American Eagle

Pilots Poised for Great Change

By Capt. Richard Krutenat, American Eagle Communications Committee Chairman

American Eagle pilots are entering the final 2 years of a 16-year contract signed in 1997. They expect 2011 to be a year of great change. The long-term agreement was designed to bring about stability and put an end to the whipsawing of American Eagle pilots by joining four separate carriers serving American Airlines (AA): Executive, Flagship, Simmons, and Wings West. Included in the 16-year contract were three contract amendment rounds. The agreement was signed just months after ratifying a four-party agreement with ALPA, the Allied Pilots Association (APA), AA, and American Eagle that provided furlough protection for AA pilots in the form of RJ captain positions. This same agreement gave Eagle pilots a way to obtain AA seniority numbers, allowing them to “flow through” to the mainline when AA was hiring.

“No one could have known that the most traumatic decade in U.S. airline history was right around the corner,” says Capt. Tony Gutierrez, the pilots’ Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman. “9/11 and substantial furloughs at AA brought a host of grievances and arbitrations. No one imagined a scenario and the resulting ramifications of a flow-back/flow-through arrangement during simultaneous AA pilot furloughs and a growth cycle at American Eagle.”

The Eagle MEC has spent the better part of a decade fighting to protect the Eagle pilot group while preserving the flow-through rights of Eagle pilots holding AA seniority numbers. At times, it has been an uphill battle.

Now, the Eagle pilots are at a crossroads. On one hand, AA may be on the verge of a prolonged period of pilot recalls. There remain approximately 450 Eagle pilots with AA seniority numbers who may find themselves in AA training classes in 2011. Additionally, due to a recent arbitration, another 824 Eagle pilots will have preferential hiring status when AA is unable to fill its classes with AA furlough recalls.

On the other hand, it appears that AMR Corporation, the parent company of AA, is still intent on divesting Eagle. Many Eagle pilots are concerned a divestiture could signal a future of AMR reverting back to whipsawing its regional feeders, just as it did in the mid-1990s. This will be a major factor for many Eagle pilots in their decision to stay with Eagle or go to AA.

Other Eagle pilots wonder if AMR is looking for ways to “creatively” address AA’s scope clause, which is the most restrictive among legacy airlines, by divesting Eagle and increasing its use of codesharing. If successful, evading AA’s scope clause in that manner would hurt Eagle pilots, AA pilots, and the airlines they work for.

“The Eagle MEC strongly believes that this is a perfect time for AA mainline and Eagle regional pilots to come together and make a stand for the future of the flying profession at American Airlines,” Gutierrez says. “Any AA pilot can look across the ramp at Chicago O’Hare and see the proliferation of regional airlines that are flying routes formerly flown by AA pilots. This MEC understands the emotion that runs deep for AA pilots who have seen their careers stalled. However, this may be the time to take the lead in the industry and craft a new solution to the problem of pitting mainline pilots against regional pilots.”

The Eagle MEC believes that together with AA pilots it can present a competitive business plan that will address scope issues, career expectations, and job security for both pilot groups, and will also give AMR a competitive edge in the industry.

EGL at a Glance

Pilots Joined ALPA: 1995 (although Simmons had been an ALPA member since 1986, after the NMB’s 1995 ruling that the four predecessor airlines constituted a single carrier, the Eagle pilots established a single MEC)

Number of Pilots: 2,857

Pilot Domiciles: Chicago, Dallas/Ft. Worth, Los Angeles, Miami, New York JFK and LGA, and San Juan, PR.

Operations: More than 1,700 daily flights to more than 150 cities throughout the United States, Canada, the Bahamas, the Caribbean, and Mexico

Headquarters: Ft. Worth, Tex.

Fleet: 39 CRJ700s, 118 EMB-145s, 59 EMB-140s, 18 EMB-135s, 39 ATR 72s