

RISING AIRCRAFT PARTS REBUILDER

In eight years, Aerostar has expanded its parts-based maintenance and repair services, serving major and smaller carriers in the U.S. and abroad.

BY JANE NICHOLES // PHOTOS BY BRAD McPHERSON



"In layman's terms, we're a mechanics shop for airplane parts," says Greg Guzman, president of Aerostar Inc. in Mobile.

Of course, it's much more complicated than that. Many of the major carriers in the United States are contract customers, and Aerostar also does business globally. It is certified to work on some 3,300 airplane parts. The company is constantly looking for new employees who can handle highly technical jobs.

"We specialize in refurbishing commercial and military aircraft parts, whether it's the pneumatic system, hydraulics system or the electro-mechanical system. We're getting into some simple structural parts. It all comes off working aircraft, so there's nothing new," Guzman says.

Aerostar, founded in 2011, has been in the thick of the aerospace boom along the Gulf Coast. It completed a \$2 million expansion in January, adding 16,875 square feet to the existing 6,000 square feet at the Mobile Aeroplex at Brookley. Also this year, the company was one of eight in the state to receive the Governor's Trade Excellence Award for its role in bringing international business to Alabama.

As a third-party maintenance operation, Aerostar repairs and replaces parts at far less cost than an original equipment manufacturer. Guzman says that Aerostar might charge \$2,000 for a refurbished part that an original manufacturer would sell for \$20,000.

"We're just replacing what needs to be replaced, whereas they are taking it to the nth degree and basically making a

Opposite, top: Workers at Aerostar in Mobile are certified to work on some 3,300 aircraft parts — pneumatic, hydraulic, electromechanical and simple structural elements.

Opposite, lower left: The Aerostar leadership team, from left, Marketing & Sales VP Alan Howell, CEO and co-founder Greg Guzman and Operations VP and co-founder Frank Lapcheske.

Opposite, lower right: At work on a single part.

This page, top: Servicing the motor for a hydraulic pump.

This page, lower left: Testing a part under pressure.

This page, lower right: Completing fiberglass composite parts in the composite shop.

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brand new product," he says.

A part may be out of warranty, but it must be certified by the Federal Aviation Administration, its maintenance history must be documented and any maintenance must be done by an FAA-certified company.

Aerostar also brokers parts among airplane companies — obtaining something from one company that another company may need. And the company prides itself on guaranteed turnaround time: an average of 11 days for contract customers, 17 days for non-contract customers.

"The industry standard is 21 days, so we're well below what the industry typically will accept," Guzman says.

What Aerostar doesn't do is business with the Airbus final assembly plant complex right across the road at Brookley. Guzman says he is often asked why not: The answer is that while Aerostar does some maintenance work for Airbus, Mobile's Airbus complex is building new planes. "We've not found a good fit for what they need versus what we can offer at this point."

VT Mobile Aerospace Engineering, however, is a steady client and one of the reasons Aerostar was founded at Brookley. Also just across the road, MAE takes advantage of not needing to ship parts across the country and overseas for repair or replacement. So does FedEx, also located at Brookley.

Other major customers include Southwest Airlines, Delta, SkyWest Airlines, Allegiant Air, JetBlue and GE Aviation. Altogether Aerostar has 45 to 50 clients.

Guzman, who now commutes to Brookley from his home in Gulf Shores, was working in Fairhope for the Dutch conglomerate Fokker in 2010 when he "got the itch to be an entrepreneur." Fokker eventually shut down its operations in Fairhope, and Guzman, along with Frank Lapcheske, now vice president of operations, founded Aerostar at Brookley.

"When we started in 2011, it was me and one other guy, Frank," Guzman says. "Frank is the master of the operations and the quality side, and I'm the master of finance and the sales side."

Operations began in 2012 after Aerostar received various FAA and European certifications. At that time, Brookley Aeroplex was known as Brookley Field

and promises were being made to win the government contract for an aerial refueling tanker to be assembled by Airbus. But Guzman and Lapcheske wanted to do business with MAE, and Airbus wasn't yet there.

Brookley lacked basic amenities, such as good roads, drainage, high-speed internet, security and proper lighting, Guzman says. That's all changed.

"They did a tremendous amount of work, and I will credit the chamber, the mayor's office and the Airport Authority on doing a really good job here," Guzman says. "It's night and day from when we started here back in 2011. I had to wash my car every other day because of the dust and everything with the trucks going by."

Guzman had established some international connections through his work for Fokker. Aerostar now does business in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and it recently completed its first transaction in Dubai. A consulting firm based in the Netherlands has been hired to represent Aerostar in the Middle East and Africa.

The aircraft business in Europe tends to fluctuate, but there is great opportunity overseas, Guzman says. "The challenge you face over in Europe is there's a handful of very large carriers, and, then, there's a ton of very small guys." The "small guys" may have only 10 or 20 airplanes, where a U.S. carrier has hundreds. "Their needs are much different than the needs of a larger carrier."

One major challenge still facing Aerostar is its need for highly skilled employees. "The talent pool for quality employees that work on airplane parts is nonexistent. You go to Airbus, and they're robbing employees not only from us but from MAE." The various aviation-training programs at the high schools and community college levels don't address the skills needed by Aerostar, Guzman says.

Lapcheske says that even when they recruit someone with the necessary skill, training still takes three to six months. For example, parts for a pneumatic system must be tested in a 36,000-gallon tank at pressures up to 200 psi. The calibrations must be exactly correct or the part or its stand could be damaged. An operator can also be intimidated because

the operation sounds like a jet taking off, and although a major injury has never occurred at Aerostar it is still possible.

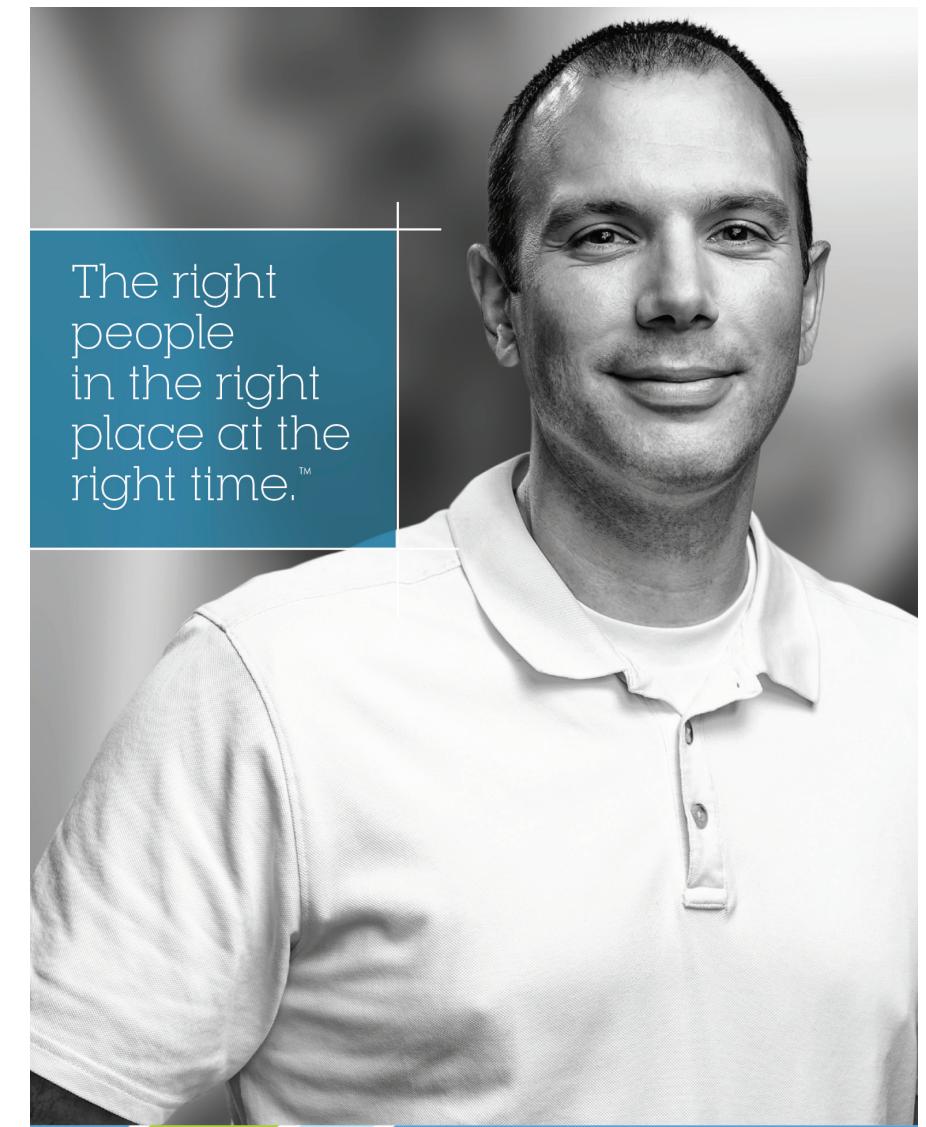
"It's a technical job," Lapcheske says. "It takes a lot of skill to do this."

Guzman credits Aerostar employees, entities such as the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce and his banker, Hancock Whitney Bank, for the company's success. Winning the Trade Excellence Award also increases Aerostar's reputation.

There's room for more growth, as well.

"I have a goal this year to be on every major carrier's U.S.-approved vendor list with the exception of perhaps one or two guys," Guzman says. "I think that's realistic. And for a company our size, you won't find anybody out there who can say that."

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