

# Night owls

## *Avionics pros rule the quiet hours*

STORY BY CHRISTINE KNAUER

**A**t Canandaigua Air Center in western New York, the avionics magic happens at night. A team of three technicians work from 6 p.m. to midnight installing Garmin G3X flight displays, upgrading autopilots and radios, and testing and certifying transponders and pitot-static systems.

“In 2020, during the pandemic, we created a night shift to keep ourselves away from COVID-19,” said avionics technician Dan Miller. “As an essential service, aviation was able to stay open. At the time, we didn’t know anything about the virus and how bad its effects were. The night shift let us take care of the aircraft while also staying safe.”

Today, the service center’s unique nighttime avionics setup continues with even more benefits, not the least of which is a flexible schedule that retains their much-needed avionics talent. It’s a prime example of how founder and owner Chris Schubert is open to ideas that serve customers and employees while also growing the business.

Along with avionics, the service center at Canandaigua Airport offers airframe, engine and interior modifications as well as paint capabilities for mostly single- and twin-engine pistons and occasionally turboprops and light jets.

“We’re branching off into more jet work, but obviously that requires more aircraft technicians,” Miller said. “As you know, it’s hard to find people in this industry.”



### Flawless connections

Schubert, a lifelong entrepreneur, opened a small aircraft maintenance shop 30 years ago after earning a bachelor’s degree in aviation management and flight technology. In 2000, he moved across the state and acquired the current facility at Canandaigua Airport, eyeing its potential for expansion.

Over time, he introduced additional services to meet customers’ needs. In 2019, Schubert added a Garmin dealership to provide operators with full access to the manufacturer’s popular avionics systems.

**WEBSITE:** [canandaiguaaircenter.com](http://canandaiguaaircenter.com)

**EMPLOYEES:** 12

**FACILITIES:** 16,000 square feet

**WHAT THEY DO:** Canandaigua Air Center offers avionics services as well as airframe, engine and interior modifications, and paint capabilities.

**FOUNDED:** 2000

**AEA MEMBER SINCE:** 2024



*Avionics technician Marty LaChance traces the wiring behind the panel of a Cessna 210.*

Photos courtesy of Canandaigua Air Center

“There was definitely a need for the Garmin dealership,” Miller said. “If you look at the growth within the marketplace, Garmin is huge. It’s a staple. There’s a lot of other fantastic equipment on the market, but Garmin’s systems have really become a favorite.”

Regardless of which systems a customer chooses, Canandaigua Air Center emphasizes quality workmanship.

“We do some really nice work. It’s not just the panel, it’s the craftsmanship behind it, and it’s where we stand out the most. Unfortunately, most people don’t think about what’s happening behind the panel. It’s like a house. So it looks great on the outside, but what does it look like behind the walls? Did the plumber, electrician and other trades do what they’re supposed to?” said Miller.

“Our attention to detail is just phenomenal. For starters, when we install any kind of system, we do wire tracing and pull out anything that doesn’t have a purpose. The amount of extra weight that comes out is pretty amazing. Most of these aircraft are 30 to 40 years old. They’ve been through so many hands by the time we get them. And most of the systems being manufactured now do the work of what once took some 10 instruments. You can imagine all the extra weight we pull out of the airplane.”

On the late shift, the technicians enjoy another big benefit – a quiet environment that lets them focus on the work at hand without interruption. These night owls work well together with each one specializing in a specific area.

*Continued on following page*



## CANANDAIGUA AIR CENTER

*Continued from page 27*

Focused on details, Marty LaChance handles the intricate wiring and any fit and finish pieces. Miller primarily troubleshoots and installs autopilots. Kevin Reynolds coordinates it all, including sourcing technical data and establishing the workflow.

“You never know what you’re getting into until you open it up,” Miller said. “Garmin’s support team is usually open late. If we ever need them, they’re available to answer our questions and get us any technical information. It’s awesome. Kevin also handles the customer service aspect of it, explaining what needs to be done and why, and presenting any additional options that come up along the way.”

Meanwhile, during the day, avionics technician John Corl handles troubleshooting, making adjustments as needed, fixing smaller issues and getting customers their aircraft that were completed overnight.

### Long-range vision

Canandaigua Air Center is centrally located between several major New York cities, including Rochester, Buffalo and Syracuse, and not far from Lake Ontario and Toronto, Canada. In addition to local and regional customers, the service center sees a fair number of Canadian operators coming in for upgrades.

“We’re in a rural area near the Finger Lakes. It’s wine country. People love to visit during the summertime,” Miller said.

So far, new customers have come by word of mouth built on the strength of the service center’s high-quality work. Schubert sees room to grow. Along with targeting larger aircraft, his future plans include acquiring a 30,000-square-foot hangar.

“Chris always has a vision of being better. That’s the fun part,” Miller said. “He’s passionate about airplanes and what we can do with them. He gives us the tools to do the work and the room to take an artistic approach so we can do it even better.”

As for challenges, educating operators seems to be one of the biggest.

“Everything in aviation is expensive,” Miller said. “The cost can be a shock to operators. A full custom panel upgrade is like \$100,000. Customers don’t realize a lot goes into that. They don’t understand what’s behind their altimeter or how the radio actually talks to all the other equipment. Is their old Garmin transponder delaying the software in some way? Does it talk to the GI 275 right? A lot of systems are computerized so we’re always fighting the demon to make sure that everything we put in talks to each other and works together correctly.”

Ultimately, all that behind-the-scenes work ensures operators enjoy a safe and efficient aircraft. Everyone at Canandaigua Air Center takes pride in it.

“Canandaigua Air Center’s success is directly the result of our dedicated team,” Schubert said. “They’re the backbone of the business. I think it’s important to invest in the people, processes and latest technology to ensure we’re delivering the highest standard in quality and service.” □