

Podcast Transcription

Fly by Night: Officer Update, June 2020

Captain Chris Lee My guests today are MEC Chairman, Captain Dave Chase, MEC Vice Chairman, Captain Bill Hubbell and MEC Secretary-Treasurer, First Officer Don Loepke. Thanks for coming, guys.

Captain Dave Chase Hey, Chris.

Captain Bill Hubbell Thanks.

Captain Chris Lee Many states are currently going through the re-opening process for the coronavirus and we're now seeing a surge in coronavirus cases. How do you see that affecting flight ops?

Captain Bill Hubbell Chris, initially we did have 19 pilots who tested positive for coronavirus. It stalled out for a while there. We got to number 20 and it stalled again. And then in the last week, we've had four new cases among the pilot group.

Captain Dave Chase Chris, we're all pilots here. We see it out on the line too when we go out there. Everybody is getting a bit fatigued with what's going on with coronavirus. It's in the news. There's a political element to it as well. But in reality, the virus doesn't discriminate. It's still out there. It's still something that all of our pilots need to be serious about and deal with. So the effect on flight operations is no matter how tired you get on this, you need to continue to wear your masks, social distance, continue with the handwashing and the other precautions that doctors tell us we need to do. And we'll continue to advocate for cleaning of the airplanes and the other things we can do to make sure you're as safe as possible while you're out on the road away from your families.

Captain Don Loepke Yeah, I think, advocating for the pilots. We've also pushed the Company to the point where we're now going to be offering the testing to all pilots, regardless of the flying you're doing.

Captain Dave Chase We took the opportunity to thank some of the upper level management for the corporate resources they're putting towards testing. We know this has been very important to the pilots and it's been an emphasis point for us because of the PDR system. Initially, we weren't sure that would be something that was possible, and as the Company was able to secure testing, we've asked them to continue to spread that around the system. And that's something we're very pleased that they've been able to do. The additional testing won't be the immediate type of testing that the crews are getting on their way out on international trips but it does provide the added ability to find out. If you have symptoms, you'll still be able to get tested. We think that's an excellent way to help keep the virus from spreading around the crew force. And it provides more assuredness for people when they return home to their families as well.

Captain Don Loepke Exactly. It relieves some of the stress that's just involved with operating in this kind of environment. When you relieve that stress, then that's one less thing that pilots are likely to let affect the safety of flight. Whether it's arguing just because they're tired and stressed out or if you know you're not going to get a coronavirus positive pop when you get to China or you're fairly certain, that's a big load off your mind.

Captain Bill Hubbell Yeah, and even more so, I think for some people, when you come home at the end of a trip before you go and interact with your family again, that you know whether or not you're going to be safe for them to be around.

Captain Chris Lee Do you have any information on where the testing sites are going to be at?

Captain Bill Hubbell Yeah, they're going to roll out some new testing sites. It's going to be open to all domestic pilots. The first one is at 3131 Democrat. And that will be available to pilots and also people that work there at 3131. The next location is going to be out on Democrat at the old Enterprise Rent-A-Car location. It'll be a tent type setup. That location is going to be available to all FedEx employees. Even if you're symptomatic you can go to that location and then they're going to open another tent location over at the world headquarters.

Captain Dave Chase I know when I went to Guangzhou, I was very happy to get tested before I went. And I was equally or more happy to get a test when I got back. It was a nice feeling when I got home to know that I had tested negative for the virus that I was going to spend more time around my family. We expressed that thanks to the Company, at the same time, we've asked them to do much more to recognize the stress that's being placed on the crew force. We don't want them to view the interactions amongst pilots in some other paradigm. We know there's an enormous amount of stress in dealing with this. We're not trained to fly in this type of environment. The entire system's not set up around being maintained in a hotel room confined day after day, domestic fliers having to use UberEATS to get food and the difficulties in moving around the system when you're in AOC, even just in terms of moving back to the sleep rooms on the hub turns. So it's not a normal environment. We don't think it's appropriate to view it as a normal environment. I would ask all the crew members to remember the resources available from ALPA, including PATH, the Pilot Assistance Team Hotline. If anyone needs to avail themselves of those resources, they can find that on our website or in the Positive Rate. We've been advertising it. We have seen an uptick in those calls, so we know that's a needed resource. We also would recommend to all pilots to keep in mind that we do have a Professional Standards Committee. If you see interactions amongst pilots that maybe people are losing their cool or having trouble working together, it's highly likely that it's created by the stressful environment we're all operating in. We've asked flight management to be much more careful about the way pilots are interacting with one another and help us get those people into the professional standards, out of potential discipline environments. That's what we mean when we say to look out for one another. If you're out on the line and you see an issue there please get in contact with professional standards and allow us to help de-escalate anything going on.

Captain Don Loepke The one thing that pilots like is a certainty of a schedule and with all the trip revisions, with the short staffing in the crew travel services, sometimes you don't get your travel arrangements or your hotel until right before you're operating on a trip. And that causes stress. And pilots need to know that we are advocating for them strongly with the Company.

Captain Bill Hubbell The thing I'll add to that, yeah, I agree with everything you both said. We have stressful times in the system like peak. But there's a known kind of a beginning, an end to that. We're on month five of this with no real end in sight. I hear it in the emails and the PDRs, the voice mails, obviously, we've seen some things where I'm very concerned about how much stress our pilots are under and the vice just seems to be

getting a little bit tighter and a little bit tighter. And there are certainly places where the Company can relieve some of that pressure, and I hope they take advantage of those.

Captain Dave Chase I think you make a great point. This is not peak where you go to work and you know you're going to have a few trip revisions and some longer days. This is something you deal with at home and on the road. All of our families are dealing with it as well. It's an added situation when you ask about the effect on flight operations. It's there all the time.

Captain Bill Hubbell Well, then from the family point of that, you know, we tend to think of it just as the pilots. But, you know, you don't consider the spouse's paychecks or I've talked to several people that have kids coming out of college that their prospects aren't what they were six or nine months ago. So there's that stress. We've had people that are physically very sick from this virus or have family members very sick. I don't think it should go unsaid that we lost a crew member from this. So it's, again, month five of what seems to be just an endless supply of new stresses and constant changes.

Captain Chris Lee How are the business necessity jumpsuits working?

Captain Dave Chase It depends on whether or not you mean the contractual business necessity jumpseats, that were already in Section 8.A.3 or the Travel MOU. The Travel MOU is working well. The business necessity jumpseats used in the Travel MOU have to be approved by our members of the SIG and we feel that's going well and we understand where they're going to be used and we're able to have some control of where they're placed in the bid pack. The Company business necessity, jumpseat usage, the ones they've had contractual ability to use even prior to anything called COVID, those aren't going as well. And we have to grievances on that. The Company is not notifying us properly through the Scheduling Committee when they use the business necessity jumpseats. We tried to address it outside of grievance with the Company. We received some, what we took as assurance that it would be fixed. It wasn't. And so we grieved it. We have a second grievance over the way they're doing some of the business necessity jumpseats later in trips with the late trip revisions. We're not satisfied with that and those are grievances 20-07 and 20-08 and pilots should go read them. We've placed those in the Positive Rate so they have a better understanding. We know it's a bit complicated that there's different kinds of business necessity jumpseats, it's even hard to say for me today, but the Travel MOU itself has been very successful. The others, we feel the company can do better to comply with the collective bargaining agreement.

Captain Chris Lee We're seeing a lot of issues with the crew travel desk. What can you tell the pilots about that?

Captain Bill Hubbell Generally speaking, what's happening, there are a lot of revisions, endless revisions to parings. There's a lot of extra flying being generated. And that desk, that group is completely overwhelmed with the amount of changes that they're having to make. And that's why we're seeing issues such as hotels not being assigned until the trip has started. Issues with ground transportation not being assigned, deadheads not being booked in a timely fashion, which leads to late revisions on trips. The big takeaway there is that there's not enough people, there's not enough resources to do the amount of work and it's falling on our pilots. And so management has to rectify that, whether they need to bring in more people or however they need to do that. It's failing right now and they need to remedy that.

Captain Chris Lee Have there been discussions with management on that issue?

Captain Bill Hubbell Yes, we've engaged through a few different angles trying to find solutions within their current framework. And what the end result keeps becoming apparent is that it's just a resource issue. To be quite honest, it's a money issue. They need to get more resources to get the work done. But again, it's falling on our pilots when they're on the road and it's not our pilots' job.

Captain Don Loepke You know, on the one hand, we can understand the fact that they are overwhelmed with all of the change and all of the revisions, etc., but on the other hand, it's our responsibility to advocate that they go out and get whatever resources are available so that they can comply with our contractual requirements. And I don't think they're doing that right now.

Captain Dave Chase So when a pilot sees a one-dollar fare on their pairing or no hotel or no ground transportation listed, that's the indication of what we're talking about that there's insufficient manning in either global travel, crew travel services, or crew scheduling and that's the under manning we're talking about that needs to be rectified. Essentially, they are trying to operate at peak capacity without proper manning.

Captain Chris Lee We just completed a phone survey. What can you tell the pilots about the results?

Captain Dave Chase Well, even though there was a number of questions there, I'll say, in general, the pilots expressed support for the MEC. They expressed support for the work we've been doing on the coronavirus issue in a number of ways. They believe the MEC and the coronavirus team were responsive to their concerns and communicated them well. Overwhelmingly, we see pilot support for the negotiated agreements. We believe the MEC was very successful in identifying the problems through the PDR, working with the Negotiating Committee, breaking down the problem into a few areas. They stabilized it through the China OIM? We know the Company made a choice to withdraw from the China OIM but the Travel MOU and the Medical MOU as we call them shorthand here, they're both in place and they're providing an enormous benefit to our pilots.

Captain Don Loepke I think it's reassuring to see the support that we got for our handling of the COVID crisis. This is a big issue for pilot unity going forward into contract 2021. They've actually got to see firsthand how we can perform under pressure. We've responded well under pressure. We have a good plan going forward. And with the pilots seeing how we responded to the COVID-19 crisis thus far and being fully behind us as the survey indicated, I think it bodes well going forward.

Captain Bill Hubbell And I think on top of that, where it all started was pilot engagement. Not only with the survey, but also with all the PDRs and contacting their reps. That's really what drove us towards the OIM and the MOUs to get it stabilized. We don't know what the problems are unless the pilots are engaged. So kudos to the pilots. They were a huge part of that.

Captain Dave Chase And the MEC took a huge step here. We were lucky we had the PDR system in place and we used it long enough to really know how to make it work. But we had to put a considerable amount of resources towards the coronavirus issue in terms of time and the other assets we have. And then we had to break down the problem into components. Multiple agreements were made with the Company, along with a lot of

engagement and interaction. Many of our committees are involved. We had a timeline towards bargaining and at the same time we have this other overwhelming issue going on. And so it's comforting to see that the pilots were able to use the resources that we provide to help solve problems. And it was excellent to watch the leadership get involved and really advocate for their pilots and make sure that the agreements were in place to solve their problems.

Captain Don Loepke It also allowed us to pivot to our timeline to negotiations for contract 2021. And we've got a web-based survey that'll be coming out that will be an in-depth for everyone to participate in. And so this is why we ran for office, was to get us ready for contract 2021. And here we are. We're getting ready for contract 2021.

Captain Chris Lee Can you talk about some of the challenges as you prepare for contract 2021 in this environment?

Captain Dave Chase Well, clearly, we can't have our normal face to face meetings with the pilots in the way we normally would do. Normally we'd be out at the hub. Don and I, we love going out to the hub turn meetings, engaging with the pilots. Billy had even had a chance to do that yet as an officer. So normally we'd travel around the system or we'd be out in the hub several times a month, family awareness events. We can't do those in the traditional sense, but we're going to start using technology that will enable us to have the pilots gather and ask us questions and participate. We've dealt with that internally. We started using a lot more technology for our meetings. Been very successful with it and we think the pilots will embrace it. So, yeah, it's been a challenge, but we're looking forward to finding other ways to solve some of those problems and get prepared for contract 2021. Chris, everything we're doing is focusing on letting pilots have a say in their union.

Captain Don Loepke Well, I think it's also afforded us some opportunities to grow as an organization or to learn new methods for communicating with the pilots. We've started using GoToMeeting a lot for our internal meetings, and it's kind of spread through all of our committees. And I think that we can use that for engagement with the pilots. We're coming up with new ways to reach out to the pilots, including these podcasts.

Captain Bill Hubbell Yeah, that'd be my takeaway is that it may not look traditionally like what you're used to, but that we are going to engage and were interested in getting everybody together.

Captain Chris Lee Thanks again for coming. Any final thoughts?

Captain Bill Hubbell I'll put in a plug just for everyone, knowing how much stress everyone's under, just to be kind and look out for each other. Really, take an extra moment to take care of each other. Reach out to us and use the resources or point people in this direction for things like Pro Standards and PATH. Yeah, mainly just everybody take a breath, but take care of each other would be my take away.

Captain Don Loepke I know we're going to keep engaging on behalf of our pilots on all the issues that we're seeing with the PDR, but the one thing I'd like to stress to everyone is that we are pilots first. And when you're in the cockpit, as much as you can, keep those stressors out. Try to stay focused on flying the airplane safely, because the most important thing for any of us is to make it home safely to our families.

Captain Dave Chase My final thought would be for everybody to have a great summer. Be as safe as you can. Despite this virus, our timeline remains intact, that we will continue towards bargaining. It's something we need to do as an organization. We need to do it together. We're not going to be able to do without the support of the pilots. We're going to advocate for the pilots. We're going to go out there and fight for them to get the safest environment to operate in and pilots need to do their part. Stay informed, participate in our surveys, watch the retirement series we're putting out and help us be as prepared as possible to bargain for contract 2021 come next spring.

Captain Chris Lee Well, thanks again and thanks for listening. If you have any questions or comments, topic ideas, please send me an email to fdxpodcast@alpa.org and as always, be safe out there and we'll see you next time.