Modified Airborne Laser Aircraft Takes Successful First Flight From Boeing Flight Line In Wichita

The first Airborne Laser (ABL) aircraft, extensively modified by Boeing [NYSE: BA] to house the revolutionary ABL ballistic missile-defense system, successfully flew for the first time today.

The 747-400 aircraft took off from the airport adjacent to Boeing facilities in Wichita, Kan., at 3:30 p.m. (CDT) on its inaugural flight. Sprouting a distinctive nose turret and top-mounted laser targeting pod, the aircraft's first flight is the beginning of a rigorous, summer-long, flight-worthiness test schedule.

Aircraft 00-0001, the initial airborne platform for the ABL system, flew a 90-minute flight plan to check out the aircraft's aerodynamic performance and system operation.

The next major program milestone is flight-worthiness testing in Wichita. The aircraft is undergoing complete systems functional checks and flight tests to verify aerodynamic performance, and surveillance system checkout.

Following flight-worthiness tests, the ABL aircraft will fly later this year to Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., where its sophisticated tracking and high-energy laser system will be installed.

"This system is one of the most complex engineering challenges ever undertaken in an aircraft, and our team has made solid progress," said Scott Fancher, Boeing vice president and ABL program director. "We've created a methodical approach to ABL development, moving through each phase after meeting appropriate technical goals. We are now at the beginning of the future of missile defense."

Col. Ellen Pawlikowski, Air Force ABL system program director at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., was pleased with the first-flight results: "This represents a major step forward for the Airborne Laser program. We're making important, careful strides toward our goal of building a boost-phase missile defense system."

Team ABL -- Boeing, Lockheed Martin and TRW -- is developing the airborne boost-phase missile defense system under direction from the Missile Defense Agency. The ABL system will use a TRW-developed megawatt-class chemical laser aboard the aircraft to shoot down missiles in their boost phase of flight.

Boeing is the ABL team leader and is responsible for developing the ABL surveillance battle-management system, integrating the weapon system and supplying the modified aircraft. Lockheed Martin is developing the beam control/fire control system, which will acquire the target, then accurately point and fire the laser. TRW is providing the complete chemical oxygen-iodine laser system.

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