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THE SKY ISN'T THE LIMIT

Altitudes Global chats with Joe Bonita, Managing Director of Citadel Completions about the company's achievements and not only surviving the global pandemic, but two hurricanes, too

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The best for the job: Bonita heads a hand-picked executive team, each with more than 25 years in aircraft modification, maintenance and management.

Hello Joe, please tell the *Altitudes Global* reader about yourself and your history in aviation.

My aviation career began right out of high school when I enlisted in the US Air Force. I started as an avionics technician on several aircraft and was later selected for commissioning as an Aircraft Maintenance Officer after finishing my college degree. I am a firm believer that to be a good leader, you must first be good at following and good technically. During my Air Force career, I worked on numerous aircraft culminating on the F22 just before retirement.

After the Air Force, I took a job for a government contractor where I oversaw all maintenance aspects of a B737 operation in Las Vegas, Nevada. During this period, I led the transition of the fleet to 737NG aircraft as part of a modernisation effort while sustaining fast paced operations.

I was then recruited by a prominent MRO company as the Vice President of Safety and Quality, and Operations at multiple locations, as well as the FAA Part 119 responsible person for their Part 135 helicopter operation.

Finally, after my first exposure to working on VVIP aircraft during a complete modification for Citadel's owner, I was asked to come onboard and start the current operation using the same attention to detail, culture, teamwork, and speed we achieved during that aircraft completion.

In addition to the above, I've served as Adjunct Faculty for Embry Riddle Aeronautical University for more than 25 years focusing on aviation safety, accident investigation, and maintenance management curriculum.

What is Citadel Completions?

Citadel Completions is the premier completions and MRO facility in the world. We can say that because we have been able to break the paradigm of taking years to complete an aircraft and do things smarter, better, but most importantly faster. When you work with our owner and team, you don't get to make excuses on why things take so long. Our collective common-sense approach to solving issues and world-recognised success at many different ventures prove that you can do things differently, challenge the status quo and succeed if you simply don't accept what others tell you must be done.

What are Citadel's goals?

Simply put, our goal is to be the best completion center in the world. We strive to become the most highly sought-after completions center anywhere and believe that by providing extreme customer service, taking the best care of employees and doing the ►

“Simply put, our goal is to be the best completion center in the world.”

JOE BONITA

► best completion work possible we set our path to the future. Of course, we’re still in early stages of the business, growing rapidly, but we are staffed, equipped, and resourced extremely well as we pursue our objectives.

Where are your facilities and how many projects can you support?

We are currently located in Lake Charles, La which is in the Southwest portion of Louisiana, between New Orleans, Louisiana and Houston, Texas. We have several lines of work running concurrently. We can support several wide body and narrow body aircraft completions while also keeping at least two lines of MRO support for our valued VIP customers. When we perform a completion for a customer, the support doesn’t stop there – we are able to maintain and support that aircraft as far into the future as needed.

Who are your customers?

While we don’t give specific names of customers,

we can say that our customers include high net worth individuals and families, special use aircraft, Head of State (HOS) customers, and even our owner. Basically, anyone with a VIP aircraft who demands the very best in service and quality. And I can say we have the best customers in the world at Citadel.

What aircraft have you worked on for your customers?

While we take pride in servicing the largest business jet in the world (an A340-500), we also work on all Airbus and Boeing aircrafts. We are known as experts on the B747SP. We have worked on A330, A340, B747, B757, B767, BBJ/B737 and even an aircraft that launches rockets!

Can you take us through the completion process from concept to testing?

We’ve implemented an engineering-centered approach to completions, whereby we infuse engineering throughout the entire process... from initial conceptual meetings, through design stages and of course during the manufacturing and aircraft modification phases. Our experience shows that rapid, thorough, and accurate engineering facilitates the speed of production we’re seeking and allows the certification process to go more smoothly. From the earliest stages with our customers, our sales team, designers, engineers and operations teams work hand in hand to integrate their work on the program. Using this integrated approach, we conduct both the aircraft modification and component manufacturing with skilled resources second to none. Key to the process is certification teams working closely with the whole team to ensure concerns are rapidly corrected and certification is smooth.

How is Citadel Completions today?

Similar to other businesses, we are working through the trying times everyone has faced this year. We are very fortunate that our ownership allowed full ►



Rendering courtesy of Massari Designs



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Exemplary craftsmanship at every level: Citadel works closely with its customers to ensure that each interior not only meets expectations, but transcends them.



Rendering courtesy of Massari Designs

► retention of our team during the Covid shut down periods, which actually postured us to compete and win three projects for customers that were displaced by a competitor who ceased operations. We’ve successfully delivered one of them and have the other two currently in work.

On top of the Covid pandemic, we endured two hurricanes in Lake Charles (Laura and Delta) within 6 weeks of each other, driving widespread damages and power outages for quite a while. While they say wartime is when Generals are made, it is during times like this when you discover who you are as a business. Our team rallied, and while handling significant personal concerns at the same time, we completed one project under generator power, moved equipment to an undamaged building, and brought in a brand-new customer while we still didn’t have power to the facility. And they all still left on time, and extremely satisfied! This is a true testament to the will of the great people on our team and in the Southwest Louisiana region. How are we today? Well I would say we are better than ever, and with a resolve that you can’t imagine.

In what way has COVID 19 affected the business?

We’re experiencing similar slowdowns, especially in the completions segment of the business, other leaders in the industry have opined about over the last few months in numerous media outlets. We do, however, see steady MRO and refurbishment activities and are hopeful for a strong rebound in 2021.

The biggest impact is that we can’t see our

customers face-to-face like we would wish. And new customers can’t come see the facility as easily as before. But we are not alone with these aggravations – everyone globally feeling them. The difference is how we overcome them with outstanding customer support.

COVID-19 as a whole has actually increased interest in the completions business as people that have the means to afford their own aircraft see the benefit of not traveling commercially and risking exposure. Our inquiries for new completions are starting to ramp up, and as we get into an economic recovery we expect our business to rebound to a higher place than before the pandemic.

What measures did you put in place to safeguard 2020’s projects?

We’ve been very fortunate that our team members have experienced relatively low levels of impact from the pandemic. We’re taking numerous precautions, proactively testing and mitigating risks the best we can all the while being fully operational.

There is no such thing as a safeguard as far as we are concerned. We win customers by working harder and better than others, and we keep them by delivering on time with no defects. The only safeguard that we have in place for 2020 is the same one we have in place every day – never take your customers for granted, deliver on time with the best quality, and become the place everyone wants to go to.

What’s next for Citadel Completions?

We expect there will be some consolidation in this market. We have the intent of strategically looking at what makes the most sense for us to invest in. But our rule is not to buy market space - you can only earn that. We are looking at opportunities that broaden our capabilities, give us technology, and allow us to increase our offerings to customers. We think that there is opportunity in the supply chain for improvement. We would also like to broaden our services by becoming an all-encompassing VIP aviation services business. You’ll certainly continue to see our international presence, with near term growth as we continue to expand. Even the sky isn’t the limit for Citadel’s future! 🚀

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