

Winter of Our Discontent

By Capt. Duane Woerth, ALPA President



“These are times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”
—Thomas Paine

In the winter of 1777, a ragged collection of colonial militiamen marched, rode, or stumbled to a temporary home at Valley Forge, Pa. The thousands under Gen. George Washington’s command had waged several battles against British regulars since even before independence was declared on July 4, 1776. They had won a few, drawn a couple, and lost several. They had learned several lessons in that first year of war:

- Defeating a large, professional army requires more than courage. To win, they had to transform themselves from untrained militias into a true army.
- They could win only by working as one. They had to be a Continental Army, not a collection of provincial units.
- Victory required great sacrifice.

The Continental Army that emerged six months later was lean, well trained, and steeled for the campaigns to follow. They had used their time at Valley Forge not to rest, but to prepare for an uncertain future. In the years after, that army followed a path that led through many bloody fields until the British surrendered at Yorktown, Va., in 1781.

For the last few years, many blows have hit the U.S. airline industry. The events of Sept. 11, 2001, were the first, followed by interest rate stagnation, a heavy ticket tax burden, the loss of control over air fares, exploding fuel costs, and so on. However, by far the most severe blows have come through the bankruptcy courts. The latest blows came on Sept. 14, 2005, when Delta and Northwest filed for bankruptcy, after the bankruptcies of numerous other airlines whose pilots ALPA represents. By unofficial count, more than half of U.S. seat capacity is now operating under the so-called protections of the bankruptcy process.

In a real sense, we are in our Valley Forge—we have suffered through significant job losses, pay cuts, work rule changes, and the shattering of our retirement security. We have spent the last years fighting battles with all we had. We have won a few, drawn a couple, and lost several. You know that these are tough times to be an airline pilot. Pilots are tired, and they are tired of bad news.

Our members often ask me what ALPA is going to do to



address the situation. The answers are difficult to find, but if I had to sum them up in three tenets, here they are: We must

- continue to vigilantly protect the interests of all pilots through aggressive enforcement of our contracts and preparation for opportunities to negotiate;

- work to unify the profession, both by getting pilot groups to work together and by organizing non-ALPA pilots; and
- spare no effort in helping to elect federal officials who support our industry and labor.

No mystery or magic is involved. Get on board with

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one or more of these issues, and you can make a difference, and we can strengthen the profession. If we stand still or move backward, we will suffer. While we toil in our Valley Forge, I will continue to drive every aspect of our union to move on these three fronts.

What sustains me during this brutal time is the amazing record that airline pilots have established over the decades. That faith is strengthened by one fact: You continue to do your jobs with enviable professionalism, flying millions of passengers and tons of cargo safely, day after day. What you contribute to the economic health of our nations may not be properly valued right now, but you have preserved the one precious resource essential to recovery—a profession of skill and excellence.

I cannot tell you when our Valley Forge will be over. Will we look back at the America West-US Airways merger, and the incredible efforts of those two pilot groups, as the first light at the end of the tunnel? Will we recall the successful Polar strike, which led to a double-digit percent pay raise, as another ray of growing light? I do not know. I do know that you are neither sunshine patriots nor summer soldiers. You are the hardened core of this profession. Thomas Paine would have saluted you all, and I could not be more proud to be your President.