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Small part of giant jet contract lifts firm's fortunes

DON FRASER

Local News - Tuesday, September 26, 2006 @ 01:00

Whenever Tom Burbage shows visitors around a Texas plant building fighter jets as part of the largest contract in military aviation history, he makes sure to mention a small Grimsby company that's playing a significant role.

"Every tour I give - with heads of state, ministers of defence, top U.S. politicians - I always tell the story of Handling Specialty," said Burbage, executive vice-president and general manager of Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) project, which is worth at least \$250 billion US.

Since 2003, Handling Specialty has been awarded two contracts worth more than \$20 million in total to supply 14 vertical assembly platforms for building fighters to replace aging planes in the fleets of eight countries, including Canada and the U.S.

The pedigree of the 60-employee company that specializes in lifting equipment and the high profile of its products are top of mind at the U.S. aerospace giant, said Burbage, guest speaker at an open house at Handling's South Service Road headquarters on Monday.

"I get to go around to all our partner companies and see the best of the best - the companies that have worked their way into a position on the program," said Burbage. "I can tell you, bar none, this company here is as good as it gets."

Burbage said the Handling logo is "very prominently" displayed in the large wing-assembly area at Lockheed's Fort Worth factory.

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Burbage said he tells visitors: "This is a company that makes lifts for Cirque du soleil," referring to a unique stage made in 1998 for the avant-garde entertainment company's \$100-million Las Vegas production at the Bellagio casino.

The \$5-million Handling project consisted of a four-section stage that was capable of being raised and lowered in a giant pool. It remains the largest of its type in the world.

"A small company that's a very niche-oriented company and also working on JSF is a great story for us," said Burbage.

Dennis Parass, Handling's president, said it took about six months after the company was awarded the initial Lockheed contract to gauge the sheer "scope and size of this potential program."

"This is the first time Lockheed has had commitments with large volumes of planes in a contract that allowed them to approach the manufacturing process in a new way," he said.

Lockheed's mission was to help "drive down costs" and "handle the high volume of planes they expect to sell," said Parass.

Parass added that indications are JSF manufacturing plants would be starting up in other international locations.

"They'll be requiring exactly the same kind of equipment and we'll have the opportunity to quote on that equipment also," he said. "We're hoping we're going to be successful."

The Lockheed Martin project will have the same effect as the Cirque job eight years ago, Parass predicted. "It raises our visibility to all the real players in this industry."

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A massive project

Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) project

The U.S. Pentagon awarded the contract to Lockheed Martin over Boeing in 2001. The deal is estimated to exceed \$250 billion US over the next three decades. It is the largest military aircraft contract in history.

The plane will be built in Fort Worth, Texas.

The strategic partners are the governments of the U.S., United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, Denmark, Norway and Australia.

Canada's Department of National Defence will receive 35 of the fighters to replace aging CF-18s by 2035.

So far, a JSF test model has been built and it will be flying shortly. Ultimately, hundreds of planes, at least, could be built for U.S. and partner air forces.

Handling Specialty of Grimsby, which fabricates complex lifting devices, is making vertical assembly platforms for the plane's wing assembly

Handling's contracts for Lockheed since 2003 have been worth more than \$20 million.





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