

Friday, May 23, 2008

ATI Allvac forging a bright future

\$260M plant in Monroe to add jobs, expand role in U.S. aircraft industry

Charlotte Business Journal - by Ken Elkins Staff writer

Production starts next month at a \$260 million titanium alloy forging plant in Monroe as ATI Allvac boosts its presence in the aerospace industry and prepares to grow to 1,225 employees in Union County.

ATI Allvac's parent, Pittsburgh-based Allegheny Technologies Inc., is investing \$800 million in a plant to meet rising demand for titanium and other alloys used in redesigned aircraft, which are expected to increase their titanium content by as much as five times the current levels.

Much of the growth in production will occur in the Charlotte region. ATI, which ranks as Monroe's second-largest employer behind Tyson Foods Inc., already has 1,100 employees in that city. The company will add 125 workers within a year at the new, 400,000-square-foot plant in AeroPointe Industrial Centre. The plant is in the Bakers community, near the Charlotte-Monroe Executive Airport, formerly known as the Monroe Regional Airport.

"While Monroe's core industries have been associated with aerospace for decades, ATI Allvac's record commitment is the pinnacle of a five-year wave of investments that has solidified Monroe as the center for aerospace manufacturing within the Charlotte region," says Chris Platé, director of Monroe Economic Development.

ATI Allvac also has 350 employees at its Richburg plant in Chester County.

Next month, the new Monroe plant's first group of employees will begin inspecting, cutting and polishing up to 30-foot billets of titanium alloys before they're shipped to customers.

The plant's additional functions -- primarily pressing and forging operations -- are to be added by the third quarter of 2009, says John Sims, ATI Allvac vice president of operations.

Allegheny Technologies recently hosted a visit by trade-publication writers from around the country, showing off ATI Allvac's 3,000-degree plasma arc melting furnace that formulates 17,500-pound billets of titanium alloy. The company also makes nickel-based superalloys and steel-based alloys in Monroe and Richburg.

Hunter Dalton, who became president of ATI Allvac last month, says Allegheny Technologies is reorganizing to create a "company within a company" to ramp up superalloy production for the aircraft industry.

The titanium content of airliners is being increased to more than 100,000 pounds per airplane from the current 30,000 pounds, he says. Plus, many aging planes will be replaced in the next decade, Dalton says.

"You put the two together and you have aircraft with a fivefold increase in titanium, (production) schedules as high as they've ever been ... and you see there is a tremendous demand not only now but in the future for the materials," he says.

ATI Allvac's customers include engine makers General Electric Co. and Pratt & Whitney and airframe makers such as The Boeing Co. and Airbus S.A.S.

Airframe manufacturers are using larger amounts of titanium because it's stronger than aluminium but not as heavy as steel, Dalton says. And aircraft engine makers are using titanium for its heat-tolerant capabilities in more fuel-efficient engines, which operate at higher temperatures.

As part of its investment in superalloy production, Allegheny Technologies also is building refining plants in Utah and Oregon.

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