

FAB at a Glance

Founded: In 1946 as Bradley Air Service, now wholly owned by the Inuit people of Quebec through the Makivik Corporation

Number of crewmembers: 142

Pilots joined ALPA: 2008

Pilot bases: Ottawa, Ont.; Yellowknife, NT; Iqaluit, NU; and Edmonton, Alb.

Headquarters: Kanata, Ont.

Operations: Provides scheduled passenger and cargo service between 30 northern communities plus charter service worldwide

Fleet: 7 B-737-200s (four combi), 3 B-737-400s (two combi, 1 passenger), 1 B-767F, 9 ATR 42-300s, 2 ATR 72-212s (all combi), and 2 Lockheed L-382 Hercules

First Air

Regaining Altitude

By **Rusty Ayers**
ALPA Senior
Communications Specialist

After several years of being buffeted by tragedy and uncertainty, First Air is now on track to strengthen its status as the “Airline of the North,” with a new CEO, a new pilot agreement, new airplanes, and a big new freight contract with one of Canada’s most historic companies.

“Like all the northern carriers, our airline has been affected by the economic downturn. But we accomplished a lot in 2013, and it’s fair to say we believe we’ve turned the corner and are looking forward to the new year,” says Capt. Peter Black, the pilots’ Master Executive Council (MEC) chairman.

Offering scheduled service to some of the most remote

The group was a charter member of the President’s Committee for Remote Operations (PCRO), formed in 2012 to push for safety improvements at rugged northern airstrips, many of which have unpaved runways and few if any landing aids. Black chairs the PCRO.

The pilots’ greatest accomplishment in 2013 was finally completing a new contract, the first negotiated by ALPA since the former First Air Pilots Association (FAPA) merged with the Association five years ago. The talks took three years, with the bulk of the new agreement negotiated directly between the pilots and the company with a handful of remaining items decided by an arbitrator.

The five-year agreement is retroactive to 2010 and will become amendable in 2015. In addition to a signing

bonus, pilots will receive raises totaling more than five percent over the duration of the deal. The agreement also includes improvements to vacation and reserve, a new meal allowance, and higher living allowances for crewmembers located in expensive far northern communities.

Black credits new First Air CEO Brock Friesen with breaking the contract

deadlock. Before Friesen’s arrival, the airline had seen a revolving door of CEOs, COOs, and other executives.

“Having the continuity of a single leader with a defined plan and the authority to

carry it out has paid big dividends for us, not just with the contract but in other areas of management as well,” says Black.

In July, the same month that the contract was finalized, First Air announced a big new freight customer, Canada’s famed North West Company. Associated with the frontier since it began selling supplies and equipment to fur traders in 1779, the North West Company has grown into one of the largest shippers in the Arctic. It hired First Air to deliver food and other cargo to its stores in remote communities in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Nunavik.

Last summer, the airline also acquired three more modern, fuel-efficient B-737-400s. Two have been retrofitted as combis to carry a mix of passengers and palletted cargo, while the third remains in an all-passenger configuration.

The new business and expanded fleet are particularly welcome since management spent much of the previous year trying unsuccessfully to sell the airline.

In October, the MEC concluded its 2013 “FABulous Flying” calendar campaign to raise money for the families of First Air Flight 6560 crewmembers. Thanks to donations and contributions from ALPA national officers, the Canada Board, the Alaska and Jazz MECs, and individual pilots across North America, the campaign raised more than \$17,000 and each of the young children who lost a parent in the accident received almost \$2,500 for their future education. 



PHOTO BY MATT MCCULLOUGH

A First Air ATR 42 taxis for takeoff at Baker Lake, Ont.

and inhospitable places on the planet, First Air provides a lifeline to a few dozen communities scattered across the Canadian Arctic and also flies cargo charters around the world.