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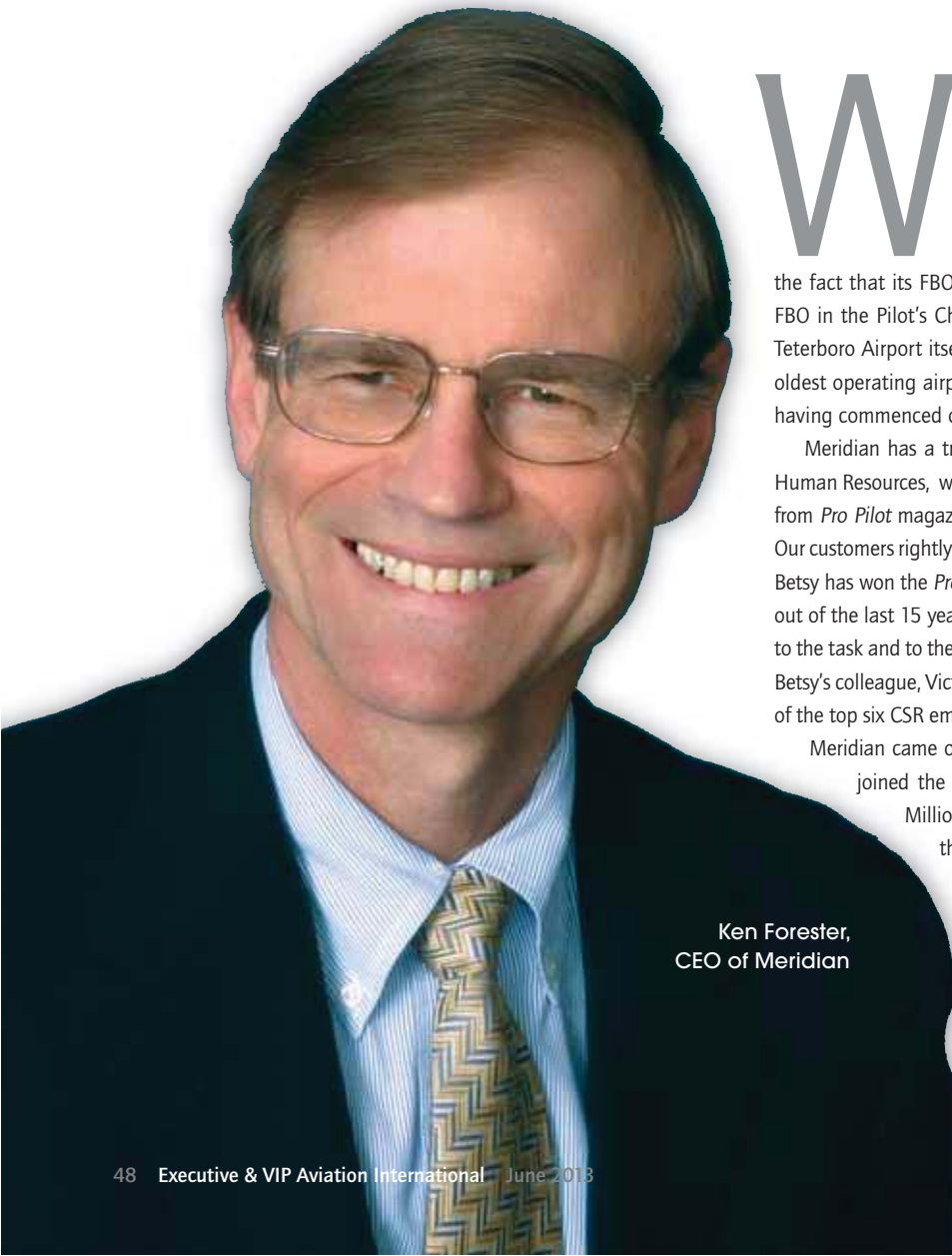
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Defending the #1 FBO spot



With a choice of five separate FBOs at New York's business aviation airport, Teterboro, there is no doubt that jet owners and operators flying into New York are spoiled for choice. With so many FBOs in close proximity, customers can feel certain that each FBO operator will be doing their utmost to retain their business as a client. By *Anthony Harrington*



Ken Forester,
CEO of Meridian

When all it takes is a phone call and a short walk across the apron to change FBO suppliers, you know that each FBO is going to be polishing its merit badges for extraordinary levels of service just as hard as it can. So it is no surprise that Ken Forester, CEO of Meridian, reckons that the whole company is hugely proud of the fact that its FBO at Teterboro was awarded the #1 spot as the Best US FBO in the Pilot's Choice Survey on FltPlan.com for the third year in a row. Teterboro Airport itself is just 10 miles from mid-town Manhattan and is the oldest operating airport in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area, having commenced operations in 1919.

Meridian has a tremendous asset in Betsy Wines, VP Customer Service & Human Resources, who consistently tops the 'best in customer service' honours from *Pro Pilot* magazine. "This is not a business that forgives mistakes lightly. Our customers rightly expect the highest standards at all times and the fact that Betsy has won the *Pro Pilot* award for the best customer relations employee 14 out of the last 15 years is testimony both to the extraordinary skills she brings to the task and to the dedication of our team," Forester says. He points out that Betsy's colleague, Victor Seda, is also consistently placed in the survey's ranking of the top six CSR employees in the country.

Meridian came out of the Million Air FBO franchise in 2006, having first joined the franchise in 1986. "We had 20 tremendous years with Million Air, and we learned a vast amount about the business through the Million Air community. However, we had



We had a growing MRO capability, so the time came, in 2006, when we decided to make the break and to invest in our own purpose-built terminal here at Teterboro



developed a strong charter business while we were with Million Air which we ran under the Meridian brand, and we had a growing MRO capability, so the time came, in 2006, when we decided to make the break and to invest in our own purpose-built terminal here at Teterboro," Forester says. Establishing its own FBO allowed the company to pull all four of its operations, namely FBO services, charter, aircraft operations management and MRO, all together under the one brand. "It

was quite a big leap for us, but we had just put in a new 30,000 square foot terminal building and apron and we had very well established relationships with customers, so we felt pretty confident that the time was right," he says.

Meridian operates 21 aircraft, two of which are wholly owned by Meridian and form the core of its charter fleet, while the other 19 are owned by corporations and high net worth individuals. "We operate and manage the airplanes for them and

all but two of these form part of our charter fleet when not in use by the owner," Forester says. The majority of the planes are large cabin, long-range aircraft and include five Gulfstream 4s and 4SPs, a Falcon 900, a Falcon 2000 and a G200. There are also four Hawker 800s, two Citation XLSs, plus the only small jet in the portfolio, a Mustang. The bulk of the flying is East Coast of the US to Europe and the Middle East, along with some regional travel in the US. "But we go all over the world. Clients

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travel to Latin America or the Caribbean, or to Asia. We feel that we have to do everything on a world-class basis here at Teterboro because we are competing against the extremely high standards of service our clients experience in the best hotels around the world. When clients come to Meridian Teterboro, they expect to be in a very professional facility that takes care of every need they have. The only way you can be in this business and thrive is by paying absolute attention to detail. You have to target perfection all the time," he adds.

Aircraft are complex pieces of equipment and occasionally, with the best will in the world, something will delay a flight. However, by being absolutely thorough with maintenance procedures and knowing the planes well, problems can usually be anticipated and handled in a way that makes for the least disruption for the customer. "We jump into high gear when something happens and we will find ways of dealing with it. The solution may be to bring in an alternative aircraft, or, if weather is the issue, we look to see if we can reposition the plane in a better weather zone ahead of time," he comments. Forester adds: "There can be a lot of unanticipated issues in this industry but from the time the customer gets here to the time they walk off the plane, everything should be seamless. We are not going to drop the ball and forget something that they asked us to do and indeed, we try to anticipate things that maybe they didn't ask us to do."

Meridian has only recently opened up on the West Coast to supplement its East Coast operations. It now has two sales offices in California and has positioned one of its charter



aircraft, a Citation XLS, at Hayward Airport. So would Forester contemplate opening up FBOs elsewhere in the world? Meridian is forever on the lookout for opportunities for growth, he says, but the company has always prioritised sustainable organic growth as the best way forward. "We're looking for carefully managed growth so that there is no chance of us disappointing our customers through getting overstretched," he adds. Forester and the Meridian team have visited many other FBOs across the US and in Asia and Europe and have garnered the best ideas in design and operational procedures from what they have seen around the world. "We blended these together with what pilots and passengers are looking for from an FBO and we think we have come up with a very exceptional facility," he comments.

One of the keys to success in this business is staff longevity. Having staff who have been with the company for many years and who are familiar with and comfortable with the high levels of service required, is an invaluable strength. "Our FBO President, Steve Chandoha, has been here since 1988, and our charter business President, Dennis O'Connell, has been with Meridian since 1984. And our accounting department Vice President, Aida Libiran, has been here since 1985, so we have a tremendous base of knowledge to draw on," he comments. The importance of keeping good staff and having everyone feel that this is a great place to work is hard to overestimate. "Keeping good people, and this goes from customer representatives through to professional mechanics in the MRO, is vital to retaining the culture of the enterprise and in getting everyone working as a team," Forester explains.

The same loyalty has been shown by many of the company's customers. "We began life as a business as a little flight school and doing some work on piston engines and some of our mid-size and larger cabin customers today are people who began their flying careers with us back then, flying Piper Saratogas and Cessna 182s," he says.

Forester is optimistic about the future for business aviation, despite the wave of anti-aviation feeling that swept through the US media after the auto industry CEOs made the 'mistake' of flying their corporate jets to Congress to ask for a taxpayer-funded bailout. "That error is behind us now. President Obama really does get that flying



is important and that the industry is responsible for a very large number of jobs around the world. Time is the only commodity that you cannot get back again and business jets give executives and VIPs the chance to be more productive and to reach places more rapidly than they could with commercial airlines – and very often it helps them to go where the commercial airlines don't find it worth their while to fly," he says.

Part of the optimism that so many in the sector feel, in the wake of the lean times following the global crash of 2008, has to do with the rise of business aviation in the emerging markets of India, China and Asia generally. "One of the reasons why we are focusing on the San Francisco Bay area with our new West Coast offices is that we see it as the potential gateway to Asia. However, there is a great deal of business to be had right here in the US, so we won't be rushing into any Asia-related moves. There will be an opportune time for us to do it, in all probability, but we certainly will not be joining the general throng headed for Asia. The US still has a great deal to offer," he concludes. ●



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