What It's Like to Be a Pilot During the Coronavirus Pandemic
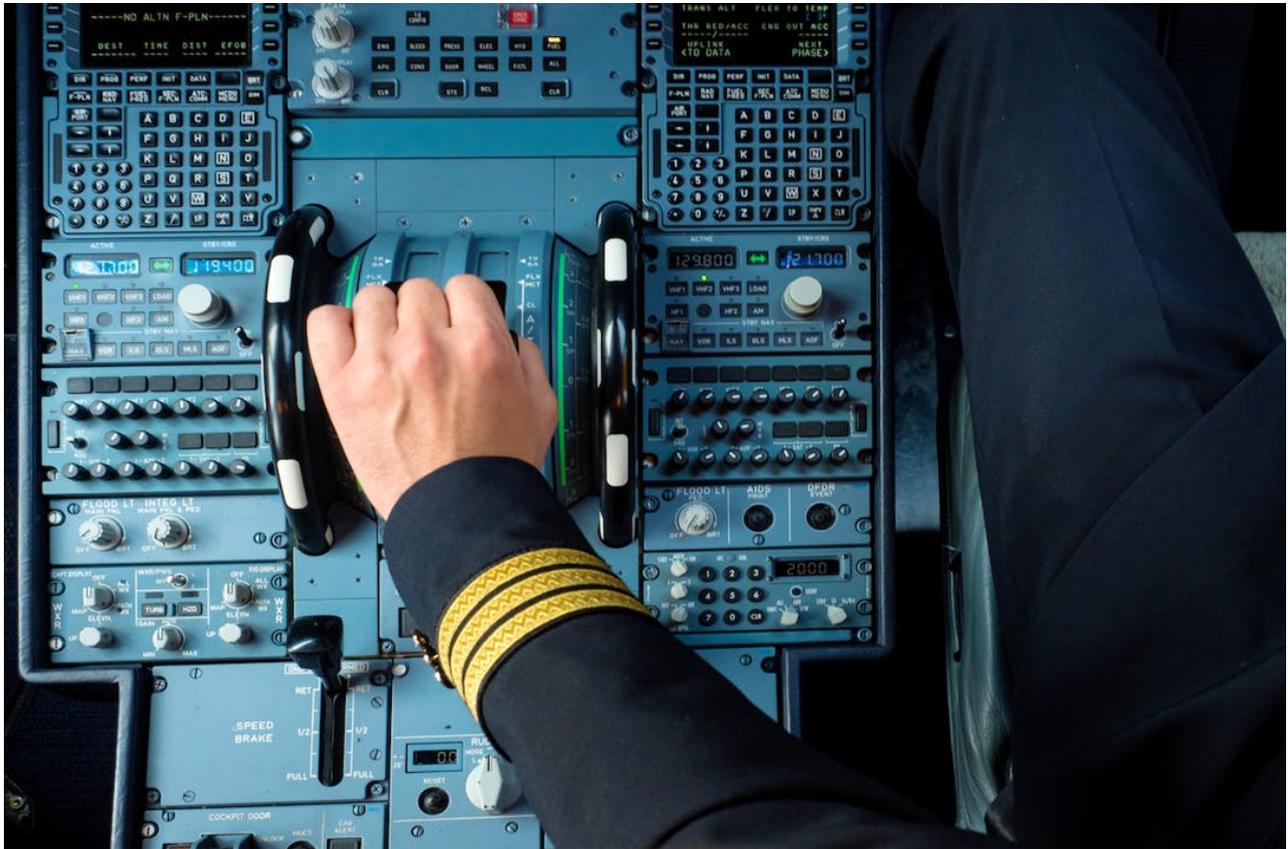
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While many travelers have been grounded, pilots and flight crew still operate what flights remain in the sky.

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Life is tough for everyone around the world right now. Bars are closed, stadiums are empty, and the skies above our heads are quiet. Medical staff, grocery store workers, and delivery drivers work around the clock to keep things afloat. For everyone who can work from home, kitchens and living rooms serve as de facto offices. It's a disconcerting and uneasy time for us all.

Airlines have been hit brutally by the coronavirus pandemic. With countries banning international travel, the demand for flights has declined rapidly. Aircraft have been parked at airports with pilots and flight attendants left waiting at home, not knowing

when they will work again.

This is the part that hurts most. The waiting. The unknown. As a pilot who flies long-haul routes across the Atlantic, my flight last week was canceled, and my next one awaits the scheduler's axe. As aircrew, we rely on flying for our earnings, so we're worried. Everyone lives to their means, and when those circumstances change you have no choice but to adapt.

However, the part of the job I used to love the most is now the most worrying. Travel used to free my mind; now it troubles it. Fears of unknowingly passing the virus to someone else or being stranded away from family are now front of mind.

As more people practice social distancing and stay home, some flights still operate. People need to get back to their home countries and you can't fly a commercial aircraft without pilots and flight attendants.

The rules on international travel are changing by the day

Some countries have a total ban on foreign nationals entering; others grant airline crew entry in certain conditions. In the United States, international airline crew must abide by strict government rules for the entirety of their trip.

Crew must remain in the hotel as much as possible—this includes eating all meals in their room, either via room service or delivery. If no food is available in the hotel, a short walk to a nearby restaurant is permitted. However, with cities starting to shut down, even this may not be an option in some locations. To discourage social gatherings, hotels have closed swimming pools and shut down gyms.

The ultimate fear is being stranded in a foreign country when the rules suddenly change and the drawbridge is pulled up. Fortunately, most airlines put contingency plans in place for this possibility. Even if I were to operate the last flight into a city, I would fly home on the same aircraft (as a passenger, in order to not violate limitations on the number of consecutive hours a pilot can fly).

The operational side of flying the aircraft has also changed.

For every flight, we must designate an alternate landing airport should we not be able to land at the destination due to bad weather or the airport closing unexpectedly. For a flight to San Francisco, this would normally be somewhere like Oakland or San Jose.

However, as of March 20, 2020, the U.S. government has decreed that <u>flights arriving from the majority of Europe</u> may only land at 13 U.S. airports. This is to ensure that passengers receive proper screening on arrival. These are known as the "gateway" airports.

As neither Oakland nor San Jose are gateway airports, we can no longer use them. The closest useable airport to San Francisco is Los Angeles, 400 miles south. That means we should carry additional fuel in the event we have to fly farther than originally expected.

Concerns about health and hygiene inflight

Social distancing becomes a problem when you're flying an aircraft. In the flight deck, pilots sit just three feet apart, both required to touch the same switches and buttons. On longer flights with more than two pilots, we're required to use the same bed as the previous pilot when taking our turn for inflight rest. Radio headsets provided in the aircraft are shared. There's only so much distance you can keep from other people in a sealed metal tube seven miles above the ground.

When entering the flight deck, I clean as many of the buttons and switches as I can with alcohol wipes—the control column, thrust levers, the radio transmission switch. I also make sure that the high-usage areas such as the lavatory are cleaned several times throughout the flight and that I wash my hands regularly. (We share the lavatory with flight attendants and passengers so all the more reason to keep this area extra clean.)

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That said, I try not to let myself think about coronavirus too much. Flying the aircraft safely is my top priority and I cannot let anything distract me from that.

Flying during the coronavirus pandemic also poses potential problems en route. What if a passenger becomes ill and we need to land? Our options are now vastly reduced due to the limited number of gateway airports.

Despite all these challenges, hope remains

Supply chains need maintaining and commercial aviation plays a vital role in this. On most long-haul passenger flights, tons of fresh fruit, vegetables, and fish among other items are in the cargo hold below. Avocados from Mexico, salmon from Scotland, and lobsters from Canada. For the world's food supply to keep moving, flights need to keep going.

As I sit here doing my own version of working from home, I can hear aircraft flying overhead. It gives me confidence. As all pilots know, turbulence is just temporary. You just have to keep moving forward to find the smooth air on the other side.

Charlie Page (which is not his real name) is an airline pilot who flies a Boeing 787 Dreamliner.

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