



◀ **FAMILY:**  
The Gillespie  
brothers are  
pushing the  
firm forward

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ERIC GILLESPIE  
Vice-president, Flying Colours

# AMBITION GROWS AT THE DOUBLE

Picture: Howard Slutsken

▶ **By HOWARD SLUTSKEN**

## The Gillespie twins are driving Canadian completions house Flying Colours into new territory with big plans to expand the firm

It is difficult to tell the difference between Bombardier's CRJ200 regional jet and the Challenger 850 corporate aircraft. It is equally difficult to tell the difference between Sean and Eric Gillespie, vice-presidents of Flying Colours.

Along with their father, John Gillespie, the twin brothers are guiding the corporate jet completion company through an ambitious growth plan – and the Gillespies and the jets are tightly linked.

Flying Colours has been in operation for over 25 years. The Canadian company has grown from a modest aircraft paint facility in Peterborough, Ontario, to having international locations that specialise in business aircraft completions, refurbishment and conversions, along with full maintenance, repair and overhaul, paint and

avionics support and upgrades. The company has worked on completions of corporate and special mission aircraft, from Beechcraft King Air and Bombardier Dash 8 Q400 turboprops all the way up to Bombardier, Dassault Falcon and Gulfstream business jets. The Peterborough head office has 13,900m<sup>2</sup> (150,000ft<sup>2</sup>) of full-service facilities, and the St Louis, Missouri operation is 6,040m<sup>2</sup>.

### SUCCESSFUL CONVERSIONS

Completions of "green" Bombardier Challenger 850s are performed exclusively by Flying Colours, complemented by its successful CRJ ExecLiner con-

versions. That programme has been running for almost 10 years. "We take a CRJ200, strip out the passenger seats and fittings, install a new interior, new paint and add an auxiliary fuel system," Sean Gillespie says. "It's a good charter airplane. It looks like a new [Challenger] 850 and runs like a new 850, even if it has 25,000 hours on it."

"The [CRJ200] is built to last. It's got an 80,000h airframe, and no one is going to take it there," Eric Gillespie adds. "We've done conversions of planes with 20,000h or more, but most are under that. One had just 3,000h."

Flying Colours has delivered 16 ExecLiners in the VIP configuration, and an additional two aircraft are in progress. Four converted aircraft with a corporate shuttle interior are awaiting delivery. Sales and marketing of the ExecLiner is focused on Asia, Latin America and Africa.

To support the worldwide expansion of its sales efforts, earlier this year Flying Colours announced a partnership with Bombardier to provide interior refurbishment and reconfiguration services at the airframer's Singapore service centre at Seletar airport. "We have clients who come back to us from that region all the time. This will make it easier for them," says Eric. The Singapore facility is expected to be operational early next year.

The brothers estimate that completions and support for Bombardier aircraft makes up about 75% of the work

done by Flying Colours. They are working towards adding capability to complete special mission aircraft based on the CRJ700, CRJ900 and Global family airframes. "We've been focused on the 'pretty stuff' with our ongoing completions. But the defence market is something that we've been trying to tap into for a while. The long-term goal is to be able to do the whole missionised project, and we'll grow into it," says Sean Gillespie. The company is currently completing a CRJ700 with a special mission/VIP/commuter interior – part of a seven aircraft contract from Bombardier for an undisclosed Chinese customer.

### PEOPLE INVESTMENT

With an eye to this market segment, Flying Colours has expanded its in-house design engineering team. "We've brought on six senior engineers, and we'll probably add another six over the next few months. Most of our engineers are based in St Louis," says Sean. "It's an investment in people and software."

Another investment was the implementation of lean management principles and programmes to mirror OEM standards, along with obtaining AS9100 certification. These efforts seem to be paying off, with Flying Colours in the process of finalising a multi-aircraft project based on the Global airframe. "They are not regular completions," says Sean Gillespie.

In addition to the new Singapore facility, the first phase of the company's

development plans at Peterborough airport recently opened – a 1,860m<sup>2</sup> hangar expansion. An ambitious second phase will see the tripling of Flying Colours' large-cabin aircraft completion capability to nine bays, with a new two-bay, state-of-the-art paint facility. This additional 4,180m<sup>2</sup> site will be able to handle larger corporate aircraft.

Sean Gillespie says: "Over the years we've been approached about Boeing [BBJ] and Airbus [ACJ] completions many times. We've had some inquiries about [Bombardier] CSeries VIP completions from different clients, too. This facility will be able to accommodate them. We're definitely moving in that direction."

In the third phase of the growth plan the company will double the size of its St Louis operation, including the addition of a new paint facility. The site recently gained approval for work on the Challenger 350 and Learjet 70/75 series.

"Flexibility is the key in this business. We don't say 'no' a whole lot," says Sean Gillespie. At the same time, the brothers agree that it is important to manage expectations. For example, one of the first things completion clients now ask for is high-speed internet connectivity. "Some can stomach the costs, some not, and they expect it to run the same [as on the ground], but it doesn't. I can send emails, but no attachments, and I can't stream video. But the technology is improving, and it's coming," Eric Gillespie says.

Sean Gillespie also knows that Flying Colours is unique among its competitors. "The fact that we're a privately-owned, family-run business is something that our clients understand and appreciate," he says. ■



▶ **RENEWAL:** Flying Colours uses CRJ200s for its ExecLiner conversions