

BUSINESS PLUS

SAUDI GAZETTE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2011 | 7

Teaching aeronautical excellence

Aeronautical Engineer Tom Slade is a former US Air Force officer and has been working with the Aircraft Accessories & Components Co. Ltd. for the past 14 years, maintaining performance aircraft components and teaching many young Saudis the highly sophisticated tools of his trade

BIZZIE FROST

NOT everyone is fortunate enough to love the work that they do, but Tom Slade is one of them. He is originally from Montgomery, Alabama in the deep south of the United States, and he has retained the characteristic southern drawl of the area. Along with the accent comes his deep-rooted traditional values and manners, and with his unwavering blue eyes and neat appearance, it is easy to visualize him in the United States Air Force uniform that he wore for 26 years.

As soon as you mention the words "F15 Eagle Fighter", you know you are talking about serious 'toys for boys'. Most of the glory goes to the pilots who fly these awesome machines, but behind the scenes are specialist teams of engineers, mechanics and technicians who ensure that they fly safely. Slade has worked with these aircraft for the 30 years that they have existed, and has been an aeronautical engineer and mechanic for 41 years. He proudly states: "I have only had two jobs in my career: the US Air Force, and with Aircraft Accessories & Components Co. Ltd. (AACC)".

After leaving the Military, which included two postings in Saudi Arabia, he was asked by AACC in 1997 to join them. He is currently the Vice President of Development of this Jeddah-based company which overhauls performance aircraft components on

a wide range of Mechanical, Hydraulic, Pneumatic, Electrical and Fuel System components, including those of the F15 and the C130.

Slade described his job with AACC more specifically: "I am trained as an aeronautical engineer and most of my practical experience has been in the mechanical engineering field which is closely related to aeronautical. I work as an engineer in charge of product development which means I help transfer technology from the United States for US Weapons Systems to the Kingdom and train our young technicians and engineers how to use, and how to fix the parts that come from the F15, from the C130 and from other Weapons Systems."

When he began with AACC, they were qualified on only 22 products. "We now have about 200 products, the largest amount being from the F15, then from the C130," Slade explained. "We also work on components from the B2, the Tomcat, the Hawk, the M1A2 Battle Tank, and a sprinkling of AH64 Apache and UH60 Black Hawk, and we also do some repair work for Saudia main wheels, namely the Boeing 777, 747 and 737. They are very similar in the maintenance concept as that which we already do on our F15 wheels. We have about 200 employees, and are presently 75 percent Saudi."

Some of the equipment used at AACC is highly sophisticated. "We have some machining equipment that lets us grind surfaces to 50 millionths

of an inch," explained Slade. "The grinder operates in a stabilized environment at 58 degrees Fahrenheit. We have to leave the product that we are going to grind in there overnight, and then when a person is inside there, he has to handle the product with gloves so that his body heat doesn't affect the component."

When asked what he enjoys about his work, he is quick to respond: "I really enjoy training the young men here and sharing with them what I know. First of all, I want them to become better people. I teach them about integrity, and about mundane things like the habits and practices that will make them successful. I want them to take pride in what they are doing, and to really like it. I think that is the key. With my children, I told them very early in their lives that I wanted them to sort out what it was that they loved to do most in the world, and then find somebody to pay them to do it"

He is an early riser and is up at 4:45 A.M. every day and in his office by 6:30. "I do that for personal reasons. First of all, the only dangerous thing to do in Saudi Arabia is to drive



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Love for a job Tom Slade with the hub of a C130 propeller. (GG photos by Bizzie Frost)

and by leaving for work early, most of the people who threaten my safety are not on the highways yet! But more importantly, I arrive before my folks that I work with. And one of the things that I try to teach my young ones," (here Slade lets slip his paternal concern for his young engineers and mechanics), "is that although they don't have to be crazy like me and come at 6:15, you need to be prepared ahead of the arrival of the people that work for you. If you arrive together, and they are all standing around waiting for direction, then you are going to lose time and effectiveness besides not setting the best possible example."

He is uncompromising in his standards of excellence for the young Saudis they are training. When employing people for the company, he knows what he is looking for: "I look for people who want to be as good as they can be, that want to be successful. Long-range career goals are important. I want to find someone that will buy into what we want him to do, and to do that he has got to say: 'I love this! I want to be better at it, and be as good as I can be, and make a difference!' If they can do that, we can do the rest. Our attrition rates have been high. An expression from the US Army that some of the old commercials used was: 'We need just a few good men'. Well, I am looking for a lot of them! They are hard to come by and we think we have

some of the best technical preparation in the Kingdom. We work very hard to become better at what we do, but the core of that is to build young men that are competitive anywhere in the world."

Standards in the organization have to be high, because as Slade says, "The consequences when you fly an aeroplane and a part is not repaired properly are quite different to your car engine suddenly dying and you pulling over to the side of the road! We have a series of checks and alternative ways of checking the components, and we have inspectors that check inspectors, and other layers of supervision to ensure that we get it right."

On the subject of ladies working in this field, Slade is confident that they would do a good job. "The first women in the US Air Force aircraft maintenance field had something to prove and many of them had fire in their eyes. When they came to work on the flight line and maintain the F15s and F4s, they didn't have the technical experience, so guess what? They read the manuals! They did something that some of the guys never did - they learned how to do the job right, they came to work on time, and they put in an honest day's work. If that American experience is an indicator of how the Saudi Arabian women will react when they are allowed into the technical market place,



Skilled work A Saudi Test Technician works on F15 components.

I think there will be some pleasant surprises," he said.

As Slade has worked with the F15 for all the 30 years of its existence, I asked him if he thought of it as just a piece of machinery, or if he has an emotional attachment to it. He eyes and face lit up and a broad smile spread spontaneously across his face: "I have a huge emotional attachment to it!" he said laughing. "And to the extent that people can love a grey piece of aluminium and titanium, I love the F15!"

—Saudi Gazette



Mentor Tom Slade with employee Mazen Aman in front of the Servo-Cylinder Test Stand in AACC.