

MEMBER PROFILE

CHICAGO JET GROUP

CONTACT INFORMATION:
43W522 Route 30
Sugar Grove, Ill. 60554
Phone: 630-466-3600
E-mail: info@ChicagoJetGroup.com



“Sometimes it’s a struggle, (but) I’m having fun in aviation again.”

Chicago Jet Group founder Mike Mitera in his company’s Aurora, Ill., hangar.

WHAT THEY DO: Chicago Jet Group is a comprehensive aircraft maintenance, management and charter company providing one-on-one service and custom solutions to meet the needs of corporate operators.

WEBSITE: www.ChicagoJetGroup.com

EMPLOYEES: 13

FACILITIES: 15,600-square-foot hangar

DATE FOUNDED: 2003

AEA MEMBER SINCE:
2005



CHICAGO JET GROUP:

Meeting Challenges With Innovation and Experience

STORY & PHOTOS BY SCOTT M. SPANGLER

Companies, like the lives of the people who give them life, often take unexpected turns. Never an airplane kid, but always interested in things mechanical — go-karts, cars, motorcycles — Mike Mitera became an airframe and powerplant mechanic because “it sounded interesting.” He also became a pilot, now rated on a handful of business jets, because the opportunity was there.

And, in 2003, sitting in the driveway of someone else’s house in a gated community, minutes from accepting a job he really needed, Mitera instead decided to start his own business, the Chicago Jet Group, a full-service maintenance, management

and charter company at Aurora Municipal Airport, a stoplight-free ride 40 minutes west of downtown Chicago.

What the future holds for a company or individual no one can predict with certainty, but good clues are the past decisions that led to the present. After high school, Mitera worked at an Omaha, Neb., service station, which still pumped gas. When a co-worker announced he was making a career change — crossing the Missouri River to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where he was enrolled in Iowa Western Community College’s A&P program — Mitera decided to join him.

Continued on following page

CHICAGO JET GROUP

Continued from page 31

“My dad thought the idea was silly and sent me to a long-time family friend,” who, Mitera learned, was an A&P, the shop foreman at Sky Harbor in Omaha. “He laughed so hard he almost cried, and said, ‘Mike, I thought we were smarter than that.’”

— Iowa Beef Processors — in Sioux City, Iowa. Each of IBP’s five Falcons flew 100 hours a month, and “it was good experience for my first job.”

Moving to Lincoln, Neb., at age 21, Mitera joined Duncan Aviation. Refusing to be pigeon-holed, he worked mostly in the airframe shop, but also did installations and engine work. Instead

leader at age 25. Duncan had 200 employees when Mitera started and 800 when he left. “I should have stayed; I would have been a millionaire with stock options, but when you’re young...,” Mitera said without a hint of remorse.

He did learn an important lesson, however: “I’ve met some impressive people in my 25 years in the business, but for the most part, mechanics are mechanics.”

Mitera shares this observation when customers ask about Chicago Jet. “We may be small, but we have the capability to do everything everybody else does.”

Five of Chicago Jet’s 13 employees are A&Ps, and all have more than one specialty. Kevin Huffman, for example, is the avionics manager and a sheet-metal magician who learned his craft at an airline overhaul base before joining Chicago Jet in 2005. An early project was a 1968 Falcon 20, which needed some new skin and an RVSM certification.

“We had to engineer a solution for the skins that were spot-welded to the stringers and intercostals,” Huffman said.

Dassault helped with the engineering, but Chicago Jet’s mechanics, whom Huffman calls, “the most talented people I’ve ever worked with,” did the rest.

OPERATIONAL EXPERTISE

“Funny thing is, I never had a desire to fly,” Mitera said, but an opportunity to acquire the



Chicago Jet Group’s hangar at the Aurora, Ill., airport is identified by this small sign, but soon it will be emblazoned on the apex in letters big enough for all to see.

Shrugging his Tommy Bahama-clad shoulders, his blue eyes twinkling, Mitera said, “When you’re young, you don’t know what you want to do or what direction you want to go...but I’ve always been stubborn.”

MULTI-FACETED MAINTENANCE

After school, Mitera was one of three mechanics working for IBP

of specializing on an airplane type, such as Citations or Lears, “I stepped up for anything,” and he learned about them all, from Saberliners and Challengers to Gulfstreams and Hawkers.

“I was pretty aggressive, always looking for a better way to do things,” he said.

These traits made him a lead mechanic at age 23, then a team

skill was too good to pass up. And another opportunity, to be a Falcon 10 co-pilot and mechanic for an Omaha trucking company, led him away from Duncan.

The company sold its airplanes a year later, in 1996, and Mitera found another Falcon fixing-and-flying opportunity in Chicago. "I had 600 hours total time, 400 multi-engine; I more or less prostituted my mechanic skills for flying," but the owner sent Mitera to SimuFlite for this type rating.

To defray his salary, the company subcontracted his flying and maintenance services to others, which led Mitera to a company where he learned about charter operations and aircraft management. The company "flipped jets," he said, buying airworthy airplanes and selling the improved machine for a profit.

One day, Mitera said, "They fired me — I've never been fired before. They never gave me a reason, and they didn't have to (Illinois is an at-will state). I was bitter, ready to get out of aviation, go back to Omaha, work an hourly job, and lick my wounds."

Instead, he helped a G-II owner start a flight department. "I told him I'd give him three months, and I was there three years."

Just after 9/11, Mitera signed on as the director of operations for a Sarasota, Fla., company looking to get more use out of the airplanes it managed. Mitera suggested charter, and a Chicago

acquaintance said his company would add the airplanes to its Part 135 certificate for a percentage of the charter fee. With his toolbox and change of clothes, Mitera returned to Chicagoland to take care of the paperwork.

Unbeknownst to him, the two companies "traded me like I was a baseball player," Mitera said with an edge in his voice. And then, things got worse. The Chicago company filed for bankruptcy and folded in February 2003, leading Mitera to his unexpected drive-way decision.

BUILDING CHICAGO JET GROUP

It was a bad situation, said Mitera in his unpretentious Chicago Jet Group office. "I had no job, no wife, no girlfriend, credit-card debt, a car loan, and \$5,000 in my checking account."

The job he was offered was for good pay, but "looking at that five-car garage, the BMW, the Land Rover, the Bentley, the Porsche," Mitera said he thought about the decisions that led him to this drive-way, and "I just couldn't do it."

Working for someone else offered no security and no say in the future. Starting his own business didn't guarantee success, but "if I fall on my face, at least I tried," he said.

Mitera's counteroffer was succinct: "I'll manage your airplane, but I work for myself."

The Falcon owner accepted and brought in another Falcon 20, "and

that's what I started with in this hangar." The Falcons' owners were leasing the brand-new, 15,600-square-foot hangar at Aurora, and "they said, 'If you can bring in some other airplanes to share the rest, you can work here for free.' The next thing you know, we had some more airplanes and the company started taking on a life of its own," Mitera said.

Craig Allen, who worked with Mitera at the bankrupt company, agreed to help out for 30 days, bringing his toolbox and plastic patio furniture to set up an office, equipped with Mitera's laptop and cell phone, in a back corner of the hangar.

"I can't get rid of him," Mitera says as Allen walks in with a question. "He keeps coming back!" Both men laugh, and Allen, whose full gray beard stops just short of his cranial summit, says, "It's a very good place to be."

Chicago Jet soon incorporated, took over the hangar and became a repair station. This was the plan, Mitera said: "Start a maintenance company and see how its goes."

Customer requests for help in other areas led to more Chicago Jet services, including customized aircraft management and charter. With a stable of six airplanes, including a Falcon 50 and Challenger 600, avionics upgrades were the next natural step.

Continued on following page

CHICAGO JET GROUP

Continued from page 33

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

To fly charter with 10 or more passengers, a jet like the Falcon 50 or Challenger must have TAWS-A, said Huffman, describing the motivation for Chicago Jet Group's inaugural STC effort.

Chicago Jet replaced the Falcon's Primus 400 radar display with a Universal Avionics MFD-640, a radar control panel and an XM weather receiver, which also delivered XM radio entertainment to the cabin. From concept to approval,

still excited with the February 2008 adventure.

"The radar switched off, the virtual iron mountain appeared and changed from green to yellow to red, and said, 'Pull-up, pull-up, pull-up,' exactly when it was supposed to. It was a proud moment for me because I'd never done anything like this in the airline business," he said.

Being a decision-making member of a creative team was a paradigm shift from the airlines, where "your work was already engineered, packaged, approved and delivered to you," Huffman said.

Five of Chicago Jet's 13 employees are A&Ps, and all have more than one specialty.

the project took five weeks, with Huffman orchestrating the efforts of all, including the contract mechanical and electrical engineers.

On the first test flight, an "inverted logic input said the gear was down when it was up," which affected the display processing. Catching the Honeywell engineer just before he went home, Huffman got a new strapping diagram and spent several late hours surgically moving pins to prepare the airplane for the next day's test flight.

The closest "mountain with enough mass to see the system work" is in Michigan's upper peninsula. "We had to get down pretty low over Lake Superior; the ice was all broken up and it looked like a distant planet," Huffman said,

Huffman calls Mitera "a visionary, always looking for things other people aren't doing, asking why they aren't doing it and weighing the options," such as giving WAAS and LPV capabilities, as well as a dual Universal Avionics flight management system upgrade, to the Falcon 50.

In addition to the one in its hangar, Chicago Jet — with some help from Universal — "found 180 Falcon 50s equipped with the Sperry SPZ-600 autopilot system," Huffman said. "More than half of them had never had EFIS upgrades; they were still flying around with electro-mechanical displays and, typically, first-generation GPS flight management systems."

Chicago Jet just received the

upgrade STC, giving these airplanes the required navigation performance needed to fly in NextGen airspace.

Finding an annunciator panel with the LPV-required indications was, perhaps, the project's greatest challenge. Because part manufacturer approval costs would outweigh the return, no one was interested in building it; so, Huffman builds them under the STC.

Finding a circuit board that "perfectly matched the (electrical engineer's) drawing was a gift from God," he said. "It even has common lines on the outboard edges for the push-to-test and dim functions."

Bringing TAWS-A to the 19-seat Challenger 600 is Chicago Jet's current STC effort, an economically driven project that will maximize its charter marketability at a significant savings. Bombardier has a TAWS-A STC, Huffman said, but it's not for sale and the upgrade is installed in Hartford, Conn. Thanks to Continuum Applied Technology's Corridor system, the online maintenance library and recordkeeping system Chicago Jet uses, the STC work will take place at the Challenger's Atlanta, Ga., home base.

"It took more than a year to build the databases and get everyone trained," Mitera said of the Corridor system, which was developed by a friend from his days at Duncan, Jack Demeis, "but I felt it was crucial to our growth and development."

From real-time billing to all manuals and maintenance records for every airplane, it's all-access-



Kevin Huffman, avionics manager for Chicago Jet Group, logs onto a technician's Wi-Fi connected information terminal.

sible from any Internet connection. Naturally, the system is totally secure, “and we change our passwords regularly.”

On the road, mechanics and technicians pack a laptop in their toolboxes. In the Chicago Jet hangar, each of them rolls a PC and printer cart next to the airplane so they can check any manual, print diagrams they need and log their work. The only connection is for power; the hangar's Wi-Fi system provides the online connection.

Chicago Jet also uses an online phone system. Mitera punches a single button and the charter dispatcher answers on the first ring. He asks about a trip, following it

on FlightAware; the dispatcher says it's on schedule. Hanging up, Mitera said, “We had two dispatchers in the office, but last fall we had to tighten our belt, so she works from home.”

Mitera's efficient and practical ways extend to the company's growth. He has long-term plans for the company, and key to these plans are developing long-term relationships with his customers. Sustainable growth is his goal.

“We watch our pennies,” he said. “I've never taken a line of credit, never had to borrow money from anybody. I've done it all on my own and reinvest money back into the company.”

His investment goes beyond

financial. Describing himself as a “player-coach” who flies, turns a wrench and works weekends when the deadline demands, Mitera said, “I expect people here to give 100 percent,” but equally important is making time for them “to do stuff with the kids, because it only happens once.”

Since Mitera left the gated community that day, he regularly shares news about Chicago Jet Group with his parents. There are good days and bad, and the current economy is just another challenge to surmount. “Sometimes it's a struggle,” but like he always tells his mother and father, the greatest reward is, “I'm having fun in aviation again.” □