Boeing Begins Major Assembly of First 747-400F for Airborne Laser Program

Government and industry officials today helped a Boeing-led industry team kick off the start of major assembly of the first Airborne Laser flying platform -- the 747-400 Freighter -- at the Boeing assembly plant in Everett, Wash.

Dr. Lawrence Delaney, the U.S. Air Force's top acquisition executive, headlined the milestone event.

Delaney toured the Boeing 747 assembly line with Team ABL officials from Boeing, Lockheed Martin and TRW.

Also joining the tour were U.S. Air Force officers from the ABL customer System Program Office at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M.; and senior Air Force leadership team members from the Pentagon; Air Force Materiel Command in Dayton, Ohio; Air Force Space and Missile Systems Center of Los Angeles; and from the Air Combat Command in Langley, Va.

Team ABL and the Air Force are developing a high-energy chemical oxygen iodine laser carried aboard a modified Boeing 747-400 Freighter, capable of shooting down theater ballistic missiles launched hundreds of miles away.

Delaney, who is assistant secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, along with Boeing and government officials, spoke at a ceremony commemorating the major assembly start. Towering over ceremony participants at the massive Everett assembly plant was a representative 747-400 Freighter airplane nearing completion.

Work began today on the freighter's main-deck floor grids, signaling the beginning of major assembly on the ABL platform. Next week, major assembly begins on the wing, and the following week, on the airplane's body sections.

This first aircraft designated for ABL is the first to be acquired for Air Force use under the military's new commercial "off-the-shelf" philosophy. The plane also is the third-ever Boeing 747-400 to use a new fuselage assembly process that significantly improves quality, reduces rejection tags and cycle time.

"I'm impressed with Team ABL's progress; the design is rock-solid and the technology proven," Delaney said. "The Airborne Laser is on-track to be on the leading edge of theater missile defense."

"Boeing has made ABL one of its top corporate commitments," said Jim Albaugh, president of Boeing Space & Communications Group. "Team ABL is an excellent example of doing business better and smarter by leveraging diverse technical expertise across industry to develop a remarkable system that will help maintain the peace."

As Team ABL leader, Boeing is responsible for creating the ABL surveillance system; developing the battle management, and command and control system; integrating the weapon system; and supplying the 747-400 Freighter airplane. Team member Lockheed Martin is developing the beam control/fire control system, and TRW is providing the chemical oxygen iodine laser, and ground support.

"It is gratifying to see that real partnership produces real results," said Paul Shennum, Boeing vice president and Team ABL program director. "This contract was awarded in late 1996, and today we are marking the beginning of major manufacturing of the 747-400 platform for the first Airborne Laser."

"This is a real tribute to teamwork, to small teams, innovative ideas and hands-off leadership. We're building a great system that will give Americans a defense for the first time against theater ballistic missiles."

Air Force plans call for a fleet of seven ABL aircraft to be ready for rapid deployment within 24 hours to any spot around the globe. The fleet's mission is to deter potential use of theater ballistic missiles. More than 30 nations today are believed to have at their disposal more than 13,000 of those missiles. Many of those countries also are known to have or are developing nuclear, chemical and biological capabilities for their missiles.

Aircraft No. 00-0001 is to be the first U.S. Air Force aircraft of the new millennium. With major assembly beginning today, the 747-400 Freighter is scheduled to roll out from the Everett assembly line in December 1999. It then will be delivered to Wichita, Kan., for an 18-month modification program.

During the Preliminary Design and Risk Reduction phase, Team ABL is designing, developing, integrating and testing the ABL weapon system. The effort will culminate with the planned test destruction of SCUD-type missiles by the ABL in 2003.

A robust ground and flight test program begins in 2001 and continues through 2003 with a lengthy series of tests of the system against representative missiles.

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