

Bearskin

Steady On

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For 50 years, Bearskin Airlines has provided exceptional accessibility to Ontario and Manitoba by flying to 18 destinations as far north as Lynn Lake, Man., and as far south as Kitchener-Waterloo, Ont. From small towns to large cities, Bearskin provides both charter and scheduled flights with more than 100 departures each day.

"Bearskin is something special," says Capt. Dan Parnham, the pilots' Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman. "We aren't flashy, we don't have large, modern aircraft, and we don't fly to the most glamorous locations. What we have is a family of tight-knit employees and management working together to provide the best regional service possible in a competitive industry."

Last year, the pilots finalized a new four-year collective bargaining agreement with management. The agreement was made possible through interest-based negotiations, in which both sides look at the issues together and come up with solutions that benefit both the employees and the company's business plan.

"We put a lot of effort into maintaining an open relationship with management and recognize that our company and employees stand to make far better gains by being allies," continues Parnham. "We know not every pilot group or management can function this way, so we value the strength it gives our pilot group and our airline."

This give-and-take approach

to labour relations resulted in an agreement published at the end of 2012 that reduced scheduling inefficiencies and increased flexibility for the company. The company responded by providing better pay and work rules for the pilots. The agreement was reached without any threat from either side of a work stoppage or labour action.

"It's about being on the same team," comments Parnham. "We're thankful our management has placed value in retaining pilots. The pay and working conditions achieved in contract No. 5 have already proven to be what was needed to retain experienced pilots at a time when the industry predicts a pilot shortage. When management asks for something, such as scheduling flexibility, we know they don't just want to get something without giving. They work as hard as we do to make our labour-management relationship successful."

This relationship has also saved the company and pilot group a tremendous amount of manpower and money. For more than eight years, the pilot group has not filed a single grievance or held an arbitration.

On Nov. 10, 2013, the Bearskin family was tested by tragedy. As Flight 311 approached Red Lake, Ont., the airplane crashed on short final. Five of the seven people aboard, including Capt. Peter Traczuk and F/O Aniruddh Sawant, died.

Deadheading Bearskin F/O Keith Hoffman survived and was able to pull himself from the wreckage. Without considering his own safety, Hoffman

entered the burning aircraft to save the only other surviving passenger. Hoffman is considered a hero by all of those who know him, including the off-duty Bearskin passenger service agent he saved.



Within 30 minutes of the accident, ALPA resources were mobilized, and many CIRP volunteers were immediately dispatched to critical areas of need. During the next few days, the Bearskin family pulled together as they mourned the loss of two of their own and three of their passengers. Joined by a member of management and a CIRP team leader, the MEC held a meeting in Winnipeg, Man., where pilots gathered to remember the victims, share stories, and find strength to carry on. By the end of November, a trust fund was established for Traczuk's three young children, and a scholarship fund was named in honor of Sawant. Anyone wishing to contribute to either fund should e-mail Dan.Parnham@alpa.org.

"In those dark days, we leaned on each other," says Parnham. "Whenever something like this happens, we ask how and why. Those answers will come. It is only by being there for each other that we will emerge from this tragedy." 🌐

A photo of Flight 311's flight crew one hour before the tragic accident. Far left, Capt. Peter Traczuk; third from left, F/O Aniruddh Sawant.

BRS at a Glance

Pilots joined ALPA: 1997 (became an ALPA-represented pilot group when CALPA merged with ALPA)

Number of pilots: 71

Pilot bases: Thunder Bay, Ont.; Winnipeg, Man.; Kitchener-Waterloo, Ont.; and Sioux Lookout, Ont.

Headquarters: Sioux Lookout, Ont.

Operations: Scheduled and charter passenger service

Fleet: 18 Metroliners