

Pipeline for Communication



200 equipped with Airtex allows pipeliners to connect with customers, one other

by MeLinda Schnyder

Don't ask Charlie Joyce to pin down one example of when having a Beechcraft King Air 200 has improved communication for Otis Eastern Service LLC, the largest northeast United States-based pipeline construction contractor.

“In our business, it happens daily,” said the 67-year-old chairman of the board. “That shows the importance of the communication that happens when we can get to a job site or stand face-to-face with a client.”



Three generations of pipeline executives: (left to right) Casey Joyce, Charlie Joyce and the late Charles H. Joyce have all led Otis Eastern Service. (PORTRAIT BY ARTIST DAVID WILLIAM TERRY)

Job sites and client offices have grown in number and in geographic scope, so in 2015 the company based in southwestern New York transitioned from a long-term charter agreement in a Piper Navajo piston twin to owning a 2002 King Air 200 turboprop.

Bidding on jobs, delivering engineers and blueprints, and getting pipeline personnel to each job site on a regular basis is a part of everyday business for the company. And spending 300-400 hours each year in the aircraft also makes in-flight communication as vital as what happens once employees land, so Otis Eastern enthusiastically became the first King Air operator to install Airtex hardware.

“We needed something that was a good option, worked well and was within our cost parameters, so we were happy to try out Airtex,” Joyce said. “We’ve been very satisfied. It’s made the King Air an even better tool in our toolbox.”

A pipeline of business aircraft

The Joyce family has embraced private aviation for almost seven decades. They are located in Wellsville, New York, which is about a two-hour drive from a major airport with commercial service.

“My uncle, who along with my father was a partner in an earlier pipeline construction firm, owned several planes through the years, from Piper Cubs to a Douglas DC-3,” Joyce said. “In the early 1960s, he bought a Piper Aztec and we used it to ferry supplies and people to our projects. At that time, we also had a Bell 47 J-2 helicopter that came in handy on remote jobs. It gives us a strategic advantage and helps us stay in touch with our projects and with our customers.”

The 2002 King Air 200 flying near Otis Eastern Service headquarters in Wellsville in southwestern New York.



Otis Eastern Service LLC started in Wellsville in the 1930s as an eastern division of Otis Engineering Corporation of Dallas.

“My father worked for this company when I was born and later on we came back to buy it together in 1980,” Joyce said.

The family has flown several Beechcraft products over the years, including a Baron to a Queen Air. When their company pilot, Ralph Twombly, died in an accident flying a T-6 Texan at the Reno Air Races in 1994, the family turned to long-term chartering through Luftladder Air Charter. That’s the company Twombly had operated, and it was purchased by John Terrasi, who had flown for the company for years. Through charters, they flew several hundred hours each year mostly on Piper Aztecs and Navajos until 2014.

“In 2014, after the death of my father, we took in an equity partner, Argonaut Private Equity, which allowed us to expand and take care of some estate issues,” Joyce said. “It’s been a great fit and given the pickup in the number of pipelines being built around the country, it was very timely for our growth.”

Otis Eastern remains in Wellsville and is still family operated with the third generation of Joyce – Charlie’s son Casey – now overseeing day-to-day operations as president.

Changes at the business and in the industry prompted the company to get back into aircraft ownership. Executives would now be traveling regularly to visit with Argonaut Private Equity, which is based in Tulsa,

An aerial view of the Otis Eastern Service LLC headquarters in Wellsville, New York, which is about two hours to the nearest airports with commercial air service (Rochester or Buffalo).

Oklahoma. Also, the development of hydrofracturing technology has created an uptick in the production of crude oil and natural gas.

“We’re geographically located right in the middle of one of the top three high-growth areas in the United States,” Joyce said. “From the Dakotas to the southwest to Louisiana and Texas to up here in the northeast, these shale developments have triggered a boom in the natural resources industry and made the United States the No. 1 producer of natural gas in the world. We’re going to pass the Saudis as far as oil production very soon.”

As a result, there’s a need to build more pipelines to transport the product. Otis Eastern builds and maintains pipelines that carry oil, petroleum products, natural gas and sometimes other gasses or liquids. They install what are known as transmission lines, which are usually large diameter steel. They work for most of the major transporters that have facilities in the northeast, covering an area bordered in the east from Maine to the Virginias, in the west from Michigan down to Tennessee and all the states in between.

Growing into the King Air 200

For the Argonaut Private Equity partners to visit Otis Eastern’s headquarters in Wellsville, they had to take two commercial flights from Tulsa and then make a two-hour drive in a rental car.

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“The 200 is a plane that you can afford to operate,” Terrasi said. “It has a lot of utility. It’ll do a lot of work for you at a reasonable cost. We found a nice low-time plane – less than 2,000 hours – with a good history.”

Otis Eastern purchased the airplane in 2015 and employs pilot Scott Davis. Terrasi flies for the Joyces when needed, and he manages the company’s King Air.

The 2002 model Otis Eastern purchased had been used in a part 135 operation making regular flights from Florida to the Bahamas. It had wing lockers and jump seats already installed, giving the company the capability of hauling tooling to job sites and transporting as many as nine passengers.

Otis Eastern Service updated the cabin interior of its 2002 King Air 200 by changing out dark leather and carpeting for a lighter color scheme. They also improved seat padding and sound proofing.

“In addition, our project locations were more spread out than ever before,” Joyce said. “Our management team needs to be on-site on a regular basis, so we needed a reliable airplane that could get us there.”

Joyce consulted with Terrasi, the charter business owner and a pilot with more than 23,000 hours. They quickly settled on the King Air 200 as the right airplane.

While they started flying the King Air 200 immediately, they’ve made extensive modifications over the past three years. They hired Stevens Aviation in Dayton, Ohio, to install an all-new, state-of-the-art Garmin glass panel avionics system with synthetic vision and XM satellite radio. Stevens also installed winglets.

“The winglets look nice, and they make the ride a little better, a little more stable,” Terrasi said. “It might

Otis Eastern Service upgraded to this glass-panel Garmin avionics system with synthetic vision and XM satellite radio.



save a little on the fuel burn but we haven't noticed a significant difference."

Otis Eastern also updated the cabin interior, changing out the dark leather and carpeting for a lighter color scheme while improving seat padding and sound proofing.

Texting and flying

The upgrade that's made the most difference, Joyce said, is adding texting capability with Airtext.

"The number of hours we spent in the air without any communications was problematic," he said. "We felt that Wi-Fi as it is priced today was more than what we wanted to spend. John and Scott looked into it and came up with the Airtext option."

Here's how it works: a small paperback book-sized, FAA-approved Airtext box weighing about 1 pound is installed on the airplane and connects to an existing iridium phone antenna. Up to 16 passengers on an aircraft can connect to the Airtext using Bluetooth Low Energy on their mobile phones. Passengers download the free Airtext mobile app and it allows them to send and receive text messages while on board.

"An internet add-on can be \$150,000 and it has technical problems," Terrasi said. "If someone on board is downloading a movie, nobody else can use the internet."



The 2002 King Air 200 already had wing lockers installed. The firm often uses the lockers to haul small tools and equipment needed at pipeline building sites.

Others might say, technology changes so much so let's wait another year. In the meantime, we've been over here making communications for the past three years that are keeping us in business."

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The Joyce family has embraced private aviation for close to seven decades. They purchased this 2002 King Air 200 three years ago to stay in touch with customers and visit job sites for Otis Eastern Service, a pipeline construction business run by the third generation of the pipeliner family.

“It’s a phenomenal value for that price,” said Terrasi, who has purchased a portable Airtex unit that he moves among airplanes in his Luftladder charter operation. “It gets used all the time. A deal can be salvaged with a text and you won’t miss it because you were on the plane for two hours.”

Joyce said he’s already re-couped the cost of adding Airtex by submitting bids from the air to meet a deadline, finding out midflight that the team needed to add a stop at another job site, redirecting the plane to assist in an emergency situation or

According to airtext.aero, hardware costs begin at \$9,750. There is also the cost of an avionics shop installing it, then an annual data plan of \$300 per year for Iridium and Airtex network connection. That includes the first 1,000 text messages; additional messages are five cents each.

staying in touch with sites that aren’t being visited in person that day.

“We’re able to talk in real time to all the projects while we’re on our way to one project site,” Joyce said. “Not only can we reach out, they can reach us while we

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are in the air up to four hours at a time. We can have decisions made in the air that we would previously have had to postpone until we got on the ground.” **KA**

(PHOTOS BY GENESEE VALLEY MEDIA)

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Otis Eastern Service’s 2002 Beechcraft King Air 200 is based in Wellsville in southwestern New York to support the largest northeast United States-based pipeline construction contractor.

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