Simmie: I can imagine. And I imagine it must've felt really pretty eerie to be flying an empty aircraft down and coming back with people, it just must've been so tangible in a way that those of us who were not flying aircraft full of people and bringing them back home would not have an understanding of. What was going through your mind when you were having time to reflect on those days?

Richard: I think I was thinking about the company, the airline, to fly a big jet like that empty is incredibly expensive. And for the government to be making this instant change to everything we did. These airlines are operated on a fairly very thin margin of profit. And this is something that just it's unadoptable. You can't change fast enough to deal with something this big.

Scott Simmie: Have you been in touch with other pilots during the pandemic? And if so, what are you hearing from them?

Richard: Yeah, I've talked to lots of other pilots and it's a very serious situation. When you go flying the guy sitting next to you or the girl sitting next to you could be, different political stripes, are interested in different things or whatever. And you always got around conversations you didn't want to have, or you were polite and professional and it worked, there was never a problem in the cockpit. But now on Facebook there's groups that I follow and the amount of, I would say, insecurity in the comments is palpable.

Richard: People are fighting and being really, I would say, cruel to each other as social media tends to bring that out in people. But this is our group and it's really sad to see one person slamming on another person because they believe in masks or they don't where before it was pretty simple, you went out and got your job done. But maybe, that guy is married to a flight attendant and they both have lost their jobs and they have two kids and a mortgage, and this is a disaster. So it's easy to see why people are so emotional.

Scott Simmie: Is some of the same divisiveness that we've seen largely in the United States since the pandemic took hold, is some of that seeping into these groups as well. Do you sense that?

Richard: Yeah, it definitely is. And I feel like when we fly a plane, we do it based on procedure and physics and science, and it's a fairly straightforward process once all of those things are considered and the situation we're in now, the science is barely in its infancy in order to deal with this. And the other issue is that the goal is to do a whole bunch of precautions and have nothing happen.

Richard: And that would be the idea, right? We all have a huge lockdown and it just goes away and life is normal, but it's a balance between destroying the economy and preventing widespread deaths due to COVID. And I don't think it's really clear what the line is everyone's is going through this for the first time.

Scott Simmie: There are obvious economic implications for anyone whose work has been impacted, but I'm guessing there may be other implications for pilots once you've been out of the cockpit for a certain period of time, whether it's six months or a year, is there a process before you can fly again?

Richard: Yeah. That's a really big issue. And the government is teetering on a decision right now on whether or not to back airlines financially or any companies for that matter. And to give a comparison, just pick whatever job you want in a skilled job, you could be an electrician, or you could be a surveyor

or something like that. If you were to take six months or a year off your qualifications would be totally intact, wouldn't have to do any retraining or anything.

Richard: But if the airlines actually fail, a lot of those pilots will leave and go to other jobs. And if a pilot doesn't fly for six months, they have to do retraining. And if they don't fly for two years on the type of aircraft they're trained on, they have to redo the entire training course, and that can be worth 30, \$40,000.

Richard: And I don't think that forethought is being put into the decision to back these airlines. A lot of other countries around the world are doing that. And I think it's important for Canada to do it because if airlines fail in a big way in Canada, they won't come back for quite a while I think.

Scott Simmie: I looked up a couple of numbers just before we had this conversation. And one that really struck me was that since the beginning of this US airline carriers have grounded 1800 major aircraft that were in use earlier in the year. So I'm trying to think, one jet's big, five jets are a lot of jets, 1800 aircraft.

Scott Simmie: Now with a car, sticking a car away for a couple of months. That's not such a big deal, but I understand it's a much bigger deal with a passenger jet. You don't have to give us all the details, but what happens to a jet when it's taken out of service for an undetermined period of time?

Richard: So I'm not an engineer, so I don't know the exact procedure, but basically a jet is designed and meant to fly everything from the regular thermal changes that it goes through as it climbs and descends, to the fluids, hydraulics, motors that are running sediment, that happens in tanks and fluids, all of these things impact the function of the aircraft. And so what happens is the airline has to continue to maintain all of the aircraft that are sitting there doing nothing.

Richard: And the only way to stop that is to go through a lengthy mothballing procedure where the fluids are drained and maybe a particular storage fluid is refilled into the system. That's designed to sit for long periods of time. It's also quite an expensive procedure. And then to reverse it again is also extremely expensive. And some airlines are spending millions of dollars a month on leases for aircraft that would have been generating revenue in and now are sitting on the ground. So the ramifications of this are just colossal for airline operations.

Scott Simmie: What do you miss most about your job, obviously, the regularity of it and the paycheck? But I'm looking to see if there's more of an emotional connection with what you do.

Richard: There's an experience that maybe only pilots can relate to, but it's amazing to go to work on a rainy cloudy day. And maybe it's been like that for a week and you get in the plane and you take off and you climb out over the clouds. And when you pop out on top of the clouds, it's sunny and it's like this ocean of white fluff, it's quite an inspiring experience. And I miss it. I really do.

Scott Simmie: If we look back on aviation history, there's a really rich tradition of amazing firsts. First crossings of San Francisco to New York. And of course, Charles Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic to Paris and the spirit of St. Louis comes to mind, is there one aviation feat that you really admire? And if so, why?

Richard: I think that some of the more recent ones were, I think it was called Voyager. They flew all the way around the earth. Non-stop and I actually saw that aircraft at the Aviation Museum in Washington was a fairly remarkable design. That's a pretty amazing one. And we're getting into things now where you have solar powered aircraft that can fly indefinitely. They charge enough battery power to keep it running at night and recharge during the day. I think those are pretty incredible.

Scott Simmie: I recall watching that particular flight that you're talking about, and my recollection is that Burt Rutan, who is an aircraft designer of great renown, that he designed that aircraft scribble it down

on the back of a napkin, is my recollection. But at least you got to see it. It must be really quite something to see that.

Richard: Yeah. And now you bring up Burt Rutan, of course, the Virgin Galactic space flights are also an incredible feat. He designed that aircraft as well. Pretty amazing to be able to take off fly to space and then come back and land again.

Scott Simmie: Would you do that? If it became affordable, would you take that chance?

Richard: I think so. Yeah.

Scott Simmie: Awesome. Now I know from being inside of the cockpit, you're used to all sorts of cockpit noises, but this noise here, indicates that we're in the final little phase of our interview. And I'm just going to ask you a few fast questions and I'm just looking for a few fast answers. So the first one is what is the favorite aircraft that you've flown?

Richard: It's hard to say. I would say, really enjoyed flying the Dash 8 was a really enjoyable aircraft to fly.

Scott Simmie: What is the most beautiful part of the world to fly over that has been one of your regular routes?

Richard: Got to be the Canadian Rockies, just stunning, breathtaking views. I enjoyed every time I fly over them.

Scott Simmie: What's it like when there's a delay, you've got a plane full of passengers who want to get home and it's beyond your control. And you're the guy who has to keep picking up that microphone?

Richard: It's really difficult. I was in Manchester once and we had a breakdown and everyone was angry at us, but you just keep trying to do your best and inform them and keep them as happy as possible.

Scott Simmie: For when we all get back flying again. And one of the other stats I looked up is that international air travel is down year over year, 84% from one year ago. But once we all get our vaccines and we're back in the air again, is there one thing that airline passengers could do on board that would make things easier for everyone?

Richard: I think just realizing that the people that are there are humans. They're not just automatons from a company. I've seen a lot of people be rude and cruel to crew members and it's something that... We're tired too. It's been a long pairing. I think everyone needs a little more understanding and patience.

Scott Simmie: Richard. I look forward to you being able to get back in the cockpit. I look forward to the rest of us being able to get back and travel. Listen, thank you so much. It's been really fascinating. Thanks for sharing your inside story today.

Richard: No problem. Thanks very much.

Scott Simmie: You know there was something Richard said that really stuck with me. It was about leaving the ground on a rainy, gray day when everything seems gloomy and then finally punching your way through to sunshine. It's like a different world transformed from the one you left behind.

Scott Simmie: And you know what I like to believe this pandemic will resolve like that. It will take time, it will take patience and it will take science, but that sunshine is coming. And honestly, truly, I really can't wait until humanity, once again, can stand together in that sunlight. I'm Scott Simmie, and you've been listening to Inside Stories.

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