



BLUE COLLAR ON A WHITE SHIRT

News / Airlines



The more hours you have in your logbook, the cleaner your **shirt** is. By the time a pilot gets to the captain's seat at a commercial airline, he or she has spent years wearing a **white** shirt while doing blue collar work, but her passengers will never know to what extent. Blue collar is not the image the public sees. What they see is a white uniform shirt with icons and symbolism dripping from the pilot's shoulders and chest announcing experience, but it really represents the unglamorous hours spent behind the scenes, drenched in fuel, coffee, oil and blue juice.

From the first flight lesson to pre-flying a heavy, pilots get used to wearing (and avoiding) petroleum products. Sumping fuel tanks, wiping dripping brakes, checking hydraulic and oil levels, and brushing up against leading edges smashed with bug guts — all while keeping a white shirt clean — is a learned talent; by the time pilots start flying corporate, they have it perfected.

Corporate passengers don't realize that it's sometimes one of the pilots who had to jump on a tug and move the aircraft out of the hangar onto the ramp. In the winter, pilots have also shoveled and plowed snow in front of the hangar. Then, the pilots have not only pre-flighted and prepped the aircraft, checked the weather, filed a flight plan, made the coffee, loaded the ice, soda, snacks, newspaper, magazines and catering, but they've also cleaned the wastebaskets, checked the

lavatory blue juice levels, and made sure there was enough toilet paper. Very glamorous.

Before anyone arrives at the airport, the flight crew might have had to track down and purchase special catering, and clients don't think twice that their request might be inconvenient. When a client requests bagels and lox while on a road trip for a 0600 departure out of a small town airport in Mississippi, they don't realize that the local restaurants and grocery stores don't carry lox, so their flight crew had to drive an hour away to pick up their "minor" request. The client is paying top dollar for the convenience of corporate travel, but it's ultimately up to the pilots to make that happen.

Once the clients show up, the flight crew then transforms into baggage handlers and psychologists. When six guys pull up and admit they forget to tell dispatch that they're bringing their golf clubs, it's up to the pilots to decide if they can load it all, or confront the red faced anger of a corporate client who can't bring his special set of clubs. This is the pilot's chance to use his psychology degree that he never planned on using. He just got it so he could be a pilot, but sometimes things happen for a reason.

The actual flying of the airplane is when pilots perform the white collar portion of the job. They are locked in their offices, using minimal physical exertion while using all of their mental capacity. They are professional workers even though they're wearing a uniform—their uniform is white. But, they are also breaking the definition of what white collar is meant to be. It still means a high level of education, but these jobs are actually low-paying, by the hour, high stress and pilots usually have to spend thousands of dollars learning the trade, and then endure years as an ill-paid apprentice. It's one of the rare occupations that require both blue and white collar skills, and people wonder why we still have pilots given the circumstances, but pilots know flying is not about transportation, it's about transformation. It's about learning how to easily move around the compartments of your brain and open several doors at once. The result of unlocking all those doors simultaneously creates a personal pride that can only be earned, despite the paycheck.

When an oil pressure gauge starts to move in flight, pilots use both colors of their collar and open up several learned skills at once. The blue collar instantly understands the mechanics of the situation while the white collar knows how to manage the fear, use the calm pilot voice to communicate, and together they get the aircraft safely on the ground. It's learning this balance that earns pilots pride in what they do, even if their bosses want to pay them blue collar wage. It's what will keep pilots in the sky, pride in their hearts, and passengers safely to their destinations.

Erika Armstrong started at the front desk of an FBO and wore both collars on her way up to the captain's seat of a commercial airliner. Her book, A Chick in the Cockpit, will be available nationwide November 10th. If you have comments or questions, she can be reached at erika@achickinthecockpit.com

23 SEPTEMBER 2015

SOURCE: NYCAVIATION

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