

FRENCH FALCON GAVE FEDEX ITS WINGS



FedEx is a classic American success story but its early growth was shaped by an iconic aircraft from Europe: the French-built Dassault Falcon 20. As FedEx turns 40, we managed to catch up with some of the groundbreaking pioneers who flew and worked on the Falcon in the U.S. and Europe.

Former FedEx pilot, Captain Louis Turner, is one of many employees with fond memories of the Dassault Falcon 20. With a broad smile on his face, he reminisced about the Falcon: "It was the first foreign airplane I had ever flown. It was absolutely beautiful and looked as if it was going 400 miles an hour just sitting on the ground."



Back in the early 70s, Captain Turner was one of the original pilots personally recruited by FedEx founder Frederick W. Smith. He was on duty when the company officially launched on 17 April 1973, operating a fleet of 14 Falcon 20s out of Memphis International Airport – the only air freight company in the world with a fleet entirely made up of French aircraft.

The stakes that first day were high, and 40 years on Captain Turner vividly recalls the excitement, adrenaline and pressure. "It was night time when we started our shift and we had 14 Falcons on duty. On that night I just had a handful of packages on board." Later, when he touched down back in Memphis, Fred Smith and a group of VIP guests were waiting eagerly to hear how the first runs had gone. As a hands-on boss, there was no way Mr. Smith would go home without a first-hand report.

Captain Turner recalls the early years at FedEx with a mix of pleasure and awe at the sheer workload: "I was absolutely delighted to be flying the airplane, but for the first five years we all had to work at the absolute limit to get the company up and running."

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Among the many memories Captain Turner shared with us, one anecdote seemed to sum up the very essence of the young company: "One day I found myself on a routine flight from LA to Albuquerque. We had an unexpected call from Memphis to tell us to divert to Amarillo, Texas, for freight pick up. When we landed at Amarillo, the ramp agent ran out towards us. He placed a small package in my hands. Of course, my first reaction was where is the rest? But I soon realized that this is a great example of the dedication FedEx has towards its customer."

Esprit de corps

Going the extra mile at work while pulling together as a team was typical of the pioneering spirit of the FedEx team in the 70s. It's why the company became a national and then global success, and it remains true in 2013. In return, FedEx provides a great work environment – listed as one of Fortune Magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work For.

Fred Smith believes firmly in putting people first – both because "it's the right thing to do" and because it makes business sense. Right from the start, he cared personally about his customers, co-workers, aircraft and business. He also had a very personal touch: his first two Falcon 20s were named after his daughters, Wendy and Laurie – beginning a tradition of naming FedEx aircraft after employees' children that continues to this day.



Thomas Bodamer started as a mechanic with FedEx on 19 March 1973, and is now a divisional MD: "At first, there were just six of us doing all the repair and maintenance work on the FedEx planes. There was just a great esprit de corps at the time and there still is. We knew if we wanted to succeed we'd have to put a lot of work into it."



Captain Larry Tubor, another pilot from the early years, echoes this enthusiasm for the company and its aircraft. He continued on Falcons right until they were replaced by Boeing 727s in the early 80s: "It was a wonderful airplane, just like a little sports car – so responsive and just a lot of fun to fly – but also one of the most solid airplanes I have ever flown. I had the option of switching to

Boeing's but I stayed with the Falcon until the bitter end. I just didn't want to leave such an amazing machine."

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European collaboration

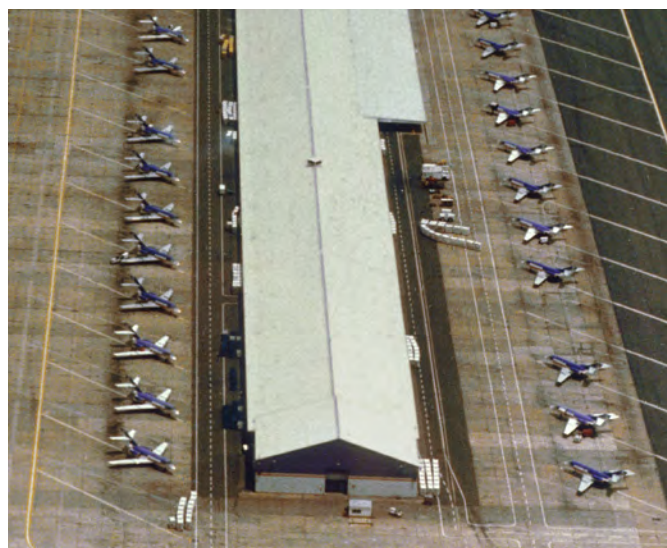
Fred Smith developed his vision of a U.S. overnight air-freight service in the late 60s and early 70s, and quickly realized he required a fleet of fast, ultra-reliable aircraft. Small enough to land at cramped local air strips across the U.S., they needed the muscle for a 6,700 pound payload and the build quality to endure pretty much any weather.

An intensive search of the world's aircraft produced a shortlist of half a dozen – but there was one clear winner. Rejecting the easy option of buying an American jet, Fred Smith turned to Europe and chose the widely admired Dassault fanjet Falcon 20. However, this was no “off-the-shelf” purchase. Early on, the FedEx team had to work hand in glove with their counterparts at Dassault Aviation, planning how to convert the French passenger jet for freight.

French connection

Much of this redesign work has faded from memory over the decades, but we managed to track down one of the only surviving Dassault Aviation engineers who worked on the original Falcon 20 and its conversion. Now 84, René Lemaire still recalls with pride the remarkable collaboration between the FedEx and Dassault Aviation teams. He doesn't have a computer or email, but we reached him in Bordeaux, France, by another fast and reliable method – FedEx-delivered letter.

Monsieur Lemaire wrote back to us about his work on the Falcon 20 prototype, and the later modification for FedEx which was carried out in the U.S. “The aircraft had not been designed for freight and Fred Smith wanted some fundamental changes, such as a bigger door for cargo. The original door had integrated steps, so we designed a new, articulated cargo door with a freight elevator. We also strengthened the floor and modified the control systems. That's how our collaboration with FedEx started. I am proud that I contributed to the creation of FedEx through my work on the Falcon 20, which fully justified the faith shown in it by Fred Smith.”



Memphis Hub – 1977

To the sun and back

The conversion work paid off, delivering a remodeled aircraft capable of hauling freight for over 2,000 hours each year. In 1993, Bruce Popp, the director of operations at the time, told industry journal Business & Commercial Aviation that the FedEx Falcons were better built than many fighter planes. "We flew enough miles with our Falcon fleet to go to the sun and back. It was a pretty darn good airplane!"

That's a fitting tribute to our old friend the Falcon 20 – and to all the people in the U.S. and France who made it, and FedEx, such a stunning success.



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