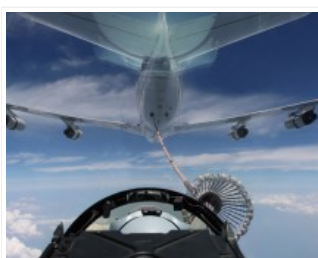


## Outsourced Flight Support: Omega Air Refueling Services, Inc.



Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on August 22, 2011

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A Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) F/A-18F Super Hornet refuels from a K-707 Omega tanker during Exercise Bersama Shield 2011. Australian Department of Defense photo

The use of commercial contractors for flight support activities by DoD and the U.S. government has steadily increased over the last decade. From airlift and in-flight refueling services to red/orange-air support, private firms are stepping in to fill training and operational voids created as the U.S. military has expanded its commitments around the world while drawing down the total force.

With deeper cutbacks in defense spending looming, DMN will profile several firms providing outsourced flight support to U.S. armed forces and examine the trends potential for expansion. We begin with [Omega Air Refueling Services, Inc. \(OARS\)](#).

Headquartered in Alexandria, Va., OARS is the only company in the world conducting commercial in-flight refueling services. Operating with two Boeing 707-300s and a DC-10 (designated K-707 and KDC-10) specially converted for probe-and-drogue air to air refueling, the firm serves clients including the U.S. Navy, FMS customers (including the RAAF, RAF and RMAF) and defense contractors (Boeing, etc).

The U.S Navy and Marine Corps are the main customers for OARS via a Commercial Air Services (CAS) contract managed by Naval Air Systems Command's PMA-207.5. The firm began operations as a subcontractor to Flight International/L-3 Communications from 2001 to 2006, flying a single K-707. Another K-707 entered service in 2006, and by 2007 OARS became the prime contractor.

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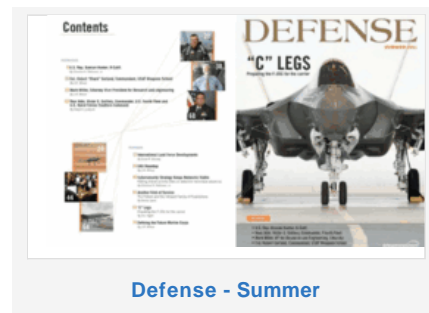
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The company is the brainchild of Irish real estate moguls and aviation entrepreneurs Ulick and Desmond McEvaddy. In the mid-1990s, the brothers recognized an opportunity in the wake of studies performed by the U.S. Navy a decade earlier exploring a Land Based Tanker (LBT) concept. The LBT would have provided the USN with a capability it lacks to this day – “big-wing” organic tanking to support carrier strike groups. The expense of the project and staunch Air Force opposition effectively killed the program.



RAAF F/A-18F Super Hornets fly with an Omega K-707 tanker for refueling during Exercise Bersama Shield 2011. RAAF Amberley's Super Hornets had deployed on their first overseas exercise as they joined air, ground and naval forces from Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom for exercise Bersama Shield 2011. Omega Air Refueling provided tanking support for the RAAF during the exercise. Australian Department of Defense photo

But the McEvaddys' vision required no support from DoD, the U.S. Air Force, or the government. In the late 1990s Omega Air, Inc., in conjunction with BAE Systems and TRACOR, converted a former Pan American Airlines B-707-300 (at its own expense) into a K-707. Modified from its inception to perform only probe and drogue refueling, the aircraft employs a unique centerline refueling station located in the aft fuselage with dual redundant hoses.

This offers two distinct advantages for U.S. Navy tactical jets. Because the Air Force uses a flying boom refueling system, its KC-135s have to be reconfigured for Navy tanking with a hose fitted to the Stratotanker's boom.

“We call it the ‘Iron Maiden’ because their drogue is like running into a basket made of concrete,” says Ed “Cube” Bouillanne, Omega’s CEO, a retired S-3 Viking NFO. “But the Navy pilots tell us all the time that we have the best basket presentation and smoothest air around because our centerline station and long hoses put the baskets down low enough to do away with most of the turbulence generated by our airplanes.”

*The smooth air makes it easier for inexperienced “nugget” pilots to learn in-flight refueling. Omega’s dual redundant system also allows one hose to be substituted for another in the event that a refueling aircraft damages the drogue or “basket” when attempting to plug in, a scenario wherein a KC-135 would have to abort the mission.*

The company’s initial K-707 first flew in 1999. Subsequently, Omega solicited the Navy and won approval for testing at NAS Patuxent River, Md. The company funded the certification trials itself. Omega’s KDC-10 (a modified DC-10-40 with FRL wing pods, allowing simultaneous refueling of two aircraft) went through the same certification and joined the fleet in 2008.



An Omega Air Boeing K-707 tanker aircraft showing the unique centerline aerial refueling system of the aircraft with its dual hose and drogue refueling gear stowed. DoD photo

The firm’s professionalism and flexibility are well recognized by naval aviation leadership, according to Omega’s president and retired Navy fighter pilot W. Stewart “Bud” Orr.

“Almost all of the flag officers currently in the naval aviation hierarchy have tanked off us and endorse us wholeheartedly,” he affirms, adding that OARS’ reliability is key to its success.

Based at San Antonio International Airport, Texas, OARS tankers fly from east and west coast naval air stations – including Point Mugu and Oceana – to provide fleet tanking support, and are scheduled by the Navy’s Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility, Virginia Capes.

The Navy loves us,” Orr continues. “We’re there when they need us and the Air Force is often a no-show even when they say they’re going to be there.”

Bouillanne explains that the while the Navy has a funding arrangement with the Air Force as its primary source for in-flight refueling, Navy aircraft have lower priority in the Air Force’s schedule.

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for tanker support. Thus, naval units requesting support for a range of domestic operations, including squadron-level training requirements, Navy and joint exercises (JTFX, COMPTUEX) and cross-county "drags" for air wing/squadron training deployments, are often stood up by Air Force tankers.

"The Navy might request tanker support from the Air Force 100 percent of the time and get an 85 percent response on the east coast and only a 40 percent response from them on the west coast," Bouillanne says.

*"The Navy understands that if they've got a carrier battlegroup off the coast of San Diego training for their deployment cycle and the Air Force doesn't show up to support them it's very costly," he adds. "That carrier is out there at a couple million dollars a day and without big-wing tanking that really affects their ability to fly all of the training sorties they need to fly."*

That's where OARS steps in, providing support to the Navy for the types of missions mentioned above at a cost of \$8,136 per flight hour. The CAS arrangement is a "dry contract", meaning that the Navy compensates Omega for the use of its airframe, the gas the tanker burns, the aircrews it employs (all highly experienced ex-USAF/USN personnel) and associated expenses. The only direct cost to squadrons/units utilizing OARS services is the fuel they offload from the tankers. The cost of the fuel is the current government price for JP-5 or JP-8 fuel.

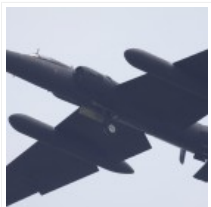
OARS' plans for growth in the near term are modest, although the company's founders and management make a strong case for greater outsourced tanking support in the future. They contend that OARS-type private tankers are a more reliable, more cost-effective way of providing aerial refueling support for the Navy than reliance on Air Force tanking.

The firm recently purchased three ex-RAAF 707 tankers to bring it back up to strength after losing one of its K-707s in a takeoff mishap at NAS Point Mugu, Calif., in May. The added tankers will restore the company's mix of two K-707s and a KDC-10 by October, with potential for more growth if needed.

Future business opportunities could include tanking MV/CV-22s and providing tanking support to the Marine Corps' III MEF on Guam. Bud Orr sees the coming budget reductions as a double-edged sword.

"It could go either way for us," he acknowledges. "They could cut so far down they could even cut our very small budget out."

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