

A PLACE IN THE SKY



*Civil pilot training takes time and dedication
but can be a fulfilling experience*

Story and picture by NEIL STONEHAM

Free international air travel, good money and a uniform that people respect must make being an airline pilot one of the world's most prestigious jobs. But when you have the safety and well-being of up to 500 people in your hands, it takes a great deal of intense training – as well as a measure of natural skill – to become fully trusted in the cockpit.



**Left to right: Suthee Chulajata,
Capt. Pisal Chayakula and
Capt. Sopit Pokasoowan**

Thai Airways International (THAI), the nation's flag carrier, receives almost 3,000 applications a year for around 80 trainee pilot positions. Some will come directly from the Royal Thai Air Force, while others will have completed a bachelor's degree.

Suthee Chulajata, flight crew recruitment manager for THAI, explains that the degree doesn't have to be in maths or science, although applicants are tested in those areas. It is very much a question, he says, of having the right balance of personality and skill.

"We are not looking for a superman," he notes. "We are looking for an ordinary man who has the capability to pass the training, along with the appropriate skills and mental ability. So, for instance, you should be able to do many things at the same time as well as have excellent hand-eye co-ordination."

Currently, THAI pilots are exclusively male, although the future recruitment of women is “under consideration”.

Captain Pisal Chayakula, Vice President of Aviation Personnel Development at THAI, has prime responsibility for all those who take to the controls of every THAI aircraft and is proud of his strict recruitment policy.

“Some people are very clever and intelligent but they may be over-confident or aggressive and that makes them unsuitable for being an airline pilot,” he says. “We want people who are talented, good at decision making and flexible.”

Anyone who possesses these qualities is off to a good start. But if you really want to reach for the sky, you have to pass through an extremely rigorous selection process. As well as taking written tests – to assess your English and mathematical skills – you’ll have to pass a thorough medical to make sure you’re fit and able. Then you must impress the THAI pilot selection committee, made up of high-ranking pilots, ending the initial selection with an aptitude test that shows up your intuitive skills. Naturally, only a few make it this far.

While being a reliable way of picking the best, a meticulous selection process also goes a long way to ensuring that passenger safety is in capable hands.

“Safety is very important for training, there is no compromise,” says Captain Pisal. “We have to train every pilot to reach our standards and to reach all the safety requirements. My department is very big because we train them to reach those safety standards.”

Learning to fly

Once a rookie pilot has been accepted for training, THAI sponsors him throughout a one-year flying course at the Civil Aviation Training Centre in Hua Hin, where he learns to fly small propeller aircraft and attains the fundamental skills of flying.

As soon as the trainee has passed this important stage and gained his Civil Pilot’s License, he is then transferred to THAI headquarters in Bangkok. Here, he joins recruited air force pilots to begin airline transition training, where he is taught to fly commercial aircraft with jet engines and heavy cargo.

When a trainee steps into one of THAI’s \$15 million flight simulators and seats himself into a replica cockpit for the first time, it is usually the beginning of a dream come true.

But the hard work has only just started. Anyone who has seen the confusing array of buttons, dials and computer equipment that make up the cockpit controls of a modern aircraft will understand that it takes months of dedicated

practice to be able to navigate everything. And that's while the plane is still on the ground.

Captain Sopit Pokasoowan, the director of flight deck crew training and a pilot with many years of flying experience, tells *learning post* that airline transition training is an important step in any commercial pilot's career.

"How you manage the flight is totally different because in the big jet you have to work in teams whereas in smaller aircraft you fly alone," he says. "So in order to work in the team, you have to closely study and follow the standard operation procedures. Both of the pilots who sit at the front have to work in harmony. For example, the guy on the left side has to know what the pilot on the right is thinking. If the left pilot is seeing that the right-side pilot is about to do something wrong, he will recognise it. We pilots call that 'cross-check'.

"This is just an introduction to the things they will have to do on a civil flight. After they pass basic training in the simulator, they will be selected to go on the domestic fleet."

If you're reading this sitting on a domestic plane and have begun sweating at the thought of a newbie at the controls of your flight, you can relax. All new pilots spend at least three months simply observing what goes on in the cockpit before they are even allowed to touch any of the flying instruments. Even when they are ready to do so, the amount of control given to a new pilot is very limited with the captain doing most of the work.

It takes two or three years experience as a co-pilot on a domestic plane before a pilot moves on to a regional routing, then another two years before moving on to the flight deck of a jumbo jet and flying long haul to international destinations.

Throughout their career, a pilot is constantly trained and retrained – on the ground as well as in the air. According to the regulations of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), every pilot, whatever their length of service, must complete a training period in class and on a simulator at least every six months.

During these training sessions, pilots brush up on their general flying skills as well as practice difficult manoeuvres such as landing in high winds or flying with an engine flame-out. This is all in addition to other necessary training, such as when a pilot learns to fly a new aircraft or land at an unfamiliar airport.

Recently, THAI has introduced a new system of e-learning, allowing some of the technical and academic training to be done from home or while the pilot is away on business. This serves as both a time and cost cutting measure but it is also convenient. Using the Internet, pilots can update their knowledge on

the latest flying regulations through to the location of various instruments on different aircraft types without a laborious trip to headquarters.

Joys of the job

The ultimate career goal of most civil airline pilots is to become the captain of a large aircraft. Of course, getting to this position takes a long time and a potential captain has to have extra skills over and above those of an ordinary pilot, such as a sense of diplomacy and the ability to command respect. These are rare qualities indeed but airlines simply cannot afford to have bad managers in charge of a 100 tonne aircraft.

Captain Sopit has his own views on what kind of pilot makes a good captain. "Ideally, they are emotionally stable, can cope with stress, do simultaneous tasks and can command," he says. "They also have to be able to take a step back and solve things in a limited time. We don't want a hero, someone who can fight a hijacker or something like that."

Once a pilot has completed around five years as a co-pilot on an international routing, they are eligible for a 'captain evaluation' – a mixture of flight observations and interviews by senior staff as well as written tests. Once passed, the new captain takes his position on a domestic plane and steadily moves his way up through the ranks until he finally takes control of a 747.

Looking back, Captain Sopit recalls the joys of the job. "First, when you join the airline you enjoy the world," he says. "After a few years, you enjoy the job security. When you become a captain, you self-actualise because you reach the top level of your career. It's a real sense of fulfillment."

So, you want to be a high flyer?

A career in the airline business is an immensely competitive one, especially in Thailand where only a minority of people ever gets to travel overseas. The rewards are good in terms of money and travel perks but it is not perfect. Irregular sleep patterns and missing family and friends whilst spending long periods away from home are very much part of the job. But most will tell you that the positives far outweigh the negatives. If you want to work for a major airline, here are some options.

1. Pilot trainee

THAI is the major airline in Thailand offering pilot traineeships. Other smaller airlines such as Bangkok Airways tend to recruit established pilots, although they occasionally offer sponsorship to student pilots.

General requirements:

- Excellent health, good eyesight
- Good command of written and spoken English
- Minimum height 165cms
- Age below 28 years
- Exempt from military service
- Bachelors degree in any discipline

The only other route to a civil pilot career is through service in the air force. Currently, there are very few opportunities for female pilots, although some of the smaller airlines such as Bangkok Airways do recruit women.

2. Cabin crew

Cabin crew are the flight attendants who make your journey a comfortable one and are the human face of the airline. There is much more to the job, however, than serving meals and being friendly. Cabin crew are trained to deal with safety issues in the event of an emergency and are responsible for general safety throughout the cabin.

General requirements include:

- Education up to and including M6
- Good command of spoken English. An additional foreign language is an advantage.
- Minimum 160cm (165cm for men)
- Strong swimming ability
- Pleasant personality with good human relations skills

With the increasing amount of new airlines and aircraft, the number of flight attendants in Thailand is growing, although competition is still fierce. As well as Thai airline companies, some foreign airlines, such as Qantas, also employ Bangkok-based Thai crew, usually through recruitment companies such as Adecco. Others, such as Emirates, recruit Thai crew but base them in Dubai.

3. Administration

There are plenty of job opportunities in airline administration from ground staff (e.g., check-in operators) through to office personnel. Some people begin their careers in administration as an opening to becoming cabin crew.

Useful contacts:

Thai Airways International – www.thaiair.com

Bangkok Airways – www.bangkokair.com

Adecco – www.adecco-asia.com/thailand.htm

'Take Off' magazine, mainly aimed at Thai cabin crew

Also, keep an eye on Bangkok Post 'classified' section for regular job opportunities.

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