

Prizefighters



Quality and pride motivate employees who build Boeing's jet fighters

By Eric Fetters-Walp and Chamila Jayaweera

The Boeing employees who build the company's highly capable jet fighters keep close to mind why they work hard to make each aircraft perfect.

"There are a lot of employees here who have kids out flying the Super Hornets and the F-15s," said Kevin Jung, a sheet metal assembler and riveter on the F-15 production line.

Hundreds of employees work on the F-15, F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and EA-18G Growler lines at the Boeing St. Louis site, knowing that the lives of fighter pilots from the United States and its allies depend on their workmanship.

It's easy to understand why they're proud of their products. The F-15 Eagle is the fastest U.S.-built jet fighter currently in production, with a perfect air-combat record. During the past

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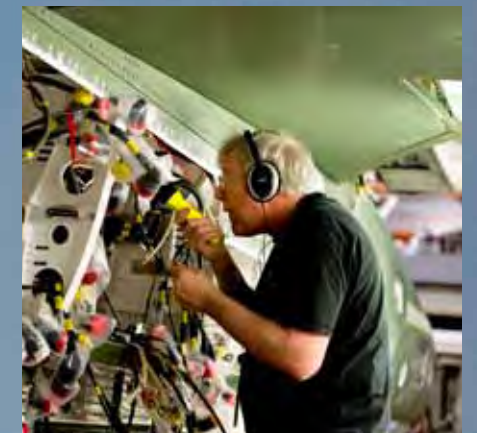
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PHOTOS: (Left) An F/A-18 Super Hornet, assembled at Boeing's St. Louis site, cuts through the sky. U.S. NAVY **(Insets, clockwise from top)** Shawn Wright reams holes into an F/A-18 wing skin; Kenneth Johnson with an F-15; Ken Niezwaag of F/A-18 Installations works on the aircraft's electric routing; Scott Marlett, working on the F/A-18 Flight Ramp, performs a toolbox inventory check; and Gregory Ory of F/A-18 Quality Check inspects aircraft components. BOB FERGUSON/BOEING



30 years, Boeing has built more than 1,600 of the aircraft, and the U.S. Air Force plans to keep flying its F-15E models through 2035. In addition to the U.S., F-15 customers include the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Israel. International orders have extended the production line into at least 2013.

The Growler is based on the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet, which is the U.S. Navy's front-line strike fighter. So far, the Super Hornet and Growler teams have delivered more than 500 aircraft to U.S. and international customers on time and on budget. Known for its versatility in diverse missions, the F/A-18 also is designed with superior survivability. Last September, the Navy awarded a new multiyear contract to Boeing for 124 Super Hornets and EA-18G Growlers, ensuring aircraft continue to roll off of that line through 2015. With strong international opportunities, program leaders say the Super Hornet line should still be producing aircraft through the end of the decade—and beyond.

Earlier this year, the EA-18G Growler flew its first combat missions as part of Operation Odyssey Dawn over Libya, and

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PHOTOS: (Left) The F-15 Eagle is the fastest fighter jet in production in the United States. U.S. AIR FORCE **(Insets, clockwise from top left)** The F-15, with joined body and wings, in final assembly; Daniel Wagener, left, and Douglas Lawhorn work on the F/A-18's cockpit; Jeffery Johnston performs part of the F-15's final assembly inspection; the F-15's vertical stabilizers and powerful jet engines; and the F-15's sophisticated radome nose in final assembly.

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according to the Navy it performed well.

James Morales, a sheet metal assembler and riveter, said the day when the first Super Hornet came out of the St. Louis factory was one he won't forget. "When those hangar doors opened up, I felt like a new dad. Even today, 500 aircraft later, I get that same feeling," said Morales, who has worked at the site for 27 years.

Once the jet fighters roll off the production line, they are tested before delivery. Shannon Faulk, a Flight Operations mechanic, said he enjoys trips into the "hush house," where the engines on just-finished Super Hornets and Growlers are fired up for the first time. The special building is designed to absorb the resulting roar.

"There's nothing you can express to feel that kind of power," Faulk said.

John Mueller, flight-ramp foreman, said the crew then runs each of the four Super Hornet and Growlers delivered to the Navy each month through a series of tests to make sure all components work together. It's a system the ramp

team has perfected over the years.

Boeing test pilot Steve Schmidt relies on the crew's expertise. "It's our job to take the plane up and make sure it's put together right and it is safe for flight for other people," Schmidt said. "I know a lot of people out there on the factory floor. I know the last thing they would want to do is put me in an unsafe airplane. So they take a lot of pride in their work to give me the best possible product that they can."

Ada Turner, Center Panstock and Door Drillout specialist for the F-15, said that while the manufacturing processes have been streamlined and improved throughout the years, the team is proud its aircraft requires more complex hands-on assembly work than other models. And when an F-15, Growler or Super Hornet takes off from the runway next to the St. Louis site, she said, it's a sight and sound to behold.

"I never get tired of seeing them go up and fly," Turner said, adding: "I wouldn't want to fly in one, though ... too fast for me." ■

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PHOTOS: (Below) Michael Haupt, left, and Terry Mills inspect an F/A-18's cockpit canopy. **(Insets, clockwise from top left)** Julie Klubek, left, and John Bunk inspect an F/A-18's electrical wiring; Kevin James works on cockpit wire bundle routing for the F/A-18; Dennis Drier, left, and Scott Marlett of F/A-18 Pre-flight Operations conduct an inspection; Thomas Naeger drills into the nose barrel of an F/A-18; and Richard Hatcher installs cockpit wire bundles on the F/A-18. **BOB FERGUSON/BOEING**

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“There’s nothing you can express to feel that kind of power.”

– Shannon Faulk, Flight Operations mechanic, on initial engine run-ups

PHOTOS: (Below) Keith Ternes, left, and Steven Stoverink work on the aft end of an F-15 fighter. **(Insets, clockwise from top)** An F-15 in final assembly; while Jimmy Morales works on top of an F/A-18, Lee Browning (bottom left) and Will Daugherty inspect the nose landing gear; an F-15 undergoing a wire integrity test; from left, Mike Carr, Mike Speciale and Steve Norman are responsible for the F-15 crew station buildup; and Brian Bert works with electrical cable routing on an F-15. **BOB FERGUSON/BOEING**

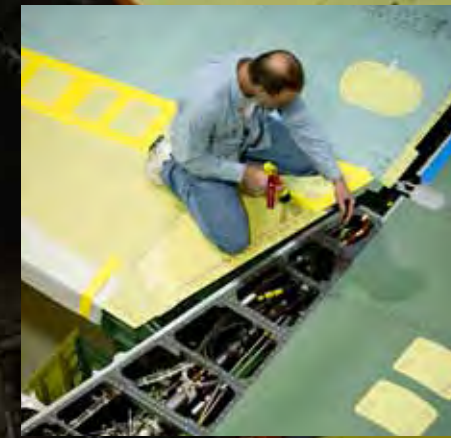
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**– Steve Schmidt,
Boeing test pilot**



PHOTOS: (Below) Staff Sgt. Michael Keller, aerial combat photographer, takes a self-portrait while in the back seat of an F-15E. U.S. AIR FORCE **(Insets, clockwise from top left)** Daniel Wagoner of the F/A-18 team; Robert Jacobs works on the F/A-18; Velus Matheney checks the F/A-18's nose barrel; Bob Tarrant works inside the F/A-18 gun bay and nose barrel; and Steven Mintle inspects an F/A-18 fuselage for foreign object debris, or FOD.

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