Airline refurbishing company finds a Cajun country home

By NANCY REGENT
Advocate state writer

NEW IBERIA — The king of Tonga rolled out the red carpet for Frank Rice, hoping Rice would locate a company on the small Pacific island near Fiji.

Instead, Rice chose Cajun country for his airline refurbishing company, Pride Aviation Inc.

Empty hangars at Acadiana Regional Airport and a ready workforce were key reasons New Iberia won out over Tonga, says Rice, Pride Aviation chief executive officer.

The company's three hangars at Acadiana Regional Airport buzz with the sounds of paint sanders as employees refurbish a Boeing 727, an MD-80, a DC-9 and a Cessna 180.

The orange and yellow stripes on the Continental Air MD-80 are being stripped and repainted to match Continental's new color scheme of white and gray with the gold-colored globe on the plane's tail.

The DC-9, a Hawaiian Airline plane bought by Kitty Hawk Airlines, is being converted to a cargo plane from a passenger plane. That plane sat in the Mojave Desert for a while. Much of the work involves removing corrosion.

The Boeing 727 and the Cessna are being repainted.

"It's like getting a new aircraft, once a plane goes through all the checks," Rice says.

Pride signed a contract with Continental Air in early 1991 to paint one narrow-body aircraft weekly for two years, says Jim Bacon, Continental's senior vice president of maintenance contracts. Continental is operating under Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings.

Continental's bankruptcy doesn't affect Pride because "certain maintenance work has to be done," Bacon says.

The contract with Continental makes up about 30 percent of Pride's sales, Rice says.

Pride Aviation, which also has an avionics department, is certified for airline inspections and is seeking contracts with the
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military for helicopter refurbishing. The company is seeking to diversify because of the fluctuating state of the airline industry, Rice says.

The airline industry - driven by too many seats and too few travelers - lost nearly $6 billion in 1990 and 1991 combined.

"This industry is so volatile that one day you may find the prices dropping on flights, and the next day it will change completely," notes analyst Richard Foote with Argus Research of New York.

As airlines gearing up for summer schedules, Pride's workload is up. Airline industry woes have made contract bidding more competitive, Rice says.

"A lot of facilities are sitting open," says Paul Lubomirski, Pride assistant vice president. "There's just not enough work to go around in the aviation industry, which leaves everybody bidding lower."

Meanwhile, Pride is expanding its square footage to more than 100,000 feet from its current 83,000 feet. The company recently increased its monthly payroll to $300,000 from $85,000.

Rice projects the payroll at $65 million annually over the next five years with the added work space. He hopes to employ 350 people, depending on the workload, he says.

Rice, 67, knew little about airplanes in 1989 when he first considered an aircraft refurbishing company. An attorney of Commerce and Industry in April granted Pride tax exemptions and credits under its Enterprise Zone program, designed to attract investment in areas of high unemployment and poverty.

The commerce board granted an estimated $647,240 in state and federal local tax relief over five years for Pride's original $330,000 investment, expected to create 256 permanent jobs, commerce records show.

The Iberia Parish Council and the Iberia Parish School Board also exempted the firm from additional taxes.

The state Board of Commerce and Industry in April granted Pride tax exemptions and credits under its Enterprise Zone program, designed to attract investment in areas of high unemployment and poverty.

"We knew it was the business to get into, but we didn't know where we were going," Rice says.

Rice sold part of his business in 1983. The two men checked Puerto Rico and other Asian countries before landing in Louisiana, he says. "It's kind of like getting your car serviced, Rice says.

Rice recalls.

Rice says Flight 811 prompted the Federal Aviation Administration to issue stronger mandates on aging aircraft. Flight 811 was the United Airlines jumbo jet that suffered a gaping 10-foot hole and sucked nine passengers to their deaths 20,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean in February 1989.

"As long as the craft is airworthy, airline companies often have them refurbished because of the cost of a new aircraft," says FAA spokesman Jack West.

Pride's work on repainting aircraft is "real fine," West says. "It's kind of like getting your car serviced," Rice says.

"Our interest is to turn an aircraft as fast as possible," Rice says.

Prance closed only one day last year - Christmas Day. It operates three shifts around the clock.

Not your typical executive, Rice's work uniform consists of shorts and a casual blue polo shirt with Pride's logo on the pocket. He describes himself as a workaholic. During time off, he rides horses and assists his wife with the 17 horses she owns.

A native of San Francisco, Rice lived in Hawaii 25 years before moving to New Iberia.

Rice first heard about the New Iberia airport through an advertisement in an airline trade publication. When Trans Ocean Airways went bankrupt in February 1990, a search began for a new airport to house the company.

"It's kind of like getting your car serviced," Rice says.

An airline company can have planes repainted and inspected at one time when taking the aircraft out of the sky. Taking a plane out of circulation can cost an airline company up to $40,000 a day in lost revenues, Rice says.

"There's more chances you'll hit by lightning than getting killed in an air crash," Rice says.

Pride's workload is up. "There are more chances you'll hit by lightning than getting killed in an air crash," Rice says.

Pride's original $338,000 investment, including $227,000 in local tax relief over five years for Pride's original $330,000 investment, expected to create 256 permanent jobs, commerce records show.

The company is seeking to diversify because of the fluctuating state of the airline industry, claiming

it is the safest way to travel. None of the airplanes refurbished by Pride have been involved in accidents, Rice says.

"You hear about the problems, but you don't hear about all the man-hours involved with one aircraft," Lubomirski says.

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