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Tunica Air Group flies high in area's aircraft maintenance, repair

By Jane Roberts (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal
Wednesday, March 12, 2008

The two sides of longtime aviation mechanics Michael Silvius and Bob Polly are immediately apparent in the way they dress.

Closest to their skin, they wear jeans and khakis for rebuilding jet engines, the work they love. Over the top, they toss on sport coats for talking to customers outside the hangar.



Aircraft maintenance company Tunica Air Group, LLC, is flying high for its founders, FedEx mechanics Robert Polly (left) and Michael Silvius.

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Right now, their time is so evenly spread between fixing planes and signing contracts, the coats are getting a little frayed at the sleeves.

Their company -- Tunica Air Group LLC -- recently expanded into a 16,000-square-foot hangar at Wilson Air Center, eight times voted the best fixed- base operator in the nation.

With it as a base, Silvius and Polly -- nighttime partners on the nighttime FedEx maintenance line -- signed a contract March 1 with Delta Air Lines as the sole maintenance provider for its mainline jets in Memphis.

Silvius and Polly are negotiating with four other carriers for work at Memphis International Airport while providing 24-hour maintenance services at Wilson Air.

"There's no telling what the people who land here need. They could be really, really broke with anything from landing gear issues to pressurization to engine problems," said Polly, vice president of operations at Tunica Air Group. "Whatever breaks is what we fix."

The bigger issues -- engine rebuilds and annual maintenance checks -- are funneled to Tunica Air Center, where Silvius and Polly started the company in 2006 with a handpicked team of FedEx mechanics working on the charters that serve the casinos.

"We started out working 80 hours a week," Polly said. "We'd run down to Tunica after our FedEx shifts and sleep a few hours on the floor in the pilots' lounge so we would be there when the planes landed.

"We didn't have any contracts then," Silvius said. "We were constantly meeting people as they landed, saying, 'This is who we are; this is what we do.'"

When Silvius joined FedEx in 2001 as a senior aircraft technician, he had completed a tour of duty with the U.S. Navy, worked for Raytheon Aircraft, Orlando-based Kiwi Airlines and managed maintenance for Midway Airlines in Raleigh, N.C.

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In six months, he was qualified to work on any plane in the FedEx fleet, a measure of his can-do aptitude.

Polly, a more buttoned-down guy, got his training in the U.S. Marine Corps, retiring after four Middle East deployments as maintenance control chief at the Marine Corps Air Station in Cherry Point, N.C. From there, he was the lead mechanic at Mobile Aerospace before he joined FedEx.

Today, less than two years later, they have 16 full-time mechanics specializing in avionics, sheet metal -- even nondestructive testing -- and reason to expect sales will quadruple in 2008 as they step up contract work at both bases.

"By spring, we expect we'll be adding four employees in Memphis with expertise on regional jets," said Silvius, president and chief executive.

Together, they are negotiating with Tunica County on construction of a 100,000-square-foot hangar they plan to lease for several multimillion contracts they expect to land in Tunica this year, including a new unnamed company that plans to offer air-taxi service based in Tunica.

"We feel Tunica Air Group represents a tremendous opportunity for the airport," said Clifford Nash, airport director. "We want to do everything we can to have them grow and expand their business."

To understand how it works, consider this: In 2007, Silvius and Polly brought 30 non-casino charter 737s to Tunica Air Center for maintenance checks.

Their owners bought jet fuel in Tunica and used other services the airport provides, giving the young airport exposure it wouldn't otherwise have.

The business nearly took a nosedive late last year when Harrah's signed a deal that guaranteed California-based Allegiant Air \$11.8 million a year to ferry patrons between Harrah's properties east of the Mississippi.

Because Allegiant provides its own maintenance, Silvius and Polly stood to lose most of their business.

"We talked to Wilson Air, saying that we had been approached by air carriers across the field," Silvis said, gesturing across the airfield outside Wilson Air. "We wanted to know if we could rent a closet to hang our hats.

"They told us they could do one better than that," Silvius said.

Wilson Air's longtime maintenance provider, Batesville, Miss.-based The Hangar Inc., opted not to continue here, leaving a spot for a new maintenance company at the airport.

"This is American entrepreneurship at its best," said David Ivey at Wilson Air. "I take pride associating with gentlemen who are reaching out into new experiences."

Contact Jane Roberts at 529-2515.

Tunica Air Group

President, CEO: Mike Silvius; vice president: Bob Polly

Address: 211 S. Airport Blvd., Tunica, Miss.

Employees: 16

2007 sales: \$250,000

tunicaairgroup.com

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