

Little Hawk flies TBM 850

Eric Walden is grandson of FSI Founder Al Ueltschi and carries on his grandfather's early business name.



Eric Walden in the left seat of his TBM 850. After 10 years as a NetJets pilot, Walden felt confident to launch his own Part 135 charter operation. Members of Walden's family have been involved in aviation since the first decade of the 20th century.

By Mike Pots
Senior Editorial Contributor

Trivia question for you: What was the name of Al Ueltschi's diner?

Yes, *that* Al Ueltschi, of FlightSafety Intl (FSI) fame. Back in Kentucky, where he grew up, Ueltschi opened a diner and used the proceeds to finance his flying lessons. The diner was called "Little Hawk."

Little Hawk as a charter service

Today, the Little Hawk legacy is being carried on by Al's grandson, Eric Walden, founder and president of Little Hawk Logistics, a charter company based in Charlottesville VA. Little Hawk operates what Walden believes to be the only Daher TBM 850 conducting non-scheduled Part 135 operations in the US.

Walden was clearly born into avi-

ation royalty. Al Ueltschi is a grandfather on his mother's side of the family. On his father's side, Walden's great grandfather was Henry W Walden, an aviation pioneer enshrined in the Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton who, in 1909, built and flew the first monoplane in America.

Eric Walden grew up on a farm in central Virginia and says he always knew he wanted to fly. The airspace over his home was a military training route, so seeing F14s, A6s and A7s flying low overhead on a daily basis only reinforced his desire to be a pilot. Then when he saw *Top Gun* he knew he had to be a Naval Aviator. He secured an appointment to the Naval Academy, but an issue with asthma derailed his plans. Walden instead opted for the University of Virginia, where he earned degrees in geology and astronomy.

In the meantime he began learning to fly at the age of 15, spending

the summer at FSI in Vero Beach. While there, he lived in the dorm, washed aircraft, cleaned the hangar and helped the mechanics in order to help pay his expenses, recalling that "Al never gave anything away." Nonetheless he knew he was very fortunate. "I was a 15-year old kid learning to fly in the best flight school in the country."

Walden continued spending summers at FSI. By the time he finished college he had all his ratings and about 1000 flight hours. Applying with Atlantic Coast Airlines he was hired to fly Jetstream 41s out of the airline's base at IAD (Washington-Dulles). He made captain in the Jetstream 41 after only 1 1/2 years as FO, then he upgraded to the Dornier 328 Jet, an airplane he remembers fondly for its outstanding climb performance.

In early 2003 Walden joined NetJets, where he would spend the next decade. He became a Cessna Citation Excel captain for the last 7 years of his time there. Walden credits his time at NetJets with giving him the flight experience and confidence to launch Little Hawk.

"I flew all over the lower 48, all over Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, going into all these tiny little places that most people don't even know exist," Walden recalls. "We'd be going somewhere new almost every single week. Sometimes you'd have to look up the place just to figure out where you were going. It's very different from the airline experience."

NetJets also exposed Walden to a wide array of other pilots. "There were retired airline guys who had been forced out before they changed the age-60 rule—guys with 30,000 or 40,000 hours," he says. "I flew with a pilot that had flown U2s. Another pilot I worked with had flown B52s with 25 missions over Vietnam. I learned so much from all those guys."

But the nomadic lifestyle of a corporate pilot was also taking a toll.



Little Hawk's TBM 850 is seen in the foreground on the ramp at GON (Groton-New London CT). Walden purchased the aircraft from TBM dealer Columbia Air Services GON and takes it there for annual inspections. A 2nd TBM is seen in the background.

"I was missing half my son's life," he complains, "So I started looking around to see if there was something I could do to give me the lifestyle I wanted and also allow me to continue to fly."

Walden decided to use a Daher TBM 850 for charter

Walden remembered seeing and being impressed with the Daher TBM 850 at Oshkosh, and he began to wonder whether it could form the basis of a Part 135 on-demand charter operation based in his hometown of Charlottesville VA.

Located about 100 miles south of Washington DC in the center of the state, Charlottesville and its immediate surrounds—what the government calls the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area—is home to about 200,000 people. The University of Virginia is located there, as is Thomas Jefferson's ancestral home, Monticello. CHO (Charlottesville–Ablemarle) is located about 7 miles north of the city and has a 6001 x 150 ft paved runway with GPS, RNAV, ILS and NDB approaches. There is limited airline service.

Little Hawk works with Meridian Air Group at CHO

There was already a Part 135 operator based in Charlottesville. Meridian Air Group, operating Embraer Phenom 100s and Pilatus PC12s, had been in business more than 15 years. Rather than attempt to launch a competitive operation, Walden approached Steve Walters, the president and ops director of Meridian, with a proposal to add a TBM 850

to the company's fleet. After reviewing Walden's business plan, Walters agreed that travel demand in the Charlottesville market would support the TBM. So a deal was struck.

"Geographically, Charlottesville is very well positioned to support operations with a TBM," Walden explains. "We're only 20 minutes from the DC airports in this airplane, and about 1 hour from New York City. The Carolina coast is 1 1/2 hrs away, and so is Atlanta."

With his business plan approved, Walden set about locating an airplane. After a diligent search, he settled on a 2007 model TBM 850 with about 1900 hours flight time on it that was in the inventory of Columbia Aircraft Services, the authorized Daher sales and service center at GON (Groton-New London). A former executive/corporate aircraft, the new Little Hawk airplane had been meticulously maintained and was in excellent condition.

With his aircraft purchased, Walden thought he was ready to go. But it wound up taking almost 11 months for the FAA's Richmond Flight Standards District Office to get Little Hawk's TBM 850 properly listed on Meridian Air's Part 135 certificate.

Charter flying in the TBM 850 now averages 35 to 40 hrs/mo

Walden flew his first revenue trip in March 2015 and managed to bill 20 hours that month. His business model was based on initially flying 25 hours each month, and he has met or exceed that ever since. Today he is averaging 35 to 40 hours monthly. A highlight of last year came when he flew a passenger to Oshkosh during

EAA AirVenture, where he first saw a TBM 850 several years before.

"The arrangement with Meridian has worked out well," Walden says. "They handle the scheduling and perform routine maintenance, freeing me up to fly the aircraft without the other worries of operating the business."

The TBM 850 received its annual inspection this past March at Columbia, where the avionics system was upgraded to a Garmin 600 suite with dual GTN750 displays.

Although Little Hawk will take a charter customer almost anywhere, most flights are within a 300 to 600 mile radius of CHO, with a general north/south bias along the business centers of the US east coast. "Trips beyond 600 nautical tend to favor a jet rather than a turboprop," Walden observes. "However, my airplane is fast. It consistently cruises above 320 kts in the winter, so longer trips are quite feasible for us."

Business has been picking up, so much that now Walden says he is considering adding a 2nd TBM to the Little Hawk operation. That would add complexity to his operation, however, including the addition of 1 or more pilots. For now, he says he is content for Little Hawk to continue as a 1-pilot single aircraft operation, carrying on the legacy of Al Ueltschi's long ago initiated hamburger stand. ✈



Mike Potts is senior editorial contributor for *Professional Pilot*. He was in corporate communications for Beech and Raytheon Aircraft between 1979 and 1997.