Just three years ago, many industry observers had shut and locked the door on ASTAR airlines. Today, although the airline is still struggling and the number of pilots has diminished, the pilots are pulling together to save their airline, their jobs, and their careers.

“After that difficult year in 2008, and seeing so many of our friends and colleagues furloughed, the pilots had to really consider where we were going,” says Capt. George Chetcuti, the pilot group’s Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman. “The choice before us was very simple: We all pull together—both pilots and management—to save our company or watch the last of our flying disappear.”

The pilots decided that it was the time to put aside the notion of management versus pilots and start seeing everyone as a part of ASTAR. The MEC took the approach of finding solutions to problems. Working closely with company executives and ALPA staff, the pilots have sought new revenue streams, suggested new ideas, and are looking toward a new future.

“We aren’t just sitting across the table with management as we have done in the past when negotiating a contract,” continues Chetcuti. “We are sitting on the same side—management, pilots, and ALPA. We’ve been able to use the full range of ALPA resources to help craft new solutions—from legal perspective to economic analysis. It’s a collaborative effort to think outside the box so that we can continue to come to work at ASTAR. For many of us, this is the only operation we’ve flown for, and we’re determined to keep the airline in business. And working with management as a partner is the only way we can do this.”

The road ahead will be rough and long. In 2009, ASTAR boasted an extensive fleet of aircraft, including 6 A300b4 freighters, 29 B-727-200Fs, 8 DC-8-73Fs, and 1 Bell 206 L-1. Today, only the DC-8s remain on the property. These workhorses of the cargo industry carry a maximum of 109,000 pounds of cargo. Although originally designed to be passenger airliners, by 2000 ASTAR was mainly using the DC-8s for cargo with very few exceptions.

Just as the fleet has shrunk, so, too, has the pilot group. When the group signed its landmark contract in 2008, the airline had more than 500 pilots. Today, just 84 remain—28 captains, 28 first officers, and 28 second officers. “Although there are fewer of us than ever before in our history, we are committed to keeping this airline going, and hopefully building it back to what it was just a few short years ago,” says Chetcuti. “We are fortunate that ASTAR is a privately held company, so we are immune to any shareholder demands for immediate profit. Instead, our management and our owners have shown the same level of commitment to this airline that every pilot on the property has demonstrated time and time again.”

Operating out of their main base in Cincinnati, Ohio, the pilots fly mainly for DHL, a Germany-based international shipping company, and another important client—the U.S. Air Force. Under contract to the U.S. Department of Defense, ASTAR pilots fly to military bases and carry cargo to help the military efforts.

The relationship with DHL goes far back to the very inception of ASTAR. Originally, the airline was called DHL Airways. Deutsche Post bought DHL in 2002 and absorbed it into the company. Federal regulations prohibiting foreign ownership of any U.S. airline forced Deutsche Post to sell the airline in 2003 to a private investment company, headed by ASTAR’s current CEO, John Dasburg. In 2007, DHL—ASTAR’s main client—bought 49 percent of the company, only to again divest its holdings in 2010, selling back its stock to ASTAR and its investment team.

As the pilots navigate through 2012, they know it will not be easy. They will continue to have an uphill battle to save the airline. However, now that the pilots are working alongside management and investors to create a new future for ASTAR, the horizon is looking a bit brighter.

Capt. Matthew Rubin takes his last flight as an ASTAR pilot with F/O Brent Covey.