

Aerial Application: It's a Family Business

Tidwell Flying

By Ellen Gragg

George Tidwell may not fly anymore, but he's far from retired. Last January, *Agricultural Aviation* reached him at the finals of the World Cutting Horse Show, where he was competing, to talk about the history of the company he founded, Tidwell Flying. In a series of brief cell-phone interviews sandwiched between events at the horse show, he related how he turned his lifelong interest in flying into a cutting-edge business for the 21st century.



George, Jeff and Jimmy are happy with the performance and quality work the 502 gives them.



A look at the up-to-date loading and containment area.

Tidwell was born and raised in northwest Florida, where his parents farmed peanuts, cotton and corn. He dates his interest in flying to his very early childhood, when he watched World War II pilots practicing acrobatic maneuvers over a military training field near the farm. Interest in aerial application showed up soon after; he remembers thinking, as he watched the ag aviator his parents used, "Someday, I'd like to be an ag pilot."

He finally learned to fly in the Air Force flying club. "I was an enlisted man," he says, "but flying lessons were cheap."

After being discharged in 1958, Tidwell flew wheat in South Dakota, worked for Boeing as a quality control engineer, moved to Florida to fly, did a little construction work, and finally moved to Arkansas, where he joined Brummett Flying

Service in 1960. That was evidently the right place for him. He bought a half interest in Brummett in 1964 and purchased the remaining half a year later, naming it Tidwell Flying. In 1969 he also bought Lonoke Flying Service.

Forty years after that first purchase, he and the business are in their third location, his sons and a hired pilot do the flying, but Lonoke, AR, is still headquarters, and Tidwell Flying is still going strong.

Growing Up Flying

Sons Jeff and James (Jimmy) clearly grew up loving flying, too. Jeff, the older of the two (sister Kathy, who works in radiology, is the oldest of George's offspring), says "As far back as I remember... My involvement goes back to when I was three or four years old." After their father started working at Brummett, "I would make my mother take me out to the flying field, and I'd sit and watch them as long as they would let me. I've lived and breathed airplanes my whole life."

"When I was little and they had two-winged planes, they would lift me up to climb on the top wing and clean it," Jeff says. "I guess they thought I was agile enough to do it without falling."

Apparently they were right; he grew up, working at the family business every summer, and got his private license at 17, followed by commercial, multi-instrument and instructor ratings after college. After a stint as a flying instructor, he piloted corporate jets, flew for Eastern Airlines, then worked in Europe for a while as a pilot for Air Sweden.

When his commitment to Air Sweden was at an end, Jeff had a hard decision to make. He was offered a job as a captain at a U.S. airline, but finally decided to come back to the family business. He knew that he would be gone at least half the time if he accepted the captaincy, and that would be

hard on his growing family. And the timing seemed right to join Tidwell. Younger brother Jimmy was about to start fulltime at the company then as well. "I always wanted to work with my brother and my dad, and this was a good way to do that," says Jeff.

Jimmy's story is much the same, though he stayed closer to home. "I grew up working around planes, loading them... I just was always fascinated with it. I always knew it was what I wanted to do." And he still enjoys it. "I really like the flying part, and [also] being a part of [the] agriculture [industry]."

Jimmy got his private license in 1987, commercial in 1990, and instrument rating in 1991. He started flying full time for his father in 1992, and has worked there ever since.

The Business

Around that time, George gave up flying due to health concerns. He's doing much better now, but has no urge to return to the air. "I'd rather do what I'm doing... riding my horses, farming my hay, doing the day-to-day business," he says. (In addition to his work at Tidwell Flying, George farms rice and commercial hay, raises cutting horses, and is active as a volunteer.)

He, Jeff, and Jimmy agree that the business is running well the way they have it arranged. There are three full-time pilots at Tidwell (one is no relation), one ground crew per pilot, and a supervisor for loading and mixing. In the summer, they add a few part-timers. George devotes himself to taking orders, scheduling, and customer relations. This suits everyone because it frees up the pilots to concentrate on flying and applications, without worrying about business details in the air.

What makes the business work, Jimmy said, is that "There's always somebody here taking orders and scheduling so we can



be one-on-one with the customer. Communication is the key to making it work. In season, Dad takes the orders, orders the fertilizer, and gets it on the schedule."

For ten years before giving up flying George had a growing feeling that he should focus on the business. "Someone needs to be on the ground that knows what they're doing. Sometimes, the reason we have ag air accidents is that the owner/operator is trying to fly and run the business at the same time. It's just too much for him to handle. Having a knowledgeable person running the business on the ground takes a lot of pressure off my sons."

The approach seems to pay off. Last year Jeff won a state safety award because he has never had an incident, an accident, or a drift claim.

State-of-the-Art Facility

The Tidwells are very conscious of the risks inherent in aerial

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application, and they recently built a state-of-the-art facility to minimize both human error and the impact of their chemicals on the environment. Built largely by George and their own crew, the facility features a blacktop runway almost 5,000 feet long with a loading plant in the center. This allows loading of two aircraft at the same time "in less time than it takes to wash the windshield." They then take off in opposite directions.

The loading facility has a control center, where one man manages the schedules, orders, clean-out, and loading for both planes, helped by a set of electric switches and automatically generated checklists that the crew follows carefully.

It also boasts a chemical containment that meets the latest regulations, with some innovative elements. The rinse-out falls directly into a trench, where it is filtered and then directed to a holding tank specific to the chemi-

cals rinsed out. The next time they're applying similar chemicals, the water in the holding tank is reused. This minimizes water waste and runoff.

The EPA has been out to review the new facility, but George denies rumors that there have been any awards for it.

Contributions to the Industry

Aerial Label for Command

There have been plenty of awards and recognition, though, in a long family history of contributions to the industry. Notably, George teamed up with Dr. Ford Baldwin and Dr. Dennis Gardisser to persuade Arkansas to grant an aerial label for Command.

Dr. Baldwin (now retired) and Dr. Gardisser both worked for the University of Arkansas extension service. Under Dr. Baldwin's research and development license, Tidwell, Gardisser, and Baldwin began working with FMC on drift studies for Command about five years ago. They did drift studies, first with standalone tank mixes of Command, and in later years with a variety of additional rice pesticides in the tank. They tested under both wet and dry conditions, and with various wind speeds. "Dry, wet - the product stayed where we put it," reports Tidwell.

Today, though they must renew the 24C every year, Arkansas applicators are the only ones in

the country who can apply Command aerially. There were no drift complaints the first two years of the 24C; last year (the first year tank mixes were used commercially) there were only four complaints.

In addition to supplying aircraft and application service for the research, George was able to use his extensive work as a volunteer in service of the project. As chair of the Arkansas State Plant Board (similar to a state department of agriculture), George encouraged its staff to work with FMC on the label.

Volunteer Work

George has been very active as a volunteer, having been on the Arkansas State Plant Board for 18 years, the last five of them as chair, and on the State Aeronautics Commission for nine years, two of them as chair.

He served the Arkansas Agricultural Aviation Association as president (which included acting as a representative to NAAA), vice president, and secretary. He joined the NAAA in its second year, and was secretary. He regretfully turned down a nomination as president; the year it was offered, he felt that local issues for his business meant that he could not take on the travel required.

The NAAA is a vital tool for pilots, George says, and he insists that all of his pilots join.

Jeff and Jimmy seem to share

his feelings. Jeff has been a PAASS presenter for two years, and Jimmy, who is currently taking the NAAA leadership training, hopes to help out with PAASS after completion of his training.

The Future

Will there be another forty years of Tidwell Flying? Quite possibly, but it's too soon to tell.

Jimmy and his wife have two young daughters (6 and 7 years old), one of whom really wants to become a pilot, but Jimmy's not sure how long that interest will last.

Jeff has a step-daughter in college, as well as sons aged five, 13, and 16. His sons tell him they want to join the business. "I won't deter them," he says, "I'll just encourage them to get all of the education they can, and then make a decision."

The family may not know whether the next generation will want to be in agricultural aviation, but they know it's where they want to be right now.

Jimmy sums up the love of ag flying: "It's old-style stick-and-rudder type flying. You get to feeling like you're part of the plane. Some days are bad, but some days the feeling of freedom is like nothing else." ■

Ellen Gragg writes regularly for Agricultural Aviation magazine, and has developed several of the PAASS modules.