Pinnacle Airlines pilots celebrated Christmas early this year when the Pinnacle-Mesaba-Colgan Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) reached a tentative agreement (TA) on a joint collective bargaining agreement. Pinnacle pilots look to 2011 as the year they start receiving the increased wages and benefits of a new contract that has eluded them for nearly 6 years.

“This TA marks the end of nearly 6 long years of contract negotiations for Pinnacle pilots,” says Capt. Scott Erickson, the pilots’ Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman. “The terms of the new joint TA reward the tireless dedication of the Pinnacle pilot group with a contract that lifts the profession, and it will clear the way for us to join our brothers and sisters at both Mesaba and Colgan to form one of the world’s largest contract carriers.” The TA includes significant improvements in all cornerstone areas of the contract, including job security, compensation, benefits, and quality-of-life provisions.

This past year started off with Pinnacle pilots entering their fifth year of contract negotiations hopeful and optimistic that an industry-standard contract was within reach. In 2009, after a majority of the pilots voted down a TA that included many contractual improvements, the pilots were eager to address the problem areas in key sections of the failed TA. After consulting with the National Mediation Board (NMB) in February, the two sides reentered unmediated talks to work through as many unresolved issues as possible before reengaging the NMB. The parties made solid progress on a successor contract, but a full contract was still just out of reach. In June, the talks moved to Washington, D.C.; and after 3 long days of intense negotiations, no agreement was reached. The NMB representatives indicated that additional negotiating sessions would not be reconvened until 2011.

“Pinnacle pilots saw our share of ups and downs this year,” says Erickson. “Yet through it all, we have remained professional, consistently providing top-notch service and maintaining a safe, secure flying environment for our passengers.”

On July 1, Pinnacle Airlines Corporation, which owns Pinnacle Airlines, Inc., and Colgan Air, announced the purchase of Mesaba Airlines. While the news came as a surprise to the Pinnacle pilots, they remained steadfast in their desire to continue their quest for a successor TA.

The Mesaba purchase brought a renewed energy to Pinnacle Airlines, which started hiring pilots in August—the first new hires since 2008. Once released to flying, the new hires (comprised initially of Mesaba furloughed pilots per a memorandum of understanding signed after the Mesaba purchase) brought much-needed relief to the understaffed and overstressed Pinnacle pilots. At the same time, Pinnacle announced the opening of a new domicile at New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Shortly thereafter, the Pinnacle, Mesaba, and Colgan MECs submitted a proposal to Pinnacle Corporation for a three-party integration, and Pinnacle, Mesaba, and Colgan pilots stood united in their goal of “One Contract, One List, One Voice.” The JNC began intense, expedited contract talks with management in early September.