

Aviation International News.

Respected. Requested. Required.

Eclipse delivers first customer Model 500

By Harry Weisberger / February 2007

After an extended gestation period and months of uncertainty about first delivery, Eclipse Aviation delivered its first production very light jet (VLJ). When the FAA awarded an airworthiness certificate for the first production Eclipse 500 in the closing hours of last year the Albuquerque, N.M.-based tyro airframe manufacturer immediately initiated a virtual “delivery” in which the co-owners completed the documents via fax.

The aircraft registration was transferred to David Crowe (the first to place a deposit for an Eclipse 500 in 2000) and a California-based fractional ownership operation, Jet-Alliance. Crowe and Jet-Alliance CEO Randall Sanada arrived at the Eclipse plant for a formal delivery ceremony on January 4. As the first customer, the Crowe/Jet-Alliance partnership paid \$995,000 for this Eclipse 500 plus \$82,000 worth of optional equipment.

At press time Eclipse was still awaiting its FAA production certificate, necessary for the company to issue airworthiness certificates under its manufacturing authority. Until it receives that document, FAA inspectors must process each aircraft’s airworthiness certificate. An Eclipse 500 going to an unidentified private operator was expected to be the second aircraft delivered. Eclipse 500 S/N 2 will be delivered to DayJet when the airplane has been signed off as suitably equipped for Part 135 ops.

Eclipse Aviation reports a deposit-secured backlog of more than 2,500 aircraft and has a goal of building 1,000 aircraft a year (four per day) when it ramps up to full production. It plans to support that rate at a manufacturing facility expected to be completed by 2010 across the Rio Grande on the Double Eagle II Airport. Albuquerque’s Sunport International Airport is the current base for Eclipse production and administration activity.

Shareowners Lining Up

The first customer Eclipse 500 has been placed on a four- to six-month leaseback to Eclipse Aviation, which will use it for marketing and demonstrations in coordination with similar uses by Jet-Alliance, said Vern Raburn, Eclipse Aviation president and CEO. Jet-Alliance, an aircraft management and fractional ownership company based in Westlake Village, Calif., will operate the first Eclipse and others it plans to acquire at the Camarillo Airport (CMA) near Los Angeles, the former Oxnard AFB.

Sanada said that Jet-Alliance will use its affiliate, Camarillo-based Channel Islands Aviation, to operate the fractional and charter/management fleet under the Channel Islands Part 135 charter certificate. Channel Islands will maintain operational control and provide flight crew for 135 operations and for Part 91 flights where a mentor pilot is required to accompany an owner-pilot.

Jet-Alliance is offering Eclipse 500 shares for as little as \$95,000 for a one-sixteenth share plus \$2,000 per month and \$788 per occupied flight hour. Jet-Alliance has three other Eclipse 500 delivery positions in its own name and, Sanada said, plans to team with a number of prospective Eclipse owners who, like David Crowe, have been attracted to the fractional ownership option. He added that Jet-Alliance has a waiting list of approximately 800 for Eclipse 500 shares, and that 29 have supported their interest with deposits. Many of the names on that list, clients of Sanada's wealth advisory firm, constitute a ready-made customer base. Sanada said he expects Jet-Alliance to sell an average of eight shares per aircraft.

Sanada and Crowe share a similar piloting background, one that is expected to prove common among Eclipse owner-pilots. Both have logged about 400 hours of pilot-in-command time in high-performance piston aircraft and have private pilot licenses and no instrument rating.

Crowe has been operating a Bellanca Super Viking out of Magnum Aviation at San Martin Airport in Santa Clara County, south of San Jose. He has upgraded the 300-hp single extensively, including an electronic flight instrument suite. "I expect the glass cockpit in my Bellanca to make it easier for me to transition into the Eclipse," he told AIN. Crowe, who has flown in a preproduction Eclipse, added that it handled "virtually the same as a Super Vike."

Sanada, a pilot since 1993, recently sold the Piper Lance he had been using to commute between the Los Angeles area and the Big Bear Lake airport (7,000 feet msl) in the San Bernardino Mountains.

Northeast Charter Firm Awaits Eclipse Deliveries

Charter operator Linear Air is preparing for the imminent arrival of the first airplane in its order of 30 Eclipse 500s, hiring 25 new pilots and working closely with Eclipse on pilot and technician training programs.

While delivery dates for Linear's Eclipse 500 have been delayed "a couple of times," said Linear president William Herp, "we'll be the first commercial Eclipse operator in the Northeast." Linear should receive six Eclipse 500s this year, 18 next year and the balance in 2009. By then, Herp expects to place follow-on orders to reach Linear's goal of running a fleet of 300 Eclipse 500s by 2011. The operator's first Eclipse 500 will be based at Hanscom Field in Bedford, Mass., near its headquarters in Lexington.

All Linear flights, including those operated by the company's five-air-plane Cessna Caravan fleet, are flown with two pilots. The Eclipses will also be operated with two-

pilot crews, Herp said, adding that the Model 500's performance and weight-and-balance numbers work out fine for Linear's typical 600-mile seats-full trip. "The weigh-and-balance and performance of the Eclipse have not changed our model at all," he said.

Linear launched with the executive-configured Caravan to test the market using an airplane that was the closest airplane to the Eclipse in terms of performance and cost. "The goal of starting the business with the Caravan was to prepare for the VLJ," Herp explained. "We doubled revenue from 2005 to 2006 and expect to triple this year. We're bullish on the market."

Linear added its fifth Caravan last month and planned to base it in the Washington, D.C. area to serve the mid-Atlantic market.