



A U.S. Air Force E-8C JSTARS aircraft is examined on the ramp at Northrop Grumman's site, Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Taking Off and Flying High

By Kenneth Kesner

LAKE CHARLES AND A TALE OF RESILIENCE

Talk with Lead Mechanic Troy Evans at Northrop Grumman's Lake Charles, Louisiana, site and you'll hear optimism about 2021 and beyond. It's a little unexpected, given the challenges of 2020, which included two devastating hurricanes for his community in addition to COVID-19. That was a one-two-three punch for his team at the Aircraft Maintenance and Fabrication Center (AMFC), and it came just as they were hitting their stride again.

"The morale here is better than it's ever been," Troy said. "There's more opportunity for people to move up, and opportunity for new people to come on board."

And then he tells his story — the Lake Charles story — and you know why.

Keeping JSTARS Flying

Troy, a Lake Charles native, began his Northrop Grumman career 27 years ago at what is now the AMFC. He was in his late 20s, starting a family with his wife, and the center had begun a new contract with the U.S. Air Force. The work involved modifying Boeing 707s to become what is now known as the E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) aircraft.

The modification contract became a series of Program Depot Maintenance (PDM) sustainment contracts. While Troy helped keep JSTARS aircraft flying for nearly three decades, the program provided a steady living. "I was able to raise my family here," he said. "It's worked out really well."

But, in early 2019, the Air Force was evaluating options to effectively sustain the aging JSTARS platform and its capabilities — including possibly bringing the PDM work in-house.



AMFC Site Director Eric Price knew his Lake Charles crew was the best to continue the unique JSTARS work — they just had to convince their customers.

Troy will tell you that Eric and the management team were

transparent about AMFC's situation, and engaged customers as well as the site's nearly 500 employees in the search for problems to fix as well as solutions. Together, the AMFC team embarked on a relentless effort focused on quality and the customer.

Within 18 months, the transformation was a significant success. Outcomes improved, taking quality measures, reviews, customer satisfaction and relationships up with them. It became apparent AMFC's unique experience with JSTARS was indeed the best way to keep the program airborne and benefiting warfighters.

"There is a lot of pride here. We were thought of as a one-trick pony," said Eric. "But this team has changed that. We're a true manufacturing center."

Resilient and Ready for the Future

Along the way, AMFC's revitalized reputation as a go-to for aircraft modernization and maintenance spread, bringing in new contract work. That was about the time

last year when Lisa Churchwell returned to the AMFC to support JSTARS. Even behind masks and restrictions for COVID-19, she could tell the place had changed for the better since she'd left a couple years prior. "It was so great to look around and see the people and positivity on the floor," she said. "Everyone wants to be here."

Lisa was two weeks in when Hurricane Laura pounded the area in August. She and Troy were struck by how everyone pulled together — all while dealing with their own family and home concerns — and had the AMFC back up for full business just four weeks later. Then they all did it again in October, in the weeks after Hurricane Delta flooded everything.

Northrop Grumman set up a tent with essential supplies for the victims as well as onsite crisis management and face-to-face support. According to Eric, the company supported employees throughout the recovery — even providing dumpsters to use for household garbage since

local sanitation services were temporarily suspended — and provided grants to the local community (over \$235,000 to local schools and nonprofits).

"Whatever we needed, they tried to provide quickly," Troy said. "I didn't see anybody else in the community getting the kind of help we were getting from Northrop Grumman."

Troy, who is still supporting JSTARS as lead mechanic for the aircraft's upper fuselage, is looking forward to his coming years and continued growth at Lake Charles. Would he recommend it to a young man like he was when he first joined the team?

"Oh, I would absolutely recommend they come here," he said. "I'd do it again."



Inset photo: AMFC Site Director Eric Price, right, looks over work with employees Lisa Churchwell and Troy Evans.

Photo by Michael Flatt