

CRITICAL SERVICE

Fiero Aero Tests Fire Detection Overheat Warning Systems for Airlines, Regional and Corporate Jets, Helicopters and Military Aircraft

Two years ago, David Hillila, the founder and president of Fiero Aero – which specializes in testing aircraft fire detection overheat warning systems – moved his operations from a converted, two-story boathouse at Amnicon Lake to the Mariner Business Center. And this was a move his neighbors with very sensitive hearing likely appreciated.

The best way to describe what Hillila does is to suggest a simple exercise. Close your eyes to eliminate any distraction before you imagine hearing the rhythmic working of a mantelpiece clock and the sound of a bell as the hour strikes. The tone is relaxing. Now, imagine what that room would sound like with multiple fire sensors going off instead – simultaneously. This is Hillila's everyday work life.

THE GARAGE START-UP

As a young man, Hillila left Superior when he joined the U.S. Navy. He got his start in aircraft maintenance when the Navy sent him to school for two years to become an aircraft electrician. "I was on an aircraft carrier – the USS Ranger; I supervised the electrician shop with the Navy," he said. After his discharge from Navy service,

Hillila worked as a testing/repair technician for several large companies in the aviation industry, which eventually led to the decision to launch his own business.

"I was doing all the work and making a small fraction of the cash. I was pretty much running the show for the other companies that I worked for," Hillila explained. "The only thing that I wasn't familiar with was the accounting. Plus, I was working 12 to 16 hours a day for my former bosses. So it was an easy, natural transition to start my own business."

Global Aviation, his nascent aviation electronics troubleshooting business, was established in 1992. "I started it out of a garage in Denver, Colorado, then moved back here about 25 years ago," said Hillila. By 1998, he had relocated to Wisconsin and set up his testing lab at Amnicon Lake.

"We actually had pretty good business going at Amnicon Lake. I had three or four employees out there working with me, and we were jamming," he said. "And you know, it was kind of a secret – just flying under the radar. Nobody ever knew who we were, but we do business around the world – in South America, South Africa, Israel and all over the U.S."



PHOTO COURTESY OF FIERO AERO

"THE WAY THE BUSINESS OPERATES IS SO FLUID AND EFFICIENT. THAT'S WHY DAVE HAS DONE SO WELL ... PROCESSING ORDERS IS SO SPECIALIZED, BUT HE'S GOT IT SO STREAMLINED."

– TECHNICIAN QUINN MUSCH

Global Aviation specialized in testing and troubleshooting all types of aircraft electronics including black boxes and lighting systems. Spending the next decade scouring the internet for the latest technology and troubleshooting the equipment was challenging, but a relentless business pursuit for Hillila.

After 20 years, however, he felt the urge to slow down and decided it was time to divest himself of most of the high-tech side of the business. In 2012, Hillila split Global Aviation in two, creating Fiero Aero to strictly specialize in overheat and fire detection while Global Aviation retained the high-tech electronic portion. Global Aviation was sold in 2014 to a businessman in Duluth and is still operating today near the Duluth International Airport.

THE MEANING BEHIND "FIERO"

"'Fiero' is the Italian word for fierce or proud; I wanted something that sounded a little bit like 'fire,'" Hillila explained of his rationale in naming the company. "It was just something different. Almost every business in aviation starts with an 'a,' so I didn't want anything that started with an 'a.'"

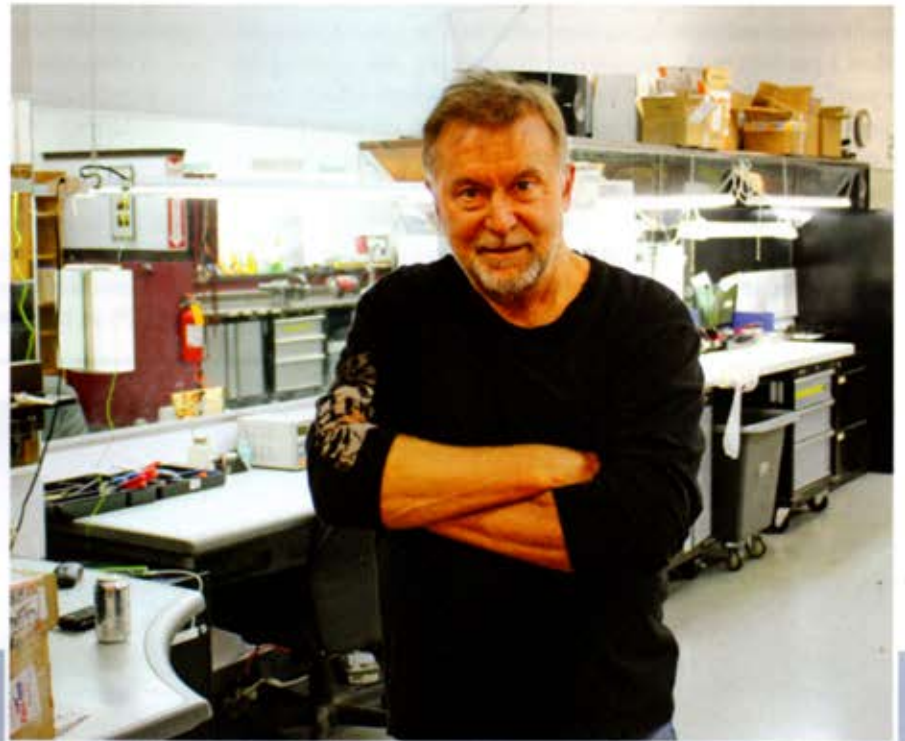
Fiero Aero tests fire detection overheat warning systems for airlines, regional jets, corporate jets, military aircraft and

helicopters. Basically, the testing process involves heating parts up to the temperature at which they're supposed to trip, which simulates a fire or overheating situation. Hillila makes sure that these parts trip at the correct point, which provides the pilot with the critical signal that something's wrong. "It sounds just like your fire alarm going off in your house," he said. "I've got it a little bit loud, so I can hear it from anywhere in the shop."

The random sounding of alarms while Hillila is on the phone with customers often turns into something akin to an old "I Love Lucy" TV comedy. "Oh, it's crazy. Sometimes they get big, you know – 10 or

15 of them going off at the same time while I'm on the phone, and I'm juggling to turn them off," laughs Hillila.

But all kidding aside, the work that Fiero Aero does is very serious business. It is required by – and certified by – the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA). Fiero Aero has about 1,000 customers worldwide and is certified to work on commercial, corporate, regional, military and private aircraft and helicopters. Helping Hillila to conduct all of this exacting work for many years is technician Quinn Musch, his longtime business associate and part-time employee.



"OUR CUSTOMERS JUST LIKE OUR PROFESSIONALISM AND OUR QUICK TURN TIMES. SO, YEAH, WE GET COMPLIMENTS ALL THE TIME."

– OWNER AND PRESIDENT DAVID HILLILA



THE WORK THAT FIERO AERO DOES IS REQUIRED BY – AND CERTIFIED BY – THE FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION AND THE EUROPEAN AVIATION SAFETY AGENCY.

Hillila speaks very highly of Musch's technical skills. "He actually started out mowing my lawn when he was, like, 14 years old. Then I put him in the shop doing the shipping and receiving for a year," he said. "And after he graduated from high school, I sent him to Colorado to school for a year-and-a-half. He came back as a great technician and ran my shop for 11 years, and he still works for it part-time."

"That was a one-in-a-million-type situation out in the country," Musch said of working at the original Amnicon Lake location. "It was phenomenal; it felt more like family than a boss-type thing. Obviously, he was – but we spent quite a bit of time together water-

skiing after work, golfing before work. It was an incredible atmosphere for me to grow up."

Today, Musch, who only assists when needed, describes Fiero Aero's Superior facility at the Mariner Business Center as phenomenal. "I love it. It's the setup – the atmosphere is just super cool. The way the business operates is so fluid and efficient," he said. "That's why Dave has done so well, because he can do stuff that most businesses can't. Processing orders is so specialized, but he's got it so streamlined."

Fiero Aero relies on the use of large shipping giants like FedEx and UPS as its airborne conduit to transport devices to be tested





between the business's testing facility and its customers' home bases. The new, centrally located space in Superior makes it easier to handle multiple shipments and provides a roomy space to work.

SUPPORT FROM THE DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION

Like many businesses, Fiero Aero took a big financial hit during the global pandemic – a direct result of the downturn in the airline industry. Hillila is thankful for the support provided to his business by The Development Association, since he received a Development Association Business Assistance Loan.

"During COVID, I was down to about 10 percent for several months," said Hillila. "They gave me a \$5,000 loan just to keep us on track, which really helped."

MOST BUSINESS FROM REPEAT CUSTOMERS AND REFERRALS

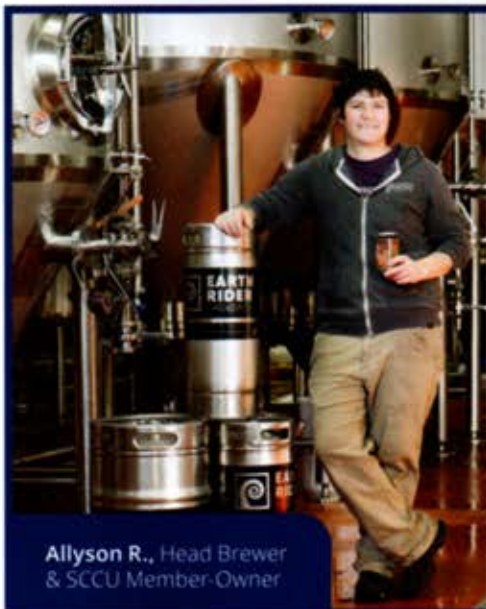
For Hillila, taking care of his customers, ensuring that they're pleased with his company's precise work and quick turnaround, is what makes his day. After all, Fiero Aero provides critical services that can ultimately help save the lives of pilots, flight crews and aircraft passengers.

"They tell me all the time, and the people that have worked for me have heard it

[appreciative comments] coming from our customers. Our customers just like our professionalism and our quick turn times. So, yeah, we get compliments all the time. And if we don't get the compliments, we always get the money to make us happy," Hillila joked.

Since the majority of business is from repeat customers and customer referrals, it's clear that Fiero Aero has earned those compliments by establishing a track record of satisfied clients. 📧

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.



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