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Boeing [NYSE: BA] today reached a significant milestone at its Long Beach, Calif., C-17 final assembly facility with a "major join" ceremony for the United Kingdom's fifth C-17 Globemaster III.

With several hundred Boeing employees in attendance, representatives from the UK's Ministry of Defence and company executives participated in the event, driving a ceremonial rivet into the aircraft's fuselage and signing its nose cone.

"The ceremony for UK 5 is a significant milestone that will lead to the delivery of another very capable aircraft, further improving access to both Afghanistan and Iraq," said Robin Philip, commercial director, Defence Equipment and Support for the UK Ministry of Defence. "Since its entry into service in 2001, the C-17 has performed superbly in RAF service, both in support of military and humanitarian relief operations."

Dave Bowman, vice president and general manager of Boeing Global Mobility Systems, said Great Britain's continued commitment and support of the C-17 is yet another example of the value the C-17 has to international customers.

"Together with the commitments made by the governments of Australia and Canada, UK-5 further demonstrates that the C-17 remains the premier airlifter of choice for the U.S. military and our international customers," said Bowman.

Major join is the first time the aircraft begins to look and feel like a C-17, with the airlifter's four major fuselage sections -- the forward, center and aft fuselages and wing assembly -- joined together into one.

Factory rollout for UK's fifth C-17 is scheduled for December. Its first flight is set for January 2008, with delivery tentatively scheduled for early 2008.

In 2006, Boeing and the Ministry of Defence signed a contract to expand the Royal Air Force's C-17 fleet from four aircraft to five. The UK plans to purchase the four C-17 aircraft it originally acquired from Boeing on lease when that agreement expires in mid-2008.

In September, the UK said it intends to purchase a sixth Boeing C-17 for the RAF. That announcement was a vote of confidence in the program and reinforced the airlifter's position as the world's airlifter of choice, Bowman said.

"The announcement that the MOD has started negotiations for the purchase of a sixth aircraft is recognition of the immense contribution the C-17 has made in supporting our operations. We look forward to our continued good working relationship with Boeing," said Philip.

The C-17 is the world's only tactical airlift aircraft with strategic capabilities. It can fly between continents and land on short, minimally prepared airfields while doing the work of multiple airlifters. The C-17 is the most reliable, flexible and technologically advanced airlift aircraft ever built.

Boeing is nearing completion of multi-year production contracts to design, build and deliver 190 C-17s to the U.S. Air Force through mid-2009. Boeing recently delivered the second of four C-17s to the Royal Australian Air Force. In early August, Boeing delivered the first of four C-17s to the Canadian Forces.

A unit of The Boeing Company, Boeing Integrated Defense Systems is one of the world's largest space and defense businesses specializing in innovative and capabilities-driven customer solutions. Headquartered in St. Louis, Boeing Integrated Defense Systems is a \$32.4 billion business with 72,000 employees worldwide.

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