

## Eye, Eye Sir

Kevin, a friend of mine, frequently tells me, “You’ve won life’s lottery.” He certainly isn’t referring to the real thing, because I would never buy an actual lottery ticket, even if the jackpot were two trillion dollars. To me, a jackpot of two trillion dollars only means that my odds of winning would be worse than if the jackpot were merely one trillion dollars; it’s a philosophical thing. What I am saying is, if I thought I could actually win the lottery with odds against me many times greater than that of:

- A. Crashing in an airplane
- B. Being hit by a meteor or
- C. Eaten by sharks in a hot tub

logically, I would never leave my house. Of course, that would result in my having a fabulous chance, by lotto standards, of dying by asphyxiation, or worse, when the house burned down.

What Kevin is referring to is my job. He thinks that as a pilot for a major airline, all that’s left for me to do in this life is to...well...there’s really nothing left for me to do. He says that I’ve “got it made,” and that option “A,” above, isn’t going to happen. No credit is given for the fact that option “A” won’t occur, because as the pilot, *I’m* going to make certain it doesn’t happen.

My father, a 30-year Army colonel, felt the same way as Kevin. He incessantly joked, even while I was flying in the Air Force, as to when I was going to “start working” or “get a job.” His jabs picked up intensity after I made the transition to the airlines. Justice was served when an issue of Money magazine came out the very month I was hired. Money had an article on the top 100 jobs in America. Yes, airline pilot was on the list—just a few spaces *behind* Army officer. Ha! “Long work hours” and “jet lag” were said to detract from an airline pilot’s job. I guess I didn’t realize how tough I was going to have it. However, it would have been nice if Money had included a warning about the nasty cases of sunburn an extended layover in the Caribbean can cause. That fact would knock airline pilot down another notch or two for sure.

Words cannot describe the emotion I felt as I held the phone to my ear awaiting the verdict from the Goddess of Fate in the airline’s personnel department—hired or “How are you at panhandling?” When she told me that I was in, I hope she was holding the phone away from her ear, or she might be deaf in that ear today.

Getting this job was the completion of a doubtful journey that, at times, I didn’t even know I was taking. To an outside observer, it might appear that I had planned this career path all along. After all, I left for the U.S. Air Force Academy at age 17, and began flying at 18. From there, I proceeded to USAF pilot training and elected to go to the “heavy” KC-10. At this point, many of my comrades waved an accusatory finger at me saying, “You’re planning to go to the airlines, aren’t you?!” This label was put on anyone who could have gone the fighter route, but chose instead to fly aircraft that looked more like a barge than a supersonic machine of death. I suppose I can see why those guys might think I was leaning a bit toward the commercial side. Next time I’m at work, I’ll have to ask some of my fellow pilots to clarify those remarks.

No, while I was a kid, a cadet or attending pilot training, I never considered the airlines. Growing up, I was around some guys who, if they were kids today, would be major

computer geeks. However, these guys didn't even own a computer, because back then, computers were larger than Bill Gates' auxiliary residence #4, which makes the White House look like a double-wide at a run down trailer park. Instead, as an alternate way to show their geekability, every once in a while, as an airplane passed so far overhead that you could only make out the long white streak of its contrail, one of the guys would exclaim, "That's a Boeing 747," or "There goes a DC-10." I'd look at the contrail and do a meaningful "who cares" shrug of the shoulders. I knew nothing about airplanes, and didn't plan to learn anything about them. It is a bit ironic that I'm employed as a pilot today, while most of those guys have only gotten as close to a cockpit as Microsoft Flight Simulator will allow them.

Lack of foresight wasn't the only obstacle that I faced in the trek to my profession. As I began to consider a piloting career with the Air Force, I saw an assortment of barriers in my path. One question every pilot has to ask himself is: Do I have the ability, or the "Right Stuff" to be a pilot? The Right Stuff is that intangible knack for being able to fly and land an airplane in all conditions and situations. As Air Force pilots in training, we thought of the right stuff as flying the T-38 in three-foot "fingertip" formation while performing aerobatics (loops and rolls), or landing while in formation. Another problem was airsickness. Just how challenging is it to concentrate on your flight instruments while heaving into a barf bag? Not as challenging as trying to read those instruments through the goo when you miss the bag. The Right Stuff aside, the most difficult problem for me was getting to pilot training in the first place.

Two of the greatest obstacles I faced to stepping into a flight suit were my own parents. That's right—my parents, in that I didn't pick the right ones. Don't misread me here. My parents have always been of great encouragement to me, and except for the occasional wallop with the nearest available kitchen utensil, they are the finest a boy could have ever hoped for. The problem lies in their eyes. They can't see, at least not well enough to be pilots. I don't want to imply that they are blind, but Mom and Dad used to go around the house emitting high pitched squeaking noises to avoid colliding with the walls.

Squeaking is a fine method for finding one's way around the home, but it doesn't work very well in an airplane cockpit. Not that this mattered much to my mom, because she would just as soon take up cobra kissing as flying a supersonic airplane. My beef with my parents is that they had the nerve to pass on many of their visual maladies to me. This inheritance doomed me to spend much of my four years at the academy and most of my meager wages trying to fight genetic injustice.

I found out, late in high school, that my eyes weren't quite up to snuff. This discovery was directly responsible for my voluntary incarceration at the federal penitentiary in Colorado—the USAF Academy, because only the USAFA had a special waiver that allowed its new lieutenants with less-than-perfect 20/20 vision to attend pilot training. Knowing I was fated by my genes to wear goggles for the greater portion of my life, I plea bargained a four-year sentence and left for Colorado to seek excitement, adventure, and celibacy.

Soon after my arrival, I realized that I faced a great conundrum. My number one priority was to preserve my eyes; in other words, I didn't want to use them for any activities other than sleeping. However, the academy had different goals for my life—a life that they now owned. It wasn't so much the academic load. Any motivated person could complete each day's task in just under 39 ½ hours. The problem was that none of the textbooks were in Braille. It became apparent that the academy was intending to require me to use my eyes to pass some of my classes. Worse yet, I couldn't even sleep in class. Sleeping in class was one of my favorite high school pastimes. I even brought a pillow to my high school physics

class to avoid getting unfashionable desk imprints on my forehead, but at the academy, sleeping equaled demerits, and demerits meant no social life. Of course, threatening to take away your social life at the USAF Academy was kind of like threatening to take away driving privileges from a two-year old.

Not being one to sit around and be abused by bad genes, I decided to take whatever steps were necessary to salvage the unfair hand dealt to me by my insensitive parents. The first action I took was to acquire a book on restoring perfect vision to malfunctioning eyes. Why were all these people in the world wearing glasses and contacts? All they had to do was follow the simple instructions in this book, including the chapter on the benefits of staring directly at the sun (no kidding), and they would no longer need those cumbersome instruments of vision correction—they could trade their glasses and contacts in for a cane and a German Shepherd.

Giving up on that sort of modern day witchcraft, I decided to take a less ambiguous route and attack my eyes directly. The trauma I was to suffer in the ensuing months would prepare me well for my career in the Air Force, that is, if my career included being shot down, captured, and then tortured by having my eyes sliced open and salt dumped in them.

The instrument of destruction I chose is called Orthokerotomy. The way Ortho-K (as we veterans call it) works is to put specially made contact lenses in your eyes. These contact lenses appear to be the same as ordinary contact lenses. The only subtle difference you might notice while wearing them is that, while driving, you may find yourself seriously considering a head-on with a Mack truck just to relieve the agony.

The Ortho-K lenses are designed to smash the cornea flat, thereby curing nearsightedness, but also inducing insanity. I used to enjoy sleeping through classes in high school. With these lenses in place, sleeping in class was not even a distant dream. Sitting there with my eyes swollen and bloodshot, all I could think about was the bell ending each session. Between classes, I would sprint to the bathroom, eject the lenses, savor blessed relief for a moment, and then reinstall the contacts for the next class. Seven classes a day, five days a week, this scenario was repeated for the remainder of my freshman year and throughout my sophomore year.

Sometimes my eyes were so swollen I couldn't pop the lenses out by the normal method. For these extreme cases, I carried a small plunger. The plunger was supposed to latch onto the lens, allowing the user to pull it out of his eye. This method worked great, except for one time when, unbeknownst to me, my contact had slid off to the side of my eye. Already wincing in agony, I hastily pushed the plunger into my eye. With it firmly attached, I began to pull—pull my eyeball out, that is. The plunger was attached, not to the wayward lens, but directly to my eye. It's still kind of painful just remembering these sorts of incidents in life.

Although I was unable to sleep in class with the contacts in my eyes, that didn't prevent me from finding myself in trouble, accused of the very activity that I longed for, but could not participate in. Once, while sitting in the back of a mechanical engineering class, writhing in particularly intense pain, the teacher took notice of me. My eyes were almost shut from swelling. Seeing the narrow slits from which I peered, he warned me not to fall asleep in HIS class. There is no justice in life.

I managed to squint and squirm through two years of shear torture, courtesy of the Ortho-K profession. The only relief came during the summers. Suffering at the academy was one thing—that was expected whether I wore the lenses or not—but suffering while away on my meager vacations was out of the question. Wearing the lenses would destroy what little rest and relaxation I had, so during the summer, my lenses remained safely tucked away

in their little containers. My eyes appreciated the break and returned to their previously warped state. They also shed the inch thick calluses that had formed on their corneas as a defense against assault by the Ortho-K lenses.

During the summer between my sophomore and junior years, while attending the U.S. Army Airborne Jump School, I acquired my first car—a 1968 Camaro convertible. The Camaro was well received when I returned to Virginia, especially by the police. However, they didn't seem to appreciate the finer points of my well honed driving techniques.

I hadn't worn the Ortho-K lenses the entire time I was on my summer break, but I decided to wear the lenses for the long drive back to Colorado. During the 2,000 mile drive to the academy, my technique was simple: Never, ever, under any circumstances, allow another car to pass. If another car passed, that meant I was driving too slowly.

I discovered that I wouldn't notice the agony caused by the contacts when I was sufficiently distracted (working out, driving at 100 mph, open heart surgery, etc.). My high speed, nonstop (except when I plowed into a guardrail) drive back to the academy gave me plenty of distractions to keep my mind off of the contacts; this was not a good thing. It's similar to taking a Caribbean vacation on the very last day of winter when you're at your whitest, skipping the suntan lotion and spending the entire trip lying out in the sun, although much more painful.

An indication that something was amiss occurred after I removed the lenses for the first time in 14 hours. I was spending the night in the best motel I could find for about 10 dollars. I looked around and noticed that a thick fog had descended over the entire countryside, including that part of the countryside between the TV and my bed. "I'll just sleep it off," I thought, and I did, until about two a.m. At that time, I sat up and tried to open my eyes; I couldn't. The reason I couldn't was because there was a four inch knife penetrating each of my eyelids and running straight through my eyeballs, or maybe someone had melted my eyelids to my eyeballs with hot coals. I wasn't sure, but I really, really needed to drench my eyes in water, NOW!

I threw on my bathing suit and dove into the swimming pool that was just outside of my door. It was then that I realized that chlorine and serrated eyes are not a good combination. Fortunately, my underwater screams did not disturb the other guests. I crawled back into bed, only able to lie there with my eyes half closed.

The next day I arose to continue my drive to the academy with one minor obstacle to overcome—I couldn't see. Lucky for pedestrians, I could tell the difference between the road and a sidewalk, but when it came to other, less distinguished features, such as which side of the road I should be on, curves in the road, etc., I was clueless. On my way out I sat, perplexed, directly in front of a traffic light, unable to discern if it was red or green. Finally, I eased into the intersection, checking both ways for any giant blobs moving in my direction, and continued on my way.

After many close calls on the way back to Colorado, my Camaro and I finally crept into the academy parking lot. The next day, I was surprised to find that I could see 20/20! I had perfect vision! Of course, the scar tissue left by the Ortho-K lenses would leave me blind by the time I hit 50, but I didn't care. I was increasing my chances of getting into pilot training!

Unfortunately, I had to discontinue wearing the contacts because of my dear stepmother, the federal government. The powers that be decided to ban the use of Ortho-K lens wearing by cadets. If you ask me, they were being awfully picky. Apparently, some complaints from pilot training bases were finding their way back to the academy. Cadets

who had used the lenses to gain entry into pilot training decided that, now that their goal was achieved, there was no need to wear the lenses any longer.

Having experienced firsthand the agony inducing capacity of Ortho-K lenses, I could hardly blame those guys. However, some of them started out with vision close to 20/3000. Without the lenses, their eyes returned to an earlier deformed condition. Obviously, these nitpicky Air Force types wanted us to be able to see before *and* after our final eye exam. Some people are never satisfied. I suppose seeing far enough to know if your visor is up or down while flying in three-foot fingertip formation at 400 mph and landing at 200 mph might help the students' performance a little.

Instructor: "Nice formation flight, Joe.  
You got a little close to lead though."

Joe: "We were flying formation?"

Denied the privilege of suffering for two more years under the auspices of my contact lenses, I reverted to my patented "graduate without reading" program. In an effort to reduce my reading workload, I chose astronautical engineering as my major. Astronautical engineering was known as the second most difficult major at the academy, the most difficult being "How to Have a Social Life" with the minor "How to Find Women: They do Exist!"

Why would I choose a major so exciting that I declared publicly, "If I ever use this major to make a living, I'll shoot myself?" The answer is, in all seriousness, reading. To learn history, lots of reading is required, likewise with English, management, you name it. However, with a technical subject, all that is needed is to grasp the concepts. Grasping concepts should take only a minute or two, right? Luckily, no one was around to remind me of this rationale as I stared for endless hours at the lime green letters on a computer monitor, writing programs for a manned mission to Mars, tracking satellites, or my personal favorite, firing nukes at the Soviet Union.

Yes, I could have gone blind working in front of that computer. Worse, I could have become a bonafide, certifiable geek. What were the effects of soaking for two endless years in this spa of geekdom? At least the academy had a test to see how our eyes endured, but what of our social skills? They were perhaps lost forever, if they ever existed at all.

Of course, there was no sense in worrying about social skills that I would never need once I entered the "real" Air Force. It was rumored that half of the assignments given out at pilot training would be to the dreaded Northern Tier. Basically, all of the Northern Tier assignments in the Air Force are located north of the North Pole, only with fewer women. So, robbing us of any of our remaining social skills was not only a less than challenging task for the administrators at the academy, it was also a meaningless gesture, since those skills didn't have a snowball's chance in you know what of being used.

Still, pilot training for us cadets was the holy grail. We just HAD to get there and succeed. Without any further techniques for eye preservation available to me, I relied on the three weeks prior to my entry into Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT) at Columbus AFB, Mississippi, to provide them with the needed rest before the big exam. For those three weeks, I was assigned to the Military Police (MPs). I don't remember much about the work I did in that interim period. In fact, all I can remember is playing tennis and

waterskiing on the river with the boat my roommate and I purchased just as soon as we arrived. I suppose my eyes got as much rest as could be expected when a 21-year old is released from captivity for the first time in four years.

At last, the test came. There should have been the quintessential drum roll as I stepped up for my turn to read the eye chart. This was my true final exam before I was qualified to enter UPT. Four years of worry and agony summed up in this one moment. And.....

I couldn't read all of the letters on the line! I could make out only one or two. I tried all the techniques in my arsenal: the twisting, the squinting, but no way was I going to read them all. Goodbye, fighter jets, I was history. Then, I noticed that the administrator was looking at me with that, "You moron" look I'm so familiar with seeing. "That's the 20/15 line," he said. Yes! Requiring only a slight squint, I was able to read the 20/20 line above it. The entire episode was so brief and unceremonious that I could hardly believe it. That was all. My journey was complete. No more worries about my eyes. Once the Air Force had sunk a million dollars into my training, I was home free. I could go blind, but they could never get rid of me now!

Little did I know that my battle had just begun against the eyes my parents had given me. No longer would the Air Force Medical Hobby Shop (as we referred to the flight surgeons and their hospitals) be standing in the way of my dreams, now it would be evil airline personnel departments and the elusive standards of their medical examinations that would be my nemesis.

At this point, I had yet to hear about the airlines, but I was soon to find out. Shortly after I walked into the KC-10 squadron at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, I understood why it was referred to as "airline lead-in school." Almost everyone below the rank of colonel had just one thing on their minds: to be hired by a major airline. Everything revolved around this goal—how the flying time was divided, who went on night flights, and who could grab the trips with the most hours in the air. Most of the guys were members of Future Airline Pilots of America (FAPA), an organization with a monthly magazine that told how many, who, and why the airlines were hiring, not to mention the salaries. Of course, no one was leaving the Air Force for "the money" in the airlines; at least no one would admit to it, that would be greedy. When asked, "So, why are you going to the airlines?" The answer was never "money." The usual response was, "for the lifestyle," which, of course, has nothing to do with money.

Me: "Are you going to the airlines?"

Fellow Pilot: "Yep, I'm gonna take my wife and the kids and move into a brand new trailer park just as soon as I get hired. Now that's a step up in lifestyle."

Me: "Why don't you use some of that fat salary and buy a big ol' house?"

Fellow Pilot: “Because I’m not going to the airlines for the money.”

We even had a complementary airline interview library, complete with books stuffed full of notes from every interview since the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk. There were even memorized copies of some tests given by a few companies, in addition to the “approved solutions” for questionnaires like the MMPI psychobabble test, complete with stern warnings of impending failure if the testee failed to meet the required psychological profile: gullible and naïve.

Sample MMPI question:  
“Do people lie, steal and cheat?”

Answer: “No.”  
Evaluation: The subject is well  
adjusted and stable.

Answer: “Yes.”  
Evaluation: Don’t hire this  
misanthropic scum.

As I studied all of the information at my disposal, it became obvious that being hired by a major airline required nothing more than the body of Hercules, the mind of Einstein, the wisdom of Solomon, and the flying ability of Superman. After achieving the body of Hercules, only more muscular, I began working on the Einstein thing. However, deep down, I knew my vision still had to survive my six remaining years in the Air Force. I turned to Dr. Mary.

Several pilots had gone to Dr. Mary to correct their less-than-perfect vision. She assured me that by wearing the glasses she prescribed and performing the necessary exercises, my eyes would return to 20/20. As she sat there across from me, wearing trifocals, her eyes looking the size of grapefruits, the obvious irony never seemed to occur to her. I was back to voodoo, and my mentor was Witchdoctor Mary. The results were surprisingly phenomenal—for Dr. Mary’s bank account.

The first item on Dr. Mary’s list was to fit me with a new pair of glasses. The pair I currently owned had a prescription that was “entirely too powerful.” “Entirely too powerful” defined as, “You can actually see something.” The new pair of glasses Dr. Mary prescribed did three things. First, and most important, the glasses enabled a substantial transfer of wealth from me to Dr. Mary. Second, for distance vision, the glasses eliminated my ability to see anything further than 10 feet. As Dr. Mary explained, “You don’t want your eyes to become dependent on glasses.” Of course, how silly of me! Why had I been wearing glasses that worked, if I wanted to get rid of them in the first place? Third, for near vision, Dr. Mary equipped my glasses with the small reading segment like you see 90-year olds using. These segments transformed the clarity of my near vision into exactly the same clarity the glasses gave me for distant vision, or in other words, none. Personally, I think eye patches would have been a cheaper, one-size-fits-all alternative to these glasses.

Slowly, the picture was beginning to come into focus, but that was the only thing coming into focus. Dr. Mary was trying to implement my own patented method developed at the USAF Academy. Outside of her office, she didn't want me to use my eyes for anything, at least not for seeing. However, inside her office, Dr. Mary implemented a different plan. She had me strapped to various machines that took my eyes through a plethora of "exercises" designed to turn each of them into little Arnold Schwarzeneggers. These little Arnolds were supposed to force my eyes into seeing better, whether they liked it or not.

Unfortunately, for some reason unknown to accomplished scientists like Dr. Mary, my eyes refused to improve. However, one thing did improve—Dr. Mary's ability to evade my questions as to why she wore glasses as thick as a window on a submarine. Why didn't she just use her own tried-and-true techniques? After all of the cash she collected from shmucks like me, she could certainly afford to pay for the treatment. When I posed any sort of question of this nature, I experienced the distinct feeling that I was treading on forbidden ground. I was in the empress's court, she had no clothes (yuck!), and I was rude enough to point out that fact.

Fortunately for me, I was granted a pardon each time I made an inquiry—a pardon in the form of a lengthy stare from Dr. Mary's enormous tarantula-like eyes—and then, ignoring those inquiries completely, the empress would pretend that nothing had ever been said. We would press on to more important matters, such as the next and more expensive phase of my treatment.

After being relieved of hundreds of dollars, I gave up on Dr. Mary and all of her methods, except for the tried-and-true no reading technique that was the essence of Dr. Mary's plan anyway, only I could do that one far cheaper myself. It was tough, but I stuck to a disciplined routine of no reading, extra sleep, and plenty of television.

Confidently, I approached the impending airline interview process, certain that I could squeak by. Then, I heard about THE FORM. Every airline was going to require each candidate to sign THE FORM. This form was concerned with just one topic: Ortho-K. Wouldn't you know it, just like the Air Force, the airlines also wanted their pilots to be able to see and not just for the interview.

Each company's form was worded only slightly differently than this:

I, the undersigned, swear on the graves of my forefathers and foremothers that I have never, ever, ever been closer than two miles to an Ortho-K lens in my entire life and three subsequent past lives, and I certainly have never put one in my eyes. If I am found to be lying about any part of the above statement, I am liable for this action and may have my eyes removed by the Company for further examination. In addition, I acknowledge that there will be no way for at least one century that my application will pass any further with the Company, except to be used in a certain capacity in the washroom.

Sign Here \_\_\_\_\_

I hadn't worn an Ortho-K lens in almost a decade. How could I prove that I hadn't? Easy, I had evidence. I had passed the psychology test. If I passed the psychology test, I must be mostly sane, and if I am sane, then I couldn't have been wearing those lenses for the past 10 years; no person could without serious mental consequences.

However, no, that wasn't good enough; I had to sign this form or no airline job. As I conferred over this dilemma with a fellow pilot, he began to sing the theme song from the local truck driving school, as though that's where I was headed. "When you drive a truck...."

I began to rationalize. "C'mon, after 10 years, my eyes have no lasting effect from those lenses. I can sign the form." The choices were laid clearly out in front of me. I could sign the form and have a multimillion dollar career with a major airline, or I could be honest, write an explanation to the company, and start working on my truck driving skills. Here was my moral dilemma, or as Homer Simpson once put it, "Mora whata?" However, I'm not Homer; I just couldn't sign the form. Curse you, conscience! I wrote my explanation and left the interview depressed and far more anxious than when I had arrived.

However, there was the happy ending. I was hired, which is why I nearly shattered the eardrum of the lady who gave me the good news. How have my eyes done since then? I don't want to imply that I've let my eyes go since that fateful day many years ago, but I'd say that they've fared about as well as my cholesterol. Yes, we also had to pass a stringent cholesterol test. As a precaution, months before the interview, I cut all fat out of my diet. Unfortunately, I can't tell you what my cholesterol is today. It must have been fine back then, but approximately 300 gallons of Haagen Dazs and 600 pounds of chocolate later, who knows? I've never had it checked. Why should I? I've won life's lottery.