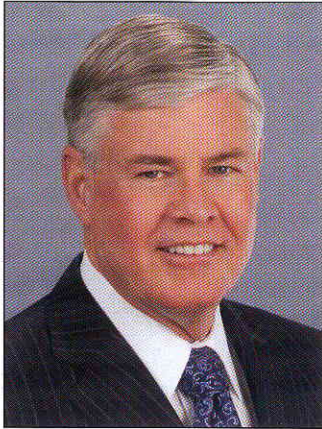


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South Alabama's Maintenance and Repair Cluster

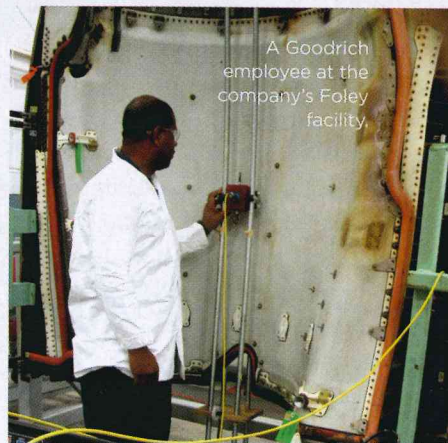
By Nedra Bloom



STA Mobile's facility at Brookley Field



Goodrich Aerostructures in Foley



A Goodrich employee at the company's Foley facility.

Ever since STA Mobile flew its fixed-wing MRO operations into Mobile's Brookley Field in 1991, Alabama's southernmost counties have been a regional cluster in the high-tech field.

MRO—maintenance, repair and overhaul—is the generic term for aircraft work, including everything from scheduled maintenance to conversions that change an aircraft's purpose in life from carrying passengers in comfort to hauling freight in a lift where comfort is last on a list of con-

siderations.

STA Mobile—called ST Mobile Aerospace Engineering, in its early years here—remains the high-tech cluster's mother ship, working on an average of 150 to 250 planes a year with a crew of some 1,500 personnel.

Another five companies that perform MRO work also call the region home.

Newest of the group is **AeroStar**, which opened in June at Mobile's Brookley Aeroplex and planned to be fully operational before the end of July. The fledgling firm, with close ties to its neighbor Star

Aviation, will perform MRO services on hydraulic and pneumatic systems. President Greg Guzman, who opened the firm after working for more than a decade with similar firms in Baldwin County, says the Brookley site should be "logistically sound" only a couple of minutes from STA Mobile.

Goodrich Aerostructures actually predates STA Mobile, opening in 1984 as Rohr Aero Services and taking on the new name in 1997 when BFGoodrich merged with Rohr. The FAA-certified repair station performs MRO services on nacelle



GREG GUZMAN HEADS UP THE NEWEST MRO FACILITY IN THE MOBILE AREA, AEROSTAR, WHICH PLANNED TO BE FULLY OPERATIONAL BY THE END OF JULY.

component, flight controls and pylon systems at its 160-acre site in Foley.

Pemco, at Dothan in the Southeast corner of the state, also predates STA Mobile. While Pemco has maintained MRO facilities in Dothan, the company moved its corporate headquarters to Tampa, Fla. about a year ago. Pemco CEO Wake Smith told the St. Petersburg Times in May, "We intend for our Tampa facility to be the company's flagship, and we see Tampa as a better market to attract the sort of executive talent we need to lead the company." For many years, Pemco had been a cheerleader for Dothan. The company website, which doesn't reflect the HQ change, still sings the praises of life in the Wiregrass.

Regent Aerospace, a relative newcomer at Brookley Field in Mobile, announced plans to open in 2010, opened in 2011 and abruptly moved operations to its facilities to Indianapolis, Ind. in May, when a required FAA certification was delayed. Neighboring firms, especially STA Mobile, hope it returns promptly.

Fokker Airinc provides component maintenance services at its location in Foley.

Attracting a Community

Being the focus of a cluster is a great advantage for STA Mobile, says Bill Hafner, vice president of operations for the Alabama facility.

"The more you get into a community, the more business you bring in, the more people who get training and come into the sector," Hafner says.

And being part of a cluster can provide advantages for firms and their clients, he says.

For example, they were delighted when Regent Aerospace made plans to join the Brookley contingent. "We've worked to-

gether over the years," Hafner says. "We'll take out the seats and route them out to Regent. They do good work." Having them on the same field cuts shipping time and helps both firms meet more aggressive schedules, he says, plus it helps avoid potential damage during shipping.

Like most aerospace sector firms, one of the biggest problems STA Mobile faces is finding qualified workers. "It is difficult to find people," Hafner says. "The industry feels that right now.

"A lot of kids graduating from high school don't necessarily see maintenance as a glamorous job," Hafner says. "Consequently, the median age of aviation maintenance technicians is starting to get up there. I think it's a nationwide problem, and in time, there will be a shortage of mechanics."

The difficulty in finding qualified people, Hafner says, "contributed to our decision to really work with the community and recruit locally, bring these folks in and build a better mechanic."

The company is associated with both Mobile Works and Alabama Industrial Development Training, bringing recruits through basics skills and up to apprenticeship programs. The Alabama Aviation Center Mobile—a unit of Enterprise State Community College right at Brookley Field—specializes in aviation maintenance training, offering instruction in airframe and powerplant and in avionics.

Like all aircraft-related industries, STA Mobile business suffered after the September 11 terrorist attacks a decade ago, Hafner says. And, "we've definitely felt the affect of the global recession," he says. And anytime carriers have a setback, so do their service providers.

"We're fortunate," he says. "We have a good customer base, and we have a good

reputation."

Today, STA Mobile has a three-part business model—major airframe maintenance, major modifications and a newer addition, parts manufacturing.

Airframe maintenance was STA Mobile's initial focus. The customer base includes major U.S. air carriers, as well as freight carriers. Many other carriers have been clients in the past and may well be again, Hafner says.

Major modifications—especially passenger to freight conversions—have been part of the business plan for more than a decade. One new aspect is conversion of Boeing 757-200 aircraft from passenger to freighter based on a Supplemental Type Certification (STC) developed for this program. It's more than removing the seats, Hafner says. It requires opening a large section of the fuselage, modifying the seat tracks, adding a new door and door surround and changing fire suppression from passenger-friendly to freight-friendly.

Parts Manufacturing Authority (PMA) is the newest aspect of the workload. "It is a significant accomplishment for us," Hafner says. "Our on-site engineering team worked on the development of the STC." STA Mobile obtained the PMA to support the parts needs for its STC-based conversion.

Projects are as complex as a new freight door and door surround developed in partnership with Boeing and as simple as a change from incandescent to LED lighting. The Mobile facility also kits part and supplies for various maintenance jobs. They gather materials from suppliers around the world, inventory them and create job-ready kits that are used in Mobile.

Nedra Bloom is a freelance writer for Business Alabama. She lives in Mobile.