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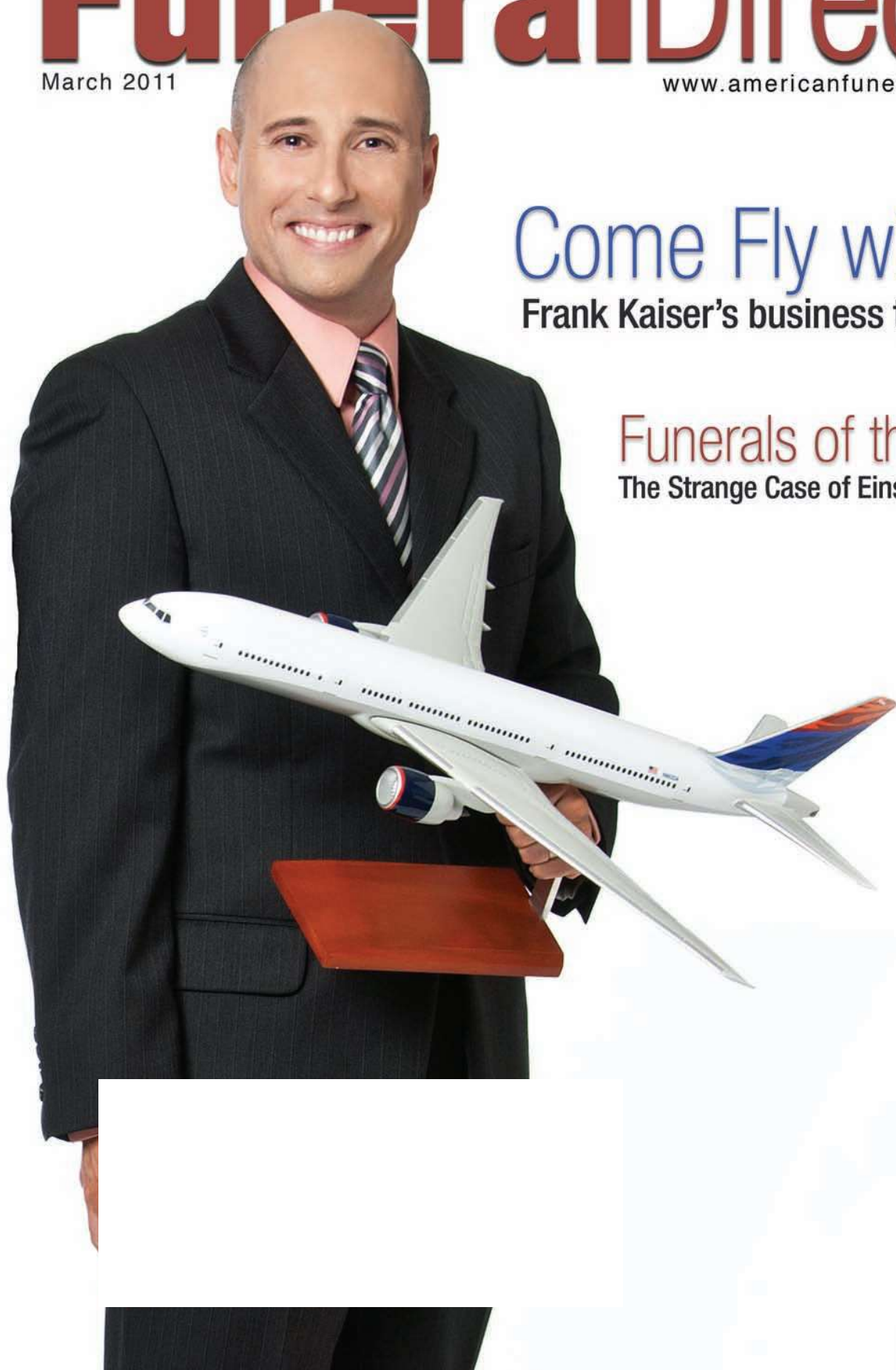
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Come Fly with Me

Frank Kaiser's business takes off

Funerals of the Famous

The Strange Case of Einstein's Brain



Cover Story

By Thomas A. Parmalee

Come



Fly with Us

The Engines Behind Eagle's Wings Air

“ Frank brings a strong background in the industry and a professional approach ... that will help drive performance and successful movements of human remains. ”

- Andy Kirschner, general manager of North America Sales for Delta Cargo



Left: Dynamic Duo – Frank Kaiser partnered with Dave McComb (far left) to launch Eagle's Wings Air. (Photo courtesy of Eye Pix Photography)

Frank Kaiser walks across any convention floor shaking hands and smiling. If he's met you once, he probably remembers your name, and he's quick to ask if you've heard of his company, Eagle's Wings Air.

In January, his company announced that it would be booking the flights for all of Inman Shipping Worldwide's cases, and most recently, it announced that it would be serving Service Corporation International on a nationwide basis. By now, it's fair to say that most people in the death-care profession have heard of Eagle's Wings Air, and they are starting to realize that Kaiser is changing the business of shipping human remains.

"From our perspective, Eagle's Wings Air is a neutral provider of air transportation management services to the entire funeral service industry," Kaiser says. "We serve all segments – single locations and independent firms that do fewer than 100 calls per year, large consolidator firms across the country and anatomical donation firms involved in shipping the deceased to their facilities, and of course, we service the shipping segment."

Kaiser, president and chief executive of the Fort Wayne, Ind., company, teamed up with fourth-generation funeral director David McComb to launch the business in March 2008.

Even before Inman agreed to the deal with Eagle's Wings, the company had established itself as one to take seriously, having shipped about 11,000 human remains as 2010 neared a close. That performance came through careful planning and strategic networking. "We've been very strategic in our launch, so when we introduced EWA to the market, we didn't run any advertising," Kaiser says. "Even from a sales perspective, we strategically talked with some of the largest independent funeral homes in the death-care community and talked to some regional shipping services to make sure we had all the details worked out in our initial launch."

The beauty of Kaiser's company – which is not an airline but a service that manages the booking of shipping of human remains through the airlines – is that it allows clients to focus on what they were meant to do.

How a typical transaction works is like this: "We look at the carrier options available and any major weather events, which are more pertinent in the wintertime," Kaiser explains. "Then we determine what the solution will be based on a number of different details, and we provide the flight info to the shipping funeral home and the securing funeral home." He adds, "We provide that via an e-mail in a nice, easy-to-read flight itinerary and include the charges. Let's say the airline charges \$500, then we have an EWA booking fee

of \$29 – so the charge to the client family would be \$529.”

The process does not stop there because Eagle’s Wings offers proactive tracking of the remains. The company makes sure the remains are confirmed and on board, and if there’s a problem, it keeps funeral homes informed.

Now that the business is established,

Eagle’s Wings Air plans on boosting its profile in a bid to build upon its solid client base. “We are a cash flow positive, profitable and stable company,” Kaiser says. “And we are intent on maintaining perfect service.”

Who is This Guy?

Kaiser may be a little short in stature – he’s just 5-foot-7 – but he’s

tall when it comes to confidence and getting things done. He also has a taste for excitement, which explains why he enlisted in the Navy after high school. He worked on an aircraft carrier and toured the world before earning a bachelor’s degree in aviation management from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Ill. He also completed professional pilot training at Flight Safety International in Vero Beach, Fla., but he pursued other things because being a pilot just wasn’t exciting enough.

In the early 1990s, he joined UPS Airlines, working within various divisions. He went on to become the general manager of customer service for Kitty Hawk Cargo, where he was working in the months leading up to the launch of Eagle’s Wings. “I think it was seven years ago that the CEO of the airline – an all-cargo airline with 48 aircraft – asked me to research the funeral industry from an airline perspective and determine if we could create a program to offer our airlines to funeral service professionals to give them more options,” he explains. “There had been a decrease in capacity in the airline industry, which made it harder for funeral homes and shipping services to determine the appropriate routing and to meet the needs of the family.”

It was during this research that Kaiser began speaking more with a Kitty Hawk client, David McComb, an owner with D.O. McComb and Sons Funeral Homes in Indiana. “We came together with a blank piece of paper,” Kaiser says.

McComb now serves as the chairman of Eagle’s Wings Air and was instrumental in funding the founding of the company. He was the one who came up with the name for Eagle’s Wings based on a church hymn that is often selected for funeral services: *And he will raise you up on eagle’s wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you shine like the sun and hold you in the palm of his hand.*

Kaiser, who grew up in the western suburbs of Chicago, now calls Fort Wayne, Ind., his home, and he splits much of his time between the Eagle’s

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Wings call center and McComb's funeral home on Lake Avenue. "Our partnership is definitely one of the most unique not only in the funeral industry but the airline industry," Kaiser says.

Kaiser's years of experience in the airline industry serve him well as he manages the day-to-day operations at Eagle's Wings. "Kitty Hawk handled all types of cargo — not just human remains," he says. "I view our efforts at Eagle's Wings Air from an airline perspective, but now we are using the major domestic airlines and select international airlines to really offer the strongest service model."

All the hard work seems to be paying off. "This undertaking is definitely the hardest thing I've ever done in my career," Kaiser says. "We are introducing a paradigm shift to two industries — the funeral industry and the airline industry, which have both been conducting themselves in a certain manner." He adds, "Dave and I worked on our business plan for nine months before I left Kitty Hawk ... we invested a lot of late-night hours."

His services are winning high marks from death-care professionals. "It's just so simple; you pick up the phone and tell them where you want the remains to go and who the receiving funeral director is and when you'd like to have it leave, you hang up and the next thing you know — here comes your fax," says Jerri Clayton, senior vice president at Flanner & Buchanan Funeral Centers in Indianapolis. "They've called the other funeral home and given them the information and made arrangements with them. A little later, you get a bill, pay it and you're done."

Clayton says the booking fee for the process is well worth it. "You have to think about what your time is worth," he says. "My time is more valuable when I can be doing other things."

'The Worst Day of My Career'

The fact that Kitty Hawk, the parent company of Kitty Hawk Cargo, was having problems probably made taking a chance on launching a new company more attractive for Kaiser. In October 2007, the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection from creditors. Just weeks later, 500 people lost their jobs. This all came after the company emerged in 2002 as a reorganized company from a previous bankruptcy filing in 2000. It was clear that business was not going well.

"I knew Kitty Hawk was struggling financially, but I never expected the company to close," Kaiser says, noting that he began planning the launch of Eagle's Wings eight months before his previous employer ran out of money and ceased operations. "Tim Hill (who is now Eagle's Wings Air's customer service manager) joined the project in August 2007 while still working at Kitty Hawk as well." He adds, "Tim and I were very close to leaving Kitty Hawk Cargo anyway to focus on Eagle's Wings Air 100 percent."

Kaiser and Hill had the difficult task of helping Kitty Hawk wind down its operations as they geared up for the

official launch of Eagle's Wings Air. "On Sunday, Oct. 28, 2007, I was notified that Kitty Hawk would be ceasing operations the following day," Kaiser says. Looking back at it now, he thinks of the next day as "the worst day of my career." He gathered his management team and 75 employees to make the announcement: "It is with much regret that I need to tell you all that effective a few minutes ago, Kitty Hawk has ceased operations. Unfortunately, that also means we are no longer employed at Kitty Hawk as of this moment."

The next two or three hours were terrible, with some employees becoming angry and others despondent. "Looking back, I am actually grateful that Tim and I were there to offer our support to our employees on that day and in the months that followed," he says. "I'm

proud to have seven former Kitty Hawk employees on the EWA team today – all led by their former manager, Tim Hill."

Deals with Inman and SCI

Kaiser won't disclose the financial terms of the deal with Inman Shipping Worldwide, but he does say Eagle's Wings makes its money through booking fees. It charges \$29 for domestic flights and \$47 for international flights. Taking the smaller number, and assuming that Inman ships 9,000 bodies per year, the total ends up being \$261,000 in booking fees per year. So no matter what percentage of that revenue Eagle's Wings might be getting, it's a huge win for the fledgling firm. Eagle's Wings Air declines to release the specifics of any financial arrangements with Inman or the airlines.

Bob Inman, founder and chief executive of Inman Shipping Worldwide, says the deal made sense because it makes the shipping process for the thousands of funeral homes he works with simpler and better. "One of the most significant changes is that Eagle's Wings will prepay all flights and collect payment from the receiving funeral home," Inman says. "That in itself is a great simplification." He adds, "It will make it easier on the funeral home so if they send a livery service to the airport, they won't have to send a blank check to the airline."

Inman says that with Eagle's Wings handling the booking process, there will be no more confusion about the bill and what is being charged. "In the past, whoever booked the flight or received the remains at the airport did not necessarily put the correct amount of airfare on the air bill," he explains. "So there were adjustments after the fact, either more money or less money, and this creates confusion – especially if the family pays the funeral bill and you have to go back to them and ask for an extra \$75 or so." He adds, "Well, this won't happen anymore. Eagle's Wings Air knows what the correct amounts are."

It took awhile for Inman to decide to work with Eagle's Wings, but Bob Inman is confident it was the right decision for his business and his customers. "We would go to conventions and Frank was there and Dave McComb was there, and we just decided that this was the thing for us to do, and we started to get serious with Frank," he says.

Kaiser followed up the deal with Inman by announcing that SCI will be using its services for the air transportation of human remains for its more than 2,000 locations nationwide.

Eagle's Wings issued a news release in which it quotes Julian Davis, director of business support services at SCI, who says that the "transient nature" of today's society led the company to call on Eagle's Wings Air

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for its specialized services. “Our staff has been coordinating the air transportation of the deceased for thousands of our client families each year,” Davis says in the news release. “It’s a critical task, but it’s complicated and demands attention to detail.”

Needless to say, Kaiser is thrilled about both deals.

Helping the Profession

Kaiser and his company have also played a critical role in educating all funeral professionals – not just clients – about aviation changes made in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

“From an aviation security standpoint, myself and my team have been involved from an airline perspective since Sept. 12,” Kaiser says. “We were at an airline when planes were forced to land, and we’ve been dealing with new regulations ever since.”

Added regulations have been good for business, but Kaiser notes that he’s traveled across the country to speak to various groups about compliance. “We put ourselves out there, and if you have a question or need help, just call us,” he says. “We have never charged a fee or generate any revenue to help people understand the known shipper program or other regulations. We’ve just offered our expertise.”

Kaiser adds, “(Just recently), myself and my customer service manager met with a major airline at their corporate office, and it was an all-day meeting.” He adds, “We met with all different functions of the air cargo operation, and we talked about what could be done to improve service not only for EWA clients but the entire funeral service industry.”

When Kaiser left that office, the airline had developed an eight-point action plan to improve service for all customers that ship human remains. It’s this type of work that requires constant attention and effort that Kaiser enjoys, and for now, he’s not

getting bored.

Elzbieta Kizer, manager of sales resources for American Airlines Cargo, notes that her company is among those that have worked closely with the Eagle’s Wings team to explore how to put things together seamlessly for the customer. “They were able to help my team understand the processes and challenges that funeral homes face, to benefit not only EWA but the entire funeral home industry,” she says.

According to Kizer (no relation to Kaiser), “Eagle’s Wings provides a bridge between the airlines and funeral homes as they fully understand the needs of both. Because they deal with us on a daily basis, they have the experience and relationships, which allows them to accomplish tasks and solve issues quickly.” She adds, “Frank has impressed me with his drive and

creativity. He is always thinking ahead for his customers. He doesn’t give up and is quick and responsive to tackling issues.”

Andy Kirschner, general manager of North America Sales for Delta Cargo, also had words of praise for Kaiser and his company. “They have a strong interest in learning the processes of Delta and what it takes to ensure the shipments ride as booked along with strong communication initiatives between our companies,” he says. “They have been very proactive to learn the process and initiatives that will benefit their customers.” He adds, “Frank brings a strong background in the industry and a professional approach. Our teams have worked very closely to develop additional initiatives that will help drive performance and successful movements of human remains.” ❖

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