

Tall, tanned, and confident, Capt. Herb Hunter (United) personifies the image of an airline pilot. Since his days as a shy youngster in Seymour, Ind., Capt. Hunter always had an idea of how an airline captain should conduct himself.

"I've always felt a responsibility to the uniform," says Capt. Hunter. "Maybe it's because I've dreamed of being an airline pilot since I was five years old. I'd see somebody in that uniform, and I knew that was exactly what I wanted to do."

For Capt. Hunter, the responsibility of wearing the uniform goes beyond the doors of his cockpit. A winning attitude and a healthy work ethic, along with a love of aviation, have helped Capt. Hunter become a goodwill ambassador of aviation to millions of aviation enthusiasts in Chicago and across the Midwest.

Each summer, Capt. Hunter stands on a platform before throngs of people, describing daredevil maneuvers of some of the top show pilots in the United States. For the past 18 years, he has served as the voice of the Chicago Air and Water Show, billed as the largest running event of its kind in the world. The event draws crowds of 1 million to 1.2 million a day during its 2-day annual run, and it allows Capt. Hunter to shine in a venue that seems designed for him.

"All I do is try to make the show better," said Capt. Hunter, whose enthusiasm and knowledge of aviation serves as a terrific teaching tool for the many youngsters—and adults—who attend the show each summer. "The pilots in their airplanes are the stars of the show. I am there to make it better by adding to the performance the pilots are putting on."

Billed by some as a "walking encyclopedia" for aviation, Capt. Hunter, with his unending passion—displayed by his waving arms and the



Herb Hunter: Goodwill Ambassador for ALPA and the Profession

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infectious smile that accompanies him as he describes the daring maneuvers throughout the show—brings an element of drama and entertainment to each show.

"So many people know more about airplanes than I do, it's not funny," says Capt. Hunter, who serves as news media spokesman for the United Master Executive Council. "It's not that I know so much about aviation, but my ability to relate what I know on a level that people can understand," he says.

Capt. Hunter has become somewhat of a celebrity to many air show enthusiasts. To them, he is the Chicago Air and Water Show.

"Every now and then, I'll be talking to someone about the Air and Water Show, and all of a sudden they start referring to me," says Capt. Hunter, whom Air Show attendees often recognize. "They just don't realize I'm him. I'm a symbol to these people who love this show. But I'm just the guy

who helps them understand some of the things they are seeing.

"Some people sit in the same spot every year. One lady comes every year, gets a different program, and has me autograph it," he recalls. "She's done this for as long as I can remember. For that one weekend in the year, I make a difference in that one woman's life. It makes me feel special to these people. It means something. For all of us, it's important for us to feel we make a difference."

Capt. Hunter's contributions go beyond the throngs of people who fill Chicago's North Shore Beach each summer for the Air Show. Air Show participants consider him one of their own. That's quite an honor for someone who doesn't fly in the show. Last year during the show, the U.S. Army's Golden Knights Parachute Team presented an honorary "baton" to Capt. Hunter, who served in the Strategic Air Command and Air Combat Command with the U.S. Air Force and Illinois National Guard for 21 years before retiring as a lieutenant colonel in late 1991 after Desert Storm. The Golden Knights, passing the baton



from one another during their 11,000-foot fall, presented it to a surprised Capt. Hunter after their pinpoint landings.

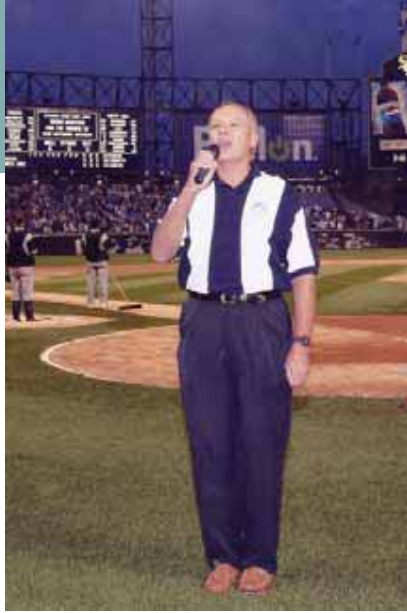
The one constant Capt. Hunter maintains throughout each show is the deep-rooted reminder that he is first and foremost an ALPA pilot. He knows, regardless of what he is saying and wearing, people look upon him as a professional airline pilot.

"I do feel I have a responsibility to look and perform the way I believe the public thinks an ALPA pilot should," Capt. Hunter says. "When I stand up on the podium at the Air Show and am introduced as an airline pilot, that means something to me."

While the pride of wearing the wings never diminishes for Capt. Hunter, the uncertainty and frustrations he and his United co-workers have experienced during the airline's journey through Chapter 11 bankruptcy over the past 32 months has produced a new wrinkle. The 27-year United veteran not only has experienced his share of pay cuts, lost pension, and drastic changes to his work rules, he has also had to commute for the first time in his career. Since United's Miami domicile was closed, Capt. Hunter has flown out of Chicago O'Hare.

Does the worry and stress that comes with an uncertain future affect Capt. Hunter in the cockpit and on stage?

"Despite the turmoil that has been going on at United and within our profession, even some things in my personal life, these are things a pilot can escape in his work," he says. "When I'm flying airplanes, like all pilots who by nature are task-oriented, I try putting that stuff behind me. It's the same way with doing an air show. For that week in Chicago, everything about me is thrust into the show. I use it as an escape. Being on stage in front of a mi-



FACING PAGE: Capt. Herb Hunter (United) has served as the Voice of the Chicago Air and Water Show for the past 18 years.

ABOVE: Last summer, Capt. Hunter sang the national anthem at the start of a Chicago White Sox game.

crophone or in front of a camera allows me to escape from reality. The rest of the world doesn't exist. Just the people and the show exist. Then, at the end of the week, I'm drained because I've put all I have into it. Now, the following Monday, I have to come back and face the real world."

That real world has been anything but joyous over the past few years for Capt. Hunter. The most difficult episode was the death of his 29-year-old son, Matt, who died in July 2003, an event that continues to affect him.

"It changed everything," Capt. Hunter says. "I'm not the same person I was. I think we as humans endure different kinds of loss and pain and we adapt to it. But the fact is, no parent should ever have to bury his or her child, and getting past that has been very hard for me. I would be lying if I said it didn't change me, probably forever. Part of me will never be the same.

"It just seems like it's been four years of constant turmoil," he continued, referring to the 9/11 tragedy, the

economic turmoil at United that led to the airline's filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, the closing of his domicile, and the death of his son. "So I love the escape I get from announcing air shows, being there and seeing the people smile, knowing that it means something to someone that I'm there, knowing that I make somewhat of a difference."

Capt. Hunter's vocal talents have taken him beyond the airshow arena. Last summer, he sang the national anthem at a Chicago White Sox game. A part-time actor, he has played bit parts in a number of television shows. He was cast for a recurring role in a new Star Trek venture, which has not yet been picked up.

Capt. Hunter has obviously overcome the shyness that marked his childhood.

"It's like flying airplanes," he says of announcing air shows and singing in front of thousands. "You just have to stop thinking about what you're about to do and just do it. That's one thing pilots do. It's like going on a checkride. Sometimes you don't sleep the night before. But you then just get in the simulator and just do it. The same can be said in announcing air shows and singing the national anthem. You just have to put the pressure behind you. If you let that worry you too much, you can't do the job."

With the demands of flying for United and doing ALPA work, does Capt. Hunter have any plans of slowing down?

"I can't imagine not doing the Chicago Air and Water Show," he says. "I'm sure it will come to an end someday. But I just can't imagine not being involved with this."

Neither can the crowds of Chicagoland Air Show enthusiasts who have come to welcome Capt. Hunter—ALPA's goodwill ambassador—as a big part of their summer ritual. ●