

Air Affairs investing in Shoalhaven's future

Air Affairs' new 5000 square metre headquarters at the Albatross Aviation Technology Park is a significant commitment to the future for defence-related industries in the Shoalhaven.

Air Affairs Managing Director Chris Sievers with the MTR-101 reeling machine, used for towing targets, attached to the company's Lear Jet.



Air Affairs is one of the great success stories of the Shoalhaven

Defence Industry Group, providing a global service with the manufacture and supply of aerial tow targets, target reeling machines, target drones, target scoring systems and defence training systems. The company provides all the target towing equipment and support services for the Australian Defence Forces and also provides equipment and services to nine countries including New Zealand, Singapore, Germany, Sweden, and other customers around the world.

Its new headquarters, which includes hangars, manufacturing facilities, administration and logistics capabilities and has direct access to HMAS Albatross Naval Air Base, consolidates Air Affairs' operational arm Air Target Services and its manufacturing arm on one site for the first time. The company was established in 1985 by its Managing Director Chris Sievers and Operations Director Jan Ujma, and remains privately owned.

Mr Sievers, an engineer who had been working on corporate Learjets in Melbourne, moved to Nowra in

1985 because he saw opportunities for using the jets for defence-related support work.

"We were pioneers in the evolution of the commercialisation of defence services," Mr Sievers said. "The Australian Defence Force saw great benefits in commercialising these training operations to reduce costs and we saw a great opportunity for using Learjets in defence work, such as towing targets for gunnery training.

"Nowra was the obvious area to create the operations base because of the Royal Australian Navy training area off the coast of Jervis Bay. It has proven to be a great place to live and operate a business. Our staff enjoy a great lifestyle, and as a result we have a stable and very capable workforce."

Mr Sievers said Air Affairs' staff of 35 were largely technician-based. "We operate in a highly specialised field, so we need people who can take a diverse and agile approach to their work," he said. "We prefer to train our own people and have taken on an apprentice a year for the last five years as our workforce has grown."

The company originally supplied and serviced a US-manufactured reeling machine that is attached to

the Learjets' wing. It contains a wire cable that is attached to a target that is towed between six and nine kilometres behind the aircraft so that Navy gunners can engage the target in simulated firings.

The target has special radar or acoustic sensors to measure the gunners' accuracy by providing a miss distance which is used to access and qualify the gun or missile system. Sometimes they destroy the target, but if not the target is reeled back to the aircraft for reuse on the next training mission.

In 1999 Air Affairs expanded its core target towing business to include manufacturing, when it purchased the rights and equipment to manufacture the MTR-101 reeling machine from US company Kaiser Marquardt. It has proven an important strategic decision that has facilitated the company's expansion. The reeling machines are highly sophisticated, containing more than 2000 components and are manufactured in South Nowra.

"Purchasing the production line to build the MTR-101 was a substantial investment that has allowed us to grow the company, with 30 people now involved in the manufacturing

side of our business," Mr Sievers said. "It gave us an introduction to international customers (who previously purchased the equipment from Kaiser Marquardt) and allows us to support our customers with more confidence, because we manufacture the equipment we are supplying."

Mr Sievers said the MTR-101s used by defence forces around the world are periodically shipped to Nowra for routine overhauls. The company also sends technicians overseas to work with customers on-site from time to time. While aviation company Pel-Air operates a Learjet for Navy gunnery training off Jervis Bay, Air Affairs also operates two of their own aircraft including a Learjet 35A and a B200 Kingair for research and development purposes and test flight services both in Australia and overseas.

Air Affairs also designs and manufactures a remote controlled drone that is used to simulate fast approaching aircraft. These have been used for Navy exercises off the Shoalhaven coast and by the Army at Woomera Test Range in the South Australian desert. The drones can fly at speeds between 400-500 km/h and are launched from a catapult designed and built by Air Affairs.

The Shoalhaven Defence Industry Group promotes defence industry capability to attract business, investment and jobs to the region. This case study showcases one of the high tech defence companies already contributing to the Shoalhaven economy.



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