



By Diane Galante

## Soaring to New Heights

### DCI Combines Love of Flying and Innovations

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**M**ike Young flies his plane all over the United States for Digital Control Inc. (DCI) and loves it. He says it's personal and that time flies when you're having fun.

Sound cliché? Well, in this case, there's nothing cliché or trite about the relationship between DCI founders John Mercer and Peter Hambling and their multifarious friend/pilot/customer service rep Mike Young. For more than a decade, these men have collaborated in friendship, a passion for flying and a dedication to the business of innovative technology as it applies to HDD drilling and locating equipment.

Just more than a decade ago, Young, co-founder and former owner of Straightline Mfg., was invited to a meeting with Mercer and Hambling. Young was given a private demonstration of a prototype DCI technolo-

gy — what would soon become known as the DigiTrak locating system. What Young saw was a completely new technology that would take directional drilling to a new level of sophistication.

"We handled the introduction of the locating equipment with secrecy because we knew we had something that would substantially improve the productivity of the HDD industry," said Mercer. "We knew we would need patent protection to keep others from copying our products."

Young describes the event: "John [Mercer] and Peter [Hambling] told me that they had an electronic locating system that would revolutionize the industry. It seemed far-fetched at the time, but looking back, I know it was one of those meant-to-be situations.

"When John turned on the prototype, I saw right away how it dis-

played clock and pitch," Young continued. "No one else had done this. I was stunned."

Stunned because until that time finding out whether the tool was coming up or down or what clock position it was in was a lengthy, tedious process. "We called it poke and hope," said Young.

Prior to DCI's locator, locating equipment was based on cable locating technology. The existing equipment could locate the position of the transmitter in the tool head and determine its depth to about 10 to 12 ft, at which point it ran out of range, and had poor locating and depth accuracy, according to Mercer. The old equipment used a time-consuming procedure to determine when the transmitter was oriented to 12 o'clock, but even that wasn't effective on longer drill runs where the drill pipe would twist but not turn.

False locates — called “ghost” locates — would often confuse the operators and lead to misplaced products. Holding depth without any pitch indication was one of the most difficult problems for new drillers to overcome.

“When our equipment was introduced, these problems were overcome and operators could literally double their productivity,” said Mercer. “Early on, we had actual data of two operators running down the same street. One operator was using our equipment and the other used the older technology. The operator using DCI equipment was doing two runs per day, while the other guy was able to do just one. We soon made a sale to the other operator.”

DCI was equally pleased with this early opportunity to work with Young. “Someone had told us to look at Straightline ... Said they were doing some cool stuff,” said Hambling. It didn’t take long for the DCI team to convince Straightline to invest in their equipment. A deal was struck. DCI sold its first 50 units and was paid upfront. “Mike [Young] wrote us a personal check,” Hambling recalled. “This was indicative of his way of doing business. It’s always personal with Mike and that’s why he eventually became part of our team at DCI.”

A series of events has led to the unusual role that Young plays for DCI. His own yearning to learn how to fly was fueled by Mercer and Hambling, both of whom have been flying private planes for decades. So in the mid-1990s, when Young sold his share of Straightline Mfg. and took some time off, he earned his pilot’s license and then his instrument’s license.

“I grew up wanting to learn how to fly an airplane,” said Young. “And I had a window of time to devote to learn-



Education and training are an important part of DCI customer support. In one of Vermeer’s classrooms, Young familiarizes a team of HDD product specialists on the more advanced aspects of the DigiTrak.

ing. I got hooked, just like John [Mercer] and Peter [Hambling] were hooked, on that indescribable exhilaration you get when you fly.”

Since their initial introductions, Young had been a great resource to DCI as they fine-tuned the functionality and performance of the DigiTrak. “Mike [Young] brought that ‘rubber meets the road’ industry knowledge,” said Hambling. “He was particularly helpful when it came to removing the complexity of use.”

It is no coincidence that Mercer’s invention of the technology for DigiTrak and subsequent DCI products is patterned after the same “roll and pitch” parameters you use to fly a plane.

“My background was in aeronautical engineering prior to HDD,” said Mercer. “When I first became familiar with HDD, I saw many parallels to aerodynamics. In fact, I have used

the term ‘terradynamics’ [the Latin translation for land is terra] to describe the HDD process. Conventional drilling terminology to define the three angular orientations of the drill head — azimuth, elevation and tool face angle — I replaced with yaw, pitch and roll — the same terms used for airplane orientation angles.”

Mercer found the early feedback from Young to be invaluable. “Some of the early versions had beeps and procedures that he found cumbersome. He wanted more depth capability, so we extended it 20 feet. He wanted a battery pack with a charger rather than individual batteries. Our first beeper wasn’t audible over the drilling machine noise, so we went to a louder beeper. By the time the first unit was sold to the customer, we had extensive drilling experience with it. And we have maintained that philosophy of not making the customer the guinea pig for our products.”

Eventually, Young went to Mercer and Hambling and said he wanted to use his piloting skills and newly acquired plane to go to work for DCI. “We were flattered that he wanted to be a part of our team at DCI,” said Hambling. “We had really enjoyed the process of working with Mike already

## Do the Math

Annually, Mike Young flies on behalf of DCI an average of 400 hours at an average speed of 210 miles per hour. That’s more than 84,000 miles with approximately 220 stops or landings. If he were to drive that amount, it would require approximately 1,400 hours. That’s a savings of 1,000 travel hours per year.



Onsite consultations are one of the most frequent reasons for Young to travel to a DCI customer. Young remembers one particular day when he traveled five states and 1,000 miles.

and felt like he was a world-class guy. We also felt a certain respect for his entrepreneurial spirit and thought that was a pretty cool way to work.”

So Young started traveling around the country in his Mooney Ovation and taking care of DCI customers. “DCI was building a business on two distinguishable levels — technology and customer service,” Young said. “On the customer service side, I was able to get places a lot faster than a car or commercial plane. And in so many cases with our industry, that old cliché ‘time is money’ comes into play.”

Junior Kool can attest to that. As president/CEO of Vermeer Midwest, he describes the job Young is doing for DCI as “a pretty clever, classy way of customer service.”

“Mike is a very knowledgeable, nice guy,” Kool said. “He doesn’t get ruffled under pressure and has handled some pretty intense situations for us quickly and efficiently.”

Young recalled one particular day when he traveled five states and 1,000 miles in one day. “Those are the times when I very much appreciate the fact that DCI puts such a high value on service and accessibility to our customers,” Young said. “If I was flying commercially, obviously a schedule like that would be impossible.”

Also a private pilot, Dave O’Connell, underground business manager for Case Equipment, considers Young’s unique situation to be one that is enviable and efficient.

“When you can go directly to the city and the customer, without the hassles of commercial travel and all that time wasted, there’s nothing better,” said O’Connell. “I personally spend 70 percent of my time just trying to get to my customers. In Mike’s case, he’s got much more control and can get a lot more accomplished. Not to mention that he’s a guy that makes things happen

anyway. I call Mike my go-to guy and he’s been a great asset to Case.”

DCI has made a significant financial commitment to dispatching this level of service to its customers. It’s also a personal commitment to Young, but again, that’s how Mercer and Hambling like to do business. “When you spend as much time as we do at earning a living, it’s got to be personal,” says Hambling. “Every individual working at DCI has made a choice to share his or her life with us. We’re extremely honored by that and it is important that we provide a place where they can be comfortable and happy while they work.”

DCI’s Seattle headquarters reflects the spirit of Mercer and Hambling. Employees are invited to bring their dogs to work and many enjoy their canine company as they go about the day’s work. The sign on the front door reminds visitors not to let the dogs out and every now and then a small ruckus will break out that calls for human intervention. Ideas are shared openly; problems are solved quickly and quite often by consensus. There is a leadership team in place, but titles and structure are not what DCI’s founders care to emphasize.

“We have some of the brightest people in the industry working here and have found that they are most effective when they can communicate with one another — and with us — without the burden of physical barriers or formalities,” said Mercer. “An idea that is discussed in the morning can very easily become a customer solution before the doors close at the end of the same day.”

With the company since 1996, DCI sales and marketing director Chris Weise knows and appreciates the “broader life philosophies” that Mercer and Hambling work to foster in their business. “John and Peter are unique individuals. They’re exceptionally intelligent, the both of them, and live their lives passionately. Both of those characteristics are reflected in how DCI operates. They want to lead in innovation, lead in customer satisfaction, lead in employee retention. It’s exhilarating.”

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