

Four Days in September

By Capt. Duane Woerth, ALPA President

As we prepare to mark the fifth anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, with the dedication of a permanent memorial outside of our Herndon, Va., office, it is abundantly clear that all pilots will remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they first became aware of what was happening on that tragic morning.



Just as for those of us around during the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, this moment will be seared into all of our souls forever.

Personally, I have always found the most compelling stories to be those of the pilots who were actually airborne and were directed to land *now*, not knowing what was happening or, worse, fearing that they too might have terrorists aboard preparing to attack the cockpit.

I was not airborne; I was in my office in Washington, D.C. This is my story of the first days after the attack, between the time the U.S. airline industry was grounded and the time the first airline pilots returned to the skies.

Capt. Jerry Mugerditchian, then ALPA's vice-president-administration/secretary, burst into my office and said that an aircraft had just flown into the World Trade Center. He had just taken a call from his daughter, who worked at United, and what she told him was too much for me to

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immediately comprehend. With the rest of the world, we watched in horror as the second airliner hit the second tower. Soon, looking out my eighth-floor office windows, we could see a plume of smoke rising in the southeast; it was the Pentagon. And United 93 was now missing.

By mid-afternoon, a senior staff person from the Department of Transportation called to tell me that Secretary Mineta would call me at home that evening and that he

wanted to be sure I would be home to take the call.

By late afternoon, we had scheduled a meeting of ALPA's national officers and senior staff for early the next morning. Our false hope was that by morning, the government would be announcing the schedule for resumption of flights. In any event, department directors were to have immediate action plans to keep ALPA functioning while the U.S. airline industry was shut down. We were already establishing a command post in our Herndon, Va., offices that could operate and communicate 24/7.

I tried to reach as many MEC chairmen as possible, and

9/11+5

my first priority was to reach Capt. Rick Dubinsky of United. When I finally did, he asked what everyone else was wondering: How long would the airlines stay grounded? I, of course, had no idea. I also had no idea that, in a few hours, Secretary Mineta would be putting me into the middle of the startup debate.

Secretary Mineta called a little after 10 p.m. We had been friends for a long time, and he got right to the point. He said he was putting together two Rapid Response Teams, one for aircraft and one for airports. He was going to ask Herb Kelleher to help lead the airport team. He wanted me to lead the aircraft team. We talked about the other team members, and I knew them all well. We could use the FAA offices and staff support, but we needed to get started ASAP. Inside the government, the debate about the necessary pre-conditions for airline startup was already intense. Just how heated it was I would find out over the next several days and nights.

9/11+1

At 6:00 a.m. on September 12, the phone rang. On the other end of the line was an airline CEO who was the designated "caller." He and his fellow CEOs had been hearing rumors that the airlines would be down for more than a week and that Washington National Airport might close permanently. They had all agreed that Secretary Mineta would view me as a neutral party, and they also were aware of my solid working relationship with former DOT Secretary Andy Card, who was now President Bush's chief of staff.

The CEOs wanted me to coordinate a meeting of ALPA's Government Affairs Department staff with their airline lob-



The debris at the Pentagon, after an airliner hit it on 9/11, was a visible symbol of the fact that the United States was a nation at war.

byists to begin thinking about seeking financial aid from Congress. I told them that my staff was way ahead of them and would be giving me a first-draft briefing on whom to approach as co-sponsors by late afternoon.

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The meeting of national officers and senior staff went smoothly. Each ALPA department had put in motion immediate action plans, and we were coordinating with our MEC field offices. When I got the preliminary report on how our ALPA team in Canada was taking a leading role in sorting out the pilot problems for the hundreds of stranded airmen, I was greatly impressed.

The big question everyone had for me was "When will the airlines start up?" I would be meeting with senior government officials all afternoon and hoped to have at least a clue by nightfall. One thing was already obvious to everyone: If I was going to be spending this much time with the government, I would have to delegate a percentage of my ALPA duties. I did so, and everyone stepped up and performed to the max.

Before I left for my meetings, ALPA Communications Department Director Don Skiados said that he was trying to place me on every TV channel in the United States to get ALPA's message out morning, noon, and night. He said he would keep scheduling me until I passed out and then would send in Capts. Denny Dolan and Steve Luckey. I thought he was kidding, but he wasn't. The first interview would be at the CNN studio at 10:30 p.m.—that night. The next would be at 7 a.m. at one of the other networks—which one, he would let me know.

Over the next several months, I—along with Denny and Steve—gave hundreds of TV, radio, and print media inter-

views. ALPA was definitely the pilots' voice when it mattered the most.

When I tumbled into bed about midnight on the 12th, I knew I would not be able to sleep. My meetings in the afternoon were case studies in frustration and wheel-spinning. The startup pre-conditions were at a definite impasse. Getting the airplanes back flying tomorrow was out of the question, and I had real doubts about the next day as well.

Government Affairs Department Director Paul Hallisay reported that he was confident that Congress would provide some form of financial aid to the airlines, but added that the White House was already lobbying hard against it. How big of a problem this was going to become wasn't even possible to imagine yet. But when Hallisay says there is a problem, there always is.

Also, I was stunned at how adamant the Secret Service was on keeping National Airport shut down. I was going to make another run at that tomorrow, but was already feeling like Don Quixote on this subject. No, sleep would not come easily tonight.

9/11+2

When I woke up on the 13th, I remembered that I had forgotten to call Denny Dolan and Steve Luckey, as I had promised to, yesterday. Although it was only 6 a.m., I assumed Denny would be in the office, so I tried him there. He answered, as I knew he would. Steve had a proposal for arming pilots after they were screened, trained, and deputized, and they wanted to give me a full briefing today if possible.

Although not named yet, this idea would quickly be-

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come ALPA's Federal Flight Deck Officer (FFDO) proposal.

Before I left for my meeting at FAAHQ, General Manager Jalmer Johnson and Capt. Howard Attarian, our executive administrator, called to report on the four separate ALPA task forces we had agreed needed to be set up and operating. We were going to need more space and more phone

lines in the command post, but they would have that handled by this afternoon.

Not long after that, Paul Hallisay called again to say that the Senate and the House were both going to schedule hearings soon on airline security and wanted me to testify. The Senate hearing could be as soon as September 20, which meant written testimony would have to be submitted in a couple of days. The House was going to wait probably until the 25th, so we had more time with that testimony. I told him about the FFDO proposal and remarked that we needed the extra time to put more “meat on the now bare-bones proposal.”

Late in the afternoon of the 13th, it was clear that the numerous preconditions for airline startup were still not agreed to. I was about to leave the briefing I had just attended, when someone mentioned that it had been decided by the big boys “upstairs” that all jumpseat riding would now be prohibited.

I exploded.

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When I got to my office, I called the same airline-CEO-



Airliners return with limited service on September 15.

designated caller who had phoned me and told him the airlines had a huge problem that they were going to have to fix ASAP. Thankfully, he got the message and intuitively knew the airlines could not operate without jumpseats. He would call me tonight after conferring with his fellow CEOs.

Hallisay called to report on his progress on lining up votes for an eventual financial aid package. He once again reported on the intense White House opposition, but was convinced we could get at least \$10 billion, although some people were now talking about loans instead of cash.

9/11+3

By the morning of the 14th, I felt this was do-or-die day for a decision to allow the airlines to fly once again. I thought my airline-CEO-designated hitter had stiffed me on his promise to get back to me on the jumpseat issue. As it turned out, he had called about 1 a.m. and left a message on my recorder, but I apparently slept through the ringing tele-



AIRLINE PILOT FILE PHOTO

Capt. Woerth testifies on Capitol Hill concerning security issues. ALPA was an early, strong advocate for Federal Flight Deck Officers and secure cockpits.

phone. He had heard that the most we would get was “on line” jumpseats with the ability to ride space-available in the cabin for pilots not on the airline’s seniority list.

After tortuous meetings at the FAA on the 14th, the DOT finally announced that limited service could begin the next day. National Airport would remain closed indefinitely. The jumpseat issue came out as described above with an outline for a software-based pilot ID system that we would have to develop later. All sharp objects became the equivalent of nuclear waste material, but the industry had finally gotten clearance for takeoff.

Aftermath

Eight days later, on September 22, the Air Transportation Safety and System Stabilization Act became law. The White House had negotiated the airline relief down to \$5 billion in cash and a \$10 billion loan guarantee deal that the administration would control, less aid than for a relatively light Category 2 hurricane in Florida.

On September 25, my testimony to the House included the FFDO program, which started a nearly two-year fight to get the first FFDOs into the cockpit.

Thousands of airline pilots were already receiving furlough notices. ALPA MECs responded with assessments totaling tens of millions of dollars to pay COBRA health insurance for them.

The next five years are familiar to all of you. I’ll never forget those early days in September 2001. They changed us all.