



## AN AVIATION ENTREPRENEUR GETS INTO SPACE

An interview with Martin Schröder, founder of Martinair

***The 80 years old Martin Schröder is not only a pilot and future astronaut, but also the entrepreneur who challenged airline monarch KLM in the late fifties, when he founded Martinair. We have an inspiring talk with Martin Schröder in his home in Noordwijk.***

***The living reminds visitors of Schröder's rich and respectable history, with the wall decorations including hunting trophies, certificates of distinction and pictures of many friends, including the late Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands. Enjoying the beautiful sea view, we learn how Martinair became an established household name and get insights in his preparations before going into space with the Dutch Company SXC.***

TEXT Elise Bavelaar, Jan Schneiders & Maarten Wormer, Students Aerospace Engineering

Before we get into the preparations for your space flight and the history of Martinair, let's start at the beginning. Where did your passion for flight originate and what was your first flying experience?

My parents and I lived near Schiphol and during the Second World War. I saw a lot of dogfights there. I was only 9 years old and still at elementary school, but even though you saw aircrafts being shot down, I was fascinated by the marvellous pieces of technology and told my dad that I wanted to become a pilot.

When I was 17 years old I joined the Air Force as their youngest pilot trainee. I had a great time there, but eventually they told me that when you are 30 years old, you cannot fly on a jet anymore. This meant I would end up in an office. This was not something for me and therefore I left. During my last 6 months at the Air Force I started developing aerial advertising.

Banner-towing was still very new back then. So I had to develop it myself. During

carnival I was perished with cold flying in a Tiger Moth for hours with a banner. But I thought I could conquer the world! It didn't work out that easily however, with my customers not being Unilever or Philips, but a local bakery – I flew with an 'Eat Roding's Bread' banner!

Where did you get the idea to go banner-towing?

I thought, well, why not? I always had a feel for advertising. When it is being done well, I find it very interesting. So I got the idea and constructed the banner. As I said, it wasn't easy though. Looking for a good contract, for almost a year I called and wrote the importer of Lexington cigarettes each week. 52 weeks in a row, without response. But suddenly he called and said: "You've bothered me for such a long time now, be here within an hour!" I went there immediately, but got a stone through my windshield and ended up being five minutes late. And I hate being late!

After punishing me, by letting me wait for an hour, he asked if I could fly in a formation of three. Cheerfully I answered yes, even though I had only one plane bought under a large debt! Why am I telling this? Well, this is one of those occasions where you really should have the wind in your sails. Back in my office I was called by the manager of the flight school. He asked: "Martin, can you use twelve Tiger Moth's, because the contract with the air force is running out?" I was delirious with joy! Suddenly I had the aircrafts and a 300 hour contract! That was the beginning. Later I developed air writing with smoke. I wrote, I don't know how many times, the name Lexington at 15,000ft.

It did not stay by advertising however. How did this develop into Martinair?

One always has to bear in mind that situations change. At a certain moment something reaches its maximum and then the interest decreases again. I kept thinking



Figure 1. Prince Bernhard performs a baptism of a new Martinair aircraft



Figure 2. In 1998 Martin Schröder left the company Martinair, succeeded by Aart van Bochove

about that about what to do next. Gradually I thought, why not make sightseeing flights from Schiphol? I started in a wooden office at Schiphol and made about 25 circuits above Amsterdam each day in a de Havilland Dove. Each time I tried to fly a minute less than the normal 20. On a yearly basis that adds up to a considerable amount!

At a certain moment I removed the seats and flew 750kg of flowers to Gothenburg. I continued doing that each night, except

grow. I believed in it, I wanted to go into the jet-age.

The first foreign destination was Palma de Mallorca, how did you end up there?

I did not want to fly only joy flights or transport flowers. I wanted to go into the holiday destinations with a DC3 I had bought. So I teamed up with a travel agency and we developed the all-in flights. They did not exist back then. I don't remember why the destination became Palma, but it is a

to stop at a certain moment. The minister then told me "Pa Martin, the first time you are back in Indonesia and you walk down the stairs, I line up all mothers with their Martina's, and then they will greet you with Welcome Papa!" I said "now I will not come anymore, this becomes to dicey for me!"

Let's do a little thought experiment. What would have happened if you got the opportunity to continue flying on jet aircraft, for example at KLM. Would you have re-

**"I've always told my former colleagues that they really should learn something next to their flight training."**

on Sunday nights. That's how Martinair started.

But when did you sleep?

I slept very little. I've slept little for my whole life actually. I could show up in the middle of the night in the maintenance hangar, to check how everything was going, because the show must go on! It's a sacred duty in which I believed. And that is the whole point! With a turnover of more twenty million I sold my shares in Martinair in 1964 for a trifling sum of money. But hypothetically, if I have to do it again tomorrow, I will do it again! I believed in the possibilities, and that is a lesson for all of you. You need to have perseverance. Money did not matter to me, I wanted to

nice destination, I have to say that. And then we also started flying destinations outside of Europe. Eventually we flew Hajji's. First 12,000 to Mekka. On the way back we flew 12,000 minus those who did not make it, plus the child birth on board. Remarkably, only on the return trip. That caused a whole lot of sensation on board of course. And they called the baby Martina, not Martin. Five of them were born. That was amazing of course; my wife always went to the Dessa, where the parents lived, with a basket full of baby clothes. Every year I had to go to the minister of religion, they have one there. They didn't call me Mister Schröder, but Pa Martin. We did those flights as long as possible, but because they shift 10 days each year and I could not miss the summer season we had

mained only a pilot?

No. That may sound strange. I love to fly; however, I always wanted to do something in addition. I've always tried my former colleagues to understand that they really should learn something next to their flight training. You could get a twig in your eye when you're playing with your kid and get you're declared unfit. Luckily some also went to law school, which they did not directly need, but one always has to think about the risks involved with a job.

So, you would have followed some sort of education next to your pilot training?

Yes, I have made an awful lot of round trips, but I wanted to participate in something

“When you are at the top of the business, you are pretty lonely, I can tell you that.”



Figure 3. The first office of Martinair was a wooden shed at Schiphol Airport



Figure 4. The hangar of Martinair was always full and crowded. Mechanics worked day and night to keep the airplanes up in the sky

more commercial, to build something up and also to learn how to coop with disappointments. That's something very important you know? I have a few major goals here. First of all, you have to run a business through good and bad times. Also, you have to have the guts to take risks. I still remember that during the times I was flying advertisements, I lost many friends, because they did not believe in the potential. However, when you are at the top of the business, you are pretty lonely as well, I can tell you that. But, more importantly, being an entrepreneur, it also means 'live and let live'. You never must be trying to be too smart, to squeeze your business relations. This is my great believe, you also have to be able to allow others their bit of luck. This greatly improves your business relationships, which you will need throughout your business.

Taking these goals in mind, were you a strict boss?

Yes, that is what they will all say. But it is true. I made strict appointments with my

staff, but you have to. I hate long meetings. To keep them short, I turned the heating down, that way; they never lasted longer than one hour! All employees had to be loyal and follow the company labour agreements, as I did. Stewardesses, who greeted passengers with 'hi', or 'bye', had a really hard time with me. Once, at 5AM in the morning, I checked two airplanes that should have been cleaned. As this was not the case, I was a bit grumpy. I went to the check-in area, to see if things were going smoothly there. On the way, I saw a captain and two co-pilots, waiting near check-in. Their hands in pockets and their jackets open. My philosophy is, you wear a uniform as prescribed, or you don't wear it at all! So I tapped the captain on his shoulder and told him that if I obeyed the CAO, he should as well. "Get your hands out of your pockets and button up!" They almost fell off the conveyer belt when they stammered: "B..but Mr. Schröder, we're not Martinair pilots!"

Anticipation on economic developments, can you give an example of this during

your time at Martinair?

Well, you also have to forecast developments. When we were at the break of the Golf war, I was in my office in Hong Kong. I was anxious; my gut feeling was not good, passengers were hesitant to fly. I called my Operations Manager in Holland and told him to immediately convert two DC-10's to freight configuration within only two days. 'But sir, that's impossible!' he replied. 'No nonsense, convert them!' I said before hanging up. This is a moment where luck struck again. An American General I knew called, at that exact moment: "Martin, are you still willing to operate for us?" I almost fell of my chair, completely astonished. Turned out he wanted us to operate an airlift for the US Air Force. That way, we suddenly had orders again. We flew day and night, medical equipment and tents. So it is very important to be flexible, to be able to adapt to the demand!

What advice should students really take to heart with respect to entrepreneurship?

In every company, whether it is an airline or a shoe factory, there should be a certain amount of discipline. In the end it all depends on your attitude. If you don't have a good attitude, you will not make it... Forget it. You have to be persistent; you have to search for possibilities. And that kind of attitude strongly differs per individual. Don't be like everyone else. You have to have guts, make sure you stand out.

Last spring, you reached the respectable age of 80. But word goes that in your mind you are much younger and you just cannot sit down! What is it that keeps you in that shape?

My great believe is that you can get older by always challenging your mind. You have to keep your mind in shape. I guide a small group of graduates who have a great technological concept. They developed a radar-warning system for airports, which can detect the kind of birds from 8 kilometres away! Technology wise, they are way above my league, but they seek my council in order to exploit this concept in a good way. How do you sell it, how do you write your business plan? The same I do for a small group of graduates who are developing a flying car. I just love it to share my knowledge; hopefully they can learn something from it! And of course, after coming back from my space flight, I would love to share my experiences with other people. I would really like to continue for a lot more years, even if I'm only able to sit on a chair. Even then I would still try to stay up to date and share my opinion.

You mentioned it already, the space flight. Being an ambassador for SXC, it means you are going to be one of the first 'normal' people going into space. When did you

first found out you were going into space?

In March or April I was on a cruise from Hong Kong to Athens together with my wife. Suddenly I received an e-mail from Ben Droste saying "Dear Martin... You're going into space! What do you think about that?" I directly went to my wife to tell her the good news, but apparently she already knew about this, because Ben Droste called her a while ago to get her permission to send me the e-mail. I couldn't believe I was going into space; I was absolutely thrilled about it! Off course, I didn't had to think about it very long so I sent Ben an e-mail right away to tell him I definitely wanted to go. Normally I don't kiss guys, but I also wrote him that I could almost kiss him for giving me this wonderful opportunity. I can't wait for 2014, I'd rather go tomorrow!

A fellow passenger and a good friend also heard I was going into space and told me she was really interested to go as well. She would love to be first female paying-passenger and she gave me her authorization to acquire a contract for her. And I did.

To be able to go into space you have to complete a special training program, including G-centrifuge Training Mission, a flight in the L-39 Albatross Jet and a Zero-G flight. Do you think you can cope with it all? Are you already preparing in some sort?

My wife motivates me to go to the gym. I'm also trying to go for a walk more often and I pay attention to what I eat to stay in a good shape. At the moment I'm still officially fit to fly, so I assume I will be able to become the oldest person ever in space if I behave myself for the next two years. And besides, the maximum amount of G's you have to cope with during flight is only 4.5. Everyone should be able to handle that. I was even able to handle a lot more G's a few years ago when I was fortunate enough to fly in a F-16 together with a safety pilot. During a dogfight simulation I accidentally exerted too much force on the joystick, which resulted in about 7 G's! At this moment I have high hopes they will put a dual control in it. That would be really amazing.



The initiative of SXC is definitely a step forward in the aerospace sector. As its ambassador, how do you see the future of this company and the aerospace sector?

I absolutely foresee major developments. I'm convinced that in the future not only Ben Droste of SXC and Richard Branson are going to offer flights to space, there are more possibilities you can think of. Just ask yourself the following question. Do you really think people are still nonstop flying with 747's to Hong Kong in 50 years?

Why not through space? 747's will eventually become outdated. That's not imagination, that's reality. We will be able to fly from A to B through space. The borderline between air- and space travel will dissolve. Ten years ago, you probably would not even thought about space tourism. Developments can go fast, that really fascinates me. It's going to happen. And that's where a big opportunity for students arises. All the opportunities lay ahead. Just be smart in making your decisions in which developments you are going to participate. ✈

#### SCHRÖDER'S LESSONS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP:

1. Stubbornness and passion, learning how to cope with disappointments.
2. Spreading of risks. Martinair operated in various branches: within Europe, intercontinental, freight and flying for other airlines.
3. Admit your own faults. Every year, Warren Buffet announced his 'blunder' of the year. Many people will always seek excuses.
4. Loyalty, integrity and honesty. Be personal to your people; be professional to your business partners. When Schröder was flying advertisements, he had one single friend, a true soul mate.
5. Sincerity. Clearly state your intentions. At Martinair, twice a year a complete discussion on the course of the company was given.
6. Decisiveness and leadership. A very important aspect. Schröder truly believes in management by walking around.