



Cut from the Same Cloth

By Capt. John Prater, ALPA President

Last month an airline crew successfully ditched in the Hudson River, following a dual-engine failure. America listened in awe to accounts of the



event. The passengers unanimously praised the captain, his first officer, the three flight attendants, and other professional crewmembers on board who assisted with the evacuation. They were hailed as heroes for maneuvering a safe outcome for everyone on board.

At the same time, in our cockpits, crewrooms, and union meetings, we pilots look each other in the eye, and we know. We know that we measure ourselves against the actions of our peers in emergencies. We ask ourselves the question. And silently, with the confidence of thousands of hours of training and experience, each professional aviator answers, "Yes, I would have been ready. I would have been prepared." Dual-engine failure or a cargo fire over the middle of the Pacific, the top of an airplane ripping off, a triple hydraulic failure, or smoke filling the cockpit with loss of all electrics... "I would have been ready."

Year after year, airline pilots who have performed superbly under extreme and critical conditions deflect the praise, just as the crew of US Airways Flight 1549 did. They humbly recognize their fellow crewmembers' contributions, the roles played by dispatchers, flight ops, and first responders, and all the training and support they've received during their careers.

Airline pilots regularly and successfully, and in anonymity, also deal with thousands of lesser events on the ground and in the air that, if handled badly, could lead to disaster. We call it "doing our jobs."

ALPA members recognize the superb flying skills and decision-making of their fellow airline pilots each year. But our attention to these matters is not centered on awards. It is our focus 24 hours of every day. The special safety and security section in this issue clearly lays out this commitment as directed by ALPA's Board of Directors. We unveiled our 2009 priorities to the world, maintaining our position as the authoritative voice of the piloting profession (see page 17).

As the airline pilots' union, we also recognize that many of our members, as well as many other airline pilots, have lost pensions, wages, medical benefits, and jobs over the past eight years. After the terrorists' takeover of four airliner cockpits on Sept. 11, 2001, airlines were grounded and passengers were few; the Bush administration's Airline Transportation Stabilization Board either refused loans or stipulated that labor contracts and pensions must be sacri-

ficed; furloughs, bankruptcies, and near bankruptcies further damaged many of our contracts.

Meanwhile, when our country went to war in the Middle East, airline pilots volunteered to serve on active duty. Other pilots are flying thousands of CRAF and military supply missions to the war theater.

Still other pilots volunteered to lead their profession and their union by raising their hand for ALPA work. It was not an easy time. They had to make far too many gut-wrenching decisions, but these union leaders did it because it was their duty, and they couldn't take a pass any more than a pilot with a dual-engine failure can.

Many of them had to weigh doubts about company survival against the unknown decisions of bankruptcy judges. They made tough decisions on contracts and concessions, earning them the wrath of friends and peers. For some, that seemed worse than facing a dual-engine flameout.

With the help of leaders cut from this same cloth, ALPA concluded the merger of two great Master Executive Councils

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—Delta and Northwest, now the largest airline in the world—into a single Delta MEC serving 12,500 pilots (see page 14). Their leaders made many decisions in a democratic setting, exponentially more difficult than being a captain with sole command authority. Debates and differences, accusations and allegations, and hard-reached consensus were followed by doubts and critical analysis, yet these men and women maintained a unity and solidarity that will long outlast the verbal fallout.

For the past two years, at union rallies, meetings, and picket lines, I have asked our members two questions: Are you proud to be an airline pilot? Are you proud to be an ALPA member?

After the bright spotlight on the crew of US Airways Flight 1549 and those fellow crewmembers on board, and in the spotlight of your collective efforts as ALPA leaders and members, I know that today even more of us would answer, "Affirmative!"

John Prater