



TURBINEPILOT

A SPECIAL SECTION FOR THE TURBINE OWNER-PILOT



Mods and mends

The VLJ company implements mods; mends relationships

BY THOMAS B. HAINES

Eclipse Aerospace co-founder and Executive Vice President Mike Press (below) lives near St. Louis, but commutes to the Albuquerque factory in his Eclipse 500. About 75 of the VLJs have already undergone significant modifications this year (bottom).



The most surprising thing about flying the latest upgrades to the Eclipse 500 very light jet was just how unfamiliar the airplane was to me two years after earning a type rating in it. I had spent many hours in the Level D simulator, but two years is a long time to be away from an airplane. However, the 500 is simple by design and I quickly felt flow patterns coming back to me as Eclipse Aerospace test pilot Jerry Chambers ushered me through the checklists.

Soon N528EA was climbing away from Albuquerque International Sunport. Passing through FL180 at some 2,600 fpm we were doing 170 knots and burning 340 pph per side. The dual Garmin 400 navigators in the subpanel were feeding data to the three large Innovative Solutions & Support displays in the panel. With the Garmin upgrades, our flight plans were showing up on both PFDs and a corner of the giant MFD.

Leveling off at FL280, the airplane settled into a 360 KTAS/0.606 Mach cruise while burning 285 pph per side.

There were a number of upgrades to the panel since I last flew it, yet the airplane felt familiar in its heavy roll through the side stick; pitch feel is about right. The upgraded S-Tec integrated autopilot system in the new Avio 1.5 modification package brings a number of handy features to the cockpit. Most welcome, especially for single-pilot operations, is the ability to start a controlled climb or descent with just the touch of a button. Simply dial in the new altitude and punch the Altitude button, and the autopilot will command a reasonable climb or descent. You can fine-tune the rate later if you want, but in busy airspace, you can start up or down right away without a lot of button pushing.

I later sat in the middle row of seats while AOPA President and CEO Craig Fuller had his first Eclipse piloting experience. It was my first time sitting in the cabin and I was impressed by the generous leg and headroom when you slide the middle seats back. Two 110-volt outlets allow passengers to stay productive. The cabin is so quiet you can easily carry on a normal conversation.

We're back

What was perhaps most remarkable about our flight was that we could visit the Eclipse factory and fly anything at all. Eclipse Aviation struggled mightily for a decade to bring the VLJ to market. It began deliveries in 2006, but the airplanes, while certified, were missing many of the avionics and deicing systems you would expect in a jet. Some upgrades



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occurred as the design matured a bit, but financial problems continued and ownership changed until finally in November 2008, after 260 deliveries, the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. When no significant cash infusion materialized, the company filed for Chapter 7 liquidation in February 2009.

Eclipse owners Mike Press and Mason Holland joined up with a group of other owners and investors and purchased the assets out of bankruptcy, forming Eclipse Aerospace. The group paid \$20 million in cash and \$20 million in a note for the assets, which includes some 30 aircraft that were in various stages of production. Separately, the investors bought 28 airplanes that were in the DayJet fleet. DayJet had attempted to start an air taxi system using Eclipse 500s in the Southeast, but it too went out of business.

Since the acquisition, Eclipse Aerospace has shed its high-tech training center in favor of having pilot training done by SimCom. The Level D simulators will be up and running at SimCom's Orlando facility this fall. The move

trimmed the company's floor space from 500,000 square feet to 400,000.

A number of Eclipse veterans, including Edward Lundeen and Jack Harrington, returned to the company and helped rebuild the service center. About 40 percent of the fleet has now had various upgrades—including the Avio NG upgrade, which replaces the Avidyne displays in the earliest models with those from IS&S. The Avio NG 1.7 upgrade adds the Garmin navigators and autopilot enhancements along with the ability to show Jeppesen charts and other information on the MFD; it is frequently done in sync with the flight-into-known-icing modification. The upgrades cost from \$250,000 to \$529,000 depending upon the state of the original airplane.

Press has stated that one of his main goals for the company is to get back into production. However, his first goal is to proceed carefully to keep the company's cash flow strong. Additional outside investment is being sought to ramp up production. An announcement about that may occur later this year.

"Everyone has a passion for this airplane," said Press. "The employees, the owners, the investors. We want to be a good steward over this amazing aviation asset. We have a lot of steps to get into production. However, we're back in business. Parts are available. Mechanics around the world have already been trained. We have authorized service centers and we own two service centers; one in Chicago and [Albuquerque]."

Get yours now

For those who want an Eclipse now, the company is upgrading the DayJet airplanes in inventory to the latest mods under what it calls the Total Eclipse Program. For \$2.15 million, customers get a fully upgraded airplane with factory warranty. Former position holders receive a \$50,000 discount off the price.

For more information, visit the Eclipse website (www.eclipseaerospace.net).

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