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Exclusive - Cargo veteran Steven Verhasselt goes his own way

Liege Airport's Commercial Director, Steven Verhasselt, decided to exit the Walloon airport and concentrate on the activities of consultancy FB Cargo S, founded by him only this September.

The tireless and very well-connected manager's career change is, of course, a loss for Liege Airport, but a gain for himself, as he can pursue his own projects come 2022. With Steven gone, Liege Airport (LGG) will be needing a full-time VP Commercial.

Steven's LGG commitment started with a memorable dinner in Guangzhou, 15 years ago, where he was asked by executive members of the airport if he could join the team in putting Liege Airport on the map across Asia. At the time, residing in Hong Kong with his wife, he had never been to Liege before, despite his Flemish origins. So, it took many meetings and discussions with Liege officials before he finally set foot on the Belgian airport's ground.

LGG decided to focus on cargo

A few years earlier, the express service TNT had moved its freighter fleet from CGN to LGG, which triggered Liege's decision to concentrate on becoming a cargo hub. Although TNT guaranteed a basic utilization rate, Liege wanted to attract more cargo business.

The economic background is that, at the time, Belgian Wallonia was facing an enormous structural change: from a coal-mining location with a coal mining train, to a modern location based on logistics, life-sciences, nanotechnology, aerospace industry, and green chemistry.

A radical change compared to the past, especially for the inhabitants, who had to qualify for new jobs with high value-added potential. This economic conversion proved to be successful, as seen by today's industrial structure of the Walloon province and the export share of 66% in the province's GNP.

Creating a snowball effect

But without the continuous upswing of the airport, the success would probably have been less. Together with Steven Verhasselt, Bert Selis, and the entire cargo team, the airport succeeded in acquiring an increasing number of cargo airlines operating scheduled services to and from Liege. Hence, intercontinental supply chains were established, linking the regional economy to the world.

As freight traffic grew, a new Cargo City was erected, and a state-of-the-art Horse Inn was built. It temporarily houses race and pedigree horses to be flown to events around the world. The highly frequented facility turned out to be a huge selling point for LGG, upping the place's reputation.

Then the pandemic stopped Steven's business trips, physically cutting him off his customers.

Changed reality

So, plans for meetings in Addis, Nairobi, a conference in Doha, and talks in Moscow had to be scrapped. "We had



VP Commercial Steven Verhasselt left LGG on Friday (17DEC21), looking for new professional challenges – archive



Steven is a dedicated soccer player belonging to HongKong's "Over 45s Legends" League – archive

discussions about the potential impact of Covid, at that time only in Asia, and how it would work out, before flying back to Hong Kong. I never expected it to take 603 days before I would board a plane again."

His summary: "A lot has changed, some for the better, much, however, for the worse and which will not be turned back easily. The way I managed my tasks was no longer realistic, so I decided it was a good time to call an end to being VP Commercial of Liege Airport based in Hong Kong."

As of January, Mr. Verhasselt intends to concentrate on his consulting company's activities.

Driving sustainability through efficiency

"I definitely hope FB Cargo S gets wings and flies out, not only in Liege, but all over the world. I would like to prove that it is possible for a consultant, or a group of consultants, to really understand what is happening in our industry. The goal is to translate that into hands-on advice on how to define a cargo strategy and assist in

implementing it. My dream is to reach a global network of cargo-oriented airports which share best practices and strive for operational excellence."

The door of FB Cargo S is open to everybody, friends, old and new, he states.

Also, he has initiated another project: Massimize, "the first application developed by Wavelength, a company founded by 2 IT experts, 1 air cargo expert, and me," Mr. Verhasselt explains. Massimize's aim is to drive sustainability through efficiency, digitizing and optimizing processes in the cargo industry, step by step.

Due to Steven's departure, we have asked leading cargo managers who have known him for long time, to send us testimonials.

Frank Van Gelder, Secretary General, Pharma Aero

Every true leader has his style of leadership that in the end makes him a different and better leader. Steven made Liege Airport a true and significant global cargo hub. Not only by developing the business as such, but especially by his accessibility as a human in everything he does. For me, Steven is a true visionary, and that is what I hold as the best memories working with him. I could endlessly spin out crazy ideas with him, that eventually turned out to be great concepts. It will be difficult to fill those shoes, especially because from the outside they might not seem so big unless you are the one wearing them. I wish Steven all the best in his next "new normal" and I am sure he will make it great.



Frank van Gelder – photo: courtesy Pharma.Aero

Steven Polmans, TIACA Chairman & Chief Customer Officer, Nallian NV

For the past 15 years, Steven was LGG and LGG was Steven. He literally and figuratively gave the airport a face and was omnipresent. He was (and still is) not only a pleasant person to deal with, but he also knows the air cargo industry inside out, had a clear vision and knew how to turn that into a workable and successful strategy. We cannot overstate Steven's contribution to LGG's success in recent years. Success is always a team effort and never the result of just one person, but his contribution has been of enormous importance. When I still worked for BRU, for



Steven Polmans – photo: Nallian

Nathan De Valck, Head of Cargo Product & Network Development, Brussels Airport Company

“Friend and foe always got along with you, and you are widely respected for your knowledge and personal opinion about our aviation sector.

We know you for your no-nonsense style and your willingness to work together on issues affecting the air cargo industry.

Your presentations were always full of jokes and anecdotes, and you made no secret of your love for your soccer team in Hong Kong.

After years of loyal service, you will undoubtedly take on new challenges and share your vision and expertise with others. We hope we can still have a regular pint of Belgian beer together in the future.”

many years we were direct and major competitors. But we always went through the same door without any problems and stayed in contact and talked in a professional and correct way, and in addition we could have a beer together and have fun. That, too, typifies Steven's professionalism. I am convinced that whatever he will do, he will do it with the same passion and vision, and that we will continue to see him regularly. Professionally as well as privately.

But for now (with a "Duvel" in hand): cheers Steven and all the best!



Nathan De Valck – picture: courtesy BRU Airport Company

Franz Heuckeroth van Hessen, CEO Aircargo Consulting Global

Steven is a classical “alpha animal”, nothing can stop this workaholic. I was in close contact with this iconic cargo pro from 2017 to 2019 during my time as VP Air Services at LGG Airport.

I came across many gifted managers but had never before met a guy who was capable of selling ice cream to an Inuit community.

To my understanding, he was instrumental in shaping Liege's air cargo business during his tenure. Words like "can't do" don't exist for Steven. He finds a workable solution for every challenge. I think I can say that, without Steven, LGG would not be playing in the top league of European cargo airports today.

Not only is he an air freight expert, but he is also an extremely fine, pleasant person and cool guy. I have a



Franciscus Johan Heuckeroth van Hessen – photo: archive
lot of respect for him.