

Mesaba

Mesaba Pilots: A New Day, a New Set of Challenges

By John Perkinson, Staff Writer



Capt. Henning Christie sits at the controls of his aircraft.

MSA at a Glance

Pilots Joined ALPA: 1987
Number of Pilots: 1,146 total (161 on furlough)
Headquarters: Eagan, Minn.
Pilot Bases: Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minn.; Detroit, Mich.; and Memphis, Tenn.
Fleet: Saab SF340s, Bombardier CRJ200s, CRJ900s

The many dramatic events that the Mesaba pilots have faced over recent years have more than tested their survivor skills, and they've proven they are not easily defeated. These crewmembers have endured their share of adversity, including former owner MAIR Holdings' decision to siphon resources from the airline to bolster its low-cost, non-ALPA subsidiary, Big Sky; a hostile bankruptcy complete with multiple 1113(c) filings by a management determined to sidestep its contractual obligations; a new owner (Northwest Airlines); and a merger (between Northwest and Delta Air Lines).

In spite of these challenges, Mesaba has survived to become an important component of the Delta Connection network—a testament to the vision, unity, and perseverance of its pilots.

"We recently received the third of four snap-backs in our agreement," says second-term Master Executive chairman, Capt. Mark Nagel, a CRJ900 pilot based in Detroit, Mich., referring to provisions in the pilot contract that allow pay rates to snap back to previous, more favorable terms. "These adjustments raise our earnings by about 4 percent above pre-bankruptcy pay rates and that percentage will double by December 2010. At that time, work rules will also return to the terms we had before Mesaba's bankruptcy."

The pilots, however, aren't completely out of the woods yet. "We aren't exactly where we thought we would be at this point," Nagel says. Despite the pilots' tenacity in overcoming adversity, they still face some significant challenges.

Post-merger Delta began rethinking its wholly owned regional carrier operation, which also includes Comair and Compass. Consequently, Delta's fleet decisions regarding Mesaba have curbed the airline's previously projected growth.

Mesaba was slated to receive 15 CRJ900s between January and May 2009. However, Delta decided to redirect 10 of the 15 to Atlantic Southeast Airlines. In addition, Delta and Mesaba are exercising an option to return 23 of the regional carrier's 49 Saab SF340s to the manufacturer. Although Mesaba pilots have seen some increased flying in and out of Delta's Salt Lake City hub, the fleet reduction has resulted in approximately 130 furloughed pilots since August 2009, with roughly 70 more furloughs planned for 2010.

In October 2009, the preferential bidding system (PBS) provisions, negotiated as part of the 2006 bankruptcy agreement, went into effect. The use of PBS is intended to improve pilot quality of life because, in theory, it permits pilots to indicate preferred days off, desired pairings, start and finish times, and other line characteristics. "We negotiated a lot of protections with this system, but without management's cooperation to explore ideas to improve scheduling, overall, the schedules have become worse using PBS," declares Nagel, who says that crew planning hasn't taken full advantage of the program's features.

Capt. Joe Tober, a Saab pilot and the MEC's PBS Committee chairman, reports that he has consulted with other ALPA pilot groups using the same PBS software and that they have experienced more favorable results. "We are eager to learn from them," says Tober, who adds that he remains hopeful management will work with the Mesaba pilots to build quality schedules while ensuring that the airline's flying is adequately covered.

"As we look forward, we hope to mend relations with management," Nagel says. "We want to return our furloughed pilots to Mesaba cockpits, reduce the large number of pending grievances, and strive for better pilot schedules. Accomplishing these goals will improve morale and job satisfaction, conditions that should maximize our company's performance."

Mesaba was founded in July 1944, making it the longest-flying regional airline in the United States. The name, Mesaba, comes from the Ojibwa (also known as the Chippewa) tribe of Native Americans and means "soaring eagle." 🦅