

BUSINESS PROFILE

Flight students flock to Naples-based Europe-American Aviation

BY GEORGE RAAB

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As general manager in charge of marketing for Europe-American Aviation, the sky's the limit for Bettina Scherf. The former music-industry marketing executive now helps build the reputation here and abroad of the flight school she owns with her husband, Carsten Sturm, president, pilot, trainer and chief administrator.

"We were looking for a business connected with aviation, and we loved Naples at first sight," Ms. Scherf said.

Euro-Atlantic Aviation was a sleepy enterprise with four planes — two Cessnas and two Pipers — when it changed hands on Sept. 1, 2001. The first step in the company's makeover was a new name to accurately reflect its identity: Europe-American Aviation.

"We were never on the Atlantic, and people were connecting the word Euro with a currency," Mr. Sturm reasons.

Like many traditional flight schools, the original school offered training on older planes. Whereas it was once OK to teach on planes that were 30 or 40 years old, the digital age and modern aviation is forcing change within the industry. The two saw the business as an opportunity to create a state-of-the-art flight school.

Grounded for 11 days following 9/11, the two were understandably shaken. "A few days into this, we were looking at each other and saying, 'We just bought a flight school in the only country in the world where flight training is officially prohibited,'" he says.

Soon operations were running again, however, and the couple proceeded with their plan to modernize their fleet. While planes come and go at flight schools, it's unusual for a school to scrap an entire fleet and start over with brand new planes. But that's what they did.

Europe-American Aviation became the first Diamond Brilliance Flight Center in the United States. Canadian-based Diamond Aircraft is known for its training planes, jets and simulators. "We knew that a modern fleet would set us apart," Ms. Scherf says.

In addition to offering FAA-certified training, EAA trains Federal Aviation Administration inspectors who come from all over the country for instruction. Its office, just north of the Naples Municipal Airport General Aviation terminal, is headquarters for its 13 planes and 15 employees, including seven flight instructors and two mechanics (the company also rents and repairs planes).

Mr. Sturm estimates that at least 70 percent of flight training worldwide takes place in the United States. At the beginning of his own career, he received instruction in Texas to fly for the German Air Force. One reason Naples Municipal Airport was rated by Aviation International News as being the 25th busiest



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Bettina Scherf, general manager in charge of marketing for Europe-American Aviation

general aviation operator in the world in 2007 is due to traffic coming from its four flight-training schools.

Following 9/11, stiffer regulations that created more documentation requirements actually played out in favor of EAA by shaking out some of the competition. The FAA began requiring schools to be Immigration and Naturalization Service-certified before teaching foreigners. Overseas students must now obtain student visas before beginning flight training.

EAA advertises in Europe, with a small campaign in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. "We do it to let people know

that we're here," Ms. Scherf explains. "Primarily, do it to direct people to our Web site."

The site, www.eaa-fly.com, offers information, in English or German, about its training programs and the many ways to become a pilot. A typical month at the school includes 10-12 students in various stages of training, and about 50 percent of them come from Europe.

That both owners are from Germany is a strong selling point, as the couple's familiarity with visa and immigration requirements comes in handy. A favorable exchange rate is an added bonus in attracting Europeans, who also love spending weeks on end basking in Southwest Florida's balmy weather.

Until 2009, when EAA joined the rest of the world in an economic downturn, business was strong, with 30 to 40 percent growth per year since 2001.

Ms. Scherf says she enjoys the challenge. "We're very proud of what we do," she says. "With a modern fleet of Diamond planes, we can take the student from zero license to individual and then commercial in the same type of aircraft. We do get a lot of repeat business, because of our focus on customer service and our familiarity with the regulations foreigners face." ■