



Jabiru's J430 LSA is ready for a 760-kg MTOW once the MOSAIC is finalised and adopted in Australia.

Jabiru's New Future

Steve Hitchen spoke with new Jabiru Executive Director Michael Halloran about the path he has laid for the company's future.

Jabiru Aircraft went through somewhat of a revolution last year when ownership passed out of the hands of the Stiff family for the first time since the company was founded. But in the hands of its new owner, engineer Michael Halloran, the revolution might just turn into a renaissance.

Rod Stiff, who founded Jabiru in 1988 with colleague Phil Ainsworth, was looking to retire when he placed a phone call to Halloran, a former Seabird Aviation engineer who had worked with Jabiru early in his career.

Halloran was the CEO of military vehicle manufacturer Supacat, which he expected would be the final step in his career. Stiff had something else planned for Halloran.

"Rod got to a point where he was looking to sell Jabiru, and gave me a call about two-and-a-half years ago," Halloran recounts. "At that point I was fully engaged with other things.

"About six months later he called me back again and said he preferred to sell it to me, so we went through the process and came to an agreement about 6-12 months later, and I took over the company in May 2023.

"It's a nice opportunity to come home, so to speak, and finish my professional career doing something with Jabiru again."

Halloran kept Stiff's daughter Sue Woods on board as General Manager, and spent the first year in deep examination of how the company operated.

"I spent the first 12 months looking, watching, learning," he told *Australian Flying*. "I have enormous respect for what Rod and Sue have done over the past 30 years and my first thought was to try not to break the magic.

"I did a lot of work on the safety data. The ATSB let me access the data base and I was able to understand where we stood. I went around flying schools and talked to people and got an understanding about where the business stood in the market."

It's fair to expect a new Executive Director to put their own stamp on a company and start making changes to maximise the opportunity they recognised when they assumed the leadership, but in Halloran's case that hasn't been easy to do; there was not a lot that needed changing at the Bundaberg plant.

"I couldn't find a penny of cost to take out of the business; it had been run extremely efficiently. Rod and Phil's view was always affordability and making aviation available to everybody. In that sense, they ran the business very efficiently.

"And everywhere here know their stuff. Most have been here around 20 years, so there's a huge amount of skill and capability inside the business. That's part of

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ABOVE: Jabiru's 4th generation engines have been one of the company's success stories.

LEFT: Halloran struggled to take cost out of what was already a very trim manufacturing and maintenance operation.

why the quality is always good and the products themselves are great products."

Changing the face

Although the internal workings at Jabiru needed little attention, Halloran admits the external interface with customers and stakeholders could be better. The company had gained a reputation for not communicating very well, exacerbated in 2014 when CASA applied operational restrictions to aircraft with Jabiru engines over safety fears.

With engineering changes and the Generation 4 motor seemingly solving that problem, Halloran can turn his attention to engagement.

"The external face is Jabiru's main weakness," he says. "The engagement with stakeholders and customers could be better. That's where we intend to make it different.

"It's about engaging and communicating with Jabiru folk in all their varieties, that's really key for us.

"What I want to build is an ecosystem of sorts, where we engage with pilots, owners, maintainers, regulators, everybody. I want to be able to get safety data out to people easily and efficiently.

"It's not such a big community

that we can't be talking to people directly. We don't need social media to be our bullhorn, there are ways we can directly communicate with people."

Jabiru currently offers the J230 and J170 LSAs, a J430 four-seat kit and has a J432 Twin Jabiru kit under development. It's a relatively stable offering, and Halloran is resisting redesigns or clean-sheets in favour of evolving the existing products.

"I think the J170 and J230

"I have enormous respect for what Rod and Sue have done over the past 30 years and my first thought was to try not to break the magic."

are great products as they are; I don't think there is a need to reinvent the wheel in that sense," he explains. "However, there is a lot of technology around that we can incorporate, and I think the thing for us is to incorporate that intuitively to increase both safety and the crew experience.

"That's the product evolution we're looking for, adding to Rod's original design, because I don't think we can design a better

product than that."

However, sometime this year the entire GA industry will change, when the Federal Aviation Authority in the USA releases its new rules surrounding LSAs. Known as the Modification of Special Airworthiness Category (MOSAIC), the rule set will open the category to new designs, technologies and weight limits.

Those limits are expected to permit Jabiru to factory-build

aircraft for Recreational Aviation Australia's (RAAus) new Group G.

"The primary thing MOSAIC will mean for us is that we will have a factory-built product suite," Halloran points out.

"The J170 will stay around the 600 kg MTOW because that's its natural weight, but the J230 will be able to go to 750-760 kg MTOW. We'll be able to factory-build the J430 and the twin J432 directly into RAAus' Group G."

What's next?

At its prime, Jabiru Aircraft was turning out a lot more airframes than it is now, and Halloran acknowledges the need to get more from the market, but also understands that the spare capacity could facilitate new income streams.

"UAVs are a new business stream for us," he says. "We have contracts with the ADF to develop a rotary-wing drone. We're also working with another couple of companies to turn our 230/430 airframe into a fixed-wing drone, that could carry 400 kg or so payload.

"The beauty of that is that 80% can come off an existing production line. We may need to expand the Bundaberg plant a little bit, but not significantly. In the early 2000s there were 20 aircraft a month coming off the production line, so there's enough capacity there, it's just a matter of how we do it."

And in a few weeks time when the Australia aviation community turns its attention towards Avalon, Jabiru Aircraft will showcase the complete range of products and technology.

"We will have a major presence at Avalon this year, with a J170, J230 and a J432," Halloran says excitedly. "We'll have some of our UAVs and hopefully a fuel-injected engine there.

"There won't be any great revelations, but we will have the full suite of products that we expect to go forward with in the next five to 10 years." ↗

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