



# Business in Perspective

## *The Flying Side of Business Aviation*

By Steve Dennis

The world of business aviation is diverse, and the people who keep this well oiled machine running span the gamut from line service person-

nel to quarter-century standing CEOs.

As business aviation continues to grow with the demands of our changing industry and the technology of business aircraft advances far into the future, we can't forget our pilots, an integral part of our industry's growth and survival. Without qualified, experienced, trained professionals flying the planes, where would business aviation be?

There are three types of pilots defined under business aviation: corporate, private and charter. Corporate flight departments are large and small, and corporate pilots usually reap the benefits of a structured flying schedule and qualified management.

Individuals who own a plane and incorporate flying into their business or traveling lifestyle hire private pilots for their transportation needs; a private pilot's schedule is likely not to be as "scheduled" as that of a corporate pilot.

Charter pilots fly planes that are hired out by groups or individuals usually for the duration of one trip; in this flying environment, the pilot serves many different types of customers and the needs of the customer's vary to extremes.

Beyond their importance to the machine of business aviation as knowledgeable, functional skyway navigators, these pilots serve as facilitators, negotiators, community leaders and pro-business aviation advocates.

Steve Nielsen came out of Vietnam and the Marine Corps in 1969. He was living in White Plains, N.Y. at the time, where many corporate jet planes were stored or headquartered.

"I saw all those planes and I knew I wanted to be involved," he said.

He started knocking on doors and was hired. By 1981, he had flown the G-2, Falcon 20 and a Hawker 200. He's traveled the world, worked for two corporations and flown privately, including a six-month stint flying for a Saudi prince. In 1985, he was offered a job flying for Houston Natural Gas, which shortly after became Enron. He was in charge of training and standards for three pilots and 12 airplanes.

Nielsen was recruited to Taco Bell in May of 1986. At that time, the company was part of PepsiCo; it

was spun off on its own in 1997. When he was recruited, the company had just bought a brand new Hawker 800. Nielsen was chief pilot of Taco Bell until last July, when Taco Bell's parent company Tricon (owner of Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken and A&W/Long John Silvers) decided to consolidate all four individual flight departments.

Nielsen was asked to move to Louisville, Ky., to head the entire fleet of consolidated flight departments. In May 2003, the Tricon became Yum! Brands. Nielsen, serving as director of aviation of Yum! Brands, oversees three Challengers, and the company just traded in the Hawker for a new Gulfstream G-200, for which Nielsen completed his training this past month.

"The Gulfstream G-200 is a new technology aircraft. It has a state-of-the-art cockpit, a large cabin feel with small airplane economics, as well as great performance, speed and range," he said. "It best meets our domestic flying needs."

### *Father and son*

Christopher Nielsen was born to parents Steve and Minnie in 1973. Since he grew up in and around airplanes, it was no surprise when he began flying at age 16.

Over the past 10 years, he's gained a measurable amount of experience working for a variety of employers. "I've been blessed with great employers," he said.

Nielsen, 39, has flown the Citation, Challenger, Falcon 900, Global Express, the G-2 and G-4, and worked his way through the spectrum of corporate, charter and private positions. His jobs have taken him around the U.S., Mexico, Canada and Europe.

"I really enjoy flying. I've been able to travel the world," he said. "Flying with my dad was a definite highlight. He's created opportunities for me. He's helped me out, and led me in the right direction."

Nielsen said that it wasn't until he started flying that he realized how supportive and encouraging his father had been along the way.

My father has instilled great values in me," he said. "He's my role model in many ways—the ruler I use to measure my success by are his standards of accomplishment and positive work ethic. At the same time, my father knew where to draw the line. He'd show me the door, but I had to walk through myself. He understands that I will progress in my career, and I need to make my own mistakes."

Steve Nielsen says he's excited his son has chosen aviation as a career, and says he's only followed in his footsteps to a degree.

"He's done very well for himself on his own, in terms of the positions he's decided to take and how well he's performed in those positions," he said.

A couple of years ago, father and son flew together as a crew from Orange County to Salt Lake and back in a Challenger.

"The trip was a lot of fun," Steve Nielsen said. "His flying was impressive. It was truly a thrill—one of those moments in life that you dream of your entire life. It



L to R: Steve Nielsen and his son Chris at this year's NBAA golf tournament.

made me proud."

According to the senior Nielsen, since 9/11, business aviation has the biggest opportunity it's ever had.

"The demand for what we do has increased," he said. "Business aircraft are more efficient than ever, which means we compete well with public transportation in terms of cost/time savings."

He and others who entered aviation in the early seventies, as the business environment and economy was skyrocketing, watched as the economy and industry turned down during the late seventies and mid- to late-eighties. Those same modern veterans of aviation saw similar if not more severe trends in lack of aviation business and jobs than the downturn we experienced post 9/11. Although the business aviation sector has suffered the last couple of years, there are still jobs available for those who persevere.

"I remember in the late eighties when a handful of resumes would come across my desk everyday," Steve Nielsen recalled. "Nowadays, I average about one prospective pilot's resume per month. I believe there's always a job for a dedicated person with a strong work ethic."

The most obvious change post 9/11, said Chris Nielsen, is that the FAA has taken more stringent measures.

"In-house people such as FBO employees are more acute to what's going on around them; pilots are much more aware," he said.

Aside from tightening security measures, it's business as usual for him.

"The future is bright, with new technologies," he said. "Planes are more fun to fly, and efficient. More and more companies are buying into business aircraft."

Bright future or not, there remains challenges; currently, pilots are experiencing the challenge of keeping operating costs down. For pilots and corporate flight departments, fuel cost is a big issue.

"Managing the cost of fuel is key," he said. "On the other hand, as a pilot, it's also important to keep in mind customer service and amenities—fuel in a timely manner at a quality level of service. Sometimes my employer lands at his destination and conducts meetings in the FBO conference room. So there may be value in paying .05 to .10 cents a gallon more."

### *Membership in the NBAA*

A forward-minded pilot has many opportunities within the realm of avia-

tion to pursue leadership and involvement—never underestimate the power of a proactive pilot.

Pilots who have seized each opportunity that has come their way, in effect, create positive waves singularly impacting this microcosm we call business aviation.

The Niensens have more in common than just flying; each has a fair share of knowledge in the business aviation industry and contributes to this unique sector in his own way. Both are active members in the National Business Aviation Association, which represents the interest of business aviation.

Chris represents the West Coast as a standing committee member of the NBAA's Airspace/Air Traffic Committee and works closely with Bob Lamond, NBAA's director of Air Traffic Services. Members of the committee represent the interests of business aviation in matters relating to airspace, airspace obstructions, aviation weather, air traffic service and hazards to aviation.

The committee consists of members from most geographical regions of the U.S. who communicate their concerns to the appropriate FAA regional or local offices through the chairman and the staff liaison.

"It's great to be involved in the NBAA, representing the needs and concerns of pilots in my region, as well as becoming informed on the upcoming regulation changes and involved in industry initiatives," he said.

Standing committees embody the

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strength and spirit of NBAA. Through committee networking, the issues and challenges affecting business aviation are uncovered and explored, and courses of action are determined.

The committee's latest agenda include continued representation in the FAA on the FAA Air Traffic Procedures Advisory Committee. The group has sponsored more than 30 regional briefings throughout the country about the FAA High Altitude Redesign Program implementation, and continues to host the FAA/Industry Friends & Partners of Weather Aviation Forum to focus user input from the entire aviation community in solving pressing weather information problems.

The efforts of the FMS/Charting Subcommittee focus on the need to publish TAA procedures to increase safety and efficiency for business aviation in terminal approach areas.

"As flying and planes continue to change with the times, serving on the NBAA ensures that pilot's concerns are voiced and addressed," Chris said. "There is a movement in air traffic navigation toward R-nav (a worldwide waypoint to waypoint system). VORs (very high omnidirectional radio) are slowly being changed out. Currently, that's one of the issues we're addressing."

Since 1984, Steve Nielsen has served on and off NBAA's Corporate Aviation Management Committee. Almost two years ago, he was honored with a board position and just completed his first official first year. The board of NBAA addresses the specific issues brought to their attention by the membership, as well as issues related to government action or industry conditions, which in turn leads to discussion and action. The board also oversees and manages the annual trade show as well as international business shows EBACE and LABACE.

"Serving on the board of directors at NBAA gives me an opportunity to participate in what goes on in our industry," he said. "Working with talented leaders of the industry is an honor. I've been very fortunate always having worked for great companies. I've received so much. It feels right to give back in the form of the NBAA."

Some of the upcoming issues on NBAA's agenda include representation on the Transportation Security Association and security protocols having affected business aviation, i.e. Washington National having become off limits to all private aircraft, which has certainly had an impact on general aviation.

Another job of the board is to ensure that business aviation has a voice in the capitol; there is an office of fulltime employees dedicated to serving the legislative interests of business aviation.

In an industry where one- or two-plane flight departments dominant

and large corporate flight departments are minorities, the small operators are at the heart of business aviation industry.

"How we represent the small operators is of utmost importance," Steve Nielsen said. "Part of our job includes identifying their needs, making training and information and resources more accessible. We ask ourselves the question, 'How can we reach them?'"

"The members of the board attend joint meetings. We just met with two people from the Aviation Manufacturing Advisory Council (which includes the presidents of airplane manufacturers). These types of interactions and relationships serve not only to grow NBAA members individually, but also to bring back education and information to our individual organizations, and help strengthen and grow the organizations we serve."

**The future**

What does the future hold for the Nielsen men?

"I want to keep learning. Every time I fly with someone new, or train for a new plane, I acquire more knowledge," said Chris Nielsen. "There's always something new to learn in this business, and I'm just enjoying the people I get to fly with and meet on a daily basis."

Both father and son are a representation of what hard work and dedication can turn into in this industry. As for advice for newcomers to this industry, "My word to a new pilot is to fly because you love it," Chris Nielsen said. "Most pilots do have a passion for flying. If you're not passionate, you won't be happy."

The senior Nielsen added some words of encouragement to his son and others out there pursuing a career in business aviation.

"Don't ever be satisfied with yourself; keep trying to grow and learn because this business will pass you by," he said. "We're just now celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the Wright brothers flying a cloth airplane—basically a kite. We've walked on the moon since then."

*W. Stephen Dennis is the founder, CEO and president of Aviation Resource Group International, a leader in aviation advisory services since 1975. He has more than 25 years of varied aviation industry and executive and senior management experience covering specialized areas such as operational efficiency, profitability conversions, business development, strategic planning, marketing and corporate restructuring. He can be contacted at [Steve@airportjournals.com](mailto:Steve@airportjournals.com).*

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 Lycoming IO-360 • 145 kts @ 9 gph • 1,070 fpm

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 Twin Centurion diesel engine  
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