

Interview with
J. DANE HUNTER

November 11, 2020

**THE PANDEMIC YEARS: COVID-19
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

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INDEX

aviation	4, 5
Chicago [Illinois]	7, 9
civil unrest	4, 7, 8
depression	9
emotionally	8, 9
furloughed	5, 6, 9
Illinois	4, 7, 9
mask	9
news	10
political	10
protests	7, 8
school	9
union	6, 9
United Airlines	4, 5

Jonathon Dane Hunter, who goes by Dane, was interviewed virtually via Zoom on November 11, 2020. He was located at his home during the interview in [Lake in the Hills, Illinois], and the interviewer, Callie Hunter, was located at home in St. George, Utah. The interview mainly covers the effects of COVID-19 on the airline industry and his personal life, as well as some minor discussion of the civil unrest of 2020.

[The first four minutes of audio was a personal conversation between the narrator and interviewer, and has been cut.]

CH: So we're doing an oral history on the effects of COVID-19. There will probably also be some questions about civil unrest in there as well. Just, what is 2020; clearly this is a big moment in history. So that's what we're working on.

DH: Yeah, it sucked. [Laughter.] Okay. Cool.

CH: Alright. For the record, can you state and spell your name?

DH: Sure. It's Jonathon Dane Hunter, J-O-N-A-T-H-O-N space D-A-N-E space H-U-N-T-E-R.

CH: Okay. Alright.

DH: I will try to avoid being a dork.

CH: [Laughter.] If you don't, I will leave that in the record and it will be there for everybody to see.

DH: Okay, as long as people can share in my – Okay.

CH: Alright. You've worked for United Airlines for how many years?

DH: A year and a half. I was hired in May of 2019 at United Airlines.

CH: Alright. And you worked at SkyWest before that?

DH: Yes, I worked at SkyWest for almost eight years. I was hired there in 2011 as a first officer, flew for them for almost eight years. Loved my time there.

CH: Okay. So, how has COVID-19, how has this pandemic affected your United Airlines and aviation as a whole? That's a very big question.

DH: That's a big question, but it has had a significant, significant and widespread impact on not only my company, United Airlines, but also the aviation sector worldwide. It's been devastating to the entire industry, to people, employees with airlines all over the world. I can't think of a single country or airline that has not had a negative impact on COVID-19. The year started – January started as one of the best times in the industry. Nearly

every airline out there was having huge profits, major success, growing significantly, expanding employees, airplanes; everything was growing. Everything was looking wonderful. And then two months later, the initial drop was 90 percent or more. So, out of all of their flights, they canceled 90 percent of them. During that time— March and April were the worst. March, April, May sort of improved, but April was definitely among the worst months in this industry.

United Airlines specifically, I think they were down 95 percent for that month compared to the previous year of their flying. They were grounding hundreds of airplanes. I believe the number was around 500 airplanes were grounded in a fleet of 700-ish airplanes. Almost every pilot was [inaudible] flying. Just in the United States, the impact in passenger counts was drastic compared to the previous year, 2019. In April [of 2019], the average day had two and a half million passengers. Well, in April [of 2020], the average day had about a hundred thousand passengers that were screened by the TSA in the United States. So, just the numbers, it's hard to comprehend what they were.

Now, a more direct impact on United. As you can imagine, they were burning through money drastically. Initially they told us even after they grounded airplanes and stopped burning fuel and they stopped all projects, they were still burning through 40 to 50 million dollars per day. And long story short, it's hard to sustain that. So the airlines started cutting everything they could, asking employees to take leave, trying to cut costs everywhere they can. So, things are improving now, but it was definitely bad then.

More to the aviation worldwide, many airlines in the world have gone out of business and there will probably be more as of today, November. I know many pilots throughout the world, more specifically, many pilots have been laid off, lost their jobs, furloughed. That's not to even mention the flight attendants, the mechanics, all the other support personnel at the airlines. So it's been drastic. So, that's kind of where we are, at least for 2020. The future is starting to look better. The numbers have been improving lately, but initially it was pretty devastating.

CH: Now, you were originally on the docket to be furloughed because of your lower seniority at United. What did United do to avoid furloughing their pilots this soon?

DH: Sure. United, as of early this year, they had roughly 13,000 pilots. The months of March and April were kind of the shock and awe moment of, "Okay, this is a pandemic, it's getting really bad, a lot of people are dying." After things somewhat started to stabilize and the world kind of started to learn more how to adjust and try to make it through, United, just like everybody else, saw that they had to cut employees. Employee payroll is among the highest business expense for any company. So, in order for the airline to survive, they have to cut costs, and when few people are working and employees are kind of the [inaudible], they have to go.

They cut all the other costs that they could and employees were on the next round. And pilots in particular tend to be the most expensive, or they are the most expensive employee at an airline. It's a very specialized skill that takes years of experience and training and licenses to even qualify for the job, and that tends to get higher pay. So, United, they came out and they initially, as of the summer, their numbers were projecting

anywhere from two to 4,000 pilots that would have to be furloughed, and I'm 700 from the bottom. So, I'm definitely inside that group. Their first response was to offer early retirement. United has a lot of pilots that have been here twenty-five, thirty plus years that are close to retirement and United offered, "Hey, if you leave now, you'll get most of your pay until you turn sixty-five." Sixty-five is the age they must retire. But it was a first step to reduce payroll costs on the higher paid employees, but also to reduce the staffing numbers so that it kind of killed two birds with one stone. They got about 1,500 volunteers for that, which isn't a lot, but hey, every one of them counts. That was the first step that they took to reduce the number of pilot furloughs. They had other pilots taking voluntary leave, six months leave, and that helped reduce some of the numbers, but it still wasn't enough. So, by law they had to notify pilots at least a month before they were furloughed and 1,900 pilots, myself included, on September 1st received our furlough notification.

Now the reason, maybe back up just a little bit. Pilots would have been furloughed long before now, except at the end of March, the government passed a stimulus package to help with the pandemic. And more specifically, the airlines received \$25 billion as long as they did not furlough any employees or cut payroll for six months. Well, October 1st was that six-month mark, so nearly every airline out there were giving pilots furlough notices for October 1st, and I got mine for October 1st. Those were the initial furlough numbers and the numbers were likely to be higher. At least for October, November, and December, it was going to be around 2,000 pilots and it was projected to have another 2,000 into next year.

Well, now specifically to United. The pilot union, ALPA [Air Line Pilots Association], representing the pilots at United, they got together and they were negotiating with the company on ways to reduce costs and not furlough pilots. And they came to a pretty good agreement, at least pretty good in my case, 'cause I didn't get furloughed [chuckles]. Essentially, it temporarily reduced pilot pay and the pilot flying. Pilots normally fly seventy to eighty hours per month, and pilots, they volunteered to reduce that. So one group, they went down to sixty hours. Another group went down to forty-five to fifty hours. My group went down to thirty-five hours. So essentially, the limited flying that we have was distributed among the other pilots. Fewer hours means less pay. So, that was the agreement that was made with the pilot union and the company. The pilot group voted on it, and it passed. This agreement is a maximum of two years. There are other provisions that we'll have pay return to normal, but more specifically to furloughs, the company cannot furlough at least until next summer, is the earliest that they can furlough, and all the projections and numbers we're seeing now is that it really won't be necessary to furlough.

One other point on why pilot furloughs are a bigger deal is that because of the specialized training with pilots, pilots are expensive to train. And if you furlough a pilot, not only do they have to get furlough pay, but when they return to the airline, it takes many days and it takes time to retrain all those pilots. So there's an economic or a financial disadvantage to furloughing pilots. It, essentially, costs money to furlough pilots. So the airline didn't want to furlough pilots. They wanted to keep them here, keep them current, avoid the cost of training, but also, they don't want to send anybody out on the street. That's not fun for

anybody. So this agreement, it essentially, saved thousands of pilots' jobs, and it's helping the airline and the pilots to get through the pandemic. Things are going to get better. They're starting to get better. So, we just needed time. We needed to buy time until things improve and people start flying again. And that's what this agreement did. It saved the pilots' jobs through a temporary reduction in pay to keep people on property, keep people trained, and we're ready to fly more flights as soon as demand returns.

CH: So, just to clarify, for anybody that may be reading or listening to this later, when you say that pilots work usually seventy-five to eighty hours, that doesn't mean that they work eighty hours a week. That means what exactly?

DH: Correct. Thank you. Sometimes, the pilot system is a little bit different than others. The monthly hours that we fly are flight hours¹ and that averages between seventy to eighty hours. The schedules vary drastically. Some people fly every week. Some people fly several times a week. An average four-day-long trip for a pilot equates to about twenty-two to twenty-five hours. So, you're gone from home for four days, you get twenty-five hours, you do three of those a month, and that's roughly seventy-five hours. So that's kinda how we calculate our time. So, in my case, now that I went from seventy-five to thirty-five hours, it's roughly two three-day trips per month, maybe eighteen-hour trips, two of those, and that's my whole month. So, it's a lot more time off, but less flying and less pay.

CH: Okay. Let's see. There was a couple of things I had thinking about, and I think you answered a lot of them.

Now, I kind of want to shift topics just a little bit. One of the other large events of 2020 has been civil unrest. I know that certain companies have made efforts or changed some policies temporarily to deal with the civil unrest with racial inequality. Have you in United, what kind of things did you see?

DH: As far as how the company was dealing with the cultural issues and the racial— the protests and all of that? They've sent out messages. Specifically with employees, they invited people to join racial understanding seminars, understanding race, how to talk about race. They offered that to the employees, just if people wanted to understand different sides better, things like that, kind of more of a good discussion about the topic.

On the operational side, the cities that were having larger protests that also turned into some violence and riots and looting and property damage, crewmembers, flight attendants and pilots, tend to be in hotels in downtown locations. So, we received messages from the company saying in these certain cities, New York [New York], Portland [Oregon], Seattle [Washington], Chicago [Illinois], some of these larger cities that were having problems with riots and violence, the crewmembers were not put in those downtown locations. They were moved to different hotels for the protection and the safety of the crewmembers, and the pilots, especially, were supportive of that. They didn't want to be near any of that. Not to mention when there's protests, that kinda causes

¹ Flight hours for purposes of pilot pay and scheduling, is the time from when the aircraft door is closed at the departure airport to the time the aircraft door reopens at the arrival airport. [Added by interviewer during editing.]

traffic issues. And when you have to get back to the airport and get to work, it's hard to predict when—and just predict getting back to work. So, it just made sense for the company, for the safety of the employees and the reliability of the operation to keep the crewmembers away from the protests and all the problem areas. As things calmed down somewhat—in most of these cities, the initial riots and then the violence started in, I believe, the end of May or early June. After that started to calm down in July and August, they went back to the normal operations. But then there were a few other flare-ups here and there in different cities and they kind of did the same thing. To protect the crewmembers, they went different locations. So those are the actions that the company took in regard to the civil unrest and all of that stuff.

CH: Okay. And then switching focus again, I do also want to kind of get your personal, how 2020 has affected you personally. I know we talked about how you've nearly lost your job. You haven't been flying much. Did you or your family, or did anybody close to you get COVID or how did COVID affect you?

DH: Yeah, well, this year, like most people on the planet, it's been a difficult year. At least on the financial side, because of the support from the government that prevented furloughs for six months, we were very, very blessed and fortunate to maintain my pay, even though I wasn't flying. So, financially it was stable. Now that we're past that six-month deadline, the government has not extended any additional aid. So now my half pay is kicking in, which of course, when you cut somebody in salary 50 percent, that's a challenge, but that's just kinda how it is. Most people in the world have had it worse off than us, so we're not gonna cry too much about it. And just that I still have my job, we are feeling very, very, very fortunate. On the professional side, I love what I do. I love flying, and I did my first trip in six months. I did that just a few weeks ago and I loved it. So, I'm anxious to get back to flying normal schedules, just 'cause I enjoy what I do. I think I'm pretty good at it.

Now to the more hidden side of it. Emotionally and mentally, 2020 has been difficult. It's difficult to see what's going on in the world with the pandemic. It's difficult to see the death that goes with the virus, that it's taking people, mostly elderly people, but also younger. It's painful. Some people have a very difficult time getting through it and that's never any fun. But also, here at home, none of my spouse or children in our home have had it. But we've had my brother had it, my sister-in-law, nieces and nephews. I have an aunt who, actually heard a few days ago, she's had it a second time. She tested positive for it a second time. She had it earlier in the summer and now a second time. But fortunately, at least my immediate family, everybody's recovering, which is a blessing. And we're fortunate for that. But dealing with this type of unprecedented event for a planet, it's draining on somebody emotionally, and it has been for our family. My wife and I talked about it frequently, how it's frustrating because when you're in this kind of situation, you have little control over your lives. And we as a human species and individuals, we like to be in control. We like to plan. We like to make sure everything's going to be okay. Well, you don't know that. You don't know, whether it's financial with employment, or safety of your family, and health, with everything going on, it's difficult to plan for that. And that's frustrating and it's stressful and it's difficult to manage emotionally and mentally. It still is, even though things are improving, it's still difficult.

For my family, I have a boy that just turned six years old. He was in preschool last March when the schools shut down, and he loved preschool. That was difficult for him. He was supposed to start kindergarten this year, and he's been doing kindergarten every day on a computer, staring at his teacher and his classmates on a computer screen. Now, it's fortunate that we have the technology to do that, that he can get education, but that's not good enough. Human species, we're very social creatures. And especially a six-year-old, they love going to school because they have friends and they like to be with other people. And he doesn't have that social and emotional connection with his classmates. He hates Zoom school. It drives him nuts. He misses going to school and he is missing out on the learning experience, the social experience of school. And you can't recover from that. You can manage it the best you can, and hopefully things will get better soon, but this is valuable time for him that he's missing. So, there are consequences to our family, to his education, more specifically, with schools being closed. So that's been difficult.

There's so many things that this pandemic has affected. Depression. Earlier this year, before my company—before the union passed that resolution where it looked like I was going to be furloughed, normally I'm able to handle myself pretty well and compartmentalize and manage myself, but I can honestly say I was verging on depression. And I know a lot of other people that did get significant depression because of jobs, because of fear. And that's really hard. It's hard to see that in others, it's hard to get help. It's hard for anybody. So there's just a lot to it, more so than just catching a virus or a cold, you know.

CH: You live in the Chicago suburbs. Here in St. George, it's actually been fairly lax with, there haven't been as many cases, there's less stringent rules to follow here. It's pretty strict where you live, right?

DH: Yes. So, early on, the governor of Illinois put out a mask mandate that if you're in groups or outside in public, you must wear a mask. That's been since May, I believe. I know some other states that the cases haven't been as high, they haven't had those mandates and later on they did. But Illinois has early on, they did the mask mandate pretty early on, and it's been that way. You can't go in a store, you can't go anywhere without wearing a mask. So, restaurants were closed, initially. They started to open up over the summer for outdoor dining. Even a couple of times this fall, we did indoor dining, but that's been shut down lately because the cases have started to spike again. But you still have to wear a mask everywhere. The cases are in this area—Chicago is a densely populated city. The majority of the high caseload in Illinois is specific to the Chicago downtown densely populated areas. The suburbs where we are, we're about an hour drive outside of downtown Chicago. It has not been that bad, but there are still cases.

CH: Well, I think that's all I need for the interview part. This might cut us off after 40 minutes and I wanted to get it all in. Before we totally finish, was there anything else you wanted to add?

DH: Yeah. One other aspect and dynamic of this year has been analyzing the information about this pandemic. You receive some information. Most of the information you receive is from news reports or journalists or news stations. And there are sometimes cases where you don't really trust what's being said, or you wonder, "Well, why are they saying it that

way?” and it’s hard to trust some of the information. At least as far as the data and the scientific information and the medical information, I actually enjoy reading up on that data analysis and statistics. But then you get people’s opinions of what that means. And then there’s always political opinions and bias. It’s hard to compartmentalize, it’s hard to analyze that. And that has also made this year difficult. It’s been a political election year. And so information that you receive about the pandemic, it could help or hurt certain groups and that’s frustrating to deal with because it makes it difficult to trust. So that’s been one other thing.

Something else that I think, I honestly believe that when we look back in a few years from now, that even with the difficulty, the economic devastation that individuals, businesses, governments, companies had all over the world and they will still feel for years to come, after that is all said and done, I think and truly believe that we as a society will be a much better society in terms of medical advancements, in terms of health. We’re going to change the way we do things. The medical community, the scientific community, the kind of knowledge that we’re gaining right now about developing viruses, about different things like that. I think we’re going to look back and see many advantages from this whole experience. Companies are going to manage their finances differently. Individuals are going to manage their finances differently, I think, for the better. I think people are gonna learn that, “Hey, maybe I should have a little bit of money saved up,” or a company is going to say, “Maybe I should have a little bit stronger financial foundation in case I have to shut down my restaurant for two weeks, two months, or more.” So, I think that we, as a species, as humans, as a society, we’re going to gain a lot from this.

I think we’re also going to—this pandemic is worldwide. Everybody in the planet is going through this, and we’re all going to get out of it together, as a planet. And I think that will make— maybe that’s going to tear down some cultural or political borders that need to be torn down. Maybe we, as a worldwide society, are going to be closer together. Maybe we’re gonna cooperate better. Maybe we’re gonna communicate better. Maybe we’re gonna be more respectful of each other. So, I’m excited to see the outcome. I’m excited to look back five, ten years from now and feel sorrow for the trouble and the struggle, but look at the bright side, look at the good that came from this terrible situation.

CH: Thank you very much. Now, we can move back to personal stuff. [Last seven minutes of audio is the narrator and interviewer continuing to catch up, and has been cut.]

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]