

THURSDAY, JULY 13, 2006

first person

Five years ago last Sunday, father-of-two Quentin Heron, 50, was one of 49 pilots sacked en masse by Cathay Pacific in a bitter industrial dispute. He explains why he and 16 other "49ers" have rejected a settlement to continue a costly legal fight against the airline.

“ I remember the last commercial flight I operated. It was a flight from Los Angeles on June 29, 2001. I remember it was rough as guts on the way in with lots of rainstorms all over the place, which we were dodging as best we could.

It was just one of those lovely, Hong Kong summer days when it rains like nothing on Earth. It is just what you train for. It is when all your ability and experience is put to use.

I had always wanted to be a pilot, ever since I was old enough to know what I wanted to be. My grandfather was in the Royal Flying Corps. My father was an airline pilot. I joined Cathay from US Airways and I had been with them for 11 years in July 2001.

I was a senior first officer and relief commander flying Boeing 747-400s. Today, I consider I've been with Cathay for 16 years – it's just that I haven't been paid for the last five years.

On July 9 I was on standby. I was sitting by my phone waiting to be called out on a flight. My standby ended at 4pm and, later, I ran into another Cathay pilot who said to me: "Have you heard? They've fired 49 pilots."

That was the first I heard of it. I said: "Really? Who are they?" But he didn't know. I'd still heard nothing the next day and I went back on standby.

I still had no idea I was one of them. On July 9 they had tracked down one 49er in Los Angeles and one in Toronto who was on leave, but they didn't even call me when I was on standby in Hong Kong.

It was only on July 11, on my day off, when I was out in Central, that my wife called me and said: "There's somebody outside the



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house from Cathay Pacific looking for you. He keeps asking if you live here.” Finally a package was put on top of the mail box outside my door and left there.

Before I returned home, I called crew control to ask: "What is my roster like for the next few days?" The crew controller said: "I can't see any roster for you."

Initially, the sense of justice is tangible. You go through a roller coaster of emotions – some days you are up, some days you are down. I had never, ever been warned that I had done anything that was wrong. I went to work. I did my job.

I was always thorough and professional. Why fire somebody for absolutely no reason? When you fire a man like that, you are not picking on him so much as on his family and children. I was 45 and even if I could find a serious airline that would hire me, at the age of 45 I was too old to start again.

Basically the end result was that they were putting an end to our careers. They had to know it.

Since 2001, I have made 20 to 25 applications to other airlines. The

biggest problem I have found is the damage done to my reputation by remarks that management made. The action the company has taken has damaged my reputation in the airline industry, and that industry is a small and tight-knit group.

I love flying and I miss it. It sets in after a few months when you realise you aren't getting airborne again. I haven't operated a commercial flight since and I have only flown once. But I will fly again when I am reinstated. For me, the motivation is justice and fairness and what is right. I believe I am going to be held to be right by the law. Are you telling me honestly Cathay Pacific will refuse to reinstate me when my case is legally proven? Why would they? They have reinstated plenty of others.

This fight will take as long as it takes. The truth will out. We are ready for this to go on as long as it has to go on.

It will come to a resolution. It will not ever just simply fade away.”

As told to Simon Parry