



Episode 17 transcript

Featuring airline pilot and novelist Karlene Petitt.

The transcript differs slightly from the audio original for improved readability and due to the transcription process.

Dave : Welcome to PlaneViz episode 17, part 2 of my interview with airline pilot and author, Karlene Petitt. In this episode, we're going to finish our discussion about pilot proficiency. We're going to get to know Karlene a little bit better by touching on her career that spans 8 airlines, her work as an aviation novelist and the operator of a thriving website.

Here's part 2 with Karlene Petitt. Let's wrap up the proficiency and safety part of the podcast. Let me ask you: What do you think is right balance is - I guess in the professional ranks of pilots- between reliance on automation and hands-on flying?

Karlene : That is the toughest question because we do rely on it. We want it. On a trip, when you've been awake for 20 hours and you didn't get your break; you're trying to break during first service with cabin, on the backside of your clock and the weather is down, you want that automation. We need to know how to use our airplanes. We need to know how to program. We need to know what they're doing when they are on their automation. But we also need to know how to fly them when stuff breaks because equipment fails.

One of the things I address was really how to do it. This is what I think, but this is going to be millions of dollars to the airline in training. But I personally think that we should - when we go on training on these automated airplanes - the pilot should be required to hand fly every maneuver.

When we go into training program, you go through a series of days. We try to touch all the malfunctions, anything that could really happen on this airplane. You can't hit all combinations. But we do engine failures and seizures and fires and electrical. We do all the stuff in there.

But we're dealing with emergencies with the automation on. Because it's available, you want to do that. You want the time to be able to think about

what's happening in the airplane versus having to fly and think about two different things. So we want it.

But what happens when it breaks and a situation happens like that? And Air France (447) is a perfect example of that. If you get your pilot comfortable hand flying the airplane - Yeah, I can fly this airplane and work with my co-pilot and deal with electrical problem and engine failure while am I hand flying my airplane, you know what? When it happens and I have my automation, it's going to be that much easier. But at least, I know I can do it. That's going to increase the training footprint. It's going to cost money because you really should go the entire footprint that way. Then add another 3-4 days at the end of it to know how to program and understand your automation. It's kind of backwards. But once again, it's money. It's all about money.

Dave : You're suggesting hand flying still takes place in the simulator and not going around the traffic pattern so to speak.

Karlene : Exactly. I think we need to do more hand flying. I know many airlines are adding this into their training. They started doing that. I worked for 8 airlines. I got people and friends all over the industry. It is pretty much the system here in the US that everybody now is touching on, you go to training and you get to take everything up. We want to see you hand fly this in that environment.

The difference is: When does the failure happen? When does it occur? Does it occur when you are in a simulator in the downwind and everything is normal? Or is it really going to occur when you're at altitude and you lost your instruments? Now you have to find the airport and you have to figure out how to get this plane down and manage it and stuff.

Dave : Maybe you can get those FARs changed.

Karlene : Yeah. That would help the future. But there's going to be a whole group of pilots that are out there right now. They're like "What do we do with them? How do we know where we're at?" Encouraging to hand fly airplane is one thing. But until you get your pilots comfortable and confident that they can do that, they're not going to do it.

Then, here's the million-dollar question: Do we really want out pilots practicing their hand flying skills with passenger on board if they haven't been doing it? If you think about it, that aspect, I don't know.

Dave : My Dad was an airline pilot of an earlier generation. When I was a kid, I remember there was simulator training that took place. But they also went out and flew training flights in the airplane which were 727s back then.

I don't know if that's economically feasible these days. But there was a balance between. Maybe because the simulators back then in the late 60s and 70s weren't up to it like they are today.

Karlene : Right. That's exactly why we don't have to go out and fly airplanes. I did that too in a 727. We were doing that on a 747 initially. But now, the simulators are so advanced that there is no real benefit to that.

You know what, I shouldn't say that. There's a benefit to it. It would be beneficial to do that. But they don't have to because the simulators are level D certified. They're not going to spend money to do it.

Dave : That's great insight. Let's switch over to you now for a couple of minutes.

Karlene : Okay.

Dave : You're flying the A330. You started out as a student pilot at some point. How did you get from there to here?

Karlene : Everybody says, "If you want to achieve success, find somebody who's successful and do what they do." That is not true necessarily.

I actually started flying in high school. The only reason I started flying was I was told when I was 9 years old I couldn't do it because I was a girl. My friend and I got into a big argument over this. Because I was stubborn enough, I said that.

When I was 16 years old, I took myself out to the airport, went for my introductory flight. I said, "Wow! They're going to pay me to do this?" I was hooked. I ran back to career counseling and said, "I want to be a pilot." She said, "Well, I don't have to tell you that girls can't fly in the military." I was one of those teenagers who rub my eyes and think, "Okay. I'll figure it out." I just did. I went the general aviation route. I got my hours.

Here's the thing. I had my whole career planned out. In college where I was building my flight time, get my job, then get married and have a family but I met somebody and we've been married 33 years now. But he's 21 years older than I am. So our window of having a family kind of shrunk. I

thought, "I have to do my career backwards." I thought, "Sure. We can have our kids while I'm going to school. Then, when they're in grade school, I'll go out and get that big career."

That was my plan until I was offered a job at Evergreen when my kids were like 2, 3 and 4. When I was offered that job, I was over at night, on my own time, I was getting my engineer ticket. They were training in the center and I asked him if I could observe a flight. He said, "Sure." So I observed him for 3 nights.

On the fourth night, a new crew came in. They said, "Sure. You're welcome to join us." We have professional flight engineers. He didn't show up. So they were going to cancel training. I raised my hand and said, "I can do it, let me. I don't have a rating, but I can read you the checklist because I did the watching the last three nights. I know what he was doing."

We did that. It turned out one of the chief pilots were in there. They called the [training] center to see if I had my FE (flight engineer certification) ticket. The problem at Evergreen, they normally required 5,000 hours of time, minimum. But what was happening is they were getting pilots who were excellent pilots but they couldn't get through the ground school because their ground school had professional engineers.

They put their pilots through that ground school. So you had to have an aptitude on drawing the electrical system, knowing where the molecule of air hits the engine and where it goes. It was really complex ...so you know, if you're not used to that type of stuff at school.

They figured I could pass screening at the ground school. They sent me to the training center to check if I could fly. Bo Corby, who owned the training center, he said, "Karlene, come on out I'm going to teach you how to fly a jet." That he did and we got in a 727. I spent an hour a day for three days. He taught me how to fly a jet. He taught me some really good principles that carried me through life.

Evergreen hired me. The big crew move was Braniff. After Braniff, when they shut down and all the pilots were on the street, I went to the training department of America West. They asked me if I had any experience teaching, which I did not. But I told them I had 3 small children and 2 Newfoundlands (dogs) and if I could teach children and animals, I should have no problem with pilots.

Dave : You certainly know how to seize the moment. I give you that.

Karlene : They laughed and they hired me on. The thing is when I did that, I found out I enjoyed teaching. I actually have an aptitude for teaching. During that time, they type rated me on the 757. I think I came down with a 737 type rating already so I was dual qualified and I instructed for 4 years. Then they got a contract with Guyana as far as the SIM portion.

At this point in my life, I was working 2 jobs because I had children going into college. On my days off, I work for another company. I was teaching 73 and 75 type ratings to Guyanese pilots.

The expat (expatriate) portion was connected with my other job. The simulator portion was with this job. I ended up working with them exclusively to check out the expats on American West procedures. Then they hired me down. I ended up after 4 years because America West locked me down in the training department for two years.

Here's the timing in life. Sometimes, we make decisions when we're like "yes, we're going." At other times, they're taken out of our hands. And 2 weeks before I got into Flight Line, because the time America West locked me in the training department for 2 years and no seniority; for 2 years, and they were doing this hiring boom. I've been training everybody to go ahead of me.

Two weeks before that two years came up, they filed bankruptcy and furloughed everyone up to my class. So there I sat for another two years working two jobs.

I ended up leaving; it was time to move after four years. I went to Guyana (Airlines). It gave me the opportunity to find out that I have an aptitude for writing because I wrote all the training programs and put their 757 in service for them. So I went down and I did ground school down there, I went up to Northwest simulators in Minnesota and taught them. After that, I left and went over to Tower to fly the 747 first officer and did that around the world and I found myself at Northwest.

Because of that teaching experience, I was hired immediately into the training department on the 747 which was nice, especially with being junior and it was able to work out. We had a merger.

Here's a thing about life: Some things you do and they just work out that they're supposed to. Sometimes, you don't have control over them. I

don't have control over that. I almost did not go to Northwest Airlines. I was looking at flying captain in six months over Tower Air. I went back and I got an interview. And I hadn't applied at Northwest. I did maybe 5-6 years ago. For some reason, my name popped up and they contacted me.

Now, I'm like: do I want to leave and go to Northwest or do I want to fly captain at Tower. I loved what I was doing and I loved what I was flying. Finally, after discussing this with all the pilots I'm commuting with on the planes, I decided that I was not going to Northwest.

I got back to Tower and I find out I was going to be at furloughed. I'm going, "I have a chance to go to Northwest Airlines." The chief pilot said, "Take the job. I'll write you a letter of recommendation. Go for it." What happened is traditionally, the owner of Tower Air would furlough everybody. He keeps a handful for pilots between December and January. He would hire them back. It was a way of not paying salaries for 2 months. They hire them back in January.

This particular year, it was 1996 going into 1997. All the airlines were hiring. The chief pilot at that time was in Florida trying to get to New York to tell him, "Do not furlough this year, you're going to lose your pilots." When he was in his car on the way to the airport to go to New York to talk to him in person to scrap this furlough policy, he was hit by a car. He was fine, but he never made his flight. The furlough letter went out.

Because the furlough letter went out, I got an interview with Northwest. By the time they offered me the job, those two had talked and they rescinded the furlough letter. I said, "I already got a job at Northwest. But I could come back and work in December and January. The problem is I can only work the first 2 weeks of December and first 2 weeks of January." So that year I had Christmas off and I walked to one job to the next.

Here's another thing: Do what you want to do. I filled out, I forget what it was called but you put in your bid, it was a paper bid, it's sat there forever. I put in my square: block holder 747, all the wide body blockholders Seattle. 747 captain and I am bidding as a new hire.

This is the way I think. I put all the body, and all the bases as a block holder, then I put reserve. Then I have one square left. I'm thinking, "What should I do? I know. I'll be a 747 second officer." I had already got an assignment as a 727 FO [first officer] and they dual qualified you and I thought that'll be fine flying the 727 then I work on the panel [the flight

engineer's panel] for the money on the other airplane. I ended up getting the back seat [flight engineer station], ended up instructing.

The funny thing was just before the merger, I got a phone call that I was upgrading to the 747-400. I couldn't get on the 200. Everybody is asking me, "How did you do that? Why did you get that?" Well, because January of 1997, I put it on the card that I want to be a wide-body block holder or reserve. There it sat. It was really funny. I got to fly the 747-400 for four months before the merger.

Dave : Even the paperwork has seniority.

Karlene : It absolutely does. Here's the thing, people. You get in this career, kind of like what I was recommended [sic]: don't bid anything other than your block and reserve because you're going to go into double jeopardy.

My attitude is if you're an airline pilot, you bid what you want. If you're afraid that you're not going to pass the check ride then you shouldn't be there anyway. That's my thought.

If you're qualified to be there, don't be afraid that you can't handle the training and that you're going to sit on reserve because you're protected now and during your probation year. Now they can't rid of you. Go on and do the best job you can. Pick what you want and the best job you can. Don't let people tell you not to do something.

I got bumped back off my airplane and ended up on the A330 at my new company. You know there is there's a reason for everything. There's a reason I went to eight airlines. There's a reason why I was bumped off and am on this airplane right now because I have a lot of work to do.

Now it's enabled me to see what's happening in all these different airlines and see the progression and see the history and see the old stuff with the new stuff and with the training experience, it's all coming together. I'm going to write a heck of paper when I go through my Ph.D in Aviation Safety because I got a background now to do that.

Dave : Speaking of writing, you've got 2 books out right now right? *Flight for Control* and *Flight for Safety*.

Karlene : Here's what's out right now : *Flight for Control*. Here's the thing. *Flight for Safety* was supposed to be out this month. It's probably going to be next month because it's 520 pages and we are having a hard time to edit that because there's so much that needs to be done.

But for your listeners here's the top secret news. There's a series of 3 books. I want to create change. I want to help make this industry be better. I want to help pilots who are coming up behind me to have a very strong and good career.

I've had a great career with all the changes that have happened. I've loved it. We get what we need and I like learning new things. I want to make it better.

What happens is that the kids that are coming in the industry right now, they don't have a voice because they won't get hired by an airline if they're speaking out trying to create change. It's not going to happen.

Most pilots at the end of their career, you either have a good career or you got beat up but you know what? It's time to go away and enjoy your life a little bit. They walk away from it; they don't have a vested interest.

Those pilots who are in it who may be outspoken while they're in it kind of gets flicked away because, oh you rich airline pilots you're complaining. It's kind of interesting industry in how to create change because the best way to create change is people in it who work in it.

Here's my plan. My plan was to write three fiction novels based on fact. The fact is *Flight for Control*, the first one, the three accidents that are in my book really did happen and how they happen, the why I did a little fiction with that. You can best imagine 2 months after my book came out; a JetBlue captain was locked out of the flight deck because he had a mental breakdown.

Imagine, what if he wasn't locked out? What's the worst thing that could happen and you have my book. I wrapped it around in what's really happening in the industry because seriously, pilots are supposed to be godlike, strong people that we cannot break.

But the problem is, pilots can break. The problem is they don't identify it because they are strong. They have strong personalities. We think we can deal with anything until it's too late.

I created these 2 worlds of "What if somebody is really unstable and got pushed because of what they perceive is happening to them in this industry and put them in an airplane?"

My plan is why I'm using real items and real issues: the 1500-hour rule, fatigue issues, mergers, and pension losses. I bring these stuff and real accidents the reason why I'm writing the way I am. That's book done.

In book two, we go inside an airbus that they lose control. I moved it from the Atlantic and put it over the Pacific and change the name. But real life accidents and incidents are going into book two. It's all about automation. It's about what we're talking about today.

Flight for Safety is about what is happening behind the scenes in the training world. But the sad thing is I have to create some fictional plot because nobody would believe the truth.

Book 3 is going to be about *Flight for Survival*. It's about proficiency and currency. My plan is once I have these 3 fiction books out and I have the following and have a backing and people know who I am that I won't be flicked off the radar screen. After my PhD, book 4 will come out. It's going to be a non-fiction version of *Flight for Truth*, the truth behind the flight series.

I may take a critical analysis of everything that has happened in our industry with these accidents and what's happening and what I know and what I've seen and what has really happened and the truth behind this and I'm going to write a very powerful book.

I've got quite a few positive comments on *Flight for Control*. The interesting ones are from non-pilots who say, "I wonder if any of this is true." I had one person say, "None of these could ever happen." I just have to smile because one day, if they are able to read the true story, they will know which part is true.

I have to warn everybody. They are a little R-rated. That is definitely the fiction part of the book.

Dave : You also operate a blog. Tell us about it.

Karlene : Yes, Flight to Success. It's actually karlenepetitt.blogspot.com . I sell my autographed books off that.

Somebody over in Europe who's just a great aviation enthusiast, Ryan Locke - you could find him on Twitter, he's actually building me a grown up website. I just have no time because I've got 3 grown daughters and 7 grandkids. Here are my other books. You mentioned Flight to Success,

which is going to be a book. I've been working on that. That's going to be a motivational book.

There's so many parallels to achieving life success with what pilots deal with and how we approach life and how we think and how we manage a flight. That's going to be a powerful book. I'm hoping January for that. I also have my children's books coming out too. I'm a little bit all over the board.

Dave : You certainly do keep busy.

Karlene : I do. But I really encourage everyone to read *Flight for Control* before the sequel comes out because it's quite good. You can go to Amazon and read all the comments on them. It's turned out good for a first novel. We're always getting better and learning stuff. But I'm really happy with it.

Dave : You mentioned your books are on Amazon, right?

Karlene : They're on Amazon and Barnes & Noble and there's even Audible. You can get the audio version also. There's hardback, paperback Kindle in there and we got all formats available for everyone.

I would love people to go and buy the autographed copies so I can make room in my closet for the next, get those moving on. My schedule is really busy, but I'd like to go out and meet new people. Because I work for airlines, I can jump seat and get locations for free.

Anybody who reads my book and likes it, they want to get me to speak for a group they have, I try to schedule some. I always have something once a month scheduled to talk to a group. I can adjust it to any angle. I even go to book clubs. I try to go around, get out there in public whenever I can. I am completely accessible to everyone.

If they have any questions, on Flight to Success, someone called it an eclectic blog and a boutique blog and there's a lot of information on it. You can go to the search box. If you want to know about auto flight, type in auto flight. If you want to know about Airbus versus Boeing, type it in the search box. There will be numerous articles on each coming up.

If anyone has anything they would like me to write or would like to post on my blog, I'd be more than happy. I like to support careers and books and writing. You can even write me a nice, little post and send me some pictures. I will shout about your podcast.

Dave : Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

One thing I did read on your blog was you're considering buying a small airplane. Last time I checked in, the Bonanza was ahead of the pack. Is that still the case?

Karlene : Yes. It's ahead of the pack. Here's the thing. I was going to buy an airplane when I retire. Then I knew a few people who had passed away. Maybe I shouldn't wait until you retire to do what you want.

I have kind of a mission. I want to be able to carry a lot of weight and load this airplane up. One of my children's books, I'm trying to shrink the world. I wan to reduce the fear of the unknown across the world for these kids.

I've got this children's story, a little girl and her airplane are going to fly to meet their friends. Each book is going to be a different country. The kids are going to learn about what's going on in the country. They're going to have friends there, and play and eat and stuff.

Now the airplane in my book is going to be my airplane. I can't really illustrate that book until I got that airplane purchased and painted like my books.

Dave : Very clever.

Karlene : Yeah. It's going to be flying around here soon. That's going to be fun because the kids are great. They are the future. With seven grandkids, what can I say?

Dave : Karlene, thank you so much for coming on the podcast today. It's been great chatting with you. One thing, you're on Twitter too.

Karlene : I'm @KarlenePetitt on Twitter. I've got a Facebook page too. They can also find me on Facebook. Everything is just Karlene Petitt.

Dave : Not hard to find.

Karlene : It's very easy. You can even find my books under Karlene Petitt because I'm using my real name.