



Our Stories

Golden Wings Past President Says There's Life After the Cockpit

By John Perkinson, Staff Writer

Capt. Gordon Wagoner has been organizing airline pilots for years, despite the fact that he hasn't stepped into a Delta cockpit to fly a trip since 2005. The retired ALPA member is the outgoing president of a network of approximately 900 former professional aviators who share information, socialize, and stay in touch through the Delta Golden Wings organization.

Delta Golden Wings, Inc., is a fraternal association based in Atlanta, Ga., with both retired and active Delta pilots. Similar to AARP's age requirement, those who fly for the airline can join the association when they turn 50. Spouses of deceased Delta pilots are also eligible to become members. The club was started in the late 1960s and has been a haven for senior fliers ever since. Wagoner says, "Once you get into it, you're hooked."

Wagoner describes the outfit as a national organization with an affiliation of loosely aligned local groups, as opposed to designated chapters. "That's how I got involved," he says. "After I retired, I would occasionally get together with Delta pilot retirees in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area called the 60th Bum Group. During a Christmas party, a former Delta Golden Wings president asked me if I'd be willing to serve in the Golden Wings as the vice president."

Current Golden Wing board members include President Jim Pancharian, Vice President Larry Berdoll, Secretary Jerry Rollins, Historian Rollin Jackson, Treasurer James Baird, Membership Chairman Julian Black, and past president Wagoner. Pancharian was recently elected to serve as the Wings' 20th president during the group's annual reunion.

Pressing on

Delta Golden Wings publishes a quarterly newsletter with common-interest items, where-are-they-now stories, and some surprising features. The third-quarter

2012 issue includes an interview with former ALPA president Capt. Hank Duffy, who reports, "Ann [his wife] and I are in good health." Duffy talks about his challenges as ALPA's fourth president and notes that he's currently on the board at the University of Miami, where an endowment scholarship bears his name.

The fraternal organization also maintains a website—www.deltagoldenwings.com—and members participate in gatherings like the "Pig Pull," held last May at Lake Lanier's University Club near Atlanta. But the Delta Golden Wings showpiece event is its annual reunion.

"Pilots tend to scatter when they retire," says Wagoner. "The yearly reunion is an opportunity to get together, tell a few lies, and keep that traditional Delta family spirit alive."

This year's big event was held September 6–9 in Portland, Ore. In addition to a dinner/dance, the attendees enjoyed a Portland Spirit river cruise and a Columbia Gorge/Hood River train tour. "We had a good turnout this year, and everyone had a terrific time," says Wagoner.

The next reunion will be Oct. 17–20, 2013, in Annapolis, Md., and future reunions are planned for Austin, Tex., in 2014 and Milwaukee, Wisc., in 2015.

Remembering when

Wagoner flew for Delta Air Lines from September 1979 to September 2005. He

fondly remembers his days as a B-727 second officer; a B-737 and -757/767 first officer; and an MD-80/90 and B-757/767 captain. The former Golden Wings president was based in Houston, Dallas, and Cincinnati and, while in Dallas, manned a phone for the ALPA Local Council and the Master Executive Council, answering contract administration questions. Before his airline experience, Wagoner flew the C-130 Hercules for the Air Force out of Dyess Air Force Base near Abilene, Tex.

"With airlines restructuring and commuting becoming more of a norm, pilot members can feel pretty disconnected," says Wagoner, who adds that while working, a pilot's circle of friends can also be stratified by the seniority system. Golden Wings provides Delta pilots with the opportunity to meet a larger cross section of pilots.

Delta Golden Wings is not alone in this effort. Comparable airline pilot retiree organizations include the Retired United Pilots Association (RUPA), the Retired Hawaiian Airlines Pilots (RHAP), and the Retired Northwest Airline Pilots Association (RNPA), to name just a few. Similar clubs exist for other airline employee groups, such as Clipped Wings for former United flight attendants. These groups help connect senior airline employees with their peers and provide a network of support and friendship. 

