

TCOM builds dozen-plus military aerostats

William F. West, Staff Writer

WEEKSVILLE --- U. S. troops operating in Afghanistan are getting a clearer view of Taliban and other enemy forces, thanks to the 22-meter aerostats produced by TCOM workers based in Elizabeth City.

The Columbia, MD based maker of aerostats and airships is close to completing a contract for more than a dozen aerostats for the Defense Department for use in Afghanistan.

The aerostats, being manufactured at TCOM's Manufacturing and Test Flight Facility will be used in the military's Persistent Ground Surveillance System. In such a system, aerostats are equipped with cameras to search an area within several miles of a forward-operating base supporting military operations. More specifically, the craft are used to watch for insurgents, for those trying to plant roadside bombs and for those trying to approach and fire mortar rounds or rockets at U.S. forces. Citing security reasons, TCOM President and Chief Executive Officer David Barlow declined to say exactly how many of the 22-meter aerostats the military has ordered, but the number will be more than a dozen.

Barlow said TCOM is expecting to receive a second contract to make more 22-meter aerostats, which are set to be delivered by the end of the year, if not sooner. The total value of both PGSS contracts is expected to be more than \$50 million.

During his recent visit to the region, U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield, D-N.C., was shown how the aerostats are launched and recovered during a demonstration at the TCOM Manufacturing and Test Flight Facility. The team of TCOM trained personnel who performed the demonstration will be deployed with the aerostat to Afghanistan to handle both it and video feed from its cameras.



Staff Photo by Bill West

The PGSS contract is one of two TCOM currently has with the military. The other, which is worth approximately \$150 million, is for a surveillance system called Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor. JLENS is used to detect cruise missiles fired from extended distances. In its role as a subcontractor for Raytheon on the contract, TCOM is producing four 74-meter aerostats. The plan is for the aerostats to be deployed in pairs.

When operational, two aerostats will carry equipment capable of identifying an incoming missile. The other two will carry precision tracking and intercept capability equipment that can allow military personnel to home in and destroy the missile. Right now, TCOM is wrapping up the initial development phase of the JLENS contract, Barlow said.

Two aerostats carrying payloads will undergo testing in Utah, he said. Other testing will take place at other U.S. facilities. There will be little additional production of aerostats for the JLENS project until the testing is complete. That's not expected to happen until approximately 2013, Barlow said. After the testing is over, the plan calls for production of several more aerostat systems, he said. Both the PGSS and JLENS projects have had economic benefits for the state. "Between those two contracts over the last two years, I believe we have let more than \$10 million worth of purchase orders to North Carolina companies," he said.

TCOM is also currently working with a number of companies to build the hulls of non-tethered airships for commercial applications. Barlow declined to name the companies, but said possible uses of the technology include airships that would float heavy equipment to remote outposts and oil and gas wells in northwestern Canada during the winter. Currently such equipment has to be hauled by truck over ice-covered lakes and rivers.

