

Retrofit & repair technical specialists Mike Banning (left) and Steve Fick perform an operational check on a 30MM Gun and Trainable Gunmount. The Fort Walton Beach, Fla., site provides services for more than 180 parts on U.S. Air Force Special Operations Forces aircraft.

MICHAEL MCCORMICK PHOTO



More than a job

A Boeing site in Florida services aircraft used by Special Ops Forces

BY FORREST GOSSETT

Mike Shaw knows sand. He points to a battle management display from a U.S. Air Force ground attack airplane (AC-130U Gunship)—a workhorse in the global war on terrorism. He runs his finger across the display's dusty surface and pronounces: "No doubt, Iraq. Look at the color. Sand from Afghanistan is darker, almost red."

Another thing Shaw knows: Wherever sand comes from, it damages equipment. The harsh environments of Iraq and Afghanistan are tough on the planes, and lots can go wrong. So Shaw, an avionics repair laboratory lead, begins his day at Boeing's Special Operations Forces Repair Center in Fort Walton Beach, Fla., by troubleshooting the monitor, looking for bad wiring.

The Repair Center—launched in 2000 after Boeing won a contract to support Air Force Special Operations Forces—tackles the critical task of keeping the fleet of planes at nearby Hurlburt Field ready for missions. Thirty Boeing employees at the center repair avionics, provide logistics services, and staff a wire shop and a gun systems test and repair station.

The customer has recognized this Boeing team's achievements, both in terms of cost and quality. Air Force Capt. Chad Messinio, program manager for the Air Force Special Operations Forces Systems Group, said the Air Force has saved \$103 million over the last seven years and more than \$17 million in 2007. As primary liaison officer between the Air Force and the Repair Center, Messinio said the center is viewed by the Air Force as a unique establishment and a model for working with industry.

"Historically, Boeing has come in below repair times and under budget. They've made assets available to the warfighter quickly and inexpensively," he said.

NO JOB SITS AND WAITS

Mike Estes, a 10-year Boeing veteran and retired Air Force chief master sergeant, manages the Repair Center. Estes finished his military career at Hurlburt Field before joining Boeing. In fact, nearly all staff members are Air Force veterans or retirees, and many served with Special Operations Forces.

Each day, one of Estes' staffers makes the rounds at Hurlburt Field to pick up parts in need of repair and to deliver repaired items. These parts range from avionics to damaged wire bundles to malfunctioning guns. Once parts arrive at the Repair Center, they are immediately routed to the appropriate person for testing and repair.

Estes said the facility has one simple rule: no repair job sits and waits. "I am proud of the job these folks are doing. They take great pride in assessing the issues, making repairs and getting equipment back in the hands of the warfighter as quickly as possible," he said.

Prior to the formation of the Repair Center in 2000, support for the AC-130U Gunship fleet was difficult to obtain, ex-



Retrofit & repair technical specialists Bruce Smith (left) and Kevin Ervin repair a Trainable Gunmount Actuator in Fort Walton Beach, Fla. The customer has recognized the cost- and quality-related achievements of the Boeing team at this location.

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pensive and time-consuming. With a fleet of 13 planes and no single repair source, each part needing repair was bid to a different business. When he was on active duty, Estes recalled it wasn't unusual for a part repair to take three to six months.

Since Boeing launched operations at the SOF Repair Center, turn-around time has been drastically cut to about three days. Equally important, the defect rate is zero.

When the Repair Center first opened, Boeing offered repairs on fewer than a dozen instruments for the planes, mostly avionics displays. Today, it provides services for more than 180 parts, and the list is growing each day.

But even with that record, the Repair Center is constantly looking to improve. Last year, some of its employees—implementing Employee Involvement principles under the leadership of Tom Hembree (EI lead for the Boeing Fort Walton Beach site)—streamlined processes and eliminated wasted time and effort by completely reorganizing the wire shop layout. The bottom line was an 80 percent reduction in cycle time for the customer.

Estes said workers at the site are proud of their efficiency and quality record, but even prouder to serve the warfighter. “We understand what is at stake,” he said. “This is serious business, and we want to make a difference.”

Supply chain specialist Tony Robinson added: “The warfighter needs us to help keep these planes in the air. This is important work. It’s about life and death.” ■

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Retrofit & repair technical specialist Linda Nelson assembles an aircraft wiring harness. She’s with a Boeing team in Fort Walton Beach, Fla., that provides repair and logistics services for U.S. Air Force Special Operations Forces aircraft.

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