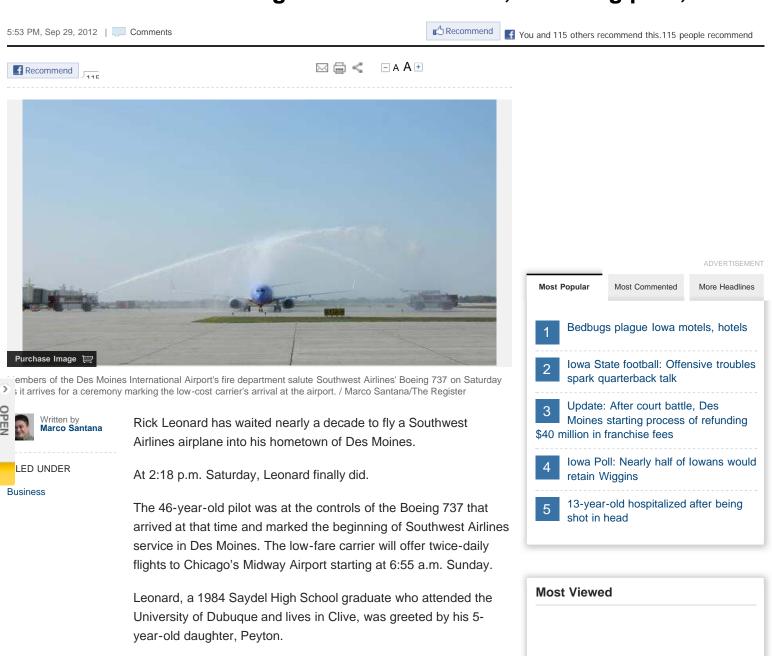


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# Southwest Airlines brings dozens of Iowans, including pilot, home



Flying into Des Moines is "one of the big highlights of my aviation career," said Leonard, who served 20 years in the U.S.



Des Moines native and Southwest Airlines pilot Rick Leonard is greeted by his daughter, 5-year-old Peyton, after flying an inaugural flight into Des Moines International Airport on Saturday. It was the first Southwest plane to arrive at and marks the arrival of the low-fare carrier to the airport. Leonard and his family live in Clive and he has been a pilot for eight years. / Marco Santana/The Register



Des Moines International Airport Executive Director Don Smithey gestures toward the runway that Southwest Airlines' first airplane at the airport would land on prior to a ceremony celebrating Southwest's arrival. / Marco Santana/The Register

Navy, including 11 active years, and is an eight-year Southwest employee. "I'm very happy to be able to bring a company I work for that has treated me so well to Des Moines for that level of service to the people of Des Moines."

Plenty of others were excited. A ceremony included Des Moines and state officials, as well as those from nearby cities, at Des Moines International Airport's service hangar. The airport's fire department saluted the plane by spraying water cannons over it as it made its way to the hangar.

The excitement surrounds the expected "Southwest Effect," a phenomenon that often follows Southwest's entrance into a market in which airfares tend to decrease and ridership tends to increase.

Government officials say this effect can provide the city an economic boost as companies find more-efficient ways for air travel. Mary Phillips, the general manager of international travel at the corporate travel agency ITA Group, said earlier this month that airfares had already started decreasing based on the expectation of Southwest's arrival.

Airport Authority Board President Ed Hansell declared it a great day for Des Moines and Iowa and said the Southwest Effect will help the airport in its battle for air travelers.

"We have lost ridership over the years to Omaha and Kansas City and we want that to stop," he said. "We want everybody to fly out of Des Moines."

Gov. Terry Branstad is already pushing for expansion, telling Ron Ricks, Southwest

executive vice president, that St. Louis and Las Vegas would be ideal destinations for the carrier. But airport officials echoed aviation experts' previous warnings that air travelers must use the service to keep them in the market.



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The plane that landed Sunday carried dozens of Southwest employees with Iowa roots and they deplaned carrying University of Iowa and Iowa State University memorabilia, as well as the state flag of Iowa.

Ricks was also on the flight, which took off from a rainy, "ugly" Dallas afternoon to land in Des Moines under clear skies.

Ricks said having the lowans give up their weekend for the ceremony let him know that, while Des Moines has never before offered Southwest Airlines, the fun-loving culture of Iowans have been "embedded" within the company already.

"They are so excited about coming to Des Moines that they wanted to come up here," Ricks said after the ceremony. "Witnessing their enthusiasm and their excitement on the airplane about this homecoming, for them, it just was such a perfect representation of the Southwest Airlines corporate culture."

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