

A MAGAZINE FOR AIRLINE EXECUTIVES

2010 Issue No. 2

ascend

Taking your airline to new heights



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The Bear



With its strong brand that sports a bear's paw print on every aircraft and its keen ability to weave both professionalism and compassion into its operations, Bearskin Airlines represents a first-rate example of a carrier that started out with very little and evolved into a leading force in its region.

■ By Stephani Hawkins | *Ascend* Editor



Every airline has a unique history that tells an interesting story from its very first flight to present day. What makes the story intriguing is the way each carrier evolves through the years, going from a state of infancy to a well-established, seasoned operation.

The journey for Sioux Lookout, Ontario, Canada-based Bearskin Airlines, referred to as the “Bear,” is no exception. After all, not many airlines can say they started their journey landing on water for lack of runways.

More than 45 years ago, in 1963, the regional carrier, named after Bearskin Lake, a remote First Nations community positioned 270 miles from Sioux Lookout, came to life, providing charter services to secluded First Nation reserves in northern Ontario.

During the first 14 years, the carrier provided airtaxi service using Cessna 180s equipped with floats during summer months and skis in the winter. Given the lack of airfields in this remote area, the aircraft worked well to charter passengers on the surface of lakes near Sioux Lookout. However, the landing devices didn’t come without challenges. During early winter freeze-ups and early spring break-ups, the landing gear couldn’t be relied upon.

That started to change in 1977 through the early ‘80s when the Ontario government began constructing new airfields, making the northern communities accessible year-round. That’s also the year one of the carrier’s pilots, Harvey Friesen, who had purchased 50 percent of the business five years earlier, bought the previous owner’s shares, giving him control of the airline. In addition, Bearskin Airlines, that same year, began its first regular scheduled flights between Big Trout Lake and Sioux Lookout. And the evolution for this young charter carrier was set in motion. From that point, other scheduled flights were progressively added, starting with Thunder Bay and then Kenora and Winnipeg.

The move from a solely charter operation to a regional carrier was a major milestone for Bearskin Airlines, but it, too, came with challenges. Part of its fleet had to be converted to wheeled aircraft to support the new markets it served as well as future expansion. To serve these communities only accessible via air, Bearskin Airlines began adding 14-seat Beech 99s to its fleet and then subsequently moved into the 19-seat Fairchild Metro 3 and Metro 23 aircraft when its northern routes were sold in 2003.

“We needed the right-size aircraft and, of course, the aircraft had to be fairly fast, pressurized, comfortable and reliable, so all those things had to come together to allow us to provide a good service,” said Harvey Friesen, president of Bearskin Airlines.

Today, the carrier operates 14 Fairchild Metroliners, which were created by legendary aircraft designer Ed Swearingen, who developed them as a stretched version of his Merlin

II corporate turboprop and designed the aircraft specifically to serve the regional airline market.

According to Friesen, the expansion of the airline, in some cases, had more to do with judicious timing to meet the needs of market demand as opposed to a formal business plan or strategy.

“I think we helped the company grow one careful step at a time,” he said.

In the early 1980s, the Bear’s biggest competitor was bought out and ceased operations to the smaller communities in northwest Ontario. The opportunity to expand simply knocked on the carrier’s door, and the owners promptly took action.

“We did have to make fairly aggressive moves at times,” Friesen said. “Back in the early ‘80s, one of the airlines that had been serving the area, and our biggest competitor, was being bought out by Air Ontario. It elected to move out of the smaller communities in northwestern Ontario. We then very quickly bought aircraft and expanded to meet all of those needs.”

Through the years, the carrier kept a close eye on the needs of travelers and expanded where it made sense. Putting customers first has been a leading contributor to the carrier’s success. It’s

been vital that Bearskin Airlines flies at the precise times of day travelers want or need to travel and that it provides direct routes that are convenient, resulting in time savings for its valued customers.

By 2003, Bearskin Airlines had expanded to include scheduled service to nearly 40 destinations and, today, more than 45 years after it first took to the skies as a two-aircraft charter carrier, the airline offers more than 100 daily flights to 17 destinations in Ontario and Manitoba, surpassing any other carrier serving these key northern Ontario markets.

For the Bear, however, it’s much more than linking Northern Ontario’s five largest cities to Winnipeg, Ottawa and numerous smaller communities for the traveling public. The carrier’s executives and more than 250 employees also place great emphasis on assisting the communities they serve.

For nearly three decades, via Hope Air, a national registered charity founded in the mid 1980s, Bearskin Airlines has provided free air transportation to Canadians who are in financial need and require non-emergency medical care outside of their native communities.

In 1997, Bearskin Airlines Hope Classic, a curling bonspiel for women, was formed to raise funds to help fight breast cancer. To date, the



Prior to taking ownership of Bearskin Airlines in 1977, President Harvey Friesen (left) was a pilot for the carrier. A year later, his brother, Cliff, purchased shares and is currently the company’s executive vice president.

annual charity event has raised nearly US\$2 million that is used to hire research scientists, purchase state-of-the-art medical equipment and fund medical facilities and support groups as well as numerous other projects aimed to help cure breast cancer.

Through its Charity Golf Classics event, the carrier, along with numerous other sponsors, such as Avis, Bell, Best Western NorWester Resort Hotel, ESSO Imperial Oil and PepsiCo, has raised more than US\$1,005,500 since launching the program in 1999. Proceeds go to a variety of charities and non-profit organizations including The United Way of Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Foundation and Northern Cancer Research Foundation/Tamarack House.

Three years ago, the Bear became a regional sponsor for Relay For Life, supporting the Canadian Cancer Society. During the annual event, participants gather for a 12-hour, non-competitive, overnight relay held at a local track. The occasion brings together cancer survivors, those who have lost a loved one to cancer, those going through cancer treatment and those who simply want to help with fund-raising efforts.

"We take pride in our role as a community supporter," Friesen said. "We remain committed to investing in the communities we serve and the people who live there. We continually attempt to develop new and improved ways to create opportunity. For the past 44 years, we have become a solid partner in supporting community events and development projects, building the economy, creating jobs and establishing important transportation links with communities in the north. Why? Because we are here for the long haul."

In its quest to continually provide high-quality air transportation throughout northern Canada, support the communities it serves and expand to meet demand, technology remains a key enabler for the airline. Its executives don't sit back and wait for technological advancements to come to them. To the contrary, they seek opportunities to improve their systems to ensure their valued customers have easy access to their products and services as well as an exceptional start-to-finish travel experience. In addition, they rely on modern technology to run an optimal, efficient operation.

For example, earlier this year, Bearskin Airlines became a launch customer for new check-in technology via *SabreSonic*® *Check-in*, using a powerful platform that enables the carrier to manage end-to-end check-in and departure control operations with precision and ease (see related article on page 76). The upgraded technology, which previously supported two check-in systems that were regionally designated, has been combined using the best of both to create a single, robust solution capable of supporting every airline business model across all corners of the world.

"By combining the features of [the North America and international systems] on one new platform, *SabreSonic Check-in* permits all



Bearskin Airlines executives and employees alike take pride in working together to assist the communities they serve. Transporting patients with non-emergency medical needs who struggle financially, raising money for breast cancer research and the Canadian Cancer Society, and sponsoring events that support a variety of charities and non-profit organizations are among the many ways the carrier's more than 250 employees contribute to those with less-fortunate circumstances.



Bearskin Airlines, which started out with ski- and float-equipped aircraft, offers more than 100 flights to 17 destinations using 19-seat Fairchild Metro 3 and Metro 23twin turboprop planes.

hosted airlines to access the best DCS features and allows *Sabre Airline Solutions*® to better focus its efforts and resources," Friesen said. "We are pleased to be the first to make this move, putting us in a great position to take advantage of revenue-generating and customer-service features, which will soon be available to all airlines hosted by *Sabre Airline Solutions*. It's a competitive landscape, and the faster we are able to enhance our systems, the better able we are to compete."

The new system went live at Bearskin Airlines in July, marking another important milestone for the thriving carrier.

To date, Bearskin Airlines has covered a lot of ground, made great headway and has left quite an impressionable impact in its corner of the world.

"True, we've been around for several decades, but we're just getting started, and we're definitely here to stay," Friesen said. [f](#)

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