

# Empire building – in a small way

Private aviation has traditionally been fragmented and *ad hoc* – in much the same way as the market it has served. But now a number of private aviation groups are emerging which are organised, forward thinking and progressive. Comlux is very much one of these groups. **Jo Murray** speaks to Richard Gaona, President and Chief Executive Officer, Comlux The Aviation Group

One would expect the former Head of Business Aviation at Airbus to understand how to build a group of businesses to serve the private jet market. To do so over the course of a year as the market reached its unstable peak has been an extraordinary achievement. Sitting with him on board the Comlux ACJ, it becomes clear that Gaona knew exactly what he was doing when he set out to build this private aviation group.

But Gaona is not unrelentingly ambitious. He consistently refers to his achievement as a “small aviation group” which has simply been put in place to “offer the customer everything he wants”. This is empire building in a very controlled manner and everything he does is aimed at developing a long-term trust relationship with Comlux clients and not to create an unwieldy domain of unrelated businesses that fail to feed off each other – especially during a downturn.



Richard Gaona, President and  
Chief Executive Officer, Comlux  
The Aviation Group



Comlux signs for an A320 Prestige in the ACJ it operates at MEBA

The group essentially comprises four business units. The first is aircraft operations and management called Fly Comlux which is now headed by Stephen Laven, formerly of Ford's corporate flight department and Harrods. This operating unit boasts three commercial air operator certificates – from Switzerland, Malta (EASA) and Kazakhstan where the operator has a significant following – and operates two categories of aircraft. Again the building of the fleet is being executed in a very controlled manner to comprise the Airbus family of private jets and large cabin Bombardier aircraft. Quite simply, points out Gaona, this is the space in which there is less competition.

A new accolade has just come Comlux's way. Following the order of a second A320, the charter department has become the largest op-

erator of the Airbus ACJ family. The new A320 will help to meet demand from the important Middle East market, and complements an A318 Elite and an ACJ that are already operated on VVIP charters by Fly Comlux. Fly Comlux has now placed orders for a total of nine aircraft, comprising four A318 Elites, two ACJs, two A320 Prestiges and one A330-200 Prestige.

All this expertise in owning and operating these Airbus types – not to mention the experience and networking Gaona brings to Comlux from his previous Airbus role – delivers comfort to owners of Airbus aircraft in VIP configuration who are looking for management contracts. Comlux has operated its first ACJ for several years, and last year became the first to put the A318 Elite into service, flying it 1,200 hours in its first year. At the moment Comlux operates a

total of three Airbus ACJ Family aircraft and a fourth one is coming this year.

The Bombardier fleet comprises two Global XRS, one Global 5000, two Challenger 850 and one Challenger 605. This is a mix of owned and managed aircraft. The consistent theme at Comlux Aviation is that the fleet should be large cabin and long range – there is no compromising on that.

The second business unit managed by Christophe Pelet, flows out of the first. This is called Comlux Transactions which manages the purchase and sale of private aircraft for the group and third parties alike. As Gaona points out, any customer that charters aircraft for a significant number of flying hours ought to be looking at a purchase and Comlux Transactions is there to lend its expertise.

Then Gaona – sitting in the surrounds of a beautiful ACJ cabin – declares that for VIP operations the cabin really does matter. It is not just the mission of the aircraft that counts but for long range, large cabin operations, providing comfort and luxury – the two halves of the Comlux name – really does count.

This philosophy has given rise to the Comlux group's third operating unit: Comlux Creatives. This is where the Comlux team's ideas and experience of operations really come to the fore, points out Gaona. "We can spec an aircraft properly," reinforces Gaona, adding that the group can then offer management services because the product will fit the market. Alexandra Brökelmann, formerly of Lufthansa Technik, has joined Comlux Creatives to work alongside the Head of Comlux Creatives, Isabelle Bevilacqua. Gaona expects that offering cabin interior design will become a real competitive advantage for Comlux.

The final piece of the jigsaw is Comlux Completion and this operating unit is very much a jigsaw in itself. Essentially this is a transatlantic operation which has been formed through acquisition.

In Europe, Comlux Completion has acquired a 40% shareholding in the Airbus Corporate Jet Centre in Toulouse, France. Comlux Completion itself is a joint venture between Comlux The Aviation Group and the MAZ Consultancy in Bahrain which is steered by Mohammed Al Zeer.

Benoit Defforge is the Chief Executive Officer of the Airbus Corporate Jet Centre. This is the former EADS Sogerma Services which has



The Comlux A318 Elite private office

come under new management to provide extra cabin outfitting capacity for the ACJ family.

Meanwhile, stateside, Comlux The Aviation Group has created Comlux America LLC and acquired the Indianapolis Jet Centre (IndyJet) which is being renamed Comlux Completion USA. IndyJet is located in the centre of the world's business aviation market and has 30 years' experience of interior completions and maintenance work on private jets. Furthermore, the completion centre holds a multiple STC for Bombardier aircraft. David Edinger has been named Chief Executive Officer. His CV includes big completions names such as the Dee Howard Company, Reese Design and Associated Air Centre.

At present there are 10 design projects going through the Comlux operations and that, by anyone's reckoning, is a significant workload. But Gaona is emphatic that he is not looking for quantity in anything that he does. A Swiss heritage of quality, consistently large cabins and appointing the best man or woman for the job are his criteria for doing business.

He sees a plethora of opportunities for the diversified Comlux business over the next two years even though he concedes that business conditions will be tough for everyone. He attributes these opportunities to the synergies he has created during the good times. ●

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