

Exciting Job for Vets With Specialized Skills, Part 3

Michael Archer | June 23, 2010

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Among air-tanker contractors, Neptune Aviation is the largest. This Missoula, Mont.-based corporation employs more than a hundred pilots and mechanics, and owns no less than nine P-2V air-tankers. However, Neptune continues to expand its business, and needs vets who are interested in finding meaningful work at a company where can-do is the watchword.

New Mexico Roots

Dan Snyder, director of operations for Neptune, explains a bit about their past: "We were formerly known as Black Hills Aviation, but were acquired in the 1990s by a new owner and moved from Alamogordo, N.M. to its present location in Missoula.

"It's grown significantly in its days since Black Hills, our highest fleet number being 11 aircraft, we're down to nine now. We now have more than 150 employees total and we're still growing, still hiring people, still looking for good maintenance personnel primarily."

What's more, they're adding more services to their corporation — a good hedge during uncertain financial times. "We also have a sister company, Northstar Jet, which is a Fixed Base Operator," Snyder added.

Innovations and Safety at the Forefront of Business

Innovation and safety are the keys to success for any business, something Neptune puts into practice every day. "The fire aviation industry operated with older aircraft for such a long time, and we operated on old role models in both the flight department and the maintenance department," Snyder explained. "But two significant accidents in a short amount of time [in 2008 and 2009] woke us up."

Snyder continued to describe how Neptune now has a full-fledged maintenance control operation with maintenance controllers, and how crew chiefs in the field are allowed to call in and add to the clearinghouse of information. "The aircraft are released from maintenance control, just like an airline would do," he added.

"We're seeing a significant improvement, and where we're able to react quicker to the problems that we find out in the aircraft."

A Can-Do Attitude

Neptune likes multi-talented folks and searches for people with varied aerospace backgrounds. A candidate with electrical, hydraulic, and



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His "Firebombers Incorporated" series of novels gives readers an intriguing "what-if" scenario on how 21st century technology could modernize the wildland firefighting force. His novel "Firestorm," received excellent reviews from *Writers Digest*, *The Nashville News*, *The VVA Veteran* (Vietnam Veterans of America's magazine) and firefighting professionals across the United States. His company, Firebomber Publications, donates 50 percent of net profits to organizations that support the families of injured and fallen firefighters.



You can visit his website at: www.firebomberpublications.com

Firestorm can be purchased at Amazon.com

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sheet-metal experience in the military is very advantageous to the corporation.

The idea is to operate lean, meaning Neptune tries to ensure that all of their employees are "capable of doing everything -- especially employees who are on the road."

"In addition to the airplanes, we have a full-blown engine-overhaul facility where we can overhaul our own reciprocating engines, we can overhaul our own propellers, we have the capability in-house to overhaul the jets (J-34s), and in addition to the machine shop, we can even overhaul our own wheels," Snyder said proudly.

Ready to Hire

While other companies may still lay workers off, Neptune is actively recruiting vets. "We're nearing 60 mechanics in-house with jet and radial engine experience," Snyder explained. "We're also looking for people with very good quality experience as inspectors."

"During fire season, we have two crew members follow the planes around all the time," continued Snyder. "We used to just have one person per aircraft."

Vets from all branches of the service are valued highly. Neptune employes a lot of Navy and Air Force veterans. "As a matter of fact," added Snyder, "our director of maintenance is retired Air Force, and our P-2 program manager is retired Navy, and we have a lot of other military folks."

And whereas pilots in the commercial airline industry face a retirement age, there's no such thing in the air-tanker industry. "What we see is that within the first year, if they like it, pilots stay," said Snyder. "Our industry doesn't have a high turnover in pilots."

A Look Ahead

What does the future hold for Neptune? "We're really getting into making our own parts because these airplanes still have a lot of life left in them, so each year we improve them, and do more to them -- such as talking about putting more advanced instrumentation into the cockpits to keep them as close to cutting-edge as we can," Snyder stated. "We know the P-2 is old, so we're looking on the horizon for a new platform."

"We're also looking for people with a newer way of doing business, trying to bring this business into the 21st century," he added.

Last Words

"There's a very large desire for military folks, since we see that the maturity level and experience levels tend to be higher with vets," asserted Snyder.

In fact, Neptune looks harder at a military vets than a civilian who just got out of A&P school.

"We definitely have a place for vets if they're interested. We are always looking for people, so it's not like the window of opportunity is closing anytime soon."

For more info, visit their website at www.neptuneaviation.com.

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