

Vista Aviation Expands, Hones Expertise

STORY BY CHRISTINE KNAUER

Nearly three decades ago, John “Dusty” Rhodes and Brenda Thomas started Vista Aviation in a tiny trailer, supplying aircraft parts and pilot gear. The start-up cost amounted to just \$7,500.

When customers brought in radios requesting they be repaired, Rhodes cobbled together a homemade shop bench from a door and two-by-fours. An aircraft battery provided power, while alligator clip leads served as a makeshift test harness.

Today, Vista Aviation serves hundreds of general aviation aircraft owners, operators and pilots every year on site, and it offers avionics sales to thousands of customers worldwide.

The company’s new multi-million-dollar complex sprawls across 4.5 acres, featuring a two-story, 12,000-square-foot, full-service FBO, large avionics shop, 14,000 square feet of work hangars, and 34 new rental hangars. The new facility opened in February 2009 near its original location on Whiteman Airport (WHP) in Pacoima, Calif., in Los Angeles County.

As an FAA- and EASA-approved repair station, Vista Aviation offers avionics sales, installations and repairs, as well as transponder pitot/static certifications. It is a dealer for more than 30 manufacturers.

“We also have a large parts store, one of only a few in the San Fernando Valley, offering general aircraft parts, including avionics parts and accessories from light sport through to military spares,” said John “Dusty” Rhodes, co-owner and president of Vista Aviation and Vista Air Inc., the company’s flight school.

As a Cessna Service Center, Vista Aviation provides general maintenance, annual inspections, pre-buy inspections and electrical troubleshooting on most Cessna general aviation makes and models.

“We have in-stock Cessna parts often needed when performing avionics installs. We carry a complete line of pilot supplies that work hand-in-hand with Vista



Vista Aviation’s first Avidyne EX600 installation in an A Star 350B helicopter.

WHAT THEY DO:

An FAA repair station, Vista Aviation provides avionics sales, installations and repairs. It also has an FBO, flight school and rental hangars.

FACILITIES:

12,000-square-foot FBO and 37 hangars totaling 65,000 square feet on 4.5 acres

EMPLOYEES: 14

FOUNDED: January 1982
by John "Dusty" Rhodes and Brenda Thomas

AEA MEMBER SINCE: 1987



Vista Aviation also is home to Vista Air, the flight school, and Specialty Aero Leasing for hangar rental.

Air, our Cessna Pilot Center for flight training and aircraft rental. We have a busy CATS testing center for taking all the FAA written tests,” Rhodes said.

Through its network of AEA members, “Vista Aviation provides spare parts to many repair shops that do not have enough volume to buy factory direct at a reasonable cost,” Rhodes said.

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Vista Aviation has put together a team of experts who are ensconced in aviation and who bring remarkable skills, knowledge and individual attention to the customer experience. In an industry where technical,

customer service and flying skills don’t necessarily cross, five of the company’s 14 personnel are pilots with two more in training.

The flight training helps give employees added insight into aircraft operations and customer issues, according to Rhodes.

Because of its small size, Vista Aviation is the kind of business where customers know the staff personally. Throughout the years, customers and staff have grown into an extended family.

Regular customers know Dusty Rhodes for his love

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Tim Harvey, Mark Rhodes and Dusty Rhodes work inside of one of Vista Aviation's hangars.

VISTA AVIATION

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of cars and aircraft. He spent many years on the NHRA drag racing circuit, building and driving top fuel dragsters. With his A&P and IA license, his focus is on maintenance and avionics. As a pilot, Rhodes often serves as “test pilot” after installations.

From London, England, Brenda Thomas, vice president and co-owner of Vista, has made the United States her home. Previously working as a buyer for military spare parts and an avionics shop, Thomas’ business acumen has been instrumental in expanding Vista Aviation beyond a parts supplier.

A ham operator in his teens, Bill DeBarmore, avionics and sales manager, parlayed his interest in electronics into a position as a bench technician at Vista Aviation more than 20 years ago. In 2000, DeBarmore

transitioned to international sales, and he uses his extensive avionics knowledge to help customers find the right equipment for their aircraft.

As Dusty’s son, avionics installer and A&P mechanic Mark Rhodes has been exposed to aircraft and racecars his entire life. “His passion for detail and natural aptitude for mechanical things make him the perfect choice for heading up the installations,” DeBarmore said.

A pilot and aircraft owner, Neil Kempt was a Vista Aviation customer for more than 15 years before he joined the staff as a bench technician in 2009. With more than 40 years experience in electronics, Kempt is adept at troubleshooting both legacy and new avionics systems.

“Our avionics team works hard to keep up with the latest equipment,” DeBarmore said. “We’re usually one of the first to install cutting-edge pieces. Currently, we are installing ADS-B and 406 ELTs, as well as glass

panels, which we have considerable experience with.”

In June, Vista Aviation completed the first helicopter installation of the Avidyne EX600 multi-function display. The installation was completed in a Eurocopter A-Star 350B.

During his more than eight years at Vista Aviation, Juan Martinez, international sales, has worked in parts and avionics sales. Along with his repairman certificate, Martinez soon will have his private pilot's license. He also is a proctor for CATS testing.

Tim Harvey, a native of the San Fernando Valley, is an A&P mechanic with a pilot's license and commercial-instrument rating.

Bertie Duffy, flight school manager for Vista Air, is well known for the Stearman rides she gives in her beloved airplane. As a ground school instructor, licensed A&P mechanic and member of the San Fernando Valley Chapter of the Ninety-Nines, the women's aviation group, Duffy is well-respected in the local flying community. The flight school, which was added in 1990, includes 10 aircraft and five instructors.

A native of southern California, Penny Alderson, office manager, worked for several large manufacturers in the aftermarket automotive industry before coming to Vista Aviation more than 10 years ago. Along with Rhodes, Alderson helped manage the company's expansion. Customers love her energetic, get-the-job-done attitude.

If you recently placed an order with Vista Aviation, it's likely Alison Cornejo processed your order. For the past three years, she has handled all aspects of shipping and receiving, and she has become involved in parts.

“When you enter our store or call us on the phone, Kathy Crawley, Vista Aviation's receptionist, is the person you meet,” DeBarmore said.

Crawley is a pilot, a proctor for CATS testing and a member of the Ninety-Nines.

Justin Phillips, website and receivables, brought a hidden talent to the group. In between managing invoices, he helped create Vista Aviation's website, which now includes a web store for parts purchasing. Phillips is working on his private pilot's license, too.

The company's two newest employees are Cassandra Ficiciyan, who helps in the office, and Susan DiPietro, who handles accounts payable. Ficiciyan's father is a pilot and hangs a plane at Whiteman Air-

port. DiPietro and her husband, who is a pilot and has been a Vista Aviation customer for 12 years, recently purchased a Cessna 150 from the company.

In May 1988, Brenda Thomas was quoted in *Avionics News* saying, “Finding additional trained avionics people is the age-old problem.”

Although Vista Aviation makes putting together an experienced team look easy, 22 years later, finding truly talented technicians and personnel is still a concern.



Vista Aviation's parts and pilot supply store.

“We take pride in the fact that all of our personnel, not just the sales team, have broad knowledge about the products we sell. We have a hard-working, loyal team with many years experience to serve our customers,” said Dusty Rhodes.

When the topic turns to the economy, Rhodes is more hopeful, seeing the possibility of a recovery in the near future.

“While we think recovery will be slow, the shops that survive will probably do well. It will be interesting to see what is in store for the aviation industry because of the current economic situation,” Rhodes said.

“I believe we will see an increase in small aircraft being used for business so people can meet face-to-face. I think there is more trust when you do business in person.” □