

From the Jumpseat: Servant's Heart

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Most months, we like to feature the stories of one or two SWAPA Pilots who most of you will never have the opportunity to meet. This month is a little different. This month, we won't be focusing on one specific Pilot — though one of our own is at the center of this story — and will instead highlight something that cynics believe is only a buzzword or catchphrase. Ten years ago, an article on Employee Performance Management in the Harvard Business Review discussed Southwest's practice of "hiring not for skills but three attributes: a warrior spirit, a servant's heart, and a fun-loving attitude" (Weber, 2015).

To the Pilot at the center of this story — a PHX First Officer we'll call "Herb", because I'm certain Herb Kelleher would be proud — the Southwest Servant's Heart is more than just a buzzword. "One of the first things they tell you during new hire training is that the Company is there for you," Herb said. "To hear it is one thing. But to experience it is another."

This story began back in July on the second day of a pairing as our Herb and his Captain prepared to operate a flight from MEM to MCO. Before that trip, Herb had never flown with PHX Captain Pete LeBlanc. "The first day was just one leg to Memphis, then everybody went to bed," Pete said. "I really didn't know much about him, other than that he was single and lived alone with his cat in the Phoenix area. Typical day one stuff."

Day one might have been typical, but day two was shaping up to be anything but. "I remember him saying that he must have slept funny, because his left arm was acting strange," Pete said. "I didn't think anything of it. Even after he said his seat didn't feel right, I just chalked it up to flying in an old 700."

The flight to Orlando was uneventful, but Pete started noticing that Herb seemed a little ... off. On downwind, abeam the airport, Pete asked Herb if he had the field in sight. "I thought it was strange that he didn't — I mean, it's a pretty big airport — but I wasn't going to push him and was content to continue on vectors," Pete said. Herb eventually called visual on final.

"That's when I realized that something was definitely wrong," Pete said. "I made an 'airspeed' call in the flare, but it didn't seem like he responded. Then, when he applied the brakes, the plane started to veer to the right." Pete took control of the aircraft, and they safely exited the runway. "It was his first leg of the trip, but his performance didn't seem to fit with what I knew about him," Pete said.

While Herb has only been with Southwest Airlines since 2022, he spent almost three decades with another airline and is an experienced Pilot. His performance on that leg didn't match with what Pete expected. "In hindsight, I think I already knew," Pete said. "My mom suffered a stroke two years ago, and I learned a lot about it through conversations with her doctors. When we got to the gate, I asked him if he was okay."

"I told him I think I needed help," Herb said. "And he sprang into action." Pete ran up to the top of the jet bridge and told the Ops agent they needed Emergency Medical Services for his First Officer. "Things happened fast after that," Pete said. "While EMS was taking care of him, I got a call from the CPNOC and PHX Assistant Chief Pilot Dave Harmon who pulled me from the trip so I could go to the hospital with him." Pete remained with Herb at the hospital that night, but that was only the beginning of what the Company would do for one of their own.

MCO Assistant Chief Pilot Paul Kury received a phone call from Dave Harmon asking for support. "It's just what we do," Paul said. "By luck, it happened in our domicile, so we were able to respond immediately to the situation." Within 24 hours, MCO Captain Joe Gick from the Chief Pilot's Office and one of the MCO reps visited Herb in the hospital.

When Herb arrived at the hospital, he immediately underwent tests that confirmed what Pete had already suspected. "They found the blockage that caused the stroke but didn't know if it was due to plaque or a clot," Herb said. As a result, he was forced to remain in the hospital for five days for more testing. Then, when he was released, he couldn't fly for 10 days.

"System Chief Pilot Barnes Pruett and HDQ Chief Pilot Bob Pieknik told us to do whatever we needed to do for him," Paul Kury said. "Between SWAPA and the rest of us in the office, including James Roach, Joe Gick, and our coordinators, Sallie Zayac and Melody Hernandez, we took care of anything he needed."

"Most of us don't pack for two weeks when we leave on a three-day trip," Herb said. "But they put me up in a hotel, bought me groceries, and took me shopping for clothes." Even the seemingly inconsequential details were thought of. "PHX Captain Brian Marin (SWAPA rep) asked if I needed help with caring for a pet," Herb said. "I didn't, but that was the level of support they provided. It was overwhelming. I never felt alone through the entire process."

"This is one of the intangibles that sets us apart from other airlines," PHX Chief Pilot Jeff Miller said. "We take care of our own. Dave Harmon got the ball rolling, and our coordinators Kim Lemmon, Maddie Nordin, and Debi Olivares, arranged for transportation to fly his mom in from Denver." Paul Kury met her at the gate and drove her to the hospital so she could stay with Herb until he was able to leave.

"When I was finally released from the hospital, I flew home and was met at the gate by Dave Harmon," Herb said. "They wanted to make sure I got home safely and had everything I needed." When it happened, Herb knew it was going to be a long road for him to return to the cockpit. But knowing he had the support of the Southwest Servant's

Heart made it seem far less daunting.

“I had a certified letter from the FAA waiting for me when I got home,” Herb said with a chuckle. “Surprisingly, it actually showed a hint of compassion.” The letter had also been sent to Herb’s Aviation Medical Examiner, who contacted him and began the process of collecting all the information the FAA required. “SWAPA resources have been huge,” Herb said. “Both the Guide to Navigating Disability and the Complete Disability Playbook have given me the peace of mind to know that I’m being taken care of it.” While Herb waits for the FAA’s response, he goes to regular appointments with a cardiologist and neurologist and completes physical therapy twice a week. “And I’m eating healthier, working on core strength and balance, and taking care of my blood pressure,” Herb said.

But has the support stopped? “Absolutely not,” Herb said. “I hear from several involved during that time quite often. They didn’t just take care of me in the moment but have proven that the Servant’s Heart is a real thing here at Southwest Airlines.” His Captain on that trip, Pete LeBlanc, reaches out via text message from time to time to make sure he’s still doing well. “We check in as needed,” Jeff Miller added. “We want him to know he has our support in the Chief Pilots’ Office, but we value his privacy.”

The 2015 article from the Harvard Business Review was titled, How Southwest Hires Such Dedicated People. But I think Herb — the real Herb — said it best: “Your employees come first. And if you treat them right, they’ll treat your customers right.” And the Herb from this story agrees. “The Chief Pilots are amazing. I felt like their whole job was to support me, and it meant a lot. It made me want to pay it forward.” **RP**



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