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Looking back at the last year: How Swiss WorldCargo reacted

One year ago, COVID-19 was already sending shock waves throughout the world, and had been labelled as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). At the time, it was hard to predict just what the full extent of the crisis would be, but the impact was already being felt everywhere. It was becoming clear that ripple effects would extend throughout the air cargo industry, which suddenly had to deal with decreasing capacities, alongside

an increased demand for the transportation of goods.

In the last year, Swiss WorldCargo has had to make significant changes to its business model and operational processes. Beginning with the first adjustments to our network in January and February, we experienced a continued decrease in available capacity in February and March. By the end of March, SWISS and Swiss WorldCargo were only operating a fraction of the normally served network, due to the stringent travel restrictions that had been imposed throughout the world. Knowing we needed to keep flying and operating existing supply chains connecting Switzerland to the world (and vice-versa), we implemented a series of steps to ensure that we could continue operating.

Cargo-only flights

We premiered our first “cargo-only” flights in the end of March 2020, with two Airbus A340-300 flights connecting Hong Kong to Zurich. As Swiss WorldCargo traditionally operated as a “belly carrier,” transporting goods within the aircraft’s belly cargo hold, this meant a sudden change. With a special designation allowing for the transportation of humanitarian goods, we were suddenly able to transport large quantities of facemasks, gowns, gloves and other products within the aircraft’s cabin.

By May, we had carried out several flights on behalf of larger institutions, including for the Red Cross and various hospitals throughout Switzerland. We also developed the SWISS Belly Charter concept, with which “cargo only” flights were offered to customers, either as a full charter flight or with specific space on the aircraft sold. These flights connected Zurich and Geneva to different cities around the world; in a short span of time, we had begun operating regular cargo-only flights to destinations ranging from Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Tokyo. By May, we had already operated over 80 cargo-only flights and transported over 1,300 tons of cargo.



Next developments

In the summer, we continued expanding our network, including with some special flights to destinations such as Toronto and Shenzhen. These were historical moments, as the flights were operated to cities purely based on cargo demand, and were outside of the traditional SWISS and Swiss WorldCargo network. In May, together with our technical division, we reached another milestone: On three of our Boeing 777-300ERs, we removed the seats in the economy class cabin, in order to add up to 12 additional tons, or 36% additional cargo capacity, in the cabin. This allowed us to expand our shipping efforts and increase our tonnage as well. The so-called CARRY flights (CARGo in the cabin with Removed Y-class seats) quickly became popular and were used on routes worldwide. Beginning July 27, Swiss WorldCargo was able to transport not just humanitarian, but also certain commercial goods within the cabin, encompassing a wide array of materials, ranging from fashion/apparel to spare parts.



Fall

By the fall, our cargo-only flights had become a regular and fully integrated part of our network. Our refurbished aircraft allowed us to carry a higher amount of cargo than we would have been able to otherwise. As of December 2020, we had carried out over 1,000 cargo-only flights and transported over 23,000 tons of cargo. In addition to this, we had also flown to destinations such as Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile, where we are able to meet the seasonal demand for the export of certain perishable goods, while also carrying specific goods from Switzerland and the rest of Europe.



2021

Since the beginning of 2021, we have continued expanding our network, with flights to destinations including Seoul

and Lima, as well as cities outside of the traditional SWISS and Swiss WorldCargo network. The flights enabled us to reach these cities and their surrounding areas, either briefly or over a longer period of time. In addition to this, with the development of different COVID-19 vaccines, we focused on the global transportation of COVID-19 vaccines. We also operated several of our wide-body aircraft within Europe, in order to meet the increasing demand and pressure to meet shipments within the continent. As shared at the annual SWISS press conference, by the beginning of March 2021, we had carried out over 1,600 flights and transported over 36,000 tons of goods, including over 7,000 tons of transported medical goods.



Looking back

During all this time, one remarkable thing has been that our focus has largely remained the same. Our volumes have increased, and the process by which we have carried out our flights (refurbished aircraft, new destinations), have certainly changed. Through it all, however, our focus has remained on the customer, and on meeting the needs for the transport of care-intensive goods. In this sense, we have been proud to focus on carrying medical goods that directly help combat the crisis, just as much as we have continued focusing on the transportation of products that stimulate local economies. Shipping spare parts, clothing and other products, for instance, remains a necessity during this time, especially as the demand for global shipping remains at a high point. Therefore, we can look back at this past year and say that in these truly extraordinary times, we are proud to have continued adhering to our primary values of quality, reliability and stability.

It is difficult to predict what the future will look like, and we expect to operate a mixture of passenger flights and cargo flights for the time being. Nonetheless, the current situation is certainly special and has necessitated some quick developments and “out of the box” solutions.



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