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## Wings Club celebrates rich history

Despite rocky periods, Manhattan's one-time flyboy club has managed to maintain its relevance in aviation circles as it prepares to turn 70

BY FRANÇOIS SHALOM, THE GAZETTE FEBRUARY 25, 2012

It started out as the quintessential flyboys' club in May 1942, five months after the U.S. entered the Second World War - whiskey and cigars, male bawdy talk and testosterone-powered tales of flying exploits.

The organization was elevated over the years from a rough-and-tumble clubhouse - an early membership requirement was to be a pilot, and early-day airmen in the Second World War were not above crashing in a corner after a martini or three - to a rather select membership in aviation.

The Wings Club, whose initial raison d'être was for these wartime pilots to fraternize and share experiences, evolved into a de rigueur circuit stop starting in the 1950s for top brass with the right stuff: astronauts, airline presidents, big-time aerospace execs and a U.S. president or two. Near Grand Central Station, it was a full-service club - an 80-seat restaurant, bar, lounge, board room, administration offices, rest areas, etc.

In May, the club will celebrate its 70th anniversary. But it hasn't been all clear skies.

The Wings Club fell on hard times after 9/11 and the recession. Membership dwindled and its rent lease in midtown Manhattan - signed on Sept. 10, 2001 - was jacked up 40 per cent, Wings Club general manager Harris Herman said in a recent interview, eventually forcing a move from its location in the iconic former Pan Am Building, long since renamed for an insurance company.

It might be inaccurate to say the Wings Club's former glory has been restored at its new, smaller site on also-not-too-shabby Park Ave. But the more spartan digs simply reflect the mass marketization of the once glamorous airline industry. The dazzling and very sexist 1960s and 1970s heydays of Pan Am, TWA, National and Eastern Airlines - "Hi, I'm Cheryl, fly me" - for the select few have given way to the no-frills charms of lowcost carriers for the masses and long airport lines.

Still, the club's relevance remains undiminished, various sources said.

By the time Bombardier Inc. president Pierre Beaudoin spoke at a luncheon of the prestigious group last week, membership had shot back up to about 1,200 members and the future looks bright again, Herman said.

Beaudoin did not pick the Wings Club by accident to deliver his truculent defence of Bombardier's future CSeries airliner, said Wings Club board member and former president Kenneth Gazzola. The former vice-president of McGraw Hill - which publishes Aviation Week, a top aerospace publication - now sits on the board of Washington's National Air and Space Museum.

"This was a good opportunity to tell a much broader venue that the Canadians are very aggressive and on the leading edge of doing things, which they have been - including their risk-taking. When (Beaudoin) had cash on hand, he was willing to go forward with a major new risky program to take on the big guys (Boeing and Airbus)."

Bombardier, said Herman, has one of the largest presences at the club, with multiple individual memberships for executives.

Another Canadian, a Montrealer in fact, recently spoke to the Wings Club - Louis Chênevert, who started his career at GM's Ste. Thérèse plant in Boisbriand and is now chairman and CEO of Fortune 500 company United Technologies Corp.

"He's also doing big things," Gazzola said. "Pratt (& Whitney, a division of UTC) got the neo engine contract (for the Airbus remodel of its A320), which is huge, and bought (aerospace systems and components maker) Goodrich, which is also huge."

The club's 70 years can be roughly divided into three phases, said Herman, a former American Airlines executive and one-time president of the famous Pan Am Shuttle. (Herman chuckled as he recalled that when MetLife bought the skyscraper with the emblematic Pan Am Building sign, he told his wife it would take years for the insurers to change the sign. "It took them a week.")

The early period was largely a pilots' club, about and for them pretty exclusively. Airlines, starting in the early 1960s, began to hold sway and still remain a strong component of the club today.

The latest phase consists of manufacturers like Boeing, Airbus, Embraer and Bombardier, and other players including finance and leasing firms.

In fact, the incoming general manager who will take over in March from 73-yearold Herman, who will be retiring after what was supposed to be a one-year stint in 2002 turned into a decade, is Tom Fitzsimmons, the chief financial officer of GAMA Aviation, an aircraft charter and management company. He also worked for PrivatAir, a Swiss-based businessclass only charter airline affiliated with Lufthansa to which Bombardier recently sold its CSeries.

His task, Fitzsimmons said, will be "simply to continue to be a forum for different views. And to continue to expand individual and corporate memberships and look for additional ways to provide advantages for our people. And to grow and prosper."

Herman said that the five annual \$5,000 scholarships awarded to students at various universities and colleges, including Boston's Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Daytona Beach's Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, are intended to provide continuity and indoctrinate students in the rich history of aviation. But not only students.

"We gave an outstanding aviator award a few years back to the Tuskegee airmen (a highly distinguished and heavily decorated contingent of Second World War African-American fighter pilots). A few of them showed up with 60 relatives. It knocked people over. But a lot of our members had never heard of them."

Bernadine Douglas, associate vice-president of development at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, said that while the club may have epitomized the flyboy's club at one time, that era is long over.

"I don't think it now fits the stereotype of a men's club with wingback chairs and cigar smoke," Douglas said.

"Every December, we take a group of students to functions at the Wings Club, and they've been extremely accommodating and welcoming to us. And there's been an emphasis lately on women in aviation."

Women were first allowed into the inner sanctum only in the early 1970s, but Herman said that their services have been increasingly recognized since then, including honouring WASPS - Women Airforce Service Pilots - who ferried all types of airplanes from factories to combat zones during the world war.

David McKay, the club's president, said the Wings Club has become "a global platform for discussion."

But no lobbying, Herman stressed. In fact, cutthroat rivals mingle at the club, perhaps the only forum where their paths cross.

"They needle each other occasionally, but there's no confrontation."

"Take Gary Kelly (the CEO of Southwest Airlines), who has spoken at our December luncheon for the last four years. Each year, Dave Barger (CEO of competing low-cost carrier JetBlue) sits at the

table closest to the dais. Gary will always - always - direct one remark at Dave, and everybody laughs. It's serious, but it isn't."

"The interesting thing about that is that there probably couldn't be a meeting of Gary Kelly and Dave Barger in private."

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