



# Island Air Pilots Play Key Role in Airline's Growth

By Doug Baj, Communications Supervisor

**O**n a balmy spring morning in Honolulu, elected officials, reporters, and other VIPs gather next to the Island Air hangar at Honolulu International Airport. They are there to catch a glimpse of the rebranded, new-look Island Air and its signature airplane, the Bombardier Dash 8-Q400.

On this day, Capts. Chris Colburn and Chris Hutton, accompanied by reporters, will pilot the inaugural flight from Honolulu to Maui for a fly-by and then back to Honolulu in what will be the first flight of the Q400 flown by an ALPA pilot.

From Island Air's new airplane livery and new color schemes to a new CEO and management team, the airline and its pilots are making radical changes to Island Air's image and the way it does business, presenting itself as more independent and confident. And the MEC chairman, Capt. Jimmy Rabino, who flies the Q400, likes what he sees and expects that the changes will have a positive effect on his pilot group as they look toward Section 6 negotiations in 2007.

Capt. Rabino, known simply as "Jimmy" by most of his fellow pilots, has seen the pilot group more than double in the 3-plus years he's been flying with Island Air. "When I first began flying at Island Air in August 2002, we had about 45 pilots and four airplanes.

"Today," he says, "we have almost 100 pilots, and we will likely increase that number by 20 percent before the year end as we will then be flying 14 airplanes."

Positive change has taken place throughout the airline since Garvanie, LLC, bought it in 2004 and subsequently hired Rob Mauracher as CEO in 2005. The change has been marked by the airline's commitment to growth, as evident from

the increased number of pilots and the purchase of three 78-seat Q400s that will be operational by the end of 2006. The stretched turboprops offer the pilot group higher pay and the opportunity

to fly a larger airliner. The airplanes are also ideal for the Hawaiian environment.

"Turboprops, and the Q400 in particular, are perfect for the rough terrain and unpredictable weather changes we experience in the Islands. They are also great airplanes for our many special-operations airports—those with mountains on three sides and those with other terrain challenges," says Capt. Rabino.

Equally important, the addition of the Q400 has given existing pilots the opportunity to fill vacancies for this flying. At press time, 12 current captains and nine first officers had been trained to operate the Q400, with another six captains and six first officers training to fly the second airplane, due in May. An additional four to six captains and first officers will fill vacancies when the third airplane comes on line in December.

The new flying also has meant that new pay rates and work rules had to be negotiated and amended to the cur-



Capt. Chris Hutton (Island Air) inspects one of his airline's rebranded airplanes, their new Bombardier Dash 8-Q400.

PHOTOS: HUGH GENTRY



Capt. Chris Hutton, left, and Capt. CJ Colburn (both Island Air) prepare for the airline's inaugural flight of the Dash 8-Q400, from Honolulu to Maui and back.

rent contract. Enter ALPA and the pilots' Negotiating Committee. Bargaining for the Q400 pay rates took place in December 2005 and lasted only a couple of weeks. Through persistent negotiations led by the Negotiating Committee chairman, Capt. Rocky Ricarte, and contract administrator John Dean, ALPA was able to attain pay rates for the turboprop that are competitive with rates at other carriers that fly 70-seat small jets. The signed Letter of Agreement also included opportunities for pay rate increases based on certain load factors.

The new ownership also gave the pilot group and the airline a clean break from Aloha Airlines. Island Air joined ALPA in 1989 as Aloha Islandair, a subsidiary of Aloha Airlines, flying DHC-6 Twin Otter interisland flights under a code-sharing agreement with Aloha. Under that agreement, the airline as a feeder for Aloha and was restricted to what airports it could serve—usually the smaller ones.

Not until 1995 did the airline get its first 37-seat Dash 8, ushering in a new era of service. But even then, the pilots had limited growth opportunity, and most left the airline within a year or two of their hire date. Many of them moved over to Aloha, attracted by larger airliners and the opportunity to fly routes to the Mainland. Those senior pilots who stayed with Aloha Islandair did so mainly because of the Hawaiian lifestyle they enjoyed and to which they had become accustomed.

These days, pilots are staying longer because Island Air is simply better as a place to work. The MEC has a good working relationship with Mauracher, who since joining Island Air as CEO in February 2005 has increased the workforce by 50 percent and has expanded the airline's routes to all major airports in the state of Hawaii.

The Island Air pilots are also becoming more involved within the ALPA community. The pilot group is more unified than ever and is committed to making the union more structured and professional as the airline grows. The MEC has made a point to expand the committee structure and include and encourage pilots to get involved in ALPA volunteer work. For instance, they have included a young first officer on the Negotiating Committee and have actively encouraged many younger captains to get involved in ALPA work on behalf of the pilot group.

Capt. Rabino says that his vision is to develop a "lead-

ership pipeline" within the pilot group to combat the turnover that still exists as pilots gain experience necessary to move on to larger airlines. He has indicated that he wants to develop a continual flow of capable, knowledgeable volunteers who are involved in union business and will contribute to a stronger union.

Despite the progress made by Island Air pilots—the smallest U.S.-based ALPA pilot group—the 2007 negotiations will be more involved than the previous two rounds, in 1999 and 2004. In 2004, with Hawaiian tourism (and load factors) down, and a newly independent Island Air, negotiations focused on modest economic improvements, such as an improved 401(k) plan with a mandatory company match.

This time around, the MEC and Negotiating Committee believe that the contract needs to evolve as the company evolves. "With the company firmly established as an independent, financially sound airline, there's no reason the pilots shouldn't share in the company's success," Capt. Rabino notes.

"Because of the growth that we are experiencing, we just can't afford not to take a new approach to the upcoming negotiations. Protecting the pilot group is one of our major concerns, for present as well as future pilots. We are looking forward to this upcoming challenge, and I think the Negotiating Committee that we have in place will do an outstanding job in 2007," says Capt. Rabino.

In addition to wages, several major issues will need improvement from the last contract as the airline continues to grow. One is contractual protection for training. The pilots would like to see the training facilities upgraded to reflect the airline's growth. Other issues include making the segment bidding process more formalized and building in work rules and other contractual protections that other carriers of similar size have in place.

The good news is that management has already indicated its willingness to open 2007 negotiations earlier than scheduled to reach a seamless agreement with the pilots. This is just another indication that it's not business as usual for this regional Hawaiian carrier as it bets on the Q400s and its pilots to begin a new era of aviation in Hawaii. 

## Island Air Pilot Group At a Glance

**Number of pilots:** Approximately 100

**Fleet:** 11 Dash 8s and 1 Q400, with 2 more Q400s expected to arrive by the end of the year

**Operations:** 92 daily flights plus charter service to all 8 major airports in Hawaii; offers more non-stop, point-to-point service than any other airline in Hawaii

**Staff:** Staff has doubled in size since 2003—to nearly 400 employees

**Code-shares:** Agreements with Aloha, Continental, Hawaiian, and United Airlines