

## BAE Systems staff take pride in Seahawk performance

The BAE Systems staff who work on the Royal Australian Navy's Seahawk helicopters at HMAS Albatross take special pride in their work.

BAE Systems aircraft maintenance engineer Matthew Gilkes, working on a Seahawk at the company's hangar at HMAS Albatross.

After all, the Seahawks can go straight from the BAE Systems hangar to deployment on RAN frigates and immediate service around the world.

"It's a nice feeling to know that a Seahawk that we've serviced can come straight out of our facility and off to somewhere like the Persian Gulf," BAE Systems' Seahawk Support Contract Program Manager Robert McNeil said.

"We have a lot of highly skilled people, many of whom have been working on Seahawks for a very long time. We meet the Navy's expectations every time, and that's a credit to the guys in the hangar.

"We've even sent our technical staff to the Gulf to deal with structural issues on a Seahawk on a ship. They had it back in the air in a couple of days, saving the Navy a lot of time and money."

Mr McNeil himself started working on the first Seahawks purchased by the RAN back in 1988 when he was a Naval aircraft mechanic, and has followed the RAN workhorses through more than two decades of sterling service.

Around 60 of the approximately 140 people BAE Systems employ in the Shoalhaven work in the hangar at HMAS Albatross, with the remainder based at the company's local headquarters at the Albatross Aviation Technology Park adjacent to the base.

BAE Systems won a seven-year renewal of its Seahawk maintenance support contract with the RAN in late 2009, supported by an assistance package provided by Industry and Investment NSW. It is now building a new hangar at the Technology Park to meet Department of Defence requirements that maintenance facilities move off-base.

The hangar staff provide what's called heavy maintenance and major servicing of the 20-year-old Seahawk fleet. The aircraft come in from their deployment (mainly on RAN frigates) and are given a complete "makeover" – a high level strip-down, inspection and repair process conducted by BAE Systems engineers, airframe and engine mechanics, aviation technicians, welders, spray painters, sheet metal and composite fabricators and hydraulic fitters.

BAE Systems' Aviation Maintenance

and Support Services (Aerospace) General Manager Mike Shaw said the company has a strong partnership with the RAN.

"Our relationship with the Navy is very much a partnership as we work together to meet the challenges of supporting ageing aircraft (a replacement aircraft for the 20-year-old-plus Seahawks is still at least seven years away). There is lots of problem-solving, and it is always done in a very positive spirit between us and the Navy," Mr Shaw said.

Mr Shaw said the company had no trouble attracting highly qualified professionals to work in the Shoalhaven, and that its stable workforce was an important asset in retaining and expanding its skills base.

"In fact we often find that people come down here to do a job for one of our contractors, and want to find a way they can stay," he said. "They like the choice of bush or coastal lifestyle, the fact that house prices are so much lower than in the city so that often their spouse doesn't have to work to meet the mortgage repayments, and that things like city traffic are not an issue down here."

He said other commercial advantages of locating in the Shoalhaven include lower business costs for land and other resources, and the ability to operate in close proximity to HMAS Albatross.

The company's Business Development Manager in Nowra, Dennis Hinds, said defence industries were well supported in the Shoalhaven.

"The three tiers of government – local, state and federal – are all really supportive while Industry & Investment NSW assisted us with our bid for the Seahawk contract renewal," Mr Hinds said.

He said companies involved in the Shoalhaven Defence Industry Group also provide a supportive environment. "We're like a family. We have strong networks with other companies in the area like Raytheon and Air Affairs, and provide them with work.

"This area has a strong military heritage with HMAS Albatross and HMAS Creswell. People here know how important defence-related industries are to the local economy, and we feel very welcome here."

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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