

EPISODE 234

[EPISODE]

[0:00:07] IP: Hello and welcome to episode 234 of AvTalk. I am Ian Petchenik, here, as always with –

[0:00:17] JR: Jason Rabinowitz. Hello, Ian. How's it going?

[0:00:19] IP: Hello, Jason. It's going well. It's going well. It's been a busy week so far.

[0:00:23] JR: Yes.

[0:00:24] IP: Aviation and non-aviation stuff. We're moving through it. Right now, I am in the middle of what is going to be an excellent, excellent adventure for all of our YouTube channel viewers, and by extension, our podcast listeners, because they're getting a heads up that this video will be coming out in the next couple of weeks. It is the build of the Concorde Lego set.

[0:00:49] JR: Oh, I thought you were going to document physically moving to a new house.

[0:00:52] IP: No. No, no, no, no.

[0:00:54] JR: That would be weird. but building the Lego Concorde, that's some high-quality content.

[0:00:59] IP: Yeah. I'm in the middle of that now. Had to take a break to record the podcast, of course. But you'll definitely want to watch the video, not only because it's awesome, both the Lego set and the actual Concorde. We're going to chat a little bit about the history and uniqueness of Concorde. Also, we'll be giving away a set in the video. Stay tuned for that. That's what's in progress right now. As Jason alluded to, yeah, we're also moving house. I forget to mention this a couple of weeks ago, a few people at Dorkfest came up to me like, "Are you okay? I listen to the podcast. Are you okay? Is everything okay? Is there anything I can do?" I'm like, "No, no, no, no."

[0:01:38] JR: I mean, in that time said, no, you were very much not okay. You were extremely stressed and far from okay, but in a good way.

[0:01:45] IP: Yeah. I don't know if it's a good way at this point, but yeah, buying and selling property is not my idea of fun.

[0:01:52] JR: If you're not stressed when you're moving, or in your case, selling and buying a house, you're probably doing it wrong.

[0:01:57] IP: Well then, I guess, we're doing it really right.

[0:02:00] JR: Okay.

[0:02:00] IP: To answer a few people's questions, I totally forgot to mention this last week when we came back. Yeah, everything's fine. It's good stress. It's good news, but it's stressful, nonetheless. Yeah, there you go. That's what's going on. What's going on with you? How are you this week?

[0:02:15] JR: Fine. Just busy with work and very uninteresting otherwise, but I'm keeping my fingers crossed that the weather cooperates on Saturday, because the good people at Tailwind, the seaplane operator here out of the Hudson River in New York has graciously invited me for a flight, but that flight only works if they can see where they're going on the East River, so I'm really hoping that the weather forecast improves, because it's doing anything but these days.

[0:02:44] IP: Anything but improving. Yeah. Well, we'll talk more about the Northeast later on in the show. We have a very good show today. Not the least of which, because my newest colleague, Chris Lomas, joins us later in the program. Chris joined my team at [flightradar24](#), focusing on content. He is going to join us to talk about his journey and his flight with Airbus on the route proving flight up to the North Pole. Chris now holds the distinction, not that I'm jealous at all, but Chris now holds the distinction for the first non-Airbus employee to fly the A321XLR.

[0:03:21] JR: Hey, that's something.

[0:03:23] IP: That's pretty cool. He'll be on later in the show to talk about what is re-proving, what are they doing, why are they just flying around Europe and across the Atlantic and why that's an important thing. But we also have important news. It's important for two reasons. One, it's a big deal. Two, we talked about it on the show last week before it actually happened and we were right.

[0:03:48] JR: All right. That so rarely happens.

[0:03:53] IP: We very rarely check all of those boxes. As we talked about last week, the FAA has upgraded Mexico's aviation safety status to category one, which entails a host of new opportunities for both Mexican and US airlines to open new routes, expand existing routes, add code shares to a variety of flights, and just all around better for travelers. Also, the safety part is a big deal, too, that Mexican authorities satisfied whatever safety concerns the FAA may have had. The FAA is comfortable saying, "Yes, you can fly here." US airlines can fly there, and now everybody can move about the continent.

[0:04:39] JR: Yeah, I don't think anybody, anywhere in this process expected this to take so long, because this took years. I think people thought this would be weeks, or maybe months, but years was – I don't think anyone had that in their mind.

[0:04:52] IP: I would have to go back to the tape. But I think when this happened, we talked about a process of a few weeks, thinking that it was a paperwork issue, or there was something fell out of certification that needed to be rechecked. Then it went on for a little while, and we were like, okay, this is getting interesting. Yeah. We did not anticipate this taking two years.

[0:05:14] JR: No. I don't think even anyone at the FAA would have anticipated that. Things really, really must have been at a whack down in Mexico for it to take this long, because there have been other countries knocked down a peg by the FAA that responded quicker than this. It's good that everything is back to where they should be, or at least there have a pathway back to that status. What this means is that Mexican airlines can now resume adding routes to US destinations, which I'm sure they are absolutely going to do very quickly. It also means that code

share agreements can be reinstated. Delta and Aeromexico, for instance, they have a very close partnership that's been suspended for years at this point, and that that's no small deal.

There were a lot of people going, I know, going down to Mexico that were paying a lot of money, compared to in years past, because these code shares were in place and capacity was way down. Hopefully, those code shares are reinstated real quick, some capacities are reinstated real quick, and fares are brought down quite a bit.

[0:06:14] IP: Yeah. A win all around, for both the airlines and consumers who are looking to book tickets. Great news all around. I guess, hold off on booking tickets to Mexico for just a few minutes while all those things get put back into place. We also have an update on a story that we talked about, I think, a few weeks ago at this point, when we were discussing elderly state aircraft, shall we say, when the German government's A340s had some issues and they said, "Yeah, we're done with them." Turns out, they're not quite done with them. The German Air Force says, "Well, they're still airworthy. We could use them and we fix the problem. Why don't we keep using them, because they're not scheduled to be retired yet, and we don't really have a full replacement ready." They could be back. Maybe. We'll see.

[0:07:07] JR: Yeah, weird story to just outright say, "Yeah, we're going to retire them as soon as possible." Then just a couple of weeks later decide, "You know what? Maybe not." Because it's not really that they need to fix a couple problems that were reoccurring rapidly at one moment. The older the aircraft get, the more parts break down, the more time the aircraft needs to spend in maintenance. Things like that add up. It's a little weird that they'd decide to unretire, not unretire, but not retire at all these aircraft at this point. I guess, if they don't have the A350s, or other aircraft in the same numbers, I mean, we're only talking to aircraft. But if they need them, they need them. I guess, that maybe they'll end up doing less critical government flying maybe. I don't know. Maybe they'll use them within Europe only, so if they get stranded somewhere, they can still take a commercial flight. I don't know. What this does mean for us, us avgeeks is that there will still be at least two more A340 VIP aircraft out there for us to all gawk at. That's a win for everyone.

[0:08:09] IP: There you go. I wonder if it was the case of the foreign ministry being like, "We're retiring the aircraft," and the Air Force being, "Wait. What?"

[0:08:17] JR: Would you mind just sharing that with us?

[0:08:19] IP: Like a fait accompli. “We’re done with the – If we say it, if we say we’re done with these, we won’t have to fly them anymore.”

[0:08:24] JR: That’s right. If you will it, it will happen.

[0:08:26] IP: It’ll happen. That seems to be the case in this next story, where a company just willed paperwork into existence for aircraft parts that there was no pedigree for these parts. They made them up. They made up the paperwork. Now, United, Southwest and Virgin Australia have all had to go find parts, because of this one company based out of London.

[0:08:51] JR: Yeah. You know what? Tell the listeners the name of this company, because it really just brings it all together.

[0:08:57] IP: AOG Technics.

[0:08:58] JR: If you’re not familiar with the term, AOG means aircraft on ground, which these aircraft will presumably be until they find replacements for these parts. I like how that all brings itself together.

[0:09:10] IP: Yeah. I mean, this is such a weird story, because all the time, aircraft parts have detailed records about where they came from. They’re manufactured and there’s all sorts of stamping and tagging and documentation about when they were manufactured, what part it is, what engine it can go in, or what part of the aircraft it can go in and all sorts of that stuff. Then, you have parts suppliers and parts aggregators that will buy these parts and then warehouse them, so that they can be purchased by airlines, or MROs, or things like that. Then you have AOG Technics, which basically, was making up certificates and approval tags for a lot of these parts.

You've got CFM56, high-pressure compressor, stage one veins, GECF6 part, multiple parts within the GECF6 engine, and then all sorts of other CFM56 engines. All of the documentation was made to look like it came from the manufacturer. Then they were just making stuff up.

[0:10:26] JR: Yeah. That's unusual to say the least. This reporting comes to us from Bloomberg, who says, they were in contact with United and said that the parts were discovered in a single-engine on each of two aircraft, which were already undergoing routine maintenance. This is going to cause United to actually ground the aircraft and swap out the entire engine before they return to flying. Just a weird story here. I hope the proper people are held responsible and it really just sucks for the airline that they're going to have to take aircraft out of service and find spare engines when spare engines are hard to come by these days. Just a strange, strange story.

[0:11:05] IP: I mean, it's strange. But one of the things that I think this highlights is the commitment to safety on the part of both the airlines and the regulators, because this was flagged by multiple operators. Then when it turned out that this was bigger than just a few parts, there seemed to be hundreds of parts, IASA got involved, the UKCAA got involved, the FAA's involved. I mean, notices have been –

[0:11:33] JR: Noticed.

[0:11:34] IP: Yeah, notices have been noticed. They're combing through all of these documents to ensure that every single part has the proper paperwork. I think, for me, the takeaway is one, why would you do this? Then two –

[0:11:49] JR: You know why.

[0:11:51] IP: Well, I mean.

[0:11:51] JR: You know what the answer is. Come on. Everything comes down to whoever AOG actually is. Just wanted to make a quick book, but I hope they see some consequences come their way.

[0:12:01] IP: There you go. Yeah, good on everybody taking it seriously. We'll hope that it comes to a speedy and very safe conclusion. Speaking of making a quick buck, Qantas wants theirs back from Alan Joyce. After Joyce retired from the airline a few months early, he was supposed to leave in November, left at the beginning of September, after an acute loss of trust, says the airline's board, they want 9 million back. 9 million US dollars, which I think is 13, 14 million Australian dollars. They want their money back, because they said, "Well, why are we paying all this money if you're leaving in scandal and without our trust?" That's going to be interesting to see. The Qantas board has also reconfigured the compensation structure for some of its top managers to a much more customer-focused compensation scheme.

[0:13:01] JR: Interesting. I'm all for it, if they want to claw back 13 million US. I'm sure he's being paid well and above that. I'm all for lowering executive compensation. If really in a case like this, if it was so bad that he resigned early after he was already going to exit, yeah, they probably have a good case to get some of that cash back. Really, it should go to the passengers who ended up having their flights that they never intended to operate canceled. Wouldn't that be nice?

[0:13:29] IP: Well, I mean, that would be –

[0:13:30] JR: Bring it to full circle.

[0:13:32] IP: Bring it full circle. It would be nice that the passengers were not quite passengers. Customers. Shall we say customers, but not quite passengers? Yeah, it would be nice that they were made whole. That loss is still working its way through the Australian courts. That could be an entirely separate issue.

[0:13:49] JR: They could put it in a fund. Whatever they claw back from Joyce, they could put in a fund and by the time the court settle this in possibly years, maybe they can pay these hypothetical passengers off the interest, and then reinvest the rest in the customer experience. How about that?

[0:14:04] IP: Sounds good to me.

[0:14:05] JR: All right. Make it so.

[0:14:08] IP: All right. Here's an interesting story that came out in a safety report and then Flight Global is reporting on it today, actually. A Ryanair 737 departing Venice had to get involved and play air traffic controller a bit, because there was an approaching aircraft, and they had not received their takeoff clearance from the tower controller. There was an Iberia A321 on approach to Venice and Ryanair had been instructed to line up on the runway and wait. There was a controller shift change between the lineup instruction and the takeoff clearance. The controller that took over the shift plugged their headset into the wrong port and therefore, could not communicate with the aircraft.

[0:14:59] JR: But did not know it. They were issuing commands over the radio, but those were going to a phone line that wasn't connected to anything at the moment, which is not particularly helpful. It took a little while for them to figure that out. In the interim, the Iberia jet and by the way, the conditions were not great at the time, which is why this was so problematic, I'm quoting from Flight Global here, "Fog event horizontal visibility was down to less than 500 meters with a cloud base of just 100 feet."

If you're getting a call back here to Southwest versus FedEx in Austin a few months ago, this is an extremely similar situation here that was resolved by dumb luck, almost in this case. In the same matter in this case, the Ryanair crew realizing, excellent situational awareness in this case, realizing what was going on that they hadn't heard any commands to them, nor the approaching Iberia jet, they got on the radio on guard. What's that frequency? 121.5 to tell the Iberia crew on the A321, "Hey, we're still here. Please don't land on top of us." Unfortunately, those radio calls were in vain. They were not heard by the crew. Don't really know why. I believe, crews are always tuned to the guard channel 121.5. Please don't meow over that in cases like this. You actually need to be able to hear and understand and not ignore what's going on.

But thankfully, at the last moment when the A321 was just 400 feet over the ground, the controller was able to figure out what was happening and maybe used, not quite clear, maybe used a different headset, or different handheld radio to issue the command to the Iberia 321 and a potential disaster was very closely averted yet again.

[0:16:49] IP: Yeah. Just an odd situation. Thankfully, thankfully it all worked out.

[0:16:55] JR: Italian Air Navigation Service developed safety protocols that you would think would already have been in place about non-optimal times to conduct a shift change. It turns out, conducting a shift change in between lining up an aircraft and giving departure clearance for that aircraft is probably not the ideal time to do that. They won't be doing that in the future, which is just a good rule that everyone should participate in.

[0:17:19] IP: Maybe put some labels on those headphone ports.

[0:17:22] JR: Yes. No idea how, or why that happened. I understand when phone jack looks like another. I don't know. If it's happened now, it's almost certainly happened in the past. But yeah, let's maybe label those a little clearer.

[0:17:35] IP: There you go. What do you say, we take a quick break and we'll come back with our conversation with Chris to talk about route proving on the A321XLR and his experience and what that's all about. Stay with us. We'll be right back after this.

[BREAK]

[0:17:54] IP: Welcome back. We are now joined by my colleague, Chris Lomas, who began working for flightradar24 just this past April. Chris has really hit the runway running and jumped into a bunch of different stuff. He is a commercial pilot, and so he brings a wealth of experience already about flying and aviation to the role that we've tested with, which is explain aviation to other people outside of flightradar24. Chris is writing for a blog. He's, well, as part of what we're going to talk about today, he's making video content for us. Today, he joins the podcast for the very first time. Chris, welcome to Av Talk.

[0:18:37] CL: Hello, Ian. Great to be here. It's great to finally make it onto the podcast. If anything, I'd say that the last few weeks, I've mostly had aviation explain to me, which has been really refreshing. I mean, it's nice to have it that way around.

[0:18:48] IP: Yeah. We've done no shortage of work with and about the 321XLR. I want to say, this goes back to probably, September of 2021 when it was on display at the, I believe it was called the Airbus Innovation Days, or the Airbus Summit in Toulouse and we got a nice walk around and we spoke with Malcolm Ridley, who is the Chief Test Pilot at the time. Then as we followed the progression of the certification of the A321XLR, you this week had the opportunity to fly on the second route proving flight for the aircraft. I guess, we start with the question is, what is route proving?

[0:19:31] CL: Absolutely. I had to get it defined myself. Essentially, route proving is a common parlance for what is actually referred to as functionality and reliability testing, or FNR testing. Now, what that actually means is that the aircraft is operated on a series of flights, some of them point to point, some of them round trips back to Toulouse and back. The idea is to test what they call system maturity. System maturity is making sure that all of the onboard systems, whatever they are, are capable of being run to an extensive level, for a long period of time in a lot of different circumstances, like they would be in an airline and in different kinds of airlines.

[0:20:10] IP: In layman's terms, we've gone from, does the plane work to, will the plane work for an airline?

[0:20:16] CL: Exactly. That's exactly it. Yeah.

[0:20:18] IP: Some of the things that we've talked about with the A321XLR being different than the A321 and the A321 – or the A321, the A321neo, the A321LR and now the XLR, which I don't think they really have anywhere to go as far as naming convention is concerned. This might be it for this one. Some of the things that we've talked about that are unique to this particular aircraft are, well, the range. That center fuel tank, which becomes part of the fuselage, along with a number of other modifications to the wings and obviously, the engines are part of the neo package. On the route proving flight, take us through from the beginning through, what did you do? What did you see? What did you experience?

[0:21:01] CL: Sure. Well, essentially, it starts off in the early evening with a safety briefing. That's a crew briefing. I was able to sit in on, I'd say, about 15, 20 minutes of that. That was looking at the weather on route, some of the operational concerns. They had a plan for rostering

the pilots throughout the trip, that kind of thing. For context, the routes, which we will and have shared on social media, was pretty much a route directly to the North Pole from Toulouse and turning around and coming straight back down.

Essentially, the briefing was the weather's pretty clear. We're expecting a smooth trip and we're going to have plenty of time to take a look at those systems from the monitoring stations in the aircraft. Fairly straightforward. We bought the aircraft, I think this is probably about 8.30 local time. We're scheduled to go at 9 p.m. Have a quick look around the aircraft, have a quick look in the flight deck. The aircraft itself is one of three XLR testbed aircraft, but it's the only one that's actually fitted with an indicative cabin. I had the choice of business class, or economy seats. I think you can probably guess which one I went for. I went for a business class seat. Took a seat and we took off very quick taxi from the test center at Toulouse to the runway.

Most of it done by the Tug, which I'm told is partly for convenience and partly for sustainability reasons, which is really good to see. Straight to the runway and pretty much straight out into the clear sky. We got up to the cruise, I'd say, in well under 20 minutes, really quick. I think before we knew it, we had a dinner service. One of the things I was really interested to see from a test flight, as someone who's not been on one before, as well as actually looking at the things that are being tested, was how do they eat, how do they sleep? The answer is it's very similar to how it would be as a passenger, or as a crew member in an airline operation.

We had a meal pretty soon after departure, I'd say under an hour after departure. That was a hot meal. Then spent some time talking to Jim Fawcett, who's the flight test engineer on this particular trip; one of two flight test engineers, I should say. He took me through a little bit about which systems they were looking at. In the case of the XLR, as you've inferred, the big differences are mostly in the fuel system. They were particularly looking at the fuel system management computer and understanding how that was behaving over a long flight.

[0:23:13] IP: Jim Fawcett was on a previous episode, for those that remember the conversation about the A321XLR's first, I forget exactly what they termed it. We'll have to put a link in the show notes. But it was the extra-long flight where they drew the XLR, because they just needed to fill up the tanks and then empty them. Instead of just flying around in circles, or flying up to the North Pole as they did in this particular flight, they drew that XLR off the coast of France.

We'll put a link in the show notes to our earlier conversation with Jim. But Chris got a bit more time with him. You were in the plane for what, 11 hours?

[0:23:47] CL: It was. It was just over 11 hours. On the personal side, that's the longest I've ever been on a commercial airplane. I've not been that far away yet. In theory, I still haven't been that far away. Just been onboard for a very long time. What was interesting was to spend that amount of time on a narrowbody. I mean, even if we look at the average transatlantic sector that's being operated by currently by the A321LR, if we look at the typical JetBlue sectors, or the SAS routes, we're looking at eight and a half, nine hours typically. This was 11 and it is a notable amount of time spent on an aeroplane, of course.

The thing that really struck me was it didn't feel particularly like it was being spent on a narrowbody. I did spend some of that time in economy seats to get a better view of the wing, and it was not uncomfortable. This aircraft isn't even equipped with the full airspace cabin. This is just indicative cabin. Those very subtle rearrangements they've made in the cabin with regards to the galleys and the seats, they do seem to work. As someone who flies on A320s and A321s so frequently, they definitely seem to work.

[0:24:44] IP: After dinner, you're talking with Jim about the fuel flow and the tank and all of these things. What else are they looking at as part of these? I mean, essentially, all of this, and this is a 10-day, 100-hour test, as we're recording, the aircraft is still powered on. We talked about this in the last episode. They're leaving it powered on, which I didn't know is a requirement, and it's fascinating to see for roughly 10 days and flying for a 100 hours over 15 flights. As we record now, Chris and I are sitting here on Tuesday, the 19th of September, and the aircraft is high above the Atlantic in between Dublin and Miami, off to visit customers who have orders, as well as potential customers to see how the aircraft operates. What else are they looking for? What are the folks that are sitting there at the test centers in the back of the cabin, what are they keeping an eye on?

[0:25:34] CL: Well, broadly speaking, they're keeping an eye on everything, and I think that's important to emphasize. You alluded before to the fact that there's essentially a lot of hours that they just need to fly in some way, shape or form to get to that certification level. What they're

really doing is looking at every possible combination of type of flight they can do and testing every system in those contexts.

On this flight, particularly, however, we're heading into the polar air. When they talk about polar air, they were keen to emphasize that can be neither northern, or southern polar air, so that cold, dry air. These aircraft, of course, are going to be operating in polar airspace by a lot, particularly in the north on these transatlantic routes. One of the other things they were particularly looking at was some of the polar navigation aspects behind the aircraft systems. Well, one, very visible example would be that once you get above a certain latitude, it's very difficult to navigate using a magnetic heading reference, because the compass effectively isn't working the same way. The aircraft is switched on to using a true heading reference.

Now, I think it was above the latitude of, I want to say, maybe 67 degrees north. I may have to check that. But the aircraft will put out a warning and say, "Guys, you need to change to a true heading reference." If the crew doesn't do it, the aircraft will do it by itself once it passes that latitude and pop out a normal warning in the flight deck. One of the things we were testing was to see whether that would happen, for example. At that stage, I'd actually had about a 20-minute nap, which they very kindly woke me up from to show me this in action. We go up to the flight deck, we pass that last two, we get the warning, the crew don't take any action deliberately, and then it changes over. Works absolutely perfectly.

There's those kind of elements that are unique to this particular flight that they're testing as well, as well as every other system. Of course, the system's in the cabin as well. There's a reason that we're being provided with a hot meal service. It's not just out of comfort, although it was pretty good. It's also because we want to understand that the cabin systems, the ovens, the galleys, everything just functions in sync with the whole of the operation.

[0:27:36] IP: You've got multiple teams that are working on the same aircraft at the same time and they may be testing different things. But again, we're going back to this. It's making sure that an airline can use this aircraft upon certification. They can start delivering and airlines can put it into service. This is an 11-hour flight. Los Angeles to Paris is 11 hours. That to me spells you want to have a full crew. How many pilots were on board to make this as most of an airline operation as can be?

[0:28:13] CL: Sure. Well, I think first of all, the crew, it was quite an extensive crew onboard. There were three pilots in total, two flight test engineers, one test flight engineer, which is different from a flight test engineer, who is effectively doing almost an enter seat role in the flight deck, plus two ground test engineers. Of those three pilots, you have the pretty typical airline operation. You have pilot flying, pilot monitoring. They're both captains in terms of experience, all Airbus pilots. Basically, they take off with the same, and land with the same two crew. The third pilot supplements the crewing throughout the flight. They take regular breaks.

Now, they have a few options of what kind of breaks they can take. They can either work for longer and sleep for longer, or they can work for a short period of time and sleep for a short period of time, rest for a short period of time. That was the option they were taking. Each of those pilots was typically working about two hours, and then taking between a 30-minute and a one-hour break. They were keeping quite fresh on the flight deck.

[0:29:11] IP: Interesting. Interesting. I know that this particular aircraft is set up with a model cabin, thinking, kind of a demonstration cabin. What was the crew rest facility on this particular aircraft?

[0:29:24] CL: Jim Foster from Airbus very kindly explained that the airlines actually have quite a lot of autonomy when it comes to choosing the kind of crew rest areas they have. They're actually quite loosely defined. Now, on this aircraft, there is no, or at least on this configuration of this aircraft, there is no specified crew rest area, say, underneath the cabin full of bunks, like you would have in something like an Airbus A330, or a 777. It's obviously a smaller airplane, so there's less space to play with.

Now what we have in this aircraft is from memory, what was referred to as a class three crew rest area. That can be one of two things. It can either be a single business class seat, or a row, economy seats. That has to be able to be sealed off with a curtain of some kind. Basically, it's a – curtain that divides first class. Goes on a rail around a particular seat, or a particular row of seats. That's either AC, or a row seat, which in an airline operation is not going to be available to sale to passengers. In this case, both options were available, but it seemed that most of the pilots I saw resting tended to prefer the economy seats, so they could have a lie down.

[0:30:29] IP: Because the business class seats, if memory serves, are basically just the recliner version. They're not full flat business seats in this particular cabin setup.

[0:30:36] CL: Yeah, in this particular cabin, there are very basic, albeit very comfortable, but very basic indicative business class seats. I'd say, you've got about maybe 20 degrees of recline, something like that.

[0:30:48] IP: Got you. Got you. I guess, the last thing that I wanted to bring up was that this was a flight to nowhere, basically. You took off nearly due north out of Toulouse, got to the North Pole and then turned right around and flew south. What does that do to your body?

[0:31:03] CL: It's a weird experience, because if you think about it, flying, especially if you're flying from somewhere in Europe, it's quite rare that you're taking a long-haul flight that is directly due north and then directly due south, because there's nothing there. I mean, we can talk about Iceland and places like that, but of course we went beyond that level. The first weird thing is that you have the sunsets and sunrises happening to the left and right view. It's a little bit peculiar and it feels like you've experienced an unnatural amount of sunsets and sunrises. It's quite hard to know when to sleep and how long for. I think that really emphasized to me the point that they were making about how careful they are with choosing when the crew rest and giving them a certain amount of autonomy and choosing the best time to rest, as long as it's within the regulations.

The other really good thing about that route is that you've got a really strong opportunity to see the Aurora Borealis, which we did see. Now we saw that about, I'd say, in the Greenland Sea, so east of Greenland, about a third, or a half of the way through the flight. It was absolutely stunning. Really excellent view of the northern ice. That was a really good bonus as well. It certainly messes up with your body clock and I definitely needed a day and a half, almost of recovery afterwards to sink in. It must be very challenging if you're working in that environment, rather than just sitting there, watching the northern ice and eating the delicious food.

[0:32:30] IP: That is certainly not all you did. We'll prove that with a blog post that Chris has on flightradar24 blog. Also, we'll have a video on our YouTube channel in the next week or so that

walks through everything that Chris got up to on the A321XLR reproofing flight. Chris, thank you so much for A, going on the flight, and then B, coming on the podcast to talk about it. Go check out the blog post now, as well as be on the lookout for the YouTube video. I know, I'm looking forward to seeing that as well. Chris, thanks so much for joining us.

[0:33:01] CL: Great to talk to you, Ian. Thank you.

[BREAK]

[0:33:08] IP: Welcome back. That concludes the conversation where I think I masked my jealousy.

[0:33:14] JR: Yes, I did, too, because I wasn't involved. I'm over here thinking about how I'm not at all jealous.

[0:33:20] IP: There you go. There you go. Hey, good news for airBaltic, which has not had a whole lot of good news in the past few years when it comes to their A220 engines. It sounds like, they're ahead of the curve, as far as getting most of their engines back.

[0:33:38] JR: Yeah. I swear, this is the first time we've heard any even relatively good news about anything relating to Pratt & Whitney engines, especially with airBaltic here. It's all been doom and gloom for a long time. I think even recently we talked about –

[0:33:52] IP: Last week. Last week.

[0:33:53] JR: Last week we talked about how bad this was going to get and it was going to get worse before it gets better. airBaltic was so far ahead of these problems, because it's an exclusive operator of the Airbus A220, which is exclusively powered by the Pratt & Whitney DTF engine. It's acutely aware of all these issues that may impact other airlines a little less. But it says, issues are getting a little better. Its fleet, I guess, you could call it, of what leased aircraft of which Aviation Week reports, it has six at this time, is down from as many as 13 in the peak summer weeks, which is natural that they'd have fewer now that summer has ended. But they are saying that it will be reduced to zero by November, which is pretty fantastic.

A quote here. "The engine issue is easing at the moment. We get many engines back from service. With that, of course, the pressure reduces to take so many wet leases, so we have a lot less flying now." That's a quote from airBaltic CEO Martin Gauss, who told that to Aviation Daily on September 19th. He went on to say, "We'll soon come to a situation where we have no engines missing. Normal engine maintenance cycles will continue while airBaltic does not expect to experience a minor engine shortage next year, too, that should not be as extreme as those experience this year." Good news. Aviation Week goes on to say, "The airlines looking to wet lease three to six aircraft for that expected shortfall." half as many as last year, I guess for next year's summer peak. Good news for airBaltic, who had to bring in some very odd aircraft.

[0:35:29] IP: Oh, yeah.

[0:35:31] JR: I think recently, I saw operating the ex-BMI, ex-British Airways mid-haul A321s, which are the ones with the legit business class and CPAC screens in economy that unfortunately be retired during COVID, somehow found their way to some weird wet lease operator, which somehow found its way to airBaltic. Very much not an A220, but very happy to hear that airBaltic seems to be on the mend.

[0:36:02] IP: Yeah. I will celebrate any good news that we can get as far as the gear turbo fan engines. I mean, and good for airBaltic, they've just suffered so much.

[0:36:12] JR: But they have done an excellent job of navigating.

[0:36:15] IP: They have. That's true.

[0:36:16] JR: I think we need to get in touch with airBaltic and get Martin Gauss on this podcast to discuss this small situation.

[0:36:21] IP: Bring him back. Bring him back.

[0:36:23] JR: We need to discuss this, because things have happened.

[0:36:25] IP: I think Martin Gauss might have the CEO sandwich card. You might be deleting CEO sandwich card. We'll have to get him a sandwich.

[0:36:34] JR: All right. From Blimpies, of course.

[0:36:36] IP: Exactly, exactly. We're not going to – Just because he's CEO, we're not going to buy him a nice sandwich.

[0:36:41] JR: We're not getting Subway here. I mean, this is a strictly Blimpies podcast.

[0:36:45] IP: Speaking of wet leases, that's what Air Belgium is going to do, and that's all they're going to do. They are getting out of the scheduled passenger service business.

[0:36:56] JR: Are they ever really in it?

[0:36:57] IP: That's fair. They tried it for a while. French leisure carriers, French long-haul, low-cost carriers undercut them on price, and so, they got out of most of those markets, and then they were focusing on South Africa and they say, “Yeah, we're not going to need that anymore either.” There are two A330-200s and two A330-900s are going to be employed elsewhere. One is currently dedicated solely to the Chicago-London BA flight. The second daily flight is currently operated by Air Belgium. That leaves them with three A330s to do with whatever they please on their own. But it won't be scheduled passenger service. They're going to go back to all wet lease, which is how they started. Then they're going to return their focus to more freight. They have A330 freighters, as well as 748 freighters.

The companies has a minority ownership stake. Hongyuan group has a minority ownership stake. Those are the liveries that you see on the A330 passenger to freighter conversions, as well as the 747-8Fs. That minority ownership stake is more interested in the cargo. Then Air Belgium says, “The scheduled passenger service just isn't working out for us, we're losing money. We're going to move away from that and go back to the wet lease only.” It seems like a decent plan. I mean, the things are going well as far as the wet lease and the freight goes in. Might as well stay away from what are clearly lost-making activities flying between Brussels and Johannesburg and Cape Town on a triangle route.

[0:38:31] JR: All right. Well, there's always demand for these wet lease wide body aircraft. If I have to be on a wet lease wide body aircraft, an A330-900neo doesn't sound too bad.

[0:38:41] IP: Not bad. Not bad.

[0:38:42] JR: Not too bad in the grand scheme of things.

[0:38:43] IP: Picking up new aircraft to them is Swiss and able wise, they're picking up a handful of ex-LATAM A350s. Those aircraft will join the fleet in the summer of 2025, even though they're not joining till not even next summer, but the summer after, a few of them will initially stay in the LATAM cabin configuration. That'll be interesting. You'll be on a Swiss Edelweiss flight with a LATAM cabin. I don't know if they're going to paint the aircraft ahead of time, or just leave them as is.

[0:39:21] JR: Yeah. Not the first time we saw it. Delta does this right now. They have a handful of ex-LATAM A350s, also still in the ex-LATAM interior configuration. I guess, the lead times for cabin interiors these days is just so long. Even though these won't be inducted until 2025, it's just still not enough time to refurbish these. I think they said, the first handful will have the LATAM interior, while later aircraft will have the actual, whatever it is, Edelweiss ends up with on the interior. Which is, I mean, that LATAM one's not that bad. It's fine. It's serviceable. What this really means is that an airline that I think exclusively on the long-haul side flies the A340-300 will no longer be doing so. The days of that aircraft are really seemingly coming to an end, though maybe –

[0:40:12] IP: Maybe they'll give them all to the German government.

[0:40:14] JR: Maybe. Maybe they'll all end up in Lufthansa, who seems like it'll be the sole operator of the type in no time. I think, Swiss itself still has some, I think, maybe. Lufthansa has a handful. They end up here in New York all the time. Yeah, it's a rare aircraft, but not yet extinct.

[0:40:34] IP: Going, going almost gone. Jason, when you think New Pacific Airlines, what destinations come to mind?

[0:40:42] JR: Reno and Nashville.

[0:40:45] IP: Oh. Well, in that case. Wait, are you running an airline?

[0:40:48] JR: I'm running an airline called New Pacific Airlines. Because I still can't fly over the Pacific, because of many annoying reasons –

[0:40:56] IP: Many reasons.

[0:40:57] JR: - I'm flying wherever I can. Apparently, wherever I can is Reno and Nashville from Ontario. Yeah, twice weekly flights from Ontario, beginning mid-November to Reno and Nashville. I don't know why we keep covering this. It's stupid. It's almost meaningless, but it's interesting.

[0:41:14] IP: It's become a project, I think.

[0:41:15] JR: It's just interesting to watch this poor airline flail around. They had a good idea. They were going to be nice the Icelandair of the Pacific. Then things just said, "No, you're not. At least not for now." They're doing what they can. I admire it. It's just these routes are just picking them out of a hat. Ontario to Reno, we already saw an airline in the last couple of years tried to do flights to or from Reno. What was it? Express Jet's little AHA.

[0:41:44] IP: It was, what did Express Jet – AHA.

[0:41:45] JR: AHA.

[0:41:47] IP: But they were doing E145s and you can't carry skis. This might be the thing to do. You can put a lot of ski boots on a 757.

[0:41:54] JR: Sure. Okay, good luck. I really hope they can start actual Pacific flights someday in the near future. The next time New Pacific Airlines, ex-Northern Pacific Airways, what was it? Whatever it is. I think they changed Airways to Airlines.

[0:42:10] IP: Yeah. It was Northern Pacific Airways. Now, it's New Pacific Airlines. Next name change is just going to be New Airline.

[0:42:16] JR: New Airline. New Airline X. When they launch yet another city, we will bring it to you. I promise, we will not talk about it again until they do something new.

[0:42:25] IP: Fair enough. This is an interesting one, because we've covered Indian aviation much more in the last, I want to say, six months, than we have probably in the past few years, just because there's so much going on in the Indian market. This one, I thought was really interesting. Jason, I'm glad you flagged it. Akasa Air, which is a startup airline in India, has had to cut flights, because enough pilots have defected over to Air India Express.

[0:43:00] JR: This is baffling to me. You would think that Indian aviation right now would have a surplus of pilots. We've seen so many of their airlines shut down recently from Jet Airways to, is SpiceJet still operating? Why am I thinking SpiceJet doesn't operate anymore? SpiceJet doesn't operate anymore, right? Yes? No? I don't know.

[0:43:25] IP: Yeah. No, no. Go on.

[0:43:26] JR: No, they don't operate. To Go Air, or Go First. There are so many – there should be such a surplus of pilots in India, to get to the point where yet another Indian airline is having so many pilots walk out, that they've had to cancel 600 flights in August and are potentially canceling 700 more in September. This comes from a Reuters report that they're – this is all caused by pilots resigning and shifting airlines. This doesn't make sense to me. It should be an airline market at this point, not a pilot market. I'm just not understanding what's happening in this market.

[0:44:04] IP: I want to go back, because I think we had some confusion there. SpiceJet is still operating. They are in trouble.

[0:44:09] JR: They are in trouble, okay.

[0:44:09] IP: But they're still operating.

[0:44:11] JR: Thank you for –

[0:44:11] IP: Yeah, I just want to clarify that before we get angry emails.

[0:44:15] JR: Yes, yes.

[0:44:16] IP: Or even polite emails.

[0:44:18] JR: I wasn't quite sure about that.

[0:44:18] IP: Yeah. They have been in trouble. There has been some rumbling about their future operations, but they are currently still operating.

[0:44:26] JR: Well, apparently, it's so acute at Akasa Air that they might have to shut down. There's a risk and they're telling the course that they have lost so many pilots, they might have to shut down. The funny thing is they're moving primarily to Air India Express, which is an airline that won't even – I think they're absorbing, or being absorbed into Air India proper during this whole privatization. It's so confusing to me. I don't understand this market, but it is fun to watch from a distance.

[0:44:54] IP: If you're a 737 pilot in India, I mean, the world is your oyster.

[0:44:59] JR: Yeah. This airline has, Reuters says, 72 Boeing aircraft on order. I don't know. I hope it isn't the case that this airline has to shut down because of this, but some Boeing orders might clear up in the near future. That would suck.

[0:45:14] IP: I think the last thing India needs is losing another airline.

[0:45:18] JR: No. This is getting out of hand, but I'm entertained by it, if nothing else.

[0:45:22] IP: If nothing else. Well, you know what entertains me, because it affects you mostly?

[0:45:28] JR: Rude.

[0:45:33] IP: I promised we'd get back to the Northeast and airports in the Northeast. The FAA extended the slot waivers from, I think, they were due to expire next month and said, "We're going a whole another year." Now, October 26th, 2024 is the date on which the slot usage waivers expire for Northeast. I'm using Northeast loosely, because DC is included in this. But really, the affected area has been the New York area. It's interesting that we're talking about this today, because the Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg, spent, I believe, 962 hours in front of Congress today, which as we learned today as well, is pretty much the number of flights he's taken since he became the Transportation Secretary.

[0:46:20] JR: Yeah. Thank you to David Sheperon for sending so much information out about this, so we didn't have to sit there and listen to it ourselves. Apparently, Secretary Pete has taken 607 commercial flights since taking office just a couple of years ago, which is an astronomical number. I don't know anyone who has been on that number of flights. I think the man is highly qualified to provide insights on the commercial aviation sector and guide that department on what it should or should not be doing, as long as it equates to the passengers and how airlines treat them, because that is a staggering number of flights.

[0:47:03] IP: That's just commercial. He's also flown on military aircraft and the FAA's own fleet. I think that's pretty incredible that he's been on that many planes.

[0:47:13] JR: Yeah. How many government officials at his level are so deeply involved in the very thing that they regulate? I can't imagine that there's really – does the Secretary of Agriculture go out there and plow farms, or anything like that, 607 times since they took office? Probably not. I can't think of a better example right now. But if you can, send us an email.

[0:47:38] IP: Oh, boy. The Secretary of Education is just sitting there taking tests. You can tell that Jason has a deep familiarity with farming.

[0:47:47] JR: Yes.

[0:47:47] IP: Farming terminology.

[0:47:48] JR: So many John Deere tractors. I don't know.

[0:47:53] IP: Anyway. Long story short, things are not great in the Northeast. Things are not great generally throughout the air traffic control staffing levels, but especially in the New York area. That was one of the topics for discussion today in front of Congress, where I believe Buttigieg called them unacceptable, the levels of staffing.

[0:48:12] JR: Potential government shutdown is not going to help the situation.

[0:48:15] IP: No.

[0:48:16] JR: At all.

[0:48:17] IP: No. I mean, there are so many reasons that is a bad thing. But I mean, we're trying to recruit air traffic controllers. But then if every few years you have to work under the threat of being forced to work, because you still have to work, but you're not going to be paid –

[0:48:35] JR: I mean, you'll get paid eventually.

[0:48:37] IP: Eventually. Sure. Yeah.

[0:48:39] JR: It could take a day. It could take a week. It could take a month. What did the last government shutdown last for? It was a good while.

[0:48:46] IP: It was a good while.

[0:48:47] JR: Yeah, that's not right. Let's not get into – weight into the political –

[0:48:52] IP: I'm just speaking purely from an air traffic control, recruitment and retention perspective.

[0:48:56] JR: Yes. Would you like to work in this extremely high-stress, mandatory overtime, unpaid for a number of weeks position? I don't know. That's not a great pitch.

[0:49:10] IP: No, it's certainly not. But they say they're working on it. I guess, when we have more information on that front, we will share it with you all. In the meantime, this is episode 234 of AvTalk. Thank you so much all for listening. We've had a great run of the last few episodes, where we've had some great feedback from listeners. Thank you.

If you do have any feedback on this episode, or the podcast in general, or you want to hear us talk about something, or you want to yell at us because we talked about something, email us at podcast@fr24.com. You can also go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a rating, or review. Tell us how we're doing. That helps other people find the podcast. We appreciate it so very much. In the meantime, I am Ian Pettechnik, here, as always with –

[0:50:01] JR: Jason Rabinowitz. Thanks for listening.

[END]