America's oldest regional airline, Mesaba Airlines, began transporting passengers within northern Minnesota in 1944. Originally founded as a private company with only a few small prop aircraft, the airline expanded steadily throughout its 67-year history to become Delta Air Lines' largest operator of 76-seat CRJ aircraft.

Mesaba's history includes flying as an independent carrier with no major airline affiliation, starting and then spinning off AirTran Airlines, and operating flights for Delta Air Lines, Northwest Airlines, and Republic Airlines. Mesaba pilots have had many successes throughout their history but have also had to overcome many challenges along the way.

Among those challenges: Mesaba pilots narrowly averted a strike during their 2004 contract negotiations, faced management threats of downsizing or elimination as a consequence of the holding company's acquisition of "alter-ego" Big Sky, and endured a 2006 "sham" bankruptcy.

Currently, the Mesaba pilots are in the process of merging with Pinnacle Airlines and Colgan Airlines. Throughout Mesaba's rich but turbulent history, its pilots have successfully turned challenges into opportunities to strengthen the pilot group, with the result being one of the best pilot contracts in the regional airline industry.

The pilots' Master Executive Council (MEC) and their counterparts at Pinnacle and Colgan took a similar strategic approach after Pinnacle Airlines Corporation announced the merger. They analyzed the company's business plan, identified potential leverage points, and extracted as much value as possible for the pilot group while helping to build a strong, profitable airline and achieve an industry-leading collective bargaining agreement.

Working as one unified pilot group, the collective MECs were able to achieve key job security provisions to prevent management from whipsawing one group against another by requiring that all flying performed for the holding company is done under the new tentative agreement. By pooling their resources quickly after the merger was announced, the Pinnacle, Mesaba, and Colgan MECs established a Joint Negotiating Committee that was able to reach a tentative agreement on a joint contract in record time. "One Contract, One List, One Voice" was and remains the goal of pilots at the combined airline.

The tentative agreement on a joint contract was a huge accomplishment and a major milestone in the merger process. The three MECs met in mid-January to discuss the merits of the tentative agreement as a group. Shortly thereafter, each MEC met separately and each unanimously approved sending the TA to the combined pilot group for membership ratification.

If the pilots ratify the agreement, the seniority list integration process calls for a final list by early May 2011. Once a new integrated seniority list is final, the three MECs will become one. This will mark the end of the Mesaba pilots' MEC.

Current plans are to transfer all existing Mesaba turbojet aircraft (60 CRJs in total) to the Pinnacle Airlines, Inc., certificate and move all Colgan aircraft to the current Mesaba certificate. The three MECs intend to make the transition as seamless and simple as possible for the entire pilot group.

Although Mesaba and the pilots' MEC will cease to exist as a stand-alone entity later this year, there is no doubt that the Mesaba legacy will continue to thrive within the pilot group.

"We are confident that we can turn the new challenges that lie ahead into opportunities, not on our own as Mesaba pilots but as Pinnacle Corporation pilots working cooperatively with our ALPA brothers and sisters at Pinnacle and Colgan," says Capt. Mark Nagel, the Mesaba pilot group's MEC chairman.

### MSA at a Glance

- **Founded:** 1944
- **Pilots Joined ALPA:** 1987
- **Number of Pilots:** 1,092
- **Headquarters:** Eagan, Minn.
- **Pilot Bases:** Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn., Memphis, Tenn., and Detroit, Mich.; La Guardia, N.Y., base is also being created
- **Operations:** Named after an Ojibwa word that means "soaring eagle," Mesaba flies to 64 cities in the U.S. Midwest, East, and Southeast as a subsidiary of Delta Air Lines. In 2011, the airline will also begin operating service out of LGA for US Airways
- **Fleet:** 19 CRJ200s, 41 CRJ900s, 29 Saab SF340s

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**Mesaba Pilots: Turning Challenges And Threats into Strengths and Opportunities**

By F/O Zohrab Grigorian

Mesaba Communications Committee Chairman

**Capts. Aaron Busch and Greg Wertz in Minneapolis – St. Paul.**