

# A Case for Light-Sport Aircraft

One flight school's story

AMY LABODA

**W**hen Bill Hood bought Aviator Air Center at Grand Prairie Municipal Airport in Grand Prairie, Texas, a little over a year ago, it was a down-on-its-luck Part 141 flight school, a wannabe airline pilot mill without anything special to differentiate it from the other flight schools on the field. Hood, a longtime EAA member and a general aviation pilot for the last 20 years, knew he had to find a way to make his flight school special—different not just from the others on the airfield, but from most of the flight schools in the United States.

“We looked around and asked, why can’t we be a big Part 141 flight school, like the ones in Florida and California?” Hood recalled. “I mean, our weather is good here, we’ve got Class B airspace to our north, but it is easy to get out from under it, a tower to keep order and help students get used to talking on the radio, and good instrument approaches for students to work with and for making it easy to fly on the few marginal and IFR days we have.”

Hood decided that it could work. But there was more. Hood had watched, over the years, as the EAA worked with the FAA and other organizations in a series of focus groups to create sport pilot and light-sport aircraft program. And he thought it was a fantastic way to introduce people, no matter what their aviation aspirations, to airplanes. “We decided to make the sport pilot our introductory” certificate, Hood said. “I mean, come on, I learned to fly in my mid-30s, and if the sport pilot option had been available to me then, I would have taken it. It is a quicker path to a pilot’s certificate, it’s a less expensive option, and frankly, it allows me to fly exactly the way I like to fly.”

Hood went to the Dallas/Fort Worth Flight Standards

District Office (FSDO) and asked if he could have sport pilot added to the school’s Part 141 certificate. The officials scratched their heads—it had never been done. Most Part 141 schools are in the business of pumping out professional pilots, pilots who want to earn instrument ratings, and commercial and airline transport certificates and earn them as fast as they can so that they can get on with their careers. Why would they want to have a sport pilot certificate? Then again, why not? The school had an advocate in Larry Clymer, the FAA’s Light-Sport Aviation Branch manager. After a little contemplation, the FSDO at Dallas/Fort Worth decided there was no harm in adding sport pilot to the agency certificate that the school held, and the first step to Hood’s new concept was taken.

Hood came to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2005 energized and spent a ton of time cruising the rows of light-sport aircraft grouped in the LSA Mall. “What drew me to IndUS initially is that the airplane is manufactured just 4 miles from the Grand Prairie Airport,” said Hood.

Scott Severen, IndUS’ aviation director of sales and marketing in North America, said the IndUS Thorpedo is based on the Thorpe 211 design and is powered by the Australian Jabiru 3300 engine. Several derivatives of the aircraft exist, including the light-sport aircraft and the FAR 23 VFR and IFR certificated versions. The most expensive version of the aircraft costs a little more than \$111,000.

By the winter of 2005 all the pieces were in place, and Hood was ready to begin marketing Aviator Air Center as the first Part 141 flight school in the United States to offer the sport pilot training in new IndUS LSA. And then the city of Grand Prairie dropped a bombshell—there

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was an obscure rule on the city's books that said it was illegal for any pilot flying out of Grand Prairie Airport to operate an airplane solo without an FAA-issued medical certificate. Now, it is not typical for an airport to have its own set of rules that mimic the applicable Federal Aviation Regulations, but the town, at some point some time ago, had seen fit to do so. Airport Director Rick Byers wasn't particularly happy about it, either.


"It didn't make sense," said Severen, who had brokered the deal for the IndUS aircraft for Aviator Air Center. "Sport pilots do have a medical. Their driver's license is a medical, and they have to self-certify, which is nothing new or untried. Pilots have been safely self-certifying to fly gliders and balloons for years. Heck, we self-certify that we are fit to fly every time we get into an airplane's left seat. That's what the 'medical' is about."

A little research will show that the visit to a doctor is not the key component of an aviation medical certificate; just read the rules. And reading the rules is exactly what the consortium that put together the light-sport aircraft regulations did. From that reading group members reached a consensus the FAA agrees with—sport pilots can self-certify. It makes sense.

"In all fairness to Grand Prairie I think it was just a technicality that was in the airport charter all those years," said Hood. "And before LSA it was a fair thing. The city airport director was a huge champion of

light-sport aviation and stood up for us all the way." The board, made up of doctors and lawyers and citizens who advise the city council, was convinced, and in June 2006 the rule went away.

So where does that leave Aviator Air Center? Hood has decided to integrate the sport pilot certificate into all of the school's training programs. "Now I see it as four steps to airline: sport, private, instrument, and then commercial. We can now ask a new student, what do you want to do with an airplane? We see three big markets that the light-sport aircraft and pilots help us mine: the entry guy, the older fellas who always wanted to fly, and a third market is time builders—aspiring professional pilots who need to pick up hours so that they can qualify to take their commercial certificate check-ride," said Hood. "They just want to punch holes in the sky the most economical way they can, and as a 141 school that offers light-sport aircraft to fly, we can do that for them."

Hood, a businessman at heart, has purchased ads in *Popular Mechanics* and *FLYING* magazines that say "Learn to fly in just two weeks at Aviator Air Center in sunny Texas!" A story about the flight school's encounter with the Grand Prairie city council ran in the *Dallas Morning News*. And at the school? Well, the phones are ringing, and after a long year of getting geared up, Hood says his eager staff of flight instructors and new IndUS trainers are ready. 

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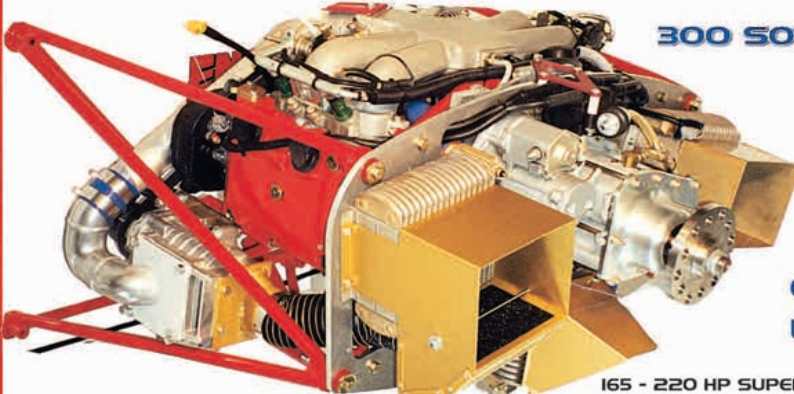
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