

Family affair: Flying Colours has been based at Peterborough Airport since John Gillespie opened Rapid Air in 1978.



The finishing touch

The aviation sector is one of the most demanding sectors for coatings and materials, and the business aviation sector is no exception. Howard Slutsken finds out how Peterborough Airport in Canada is growing its operations alongside aviation services company Flying Colours.

In 2007, there wasn't much happening at Peterborough Airport (YPQ), the airport serving the small city of Peterborough, Ontario. Sitting about 100 km northeast of Canada's largest metropolis, Toronto, YPQ was a destination for recreational flyers on a weekend hamburger run or a quick touch-and-go during flight training.

"It was a pretty sleepy airport with a 5,000 ft runway, half a dozen general aviation hangars, and a local aircraft

maintenance and paint shop called Flying Colours," Trent Gervais, YPQ's Airport General Manager, tells *Regional Gateway*.

Fast forward to today, and YPQ boasts a much-upgraded airside infrastructure with a 7,000-foot runway, 30 general aviation hangars and an aviation college campus.

And that local maintenance and paint operation – Flying Colours Corporation – has grown into a world-class international

company that provides corporate aircraft clients with completion, maintenance, overhaul, and full paint and interior support services.

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

Flying Colours has been based in Peterborough since John Gillespie, President and CEO, relocated to the city and opened his first aircraft service company, Rapid Air, at Peterborough Airport in 1978.



Local hero: Ontario's Peterborough Airport now employs around 550 people, compared to only 70 in 2007, and generates between CAN\$70-80 million a year in revenues.

The benefit of living in a smaller community is one reason Flying Colours has been able to retain a dedicated team of long-term employees.

"Growing up in a family-centred community and working with a family-centred organisation, I think that's attractive to an employee," explains Eric Gillespie, Executive Vice-President and John's son.

"They like the community – we're not in a big centre. We're close to Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, so we have 'The Big City' around us."

Gillespie says that the support from the local community and government has been the catalyst for the development of the airport.

"The goal was to attract additional business so that there would be more jobs, with an ultimate ripple effect on the community. We're a big part of it, as the biggest tenant here, and we're a growth model for the airport."

Peterborough Airport's Gervais saw the potential as he sat down with John Gillespie to negotiate Flying Colours' first expansion when the company

wanted to take over the footprint of the airport's existing terminal building, "That was the start of something great for this airport."

"I hesitate to say that we expanded the airport totally because of Flying Colours, but they definitely played a role in the council's decision to turn the airport into an employment centre for the city and the region."

According to Gervais, businesses at YPQ employ about 550 people – compared to only 70 in 2007 – and the airport generates between CAN\$70-80 million per year.

"We've also attracted the Seneca College School of Aviation with a four-year degree programme, and Sir Sanford Fleming College with an aircraft finishing programme."

STEADY GROWTH

Flying Colours has maintained steady strategic growth since establishing its first paint operations at YPQ in 1989. It now covers 340,000 square feet at the airport, with four paint shops and four maintenance hangars, along with a



Finishing touch: A recent high quality repaint of a Gulfstream G650 by Flying Colours' skilled paint shop team.

design centre and cabinetry and upholstery workshops.

In 2020, the company upgraded its capability to include painting of the largest business aircraft, such as the Boeing 737 BBJ and Airbus ACJ TwoTwenty, along with Gulfstream G700 and Bombardier Global 7500 corporate jets.

This new paint facility is housed in a \$25-million state-of-the-art hanger that measures 138 feet by 158 feet, accommodating aircraft with a tail height up to 55 feet.

Already well known for its CRJ ExeLiner conversion that turns an ex-airline Bombardier CRJ-200 into the mirror image of a Challenger 850, Flying Colours can handle any aircraft work from the installation of a satellite connectivity system to special mission aircraft completions and extensive heavy maintenance checks and overhauls.

But the company is called Flying Colours for an exceptionally good reason – its expertise in creating stunning aircraft liveries is central to its corporate mission.

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Eric Gillespie, Executive Vice President, Flying Colours

A recent repaint of a Gulfstream G650 saw the plane roll from the new paint shop in a striking translucent pearl and mica design with curving stripes and swirls.

"This one really tested our team's capabilities, but they welcomed the challenge, and the client is delighted with the result," says Gillespie.

The process of preparing, painting, and finishing both the exterior and interior of a corporate aircraft requires a team of skilled experts and an understanding of the environmental impact of the paints and solvents used for the project.

And although a buffer zone exists around YPO, Flying Colours has always made a priority of being a good neighbour. "There are [strict] regulations and environmental codes that we follow, along with regular checks and inspections," explains Gillespie.

As Airport Manager, Gervais would be the first to hear from the public, but "there's never been a concern," he states. "I can't think of a single time, in my time at the airport, that we've had complaints about odour. Flying Colours has spent millions of dollars on their systems. They did a great job."

GOING CONTINENTAL

The Gillespies recognised the opportunity presented by the maintenance needs of the massive fleet of business aircraft across the border in the United States, and in 2009, purchased JetCorp. Technical Services.

With facilities at the Spirit of St. Louis Airport, west of downtown St. Louis,



Working on the inside: Flying Colours is a regulatory and factory approved maintenance and manufacturing organisation with comprehensive aircraft maintenance repair and overhaul capabilities.



Missouri, the operation was folded into the corporate brand in 2013 and is now known as Flying Colours Corp KSUS.

An easy hop for most US-based aircraft, the company's three maintenance hangars and cabinetry shop at KSUS cover 100,000 square feet, and clients take advantage of the KSUS team's expertise in aircraft interiors and finishing.

"A regional airport near a metropolitan area is a brilliant model. If the area has natural industry, that already gives you a starter on those [employee] skills," explains Scott Manley, Flying Colours' Chief Operating Officer, who is based at KSUS.

He points to the ease of movement at a regional airport compared to the security restrictions in place at large international hubs.

"The best thing is the convenience to do business and quickly go to local resources, whether its dining, hotels, or offices. It's also the safety and security of being in a community that's small and nurturing."

That sense of community extends to the businesses at the airport, and Manley knows the importance of maintaining good relations with his neighbours.

"We share information and intel, and we try not to dabble in each other's customer base. The first thing I did when I came here was to meet with all our neighbours to introduce ourselves, and since then, they've supported our customer needs more times than I can count."

LOOKING EAST

In 2014 Flying Colours established a presence in the Asian market with the opening of its aircraft interiors refurbishment operation at Bombardier's Seletar Airport facility in Singapore.

Initially focused on simple repairs of cabinetry and furnishings, the Seletar team can now complete partial and full cabin refurbishments on Bombardier aircraft.

But back on the other side of the world, Flying Colours is firmly rooted in its home community – from participation and support of local events and business initiatives to the company's sponsorship of its community's sports teams – and Eric Gillespie knows how vital his city has been to the success of Flying Colours.

"I'm confident in saying that we wouldn't be where we are as a company if we weren't based in Peterborough." ■

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Trent Gervais, General Manager, Peterborough Airport