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Friday, Jan 26, 2007

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Robins C-5 division earns coveted award

By Gene Rector
 TELEGRAPH STAFF WRITER

ROBINS AIR FORCE BASE - The C-5 maintenance line at Robins Air Force Base achieved "world class" recognition last May. Wednesday, a throng of base officials and aircraft mechanics received the trophy.



Danny Gilleland / macon.com

The Franz Edelman Trophy sits on the back ramp of a C-5 aircraft Wednesday morning after it was presented to the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center. Maj. Gen. Tom Owens and other officials are shown in the background.

■ [Photo gallery | Air Logistics Center honored](#)

Mark Doherty, executive director of the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences, presented Maj. Gen. Tom Owen with the 2006 Franz Edelman Award, saying he was "in awe of the base, the aircraft and the local work force." Owen commands the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center at Robins.

The C-5 team at Robins is the first Defense Department agency to take the coveted Edelman prize, described as the "Super Bowl" of operational research.

The Maryland-based institute is an international scientific society with more than 10,000 members, including Nobel Prize laureates, focused on applying scientific methods to improve decision making, management and operations, according to its Web site.

The award is named in memory of Franz Edelman, a native of Germany and for many years an RCA Corp. engineer.

Other finalists for the 2006 honor were Animal Health Institute and Cox Associates, the U.S. Commercial Aviation Partnership, Ormya Hustadmarmor and Molde University of Norway and Travelocity and Sabre Holdings. Past winners include General Motors, Motorola, Continental Airlines and the San Francisco Police Department.

Robins was recognized for using critical chain project management to reduce the time required to overhaul the massive cargo aircraft from 240 days two years ago to a current average of 160 days. The reduced maintenance interval also enabled the base to cut the average number of C-5s on base from 12 to seven. Critical chain management gives workers a systematic method for prioritizing workload and focusing on critical tasks.

Owen called the Edelman award a tremendous honor. He said the reduction in maintenance flow days places more C-5s in the hands of warfighters.

"The C-5 is essential to the war on terror," the general told the work force team. "It does the heavy lifting. Our challenge is to prove we earned this award by continuing down the path of process improvement."

The center commander headed the Robins C-5 team in the late 1990s when the workload transitioned from Kelly Air Force Base, Texas.

"I had that job for 39 months," Owen said Wednesday, "and the numbers we talked about today are beyond our wildest imagination."

He praised the work force and close partnerships with industry and academia. "This kind of teamwork allows you to achieve great things," Owen said.

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Michael Abrams, a planner on the C-5 team and a Robins employee since 1981, called the Edelman award an "awesome achievement" considering the level of competition.

Abrams said the work force is focused on getting safe aircraft back to warfighters as quickly as possible.

Jackson Fields, a hydraulics technician, has been part of the process improvement since 2000. He said cutting maintenance flow days on the Lockheed jet was "a very big deal."

"When I first got here, it took us almost a year to get aircraft out," Fields recalled. "But we went through a lot of new processes and a lot of training. We also had a lot of fresh, new ideas that got listened to."

Production flight chief David Johnson credited a determined work force and the use of process improvement techniques for cutting the overhaul interval.

"The use of Lean concepts gave us an avenue to start asking the mechanics for ideas on how to run the business," he said. "They're the experts. They know how to work these airplanes. They're professionals. They know how to get the job done."

Lean is a process developed by Japanese manufacturer Toyota for identifying and eliminating waste and inefficiency.

"That began to reduce flow days in 2001," Johnson said, "and with critical chain project management in 2005 we got a drastic reduction to 160 days."

Johnson, who began working at Robins in 1997, believes additional improvements are possible. "I think we can take it even further," he pointed out. "Our goal for 2007 is to achieve 140 flow days."

He said the Edelman Award is huge for Robins because it brings international recognition. "It means we're competing against the private sector and we're winning," Johnson said. "That's something you would not have seen 10 years ago."

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