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In Olney, maker of planes for agriculture, firefighting is doing millions in business

By JOHN AUSTIN

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OLNEY — There was a new contestant in the dogfight for business at last week's Paris Air Show, and while it may not have taken much away from giants like Lockheed Martin and Bell, the little North Texas manufacturer scored a direct hit with the news media.

"What I think is very funny is, here is Boeing, here's Airbus. The company that steals the show is a converted crop-duster," said Leland Snow, founder and president of Air Tractor, which for 51 years has built, in Olney — about 100 miles northwest of Fort Worth — single-engine workhorse aircraft for agriculture and firefighting.

In Paris, Air Tractor exhibited a version of its AT-802U, of which it's already sold more than a dozen to the State Department. *The Wall Street Journal* described it as "a two-seat combat-ready crop-duster with weapons and advanced electronics."

Snow said, "It makes so much sense to build this airplane" for counterinsurgency work. "You don't need a \$50 million weapon to go after a \$500 target."

And "there's very little that ever goes wrong. We've worked the bugs out over 30 years. A screwdriver and a Crescent wrench is all you need to maintain it."

Whether or not the 200-employee company wins a piece of the growing military market for low-tech weapons systems, Air Tractor will likely continue to be the go-to source for crop-dusters and wildfire fighters. Snow, 79, expects to crank out at least \$45 million worth of airplanes this year in this town of 3,400, where there are just three stoplights on the main drag and the biggest event is a one-armed dove hunt.

'The real deal'

"When I hear the word *recession*" Snow said. "What we build here are called utility aircraft. We sold about 101 last year." , I say, 'What recession?'

That may not sound like much, but the experts say Air Tractor owns a major chunk of the single-engine air tanker market and a top spot in crop-dusting circles. Over the years, it's built about 3,000 aircraft, which cost \$325,000 to \$1.5 million.

"The interesting thing is, aviation as a whole is having some difficult times," said Andrew Moore, executive director of the National Agricultural Aviation Association. . is one of .
"But agricultural aviation, because people need to eat . the few bright spots.

"There's really only a few agricultural-aircraft aircraft manufacturers," Moore said.
"They're by far the largest. They're the real deal."

Air Tractor is also an exporter, with dealers in Europe, South America and Australia and sales from Montana to Montenegro. Though Snow goes to the office only two days a week now, commuting 45 minutes from his Wichita Falls home in a 2005 Lincoln Town Car he bought used, he is by all accounts still the guiding spirit.

"Leland Snow is a living legend," Moore said. "He's the man."

But while Snow is aware of his legacy, he's at least as eager to talk about the future as his barnstorming, sometimes seat-of-the-pants past.

Employees in Olney build just about everything but the Pratt & Whitney power plants. Snow points to a worker welding together a gray tubular-steel frame like the one in the Air Tractor that hopscotched across the Atlantic to Paris for the exhibition.

The company has sold about 16 Air Tractors to the State Department for south-of-the-border drug-crop eradication. "We've learned by battlefield experience," Snow said.

Some planes have come back to the factory for repairs after being shot up by *narcotraficantes*.

"I remember counting 19 bullet holes" in one plane, Snow said. "We have had four airplanes that crashed. None of the four pilots were seriously injured."

Troy Vaught, Air Tractor's chief test pilot, guided a visitor into the cockpit of a newly completed crop-duster. It bore the bright yellow-with-blue-trim livery sported by all Air Tractors — except those built for firefighting, which are red and white.

Vaught, a 1949 Arlington High School graduate and former Navy SEAL, pointed out the enclosed, air-conditioned cockpit that resembles a race car's protective cage.

"It's a hell of an airplane," Vaught said. "They're designed to crash and keep the pilot alive."

'Something better'

Snow, a trim, reserved, white-haired Brownsville native and father of two who wears jeans and a short-sleeved sport shirt to work, came of age idolizing barnstorming aviators when flying was still a glamour profession. He got his wings on a dirt strip where he

worked to pay for flying lessons, was licensed at 16 and started crop-dusting shortly thereafter.

"The airplanes were awful," he said of the converted World War II Cub and Stearman trainers he started in. "They were underpowered. There was no protection. If I crashed I was kind of like the meat in the middle of a sandwich.

"It was clear that we needed something better," he said.

A born do-it-yourselfer, he began crafting his first airplane, in a dirt-floor garage with no electricity or heat that he rented for \$2 a week, after his junior year at Texas A&M. He taught himself to weld. He used his motorcycle to carry 20-foot pieces of steel tube from his dorm across town to the garage, working in his overcoat to cut the tubular airframe parts with a hacksaw.

"I had enough information to start the wings," said Snow, who brings his lunch to work and occupies an office in one of the company's four pale-yellow metal buildings at the local airport on fields outside town. "I had been a model-airplane builder."

The first Snow S-1 flew in 1953. Then 23 years old, he was an aeronautical engineering graduate student at the University of Texas when he finished building his airplane and began taking deposits for more aircraft from other pilots.

He financed the early airplanes by crop-dusting in Nicaragua. Then disaster struck.

A wing peeled off his radial-engine S-2A in 1957, forcing Snow to bail out.

"I was suddenly without a prototype and without means to finish my FAA certification," Snow said. "I was basically broke."

But a friend suggested he pitch his company, then in the Rio Grande Valley town of Harlingen, to small-town businessmen looking to diversify their economic base. He tried two Oklahoma towns and struck out.

Olney, however, said yes, and a few month later he flew into town in a plane with mismatched tires, "a ratty leather jacket" and loans of \$500 to \$2,000 from local bankers. The bankers also arranged to move his fledgling operation's two nearly finished airplanes to Olney — in five cattle trucks. That was January 1958.

'We have no turnover'

The business was originally called Snow Aeronautical but has gone through several names and incarnations. The boss picked the current name from a defunct manufacturer.

"I didn't like the airplane, but I thought the name was good, so I latched onto it," he said.

The original civic gesture appears to have paid off. While the population has dropped since he came to town, good jobs at the factory have helped slow the outflow of people that drains many small Texas towns.

Rick Turner, Air Tractor's operations vice president, said employees can make as much as \$24.50 an hour. There are regular bonuses, and the last layoffs were in 2002. A number of those laid off have been brought back.

When times get tough, Snow prefers to trim everybody's hours rather than lay off employees. He said there's never been a strike.

It's the kind of place where the receptionist addresses the founder by his first name, and the boss does likewise with most employees. There's no security desk or handlers to keep visiting reporters from poking around.

"Most people come here, and they don't leave," said Turner, who started in the wing shop 22 years ago. "Pay's good; you don't have to go to the Metroplex. Takes me four minutes to get to work."

Last year, Snow decided to make the company employee-owned to give workers an incentive to be more efficient.

"I wanted them to benefit," Snow said. "They've worked as hard as I have.

"Only . we did not make a profit," Snow said. "We've done well. . two years . I've done well on a personal basis. It wasn't necessary for me to become super-rich."

Mike Kimbro, who runs a riveting machine and has been with Air Tractor more than 30 years, likes it just fine.

"We have no turnover. The guys are happy," said Kimbro, who calls Snow "the smartest guy I've ever worked for."

'To survive forever'

Snow clearly knows as much about business as he does engineering.

"This year airplanes are scarce," he said. "The farming industry is doing better these days than it has in a long time," with the ethanol boom driving corn production.

And there's firefighting, which he believes is getting a boost from global warming.

"Fires are more frequent and take longer to bring under control," he said.

Air Tractor had 81 percent of last year's market for federal firefighting contracts, Snow said.

But the self-described workaholic, who leaves his desk clean and takes his work home in a box instead of briefcase, is still hungry for more. He, two mechanics and a consultant started a turbine engine project 16 years ago as a way to get a handle on his most expensive item, engines.

"From dead scratch, we built a turbine engine," Snow said of the ongoing project. There's also a new model that he'd like to build for use in the Alaskan bush.

"We used to have a lot of energy," said Snow, who wears hearing aids in both ears.

Though "I'm good for another 10 or 20 years," he acknowledged that, like for even the best airplanes, fatigue will set in. So he's planned for the next generation of management.

"I just want this company to survive forever," he said.