

PILOT GROUP PROFILE

Canadian Pilots in The Spotlight

By Doug Baj, Supervisor, Strategic Pilot Communications

February marked the 10th anniversary of the ALPA–CALPA merger, which made ALPA an international union representing the majority of airline pilots in North America. The 1997 merger agreement signaled one of the first moves toward strengthening relations among pilot organizations on a global level, working together to face the challenges of a worldwide economy in the 21st century.

Since this merger that united Canadian and U.S. pilots, the Canadian airline industry has undergone a significant transformation. Only 3 of the 10 original Canadian pilot groups that were CALPA members in 1997 remain—Bearskin, Calm Air, and Kelowna Flightcraft—plus the 5 merged airlines that became Air Canada Jazz.

Northwest Territorial Airways was bought by First Air in 1997. The Association added the pilots of Air Transat and Canada 3000 in 1999, but Canada 3000 liquidated not long after. Canadian Airlines was acquired by Air Canada in 2000, and the combined pilot group voted to remain independent. Also in 2000, Air Alliance merged with Air Nova. Canadian Regional merged with AirBC, Air Nova, and Air Ontario and became Air Canada Regional in 2001, then in 2002 became Air Canada Jazz; its pilots were still ALPA members. Most recently, ALPA welcomed CanJet pilots as members in 2006.

Through these changes, the relationship between ALPA and its Canadian pilot groups has remained mutually beneficial. ALPA has supported its Canadian members with re-

sources to help obtain industry-leading contracts, counter union-busting threats, and effectively lobby the Federal government for improved safety standards and working conditions. The Canadian pilot groups—through the Canada Board and as individual MECs—have maintained their identities and their independence within the ALPA structure by establishing their own agendas and priorities.

“Being a part of ALPA means that pilots, when they negotiate with managements, have access to the deepest resources and most talented negotiations staff on the planet,” says Capt. Dan Adamus, Canada Board president. “And while they all have the support they need, their MECs still control the direction of their negotiations, and the pilots vote on all agreements.”

While the success stories and profiles of the Air Canada Jazz and Air Transat pilot groups have been previously featured in *Air Line Pilot*, we focus this month on the four smaller carriers—Bearskin, Calm Air, CanJet, and Kelowna Flightcraft.

BEARSKIN— A Balancing Act with Management

Established in 1963 and named after Bearskin Lake, this Canadian airline originally flew chartered and scheduled

passenger service primarily to northern Ontario destinations. It was mainly known in the 1970s and 1980s for flying passengers to many of the remote northern Ontario “First Nations,” which are accessible only by air.

The airline saw major changes in 1991, when it bought two new Fairchild Metroliners. The Metroliners allowed Bearskin to enhance its service in existing



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—Capt. Dan Parnham, Bearskin MEC Chairman

Bearskin Pilot Group At a Glance

Number of Pilots: 50

Operations: flies primarily scheduled passenger service from Ottawa, Ont., to Winnipeg, Man., and points in between, and north to Flin Flon and The Pas, Man.

Fleet: 11 Metroliners, 2 Beech 99s

Bases: Winnipeg, Man.; North Bay, Sioux Lookout, and Thunder Bay, Ont.

Headquarters: Thunder Bay

markets as well as expand into northeastern Ontario. After the collapse of government-sponsored NorOntair in 1996, Bearskin acquired more than two-thirds of that airline’s routes, mostly in Ontario.

By the summer of 2003, Bearskin had expanded to include scheduled service to almost 40 destinations in Ontario and Manitoba.

Over the years, Bearskin pilots have had a tenuous relationship with their employer but have seen a major improvement in labour relations in the past year—they are currently completing their first year under a new and improved collective bargaining agreement (CBA). “We’ve had one year under the new CBA, and we have yet to file a single grievance. This is considered historic for the Bearskin MEC,” says the MEC chairman, Capt. Dan Parnham.

While the new CBA addresses most of the top priorities of the pilot group, the MEC still finds itself disagreeing with management over pilot staffing levels. As part of the new CBA, the pilots were to be given full autonomy over building monthly schedules in exchange for some givebacks. But management continues to add new scheduling rules and change pilot schedules before the monthly schedule is distributed.

“We are losing pilots at an alarming rate because of attrition, and management is not stockpiling enough pilots to handle the attrition,” Parnham says.

This issue is turning out to be a scheduling nightmare that has created division between the MEC and management. Even the most senior pilots (top 15 percent with 15–20 years of seniority) are having their day-off requests altered to accommodate scheduling requirements. In addition, drafting is occurring on a consistent basis.

With the Canadian airline industry booming, management says that it cannot find enough qualified pilots to promote to captain within a year of being hired. And pilots

who are being hired at Bearskin are sometimes not staying long enough to gain the required experience and hours to be upgraded to captain. The solution according to the MEC: management should stockpile enough pilots with moderate experience to compensate for the high attrition rate. But management feels that it can get by with fewer pilots instead of more.

Parnham adds, “The MEC understands management’s concern for keeping costs under control. However, when it comes to pilot staffing levels, generating revenue is pretty hard when scheduled and charter flights are being canceled or turned away on a regular basis because the airline doesn’t have enough pilots to fly its airplanes.”

Despite the ongoing problems with scheduling, the MEC is generally pleased with the new amicable relationship with management. In the past, the vast majority of contract disputes were grieved and occasionally settled in arbitration.

But the culture has changed. In 2004, the pilot group recognized the airline’s financial troubles and allowed management to extend the old CBA for a year to restructure the airline’s business model (negotiations were to begin in January 2005).

Entering into negotiations in January 2006, the airline was doing better financially, and the MEC wanted to maintain the positive labour relations culture. The new CBA took 5 months to complete and contains pay enhancements, provides better working conditions and increased pension contributions, and strengthens scheduling rules.

Parnham attributes the positive relationship with management to the success of the recent contract. “We have really come a long way. The lines of communications are open with management, and we are both committed to keeping our streak of no grievances alive.”

CALM AIR— Flying at the Extremes

Calm Air was founded in 1962 as a single floatplane operation to serve a fishing lodge in the upper Hudson Bay region. Today, it’s the primary airline of the Manitoba and Nunavut communities along the western coast of Hudson Bay right up to the Arctic Circle, providing scheduled passenger and cargo service.

Calm Air pilots are a unique group who fly unique aircraft in unique places, especially where the terrain is not necessarily friendly to airliners. While scheduled service is a large component of their work, most of their aircraft have been reconfigured to haul cargo and fly in and out of the most difficult terrain, explains Capt. Art Wall (Calm Air).

MAIN PHOTO: Calm Air pilots land on a snowy ice strip without lights and nav aids. This is a challenge they face every day. BELOW LEFT: A Calm Air Hawker Siddeley 748 refuels at Coral Harbour, located on the northeastern coast of Hudson Bay, Nunavut.



PHOTOS: BRUCE GIESBRECHT



“The Hawker Siddeley 748s that our pilots fly do a great job hauling freight. Our destinations for cargo are extremely challenging because the landing can be on an ice strip or a fly-in fishing-lodge strip carved out of the bush. Even the

airstrips serving small communities are gravel and can be soft and slippery at certain times. Many of these places have few or no navigation or approach aids or weather reporting. Calm Air pilots who have flown these flights have proven their worth in cockpits worldwide,” Wall says.

These types of conditions have forced Calm Air to get its Saab 340s certified for gravel operation with gravel kits, as well as adding “ice speed” modifications, wingtip mods for improved performance on short runways, and cargo heater mods for carrying pets. Their latest project has been a 25-seat version of the SF-340 that allows for 4,000 pounds of cargo capacity.

“This is great for us because our northern passengers frequently show up with oversized baggage including large toolboxes, water heaters, caribou antlers, and coolers of game and fish,” Wall says.

The value of the Calm Air pilots was recognized in February with new agreement that gives the pilot group some of the best working conditions, pay, and benefits of any turboprop airline in Canada; 100 percent of the pilots ratified the TA.

Improvements to the contract include an increased pay scale from 6 to 10 years—an approximately 7 percent pay increase on average for the first year with a 4 percent increase each year for the next 5 years. The pilots also received flight minimums to 80 hours with overtime beginning at 85 hours and now have a 5 percent pension match.

The MEC chairman, Capt. Glen McGregor, attributes the success of the recent negotiations to the dedication and loyalty of the pilot group and the thoughtful preparation of the Negotiating Committee.

“We knew what we wanted for our next contract and began developing a proposal six months before negotiations began,” says McGregor. “We were looking for longevity—a

Calm Air Pilot Group At a Glance

Number of Pilots: 64

Operations: flies scheduled passenger and cargo service in Manitoba and the Nunavut region of northern Canada, including destinations along the western shores of Hudson Bay and into the high Arctic.

Fleet: 6 Saab 340s; 4 Hawker Siddeley 748s; 2 Cessna Caravans; 2 ATR 42s

Bases: Thompson and Winnipeg, Man.

Headquarters: Thompson

10-year pay scale, and we didn't want to waver from it. Our months of research and preparation in assembling a proposal that was fair and equitable paid off. Management was convinced and agreed in principle to everything we proposed except for a few minor provisions."

The airline is expanding its fleet in late spring with the addition of two ATR 42s. This will add at least 15 new pilots to the pilot group this year. Growing, staying healthy, and expanding into large fishing charters is what McGregor envisions for the airline.

CANJET— Pilots and ALPA Show Resolve

The ride so far has been bumpy for the pilots of CanJet Airlines, but Capt. Scott Bringloe, the MEC chairman for ALPA's newest members, hopes the worst is over.

Once a scheduled passenger airline, CanJet has transformed its business model into a full-blown charter business. Management has indicated that it has accepted contracts that will keep the airline busy through next winter. And that means plenty of work for the pilots.

"Given our shaky past with this airline, I believe pilots are cautiously optimistic," says Bringloe. "Management has indicated that it has received so many requests for charter service that we don't have enough airplanes to handle the workload. But we have also experienced a high attrition rate because of high pilot demand. This may have made management recognize the importance of reaching a collective bargaining agreement to create stability for the pilots."

ALPA was certified by the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) on June 26, 2006, to represent the CanJet pilots and served notice to begin collective bargaining in July. Almost 95 percent of the 100+ pilots signed cards requesting ALPA representation.

However, in September 2006, management suddenly announced that it would be ceasing operations and terminated the employment of all but seven pilots. ALPA filed unfair labour practice proceedings, which are ongoing, before the CIRB, and was able to negotiate an agreement ensuring that the released pilots would have a right to be rehired according to seniority as the airline's need for pilots increased.

The airline recommenced operations on a scaled-down basis in October 2006 and has rehired approximately 50 of the 110 pilots it once employed. ALPA retains representation rights in accordance with Canadian law. The new operation is smaller and no longer involves scheduled passenger service.

CanJet Pilot Group At a Glance

Number of Pilots: 50

Operations: provides subcontracting services to vacation charter airlines

Fleet: 6 B-737-500s

Bases: Halifax, N.S.

Headquarters: Halifax

Bringloe sees ALPA's goal at this point as normalizing its relationship with management and negotiating a collective agreement that would conform to Canadian Industry Standards as to rates of pay and working conditions.

"I have seen a vast improvement in our relationship with management," said Bringloe. "They inform us almost immediately when a new pilot is hired; they have begun union dues checkoff; and they address, in a timely manner, any requests or concerns that the MEC may have."

The MEC and the Negotiating Committee are planning for upcoming contract negotiations and are wrapping up a pilot survey to determine priority issues. They hope to begin meeting with management in the next few months.

KELOWNA FLIGHTCRAFT— Variety and Flexibility

The Kelowna Flightcraft Air Charter Ltd. (KFC) pilot group consists of a diverse group of men and women operating throughout Canada, incorporating a broad variety of flying duties.

KFC uses cargo-configured B-727s for Purolator Courier (including Canada Post) and Convair 580s for Purolator as well as ad-hoc passenger charters and passenger/freight transfer contracts with various lodges in coastal British Columbia. KFC has an Astra Jet, which it operates for a private company located in Kelowna, B.C.

The majority of KFC's flying is with Purolator Courier Ltd. as its primary cargo airline. The pilots move more than 500,000 pounds of freight each night for Purolator with nightly operations from St. John's, Nfld., to Victoria, B.C., and points in between.

KFC's B-727 pilots, who normally fly at night, will now also be able to fly during weekday daylight hours with the

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FOJANKE MACSWEN (KELOWNA)

addition of business from Canada Post. This flying is from the Hamilton, Ont., base.

Convair flying provides pilots with a variety of jobs and locations. A pilot's monthly schedule can include flying Coast Guard charters to Yellowknife, N.W.T., taking personnel to work and home for crew changes. Other shifts can be flying daytime Purolator runs between Vancouver and Prince George, B.C.; or depending on the off-base staff requirements, flying night freight between Thunder Bay, Ont., and Winnipeg, Man. In the summertime, Vancouver-based

Convair crews fly to the Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C., in support of various fishing lodges.

The most diverse pilot position is the role of Convair/B-727 first officer. Such a pilot completes two ground schools and four pilot proficiency checks every year and can expect to be dispatched throughout Canada.

"Never a dull moment with this pilot group," says ALPA contract administrator Albert "Bert" Leger. "Personal contact with the chairmen of the MEC and Negotiating and Grievance Committees proves to be interesting as they fly all night, sleep during the day, and are always available on weekends."

KFC management, like that of all other airlines in Canada during this aviation upswing, has had to assess its hiring process and has reexamined the minimum requirements for new-hire pilots. Pilots in recent years have been hired as B-727 second officers but with qualifications to hold a first officer position; now KFC is hiring pilots with less experience with the expectation of longer periods of employment while the pilot accumulates experience.

"It is a pleasure being an ALPA representative for this hard-working and professional group of pilots who work on the opposite side of the clock," says Capt. Carmine Maruska, KFC MEC chairman.

The KFC pilot group is in the 5th year of its 7-year collective agreement, which expires in November 2009. 🌐

Kelowna Flightcraft Pilot Group at a Glance

Number of Pilots: 100+

Operations: flies domestic cargo from Halifax, N.S., to Victoria, B.C., and points in between

Fleet: Convair 580s, Boeing 727s, and an Israel IAI-1125 Astra SP

Bases: Vancouver and Kelowna, B.C.; Calgary, Alta.; Saskatoon, Sask.; Thunder Bay and Hamilton, Ont.; and Halifax, N.S.

Headquarters: Kelowna