SOUTH CAROLINA AVIATION ASSOCIATION

Corporate Spotlight

CRAFT
FLIGHT TRAINING & SIMULATION

In the Summer of 2019 Jay and Amanda Aldea, and Barry Emerson took on the challenge that many people talk about, fewer actually do, and even only a small percent succeed—owning their own business. But this wasn't just any business; they are in the business of defying gravity and teaching others to do the same. When Jay, Amanda, and Barry took over the operations of CRAFT Flight Training & Simulation, they had two aircraft and two contract flight instructors. In 18 short months, their flight school now has tqo locations (KCHS and KDYB), 10 aircraft (seven Diamonds and three Cessnas), two Redbird flight simulators, and 10 employees - all this during a pandemic and one of the worst economic downturns ever seen.

How did three people who have never owned a business, grow a niche business so quickly?

It helps that Jay is fulfilling the lifelong dream of becoming a pilot. So, in many ways, they are "scratching their own itch" with CRAFT. At the tail-end of his 21-year career in the US Navy, Jay experienced other flight schools and their courses through his own flight training. His hours in the cockpits of other aircraft and in front of other instructors has given him a sense of what pilots like himself are looking for in a flight school experience. This empathy for what others who want to learn how to fly gives CRAFT a real competitive advantage because they are intentional about everything they do to maximize their students' experience.

"We focus on modern and safe aircraft with glass cockpit avionics to elevate the flight training experience. CRAFT makes aviation dreams a reality by elevating the lifestyle of aspiring pilots, giving them the ability to fly themselves wherever they want to go, be it for business or pleasure."

One would think that flight training is a "one size fit all" business - far from it. Jay, Amanda, Barry and their team offer a wide variety of courses that suits the novice, all the way to a seasoned pilot looking to secure a spot with a major airline. The CRAFT suite of training includes Discovery Flight,

Private Pilot, Instrument Rating (IFR), Commercial, Certified Flight Instructor (CFI), and CFI-Instrument (CFI-I) as well as accelerated courses.

A tipping point for CRAFT was the addition of a Diamond DA42-VI in June 2020. This allowed them to offer multi-engine courses to suit students' personal and professional aviation needs. These include Multi-Engine Add-On, Multi-Engine Instructor (MEI), Commercial Multi-Engine Initial (CMEL), and an Accelerated Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) Checkride Prep Course.

Learning to fly requires time in the air, but Integrating the flight simulator saves students both time and money. CRAFT combines foundational principles of flight training with modern technology to provide students with a state-of-the-art experience. Students can get the sensation of movement and learn safely on CRAFT's Redbird Simulator. A clear sign that CRAFT is doing things right is a pending contract with Charleston Southern University (CSU) to provide all flight training for the university's new four-year degree program—South Carolina's only collegiate Aeronautics program. CRAFT is in the Pre-Application phase of getting their Part 141 certification from the FAA.

"We've come a long way in the last year and are proud to be Charleston's Premiere Flight School," Amanda says. "In that course of time, CRAFT helped numerous pilots achieve their ratings, become aircraft owners, and Rusty Pilots regain currency. We continue to strive towards excellence and continue to grow our fleet to offer our members access to more aircraft in order to better their lifestyle."

While Jay, Amanda and Barry are dedicated to serving their students and leading their team, they also know that to be a part of the community means giving back to it. CRAFT is an ongoing sponsor of the non-profit Lowcountry Aviation Association organization providing affordable flight training for young aspiring pilots. Amanda is an active member of the Charleston Women in Aviation Chapter, Palmetto Pride. CRAFT advertises with local radio stations and uses other local advertising and marketing companies for online and print.

Running a business is a challenge. Doing so in 2020 is a monumental challenge. CRAFT Flight Training & Simulation's mix of experience, technology, and the right team has them positioned as Charleston's top flight school and—no pun intended—the sky's the limit. No matter what level of flying you want to achieve, Jay, Amanda, Barry and the CRAFT team will be there every step of the way.

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