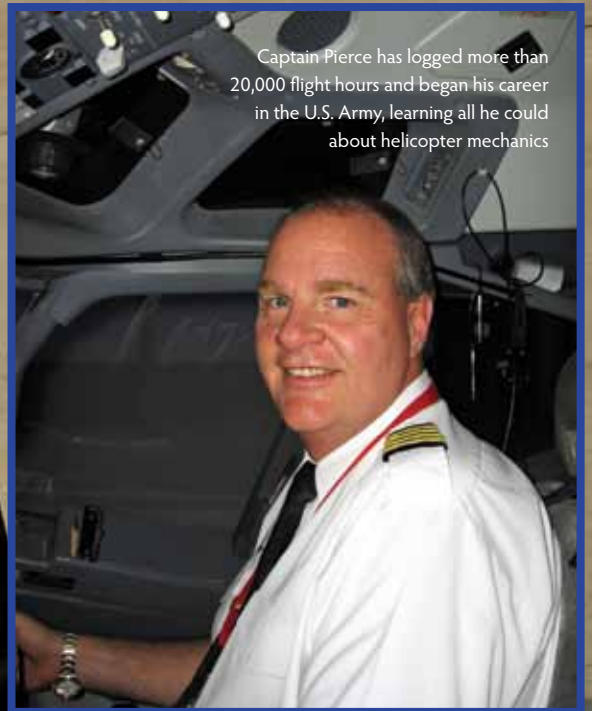


A LOOK AT THE LIFE OF A SUGAR LAND

Airline Pilot

Captain Jay Pierce navigates a major airline merger, family life, and the wild blue yonder

Written by Jennifer Heath | Select Photography by Micahl Wyckoff



Captain Pierce has logged more than 20,000 flight hours and began his career in the U.S. Army, learning all he could about helicopter mechanics

Having joined the Continental Airlines team in 1989, Captain Jay Pierce is now helping the company merge with United Airlines in his role as chairman of the Air Line Pilots Association, International

Ask

Captain Jay Pierce to describe himself, and he's bound to mention he's an adrenaline junkie and control freak. If you check around with his friends and family, though, you'll find out he's quite a bit more. Along with being a Fort Bend dad, husband, and military veteran, Pierce is also orchestrating the massive merger between Continental Airlines and United Airlines in his role as chairman of the Air Line Pilots Association, International (ALPA). As a 737 captain, he's logged more than 20,000 flight hours. Pierce also enjoys racing motorcycles off-road and recently competed in his first 500-mile off-road motorcycle race in Mexico.

Finding His Wings

Pierce had a hard time feeling grounded growing up. He felt more like a vagabond, than at home in any one place. His family moved around, so after high school Pierce felt a career in the army would be appropriate. "I wasn't mature enough for college, and I knew some discipline would need to be in order," he says. "It was the best thing in the world for me."

For six years, Pierce learned what the Army could teach him about helicopter mechanics. He then earned an aviation mechanics degree from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and started teaching others how to fly. He landed his first airline job with Air Midwest out of Wichita, KS and then joined Continental Airlines in 1989. "Flying an airplane is such a gift that's been given to me," Pierce says. "I've woken up to the rising sun in Japan and gone to bed to see the sun setting in Hawaii. I've seen the Northern Lights at night and flown by way of the Southern Cross. It's the best office in the world. It's just beautiful."

Merging Experience with Expertise

Right now Pierce is logging more time helping with the Continental Airlines /United Airlines merger than flying planes. The merger is a massive union undertaking detailing salaries, staffing, seniority lists, retirements, insurance, and benefits of employees. "It's very complicated," Pierce explains. He's hopeful the merger of the two corporations will be complete by the middle of 2012.

The Journey of a Lifetime

With his seniority status, Pierce hand-selects which trips he chooses to pilot. His favorite destinations are anything international, especially Rio de Janeiro, Amsterdam, Paris, and Hawaii. "A domestic flight is just so commonplace," he shares. "But when you take a trip to Rio, it's an event. There aren't many business travelers; you just feel the excitement in the air. It's an event." He takes his wife, Peg, with him on as many trips as they can manage. "It just makes what would be a dreary overnight into a date," he says. "It's so much more fun."

But if Pierce is not flying the plane, he finds it hard to get comfortable in the passenger section. "I hate it," he says. "I'm such a control freak. It's hard to tell where you're at when you're a passenger, and I don't like not knowing. I just don't like sitting in the back of the airplane at all."

A Place to Call Home

With Pierce's lack of a hometown growing up, he was determined to provide consistency for his two daughters when they were younger. The family settled in what was then a small-town Houston



Jay and Peg Pierce with their daughters and son-in-law

"I've woken up to the rising sun in Japan and gone to bed to see the sun setting in Hawaii. I've seen the Northern Lights at night and flown by way of the Southern Cross. It's the best office in the world. It's just beautiful." ■

- Jay Pierce

suburb – Sugar Land. Pierce says he remembers when Randall's was the only grocery store around and Hwy. 6 was just a two-lane road. "We always kept a home here," he says, noting they have called Fort Bend home for 20 years. "I was the one who would leave and do the traveling and come back. It was very important for my family to have a hometown. We wanted to create a home in every sense of the word. Sugar Land has been great to us."

When Pierce's daughters were young, it would sometimes be hard to walk out the door and leave his family behind. It always was tough when Peg would call about one of the girls having a high temperature or having injured herself and needing stitches. Despite the heartbreak of not being in Sugar Land to help, he always knew his family was in good hands. "Peg has always been my rock," he shares. "This profession has proven to be a tremendous life for us, but there have been sacrifices you make. Peg bared a lot of it back here for me to be able to do that."

Piloting the Future

With his daughters grown, Pierce now spends even more time trying to help future pilots. It's hard for commercial airlines to attract the best pilots out of college when their aviation degree could let them make large salaries faster in other occupations. "We don't want the dumb guy to pilot, we want to attract the smart people, the veterans, but it's getting harder," Pierce says. "I'm very concerned about the profession, making it inviting to younger people, and making it successful."

Future pilots can rest assured Capt. Pierce is working his tail off to keep the airlines safe and sustainable and to continue to make aviation a well-respected profession. He offers a warning to some wanting to become pilots, though. "Let me fix the profession first and then do it," he explains. "It's okay to sacrifice for something you love if you know there's a reward at the end. I'm not sure I see that anymore. I worry this is the last generation where we get to do something we love and make it into a job that's financially secure. I want to make sure it stays that way." SLM

JENNIFER HEATH is a Fort Bend mom and wife, who often flies to Kansas City to visit her family.