

## *Winging a deal*

# Sterling Aviation helps jet set fly without hassle

By AVRUM D. LANK

When Ted Kellner needs to go out of town, he doesn't call a travel agent or book a ticket online.

Instead, the Milwaukee money manager gets in touch with Sterling Aviation Inc. at Milwaukee's Mitchell International Airport and tells them where he wants to go.

Within three hours, Kellner can be on his way in a private jet, checking in at Sterling's terminal just behind the U.S. post office on Mitchell's western edge.

The ride might be on Kellner's private Challenger 601 twin jet, which Sterling maintains. If Kellner does not need it, Sterling will charter the 10-passenger plane to another party, at a rate of \$4,075 an hour, splitting the fees. From Milwaukee, Kellner's jet can make Europe or Japan in one stop.



*Rob Gort, president and chief operating officer of Sterling Aviation, gives a tour of the interior of the Challenger jet recently. The company maintains 16 planes, most owned by businesses or private parties.*



*A Challenger jet is one of the planes flown by Sterling Aviation from Mitchell International Airport.*

"Eighty-five percent of the time I am in my plane and 15 percent I'm in somebody else's," said Kellner, who is chairman and chief executive officer of Fiduciary Management Inc., a mutual fund company.

In all, Sterling has 16 planes on site, most owned by private parties such as Kellner or area businesses.

The idea is to be a turn-key provider to those owners, saving them all the hassle of dealing with the plane

but having it available on quick notice, said Chris Doerr, Sterling's co-owner and co-chief executive officer.

Doerr and his brother bought what is now Sterling in 2004, after they sold Leeson Electric Corp. in Grafton.

"When we owned the motor company, we used business aircraft on a daily basis," Chris Doerr said. "We felt then and continue to be strong advocates of private aircraft in business because of the enormous flexibility that they provide to a company."

Sterling strives to make traveling as pleasant as possible. There is no security checkpoint in its terminal, which feels like a first-class lounge at an international airport. It has an attentive staff, is well stocked with beverages and snacks and has a large television on the wall.

Planes are visible through a glass wall in a spotless hanger, which was a selling point for Kellner.

"I am stickler for details," he said. "You could eat off that floor. That tells you a lot about an organization."

The planes are flown and maintained by a staff of 70, including 28 pilots.

Sterling strives to have planes in the air about 10 hours a day, although that can vary, said Rob Gort, the company's president and chief operating officer. Recently, the dispatch center showed Sterling planes either on the ground or on the way to or from Las Vegas; Rockford, Ill.; Southern Pines, N.C.; and Teterboro, N.J. and having just arrived at Mitchell from Pittsburgh and Louisville.

The company also is building a terminal in Naples, Fla. The idea is to capture leisure and business traffic in what Gort refers to as "the Sterling corridor," 100 miles on each side of a line from Minneapolis to Naples.

Expanding to Florida is intelligent, said Michele Markarian, director of brand marketing for Air Charter Guide in Cambridge, Mass.

While Sterling has a good sized fleet and business, "they are not in a great part of the country," she said. Much more charter traffic is generated on the east and west coasts. However, Florida "gets a lot of business" she said, and Naples, which is located in the southwest part of the state, is a good place to gather business to and from the Caribbean.

Even with the expansion, about three-quarters of Sterling's business, which last year generated revenue of about \$17 million, starts from Mitchell, Gort said, although it can be much more far-flung. Recently, for example, a Sterling jet took clients on a round trip from St. Martin, an island in the Caribbean, to Switzerland.

Assignments like that often occur because Sterling is part of network of similar companies that will back up each other if a plane is not available.

That service has caused some friction with Mitchell officials, who are concerned that Sterling does not have legal authority to fuel planes from elsewhere, according to records on file in the office of Airport Director C. Barry Bateman.

According to Bateman, such planes must be attended to by a fixed base operator, which is a company that provides services to private aircraft that land at Mitchell but are not based there.



*Pilot Mike Gorelik (left) talks with aviation concierge Stacia Strand in the lobby of Sterling Aviation. The company employs 28 pilots, and a total staff of 70.*

Sterling interprets its lease to allow it to do such fueling, according to the documents.

There is only one fixed base operator at Mitchell, Signature Flight Support. Its general manger, Doug Drescher, had no comment on the situation.

For its part, Sterling might want to expand to become a fixed base operator, which would require larger operations at Mitchell, Doerr said. He would not rule out moving to someplace such as Crites Field in Waukesha.