

SWISS MADE

Switzerland may not have the illustrious aerospace heritage of its neighbours, but thanks to “brand values” of quality, efficiency and competence, it has emerged as a global powerhouse in aviation services. Business aviation giants Jet Aviation and ExecuJet are headquartered in Zurich; the former has its completions centre in Basel. SR Technics – once Swissair’s maintenance arm; now Middle East owned – is also Zurich based, as is another Swissair offshoot, Swiss Aviation Training. Geneva is home to TAG and Privatair, while central Switzerland is the heart of aerospace manufacturing with state-owned defence champion RUAG in Emmen and Pilatus in nearby Stans. In the following pages, we profile the country’s key players and look at what precisely makes Swiss aviation tick

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Though Zurich-based, SR Technics (top) positions itself as a global operation, with major centres in Ireland and the UK and a growing presence in Asia; state-owned RUAG has dramatically reduced its dependency on its main government customer; Swiss air force pilots are now training on the PC-21 (right)



business units: aircraft maintenance and modifications, component repair and engine overhaul. Each represents about third of SR Technics' revenues. The company will expand further into "key growth regions" including Asia Pacific and the Middle East, while continuing to grow European market share.

That has not always been easy. SR Technics' Dublin operation was dealt a blow earlier last month when Aer Lingus said it will pull out all but its line maintenance work later this year. The Irish flag carrier makes up about 40% of Dublin's business and only about half that is expected to remain. As well as its standard line maintenance bays, the facility – which began life as Aer Lingus's in-house maintenance facility – specialises in auxillary power units and landing gear overhaul. SR Technics has yet to say how the decision will affect the 1,300-strong workforce, although media reports have said around 200 jobs could be at risk.

SR Technics' bosses may view Aer Lingus's move as a blip in an ongoing growth curve for a company which – like many Swiss companies – includes a version of the famous white cross in its company logo, but sees itself very much as a global player that happens to have its headquarters in Zurich. ■

TRAINING

Image conscious

Swiss Aviation Training is putting its faith in the multi-crew pilot licence as it builds links with its new Lufthansa sister organisation

MURDO MORRISON

The worldwide surge in air travel might seem a strange thing to trouble the boss of a business that makes its money training pilots, but Manfred Brennwald, recently-appointed chief executive of Swiss Aviation Training, is worried about the prospect of the entry barriers to becoming a pilot being lowered if air transport becomes a just another "commodity". The industry has a responsibility to "polish the image the pilot profession has" and ensure quality students are attracted to a career flying airliners, he says.

It is part of the reason the Zurich-based organisation has no plans to grow its fledgling ab initio training venture into a global business with flying schools in emerging economies. Instead, the company – like parent Swiss International Air Lines now part of Lufthansa Group – is putting the emphasis on its new multi-crew pilot licence programme



Airline-specific training, says SAT, is all about "pre-wiring the pilot to your philosophy"

designed to equip novices to fly right-hand seat, with courses designed for needs of specific airline customers.

RIGOROUS SCREENING PROCESS

The first seven MPL candidates graduate in August and the second intake of 10 will complete the course in March 2009. Eventually, SAT hopes to run four classes of 18 students a year. Four out of five students are Swiss nationals and will end up flying for the parent airline. The organisation – which also offers a conventional air transport pilot (ATP) syllabus – has a "rigorous screening process" to select candidates. "It's all about making sure we get the right people," says Brennwald.

Brennwald, a captain himself and previously chief operating officer with Swiss, believes strongly that the MPL is "the future way of training pilots", adding: "Because it is tailored to the individual company, you have

the opportunity to pre-wire the pilot to your philosophy."

Like its former stablemate SR Technics, SAT has recovered strongly from the collapse of former parent Swissair in the wake of 9/11, building a sizeable third-party business, including in Asia where it operates a Singapore-based Embraer 170/190 facility in partnership with the Brazilian airframer. Now, under Lufthansa, SAT is looking at how best to attack the market alongside its new sister operation Lufthansa Flight Training.

SAT – which had been jointly owned by Swiss and General Electric's training division GECAT since Swissair's bankruptcy – was taken over fully by Swiss last year. The company, Embraer's preferred training provider for Europe, the Middle East and Asia, operates seven full-flight simulators – two Airbus A320s, two A330/A340s, one Embraer ERJ-145, one 170, and one Boeing MD-80 – as well



SAT is pioneering the new multi-crew pilot licence, with the first candidates graduating in August



US AIR FORCE

Brennwald: maximise synergies with LFT

as four fixed-base light aircraft simulators. It also has mock-ups for crew evacuation and cabin service training.

Its machines are in around-the-clock demand and, although the company has no room for more, one possibility is replacing either or both the MD-80 and the ERJ-145 – which serve declining markets – for one or more Embraer 190s. “It is no secret that we could expand with an additional simulator,” says Brennwald. However, any future acquisition of equipment will be decided in conjunction with its new sister organisation.

CORE BUSINESS

The two will remain separately branded, with Swiss’s core business remaining Airbus training for its parent airline and possibly expanding its regional jet offering with a Bombardier machine, while LFT continues to provide training across the Airbus and Boeing products. “We don’t foresee a merger between LFT and SAT, but it makes sense for us to maximise our synergies and market ourselves in an intelligent way, so we have a win-win situation in the third party market,” says Brennwald.

Although the booming market for pilot and crew training means that around 70% of its revenues now come from outside customers, Brennwald says the organisation’s main priority is “making sure Swiss has the right professionals at the right time” and lowering the costs to Swiss of providing in-house training.

Other opportunities include expanding crew resource management and human factors expertise into markets such as nuclear, hospitals and fire-fighting, where the same principles of communication, teamworking and problem-solving apply. “It’s a small but growing part of our business,” says Brennwald. “It makes use of our brand equity, and, unlike the airline market, it is un-cyclic.”

BUSINESS AVIATION

Brand recognition

Switzerland’s reputation for quality is reflected by its business aviation service providers and the industry is booming

KATE SANSFIELD

The global business aircraft services industry is bursting with companies but few countries have managed to build such a concentration of highly respected and well-recognised brands as Switzerland. This small country in the heart of Europe has a growing fleet of 173 registered business aircraft according to the Flight ACAS database – 6% of the continent’s business aircraft fleet – and has become a popular base for leading operators and trail blazers such as Comlux, ExecuJet, Jet Aviation, JetFly, PrivatAir and Tag Aviation.

“Switzerland has built a reputation for quality and high service standards and this is how businesses here are perceived,” says Peter Edwards, chief executive of Swiss business aviation services provider Jet Aviation.

HERITAGE

The Zurich-headquartered company is the oldest dedicated business aviation company in Switzerland with a deep-rooted Swiss heritage. Its founder Carl Hirschmann established Jet Aviation in the late 1960s and it has evolved into one of the largest business aviation companies across the globe with bases in Germany, the Middle East, Russia, the UK and the USA. The company operates a growing managed aircraft fleet and owns a superlight Cessna Citation Excel and three Bravo light business jets.

“Switzerland is also renowned for building things that last,” Edwards adds and this value has helped Jet Aviation’s interior completions and overhaul business – based in the Swiss town of Basel – become an industry leader. “Although we no longer consider ourselves to be a fully Swiss company we are continuing to invest heavily here and we appreciate the benefits that being Swiss brings to our brand. We couldn’t imagine moving our base anywhere else,” he says.

Business aviation thrives on personal relationships with customers. Switzerland, with its underlying value of discretion has become a natural choice for aircraft owners and users keen to avoid scrutiny. “Discretion is an integral part of the Swiss culture and this has helped business aviation to thrive here,” says Edwards. “You won’t find spotters hanging around airports in this country,” he adds. Greg Thomas, chief executive of VIP charter and management company PrivatAir agrees. “We are the custodian of people’s wealth and we have a responsibility to our customers.”

PrivatAir was founded in 1977 as the flight department for the Latsis Group of Greece. It launched its commercial operation in Geneva 18 years later and its Switzerland-based leased aircraft fleet includes a Boeing 757, a 767, a Boeing Business Jet and a BBJ2. Two 787s are on order, earmarked for delivery in 2012 and 2016. Thomas says Switzerland’s political neutrality has also helped business aviation to thrive. “We provide transportation for several heads of states around the globe and for many of these countries it is important to apply their national flag to the aircraft when they arrive at their destinations. Flying on Swiss-registered aircraft even with a small Swiss flag on the tail is unlikely to offend and in many cases it gives the passengers anonymity,” says Thomas.

Switzerland’s strength as a business aviation centre is also driven by the quality and quantity of potential customers in the country



PRIVATAIR

PrivatAir’s fleet includes a Boeing 757, and two 787s are on order