



COMLUX COMPLETIONS

Building a Completion Empire in Turbulent Times

When Comlux Aviation initially became interested in acquiring the Indianapolis Jet Centre in February 2008 as its completion centre, the economy was flush. By the time the decision was made to acquire the company in November, the whole world had changed. It took a strong constitution and commitment to move forward, but it has paid off. **BY Grace Trofa**

The key to Comlux Completion Centre's success so quickly can be attributed to the very experienced team the company has put in place in Indianapolis, garnered from its contacts in the industry. The average years in the aviation business for top management – 20, and for the skilled craftsmen - 30; tough to beat those numbers in the very close-knit world of aviation where everyone knows who's the best and where to find them.

The quality of the work, the dedication and the experience speak for themselves in the recently completed Airbus A320 Prestige. The cabin completion required just 12 months, came in under weight by 1,100lbs and the Decibel level throughout the aircraft was 49dB; 3dB below contract.

Another factor in their success is the ability to identify the needs of a specific client. Twenty-six different nationalities are represented in the Comlux world, which means the client can work with someone who understands his tastes; there is a world of difference between the design preferred by a Middle Eastern client compared to a client from Russia. Comlux can provide a wide range of complementary services related to business and private aviation worldwide. Think about it; they can buy, manage, charter and sell your aircraft. In addition, they can custom design or refurbish your interior, provide the maintenance service and even tend to engine repairs. Sounds like a win-win situation for jet owners seeking specialised service to secure their multi-million dollar investment.

Comlux's beginnings

I sat down for dinner with Comlux President, Ettore Rodaro, curious to learn how a sophisticated Italian from Trieste, working in Zurich as Charter Director for ExecuJet, found himself in the American heartland

of Indiana, heading up Comlux America, the company's final link in the loop of services.

Rodaro is strongly driven by instinct and it is that gut feeling that was a key factor in the formation of the company. "In 2005 we bought the first Airbus A319, the corporate jet and the gentleman selling it on the Airbus side was Richard Gaona, who was very instrumental in the further development of the company," explains Rodaro. "Gaona had a strong following, particularly in the Middle East, and for 20 years successfully built up the aircraft corporate division for Airbus. He joined Comlux at the end of 2007 and has driven its expansion, bringing it to the next stage, in his position as President and CEO of Comlux the Aviation Group. 2008 signalled the beginning of a new era for Comlux as it began providing a wide range of complementary services related to business and private aviation worldwide."

The largest Airbus Operator

Today, Comlux is a group with separate divisions. Fly Comlux is essentially the operations division, with a fleet of 22 aircraft. It is the largest Airbus VIP operator worldwide, as well as operating and managing a large fleet of Bombardier Globals and Challengers. Comlux Transactions handles aircraft sales. Zurich-based Comlux Creatives is the design branch involved with interiors. Comlux Maintenance and Engineering Services is located at Indianapolis airport. Comlux has three operational centres - in Zurich, Malta and Almaty, Kazakhstan,

David Edinger (left) and Ettore Rodaro shake hands on Comlux America's first completion of an ACJ A320 Prestige aircraft, delivered in time and underweight.



and four commercial offices - in Zurich, Bahrain, Almaty and Moscow. Each division operates independently. However, the focus is to match the customer's needs and desires to the appropriate aircraft and the company is leaning towards bigger aircraft such as Airbus corporate jets and Bombardier's Global Express.

Boutique completion centre

In Indianapolis, waiting in the wings for new cabins are a Boeing BBJ and an Airbus A319. The company operates out of three hangars, about 85,000 square feet, with an additional hangar scheduled for completion next year. The goal is to have three cabin completions and one refurbishment per year, keeping the operation 'boutique' to provide a specialised service and focus mainly on narrow-bodied aircraft at this stage. Many of the craftsmen have left their previous jobs to join Comlux, based on the company's commitment that it will remain a custom VIP cabin completion centre, not a mass-production outfit. The inhouse facilities include a cabinet shop, a finish shop, upholstery, sheet metal, avionics, a system department shop and interior installation. Rounding out the offices are the engineering department, certification and airworthiness and a design department.

The best design rendering doesn't compare to the actual experience.

If a client visits for an inspection and the seat is not comfortable, it can be corrected and approved before the client leaves the site, and when spending \$30 million on a cabin completion, this type of service is invaluable. With all of the shops in house, refurbishments during maintenance can be easily accommodated.

A recent refurbishment for a Global Express 5000 required 140 different modifications. The aircraft, which arrived directly from the factory, had to be modified for the wheelchair-bound owner who wanted access to the complete cabin interior. The Comlux team had to make its own supplemental type certificate as it cut back the galley and door entries and changed seats. The weight and balance had changed completely and everything was redesigned and modified which also required new tax certificates. This is where the personalised service and years of experience are invaluable.

In addition to the completion centre, the Indianapolis plant offers an MRO service. It is an FAA-certified repair station providing maintenance services for Challenger regional jets, Global Express and Lear jets. If an aircraft was not certified to meet EASA or FAA requirements because the interior was done overseas, Comlux can bring it up to the more stringent European and American standards.





A team of skilled craftsmen and specialists support each project under the supervision of a lead inspector.



Straight shooter

David Edinger has 35 years of experience in VIP interiors and is the CEO of ComLux America LLC and ComLux Aviation Services LLC. Like Gaona, Edinger was previously employed at Airbus, working out of Toulouse. While Rodaro is congenial, affable, Edinger is what we call in America, a ‘straight shooter’. His steely gaze in conversation keeps you engaged in the dialogue, no messing around. “My job is to see the big picture. To see the growth and mentor the whole team on both sides - management and the workshop team,” explains Edinger. “This is what I’ve done my whole career. It’s sort of in my blood and a lot of lessons have been learned along the way.” Edinger has come up through the ranks. “The guys on the floor know that I’m not just a guy sitting in an office; I’ve worked the 12-hour days, the long shifts. I’ve been up early and stayed late and I think I have their respect because I’ve done their job.” Today, Edinger sees the biggest challenge is the ever-changing issue of certification. “You have different ACO that have different interpretations of the rules, the flight tests and requirements; it doesn’t seem to be an exact level playing field everywhere. The key is to make sure the FAA respects you; you have to give them good data,” he says. “On this last aircraft, the A320, our data was flawless. We have not had one single comment on any of our test reports and that is especially impressive since, as a young company, our relationship and trust with the FAA is crucial to our future.” Comlux has chief inspectors within each company, lead inspectors for each project and a team of specialists supporting each project below the lead inspector. “In this business, every aircraft owner requires a lot of attention in order to comply with his needs and it comes down to the

small details,” remarks Rodaro. “When the principal comes on board, he feels comfortable, he thinks: ‘I got my cabin crew who know exactly how I like this type of tea served in that cup.’ If he doesn’t get that, it’s not a problem, he doesn’t die, but he starts to think ‘why am I paying all this money?’ If you grow too big, it adds complication. We are careful, because every movement is critical; there is a lot of liability. What do you do if your cabin is half a ton heavier at the end? It has a tremendous impact on the aircraft’s performance and you have this owner who has paid millions of dollars for his new aircraft cabin and he cannot get from A to B, what do you do? Can you take some weight out of a cabin? These cabinets are rare materials. It starts to get really complicated, costs millions and can kill a business in one shot. That is why we want to keep it small, work solidly, because in aviation nothing is cheap. There are so many regulations that drive up the price. We have our own inspection programme here, with our own designated inspector from the FAA working with us. We install a piece and he looks at the engineering drawing, signs and approves everything as we go along.”

Airbus Certification

Cabin completions can take from 16 to 18 months, including the design phase. Once everything is chosen and, depending on the complexity, the time-frame inhouse is 9 to 12 months. Comlux is a BBJ and Bombardier authorised completion centre with Airbus certification expected any day. “My old team at Airbus is coming out and I know the answers to the test questions,” jokes Edinger. “I have personally taken this on because I know what they expect; my goal is to have only one visit from them.”



Airflow cabin ventilation system

“Comlux customers are not looking for the shock value in their aircraft. As business people, they have a certain sense of quality and a cabin of an aircraft is always linked to a certain functionality,” explains Rodaro. “We put them together with our professional designers in Zurich at ComLux Creatives, who have experience not just in cabin interiors but the interiors of high-profile, luxury hotels and properties.” Do you want your aircraft interior to look like the lobby of the Four Seasons? No problem and why not, we are talking comfort and luxury. “The most important thing is to create value, value for me is not just the money, it is quality.” Working with a local company, ComLux has developed and patented a complete new airflow cabin ventilation system, another step towards reducing cabin noise. The aircraft comes with a standard air ventilation system from the factory. However, ComLux changes it completely, even improving the air circulation, and reducing the air outflow noise within certain cabin sections by 10dB compared to the manufacturers’ standard outfit. By tweaking each source of noise, there is an overall improvement. Edinger adds: “The lower noise level is a trend in the past 15 years or

so. No one use to care, but now it has become about bragging rights: ‘what is your weight and what is your sound level?’ There is an impact to weight, because you need more insulation and it’s a huge balancing act. Rather than only throwing weight at it, we’ve found other ways to make it quiet as well, by playing with the environmental control system. The customer will say: ‘I don’t want it over this weight but I want this level of sound’. Sometimes in the back of the aircraft, where it is not so important, typically we may leave the manufacturer’s insulation in the galley and crew area; you want the VIP area to be the quietest. Rather than saying I want 49dB across the board, it’s better to go for maybe 49dB in the bedroom and be OK with 53dB in the galley. All these computations need to be done beforehand to be sure you are in line with the weight. It’s very hard to go miles to get inches; we’ve got down to 49dB on the A320 aircraft, but it’s tough to do much better than that. You start to hear aircraft noises that you wouldn’t normally hear because it is an aircraft that has engines and parts. You don’t want it to get to a certain point where you are hearing every single noise, otherwise it’s never-ending.”

Completed and Delivered to Bahrain

The completion centre employs 260 workers and one of the supervisors, Brad Ross, has worked for 33 years as a cabinet-maker in the industry. Like many of the employees, he has worked with Edinger in the past. Supervisors put together their own teams and Ross has brought together the best in the business from 11 different states across the country; many left jobs and houses not sold to jump on board with Comlux, having the sixth sense in the industry to know a winning team. There exists a mutual respect. What speaks volumes, more than any brochure or sales meeting can convey is the almost palpable excitement felt when you are in an environment with craftsmen who are proud of their part in creating a thing of beauty. You notice the attention craftsmen pay to the details, the finishes. Walk through the A320 and you want to run your hands over the fabrics, wooden cabinets and mirrored finishes.

Rodaro sums it up: “The good thing about this business is that clients always have time for the aircraft because we are talking about pleasure and working with the clients has given me some very nice moments, but, at the end of the day, we are a service provider. They always expect the best service, the right attention and this is what determines your survival in the long run.”

A320 Based in Bahrain

The A320, now based at Comlux in Bahrain, is proving popular with customers, accounting for some 40 percent of its bookings in the region, with its ACJ318 and ACJ319 taking up the rest.

“The aircraft is quite busy since its entry into service which shows a demand for this upper segment of the market and we fly mainly members of the Gulf region’s royal families,” says Christophe Lapierre, VP Commercial Operations at Comlux. “The aircraft is currently used mostly on routes from the Middle East to European summer destinations, such as Nice, Malaga, Paris and London, in addition to flights from Europe to the US, the north-east and California. Our clients particularly like the private bedroom and the very comfortable VIP lounge, plus the phone/internet connection for their iPads and iPods.

Lapierre, points out that the key points why customers re-book the aircraft after the first experience are the service on board and the quantity of baggage they can carry, nearly 100 large suitcases.

“Our crew also tell us that when the client enters the aircraft, they get the feeling of being on a beach because of the colour scheme of sea blue and beige,” adds Lapierre. “This radically-different interior, compared to other jets, makes all the difference.” ■

The A320 Prestige, which is now based in Bahrain, features rear-cabin first-class seats and up-front private lounges, all in desert hues, with deep ocean-blue accents.

