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Zivko Aeronautics Makes Airplanes, Composites for Top-Secret Projects

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GUTHRIE ? Top-secret prototypes are engineered for some of the country's  largest aircraft manufacturers in two metal buildings just outside Guthrie.

If lucky enough to get the 50-cent tour at Zivko Aeronautics Inc., at the Guthrie-Edmond Regional Airport the visitor may see parts being worked on but won't find out what they are. For example, on a recent weekday, asking about a mold on which an engineer was working halted the conversation for a moment.

"I'm not at liberty to tell you about that," said Dan Bierly, who works in technical marketing for Zivko.

Some days visitors aren't allowed in the hangars where prototypes are built for companies such as Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman and for clients such as the U.S. Navy.

"A lot of what we're working on is cutting edge work and products that our customers don't want publicized yet. They certainly don't want the competition to see it," Bierly said.

Zivko also specializes in designing, engineering and building aerospace composite structures such as instrument racks or payload enclosures. Some of

these are being used on unmanned aerial vehicles such as the Predator, which is flown in Iraq. Other enclosures are built to house meteorological equipment for work such as cloud or ocean studies. The company does a lot of work for CIRPAS, the Center for Interdisciplinary Remotely Piloted Aircraft Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., Bierly said.

Zivko also builds acrobatic planes. Its Edge 540 and Edge 540-T planes are flown by racers such as Kirby Chambliss in events such as the Red Bull Air Race, which was held in various countries six times this year.

Bierly said, in an air race, the planes fly about 50-feet above the ground through enormous inflatable pylons, reaching speeds of 250 to 300 mph.

"This is the fun, exciting, flashy part of the business," Bierly said. "It used to be the largest part of our business, now with our prototype and composite work; it's become a smaller part."

Zivko was founded in 1988 in Oklahoma City by Bill and Judy Zivko. The company moved to Guthrie in 1991.

Bierly said Bill Zivko grew up in the aircraft business, first working as a mechanic, then as a composite shop manager in California. He followed a job to Oklahoma and soon after started his own business.

"Through contacts he had made, he found there was a need for replacement wings on acrobatic aircraft," Bierly said. "After doing a few wings, he decided he could do an airplane from the ground up much better."

In the past 15 years, Zivko has expanded its space in Guthrie three times. It's expanding again, building onto its hangar space.

The company has 25 employees, but Bierly said that will grow as the work area grows. The company also uses a pool of contract pilots and mechanics to fly its

planes when necessary. A full-time pilot and mechanic are stationed in Monterey, Calif.

Bierly said the Zivkos are fiercely proud of the fact that they've grown without the benefit of venture capital.

"We're self-funded. All our growth is done in-house," he said.

When asked if he'd ever gotten to fly in one of the acrobatic planes Zivko builds, Bierly said, "Just once. I got to fly in a two-seater. I walked around with a stiff neck and a smile on my face for about a week."

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