Hersman Speech Focuses on Pilots—Past, Present, and Future

Deborah Hersman, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), provided the keynote speech for the closing session of the 57th ALPA Air Safety Forum prior to its awards banquet. “This is my eighth Air Safety Forum and it is a privilege to address so many individuals—and an organization—that do so much for aviation safety,” she said.

“Throughout your history, ALPA has advocated and helped achieve improvements in the cockpit such as ground proximity warning systems, weather radar on aircraft, collision avoidance systems, and so much more,” Hersman told the crowd.

The second-term NTSB chair reflected on the conditions and events 80 years ago, which led ALPA to become a leading aviation safety advocate and to propose the creation of an independent five-member safety board to investigate accidents and make safety recommendations. She exclaimed, “What a great idea! Five individuals, combining their talents to make a formidable team for improving transportation safety . . .

“In our business at the NTSB, we see bad outcomes,” said Hersman, adding, “Every year I look forward to seeing line pilots recognized for good outcomes in the face of challenging situations.”

Hersman then shifted the focus of her presentation to what it will take to prepare the next generation of pilots. “As we look forward to the next 80 years, how do each of you, as professionals and leaders in the industry, instill that same passion in the next generation of safety professionals?” she rhetorically asked.

In remembering accidents like the one involving 2009’s Colgan Flight 3407, Hersman emphasized that it will take training, teamwork, and sound decision making and leadership to adequately prepare tomorrow’s pilots. “I opened my remarks talking about the past, when aviation’s biggest challenges were more clear-cut—improving equipment, developing standardized procedures, and staying clear of terrain. Today’s challenges are more subtle safety obstacles: automation, complacency, and distractions,” she said.

Hersman concluded, “It’s really up to you—today’s pilots, today’s ALPA members—to help build the new generation, one pilot at a time. While you are in the left seat make the right choice. Mentor those who are following you. You are the most powerful teachers. While you are flying, model professionalism through your training, teamwork, and leadership. Pass it forward.”