

MEMBER PROFILE

WYSONG ENTERPRISES

LOCATION:
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Wysong Enterprises devoted a large amount of man-hours to complete an extensive refurbishment of this Bell 206 L1, including the avionics, interior, windows, paint and maintenance.

WEBSITE:
www.wysongusa.com

FOUNDED BY:
Steve Wysong

WHAT THEY DO: Wysong Enterprises is an FAA-certified repair station providing full-service maintenance, repair, avionics, completions and paint for rotorcraft.

EMPLOYEES: More than 40

DATE FOUNDED: February 1989

AEA MEMBER SINCE: 1997

Wysong Enterprises Expands Rotorcraft Expertise to More Markets

STORY BY CHRISTINE KNAUER

The TV station helicopters buzzing over O.J. Simpson's slow-speed chase in California, the pool helicopter capturing wrenching footage of Hurricane Katrina's devastation in New Orleans, and countless other airborne news broadcasts around the country have been made possible by Wysong Enterprises Inc., the Tennessee-based company specializing in outfitting TV station helicopters.

With recession economics driving television stations to reduce or eliminate their airborne coverage, Wysong Enterprises began concentrating on other markets: law enforcement, emergency medical service (EMS), corporate and special-mission helicopters. The transition is proving successful.

"About one-third of our business is now law enforcement completions; one-third is EMS completions; and the other third is mainly executive-type completions and special missions," said Steve Wysong, president and founder of Wysong Enterprises.

With new market segment growth, the 20-year-old FAA-certified repair station has expanded from two employees to

more than 40 employees occupying three separate hangar facilities. Along with making smart adjustments, patience has played a key role.

"We continue to make growth and business decisions with long-term goals in mind instead of the immediate monthly or quarterly returns that drive larger, investor-owned companies," said Rodney Wysong, vice president of the company and the founder's son.

One of the few independent, family-

owned and -operated helicopter completion centers in the industry, Wysong Enterprises provides avionics installations, sheet-metal work, interior completions, paint and maintenance. The 30,000-square-foot service center is on the Tri-Cities Regional Airport (TRI) in Blountville, Tenn.

"We're still 99 percent helicopters," Steve said. "Once in a while we'll do a transponder check on an airplane for

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Founded in 1989, Wysong Enterprises provides full-service maintenance, repair, avionics, completions and paint for rotorcraft.

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someone locally here but our core business is helicopter completions.”

Wysong Enterprises actually began transitioning to additional market segments 11 years ago, when the company took on some EMS helicopter completions and began offering paint capabilities.

“My background has been mostly avionics, but we’ve diversified into other areas,” said Steve, who began his career in avionics at Collins Radio in 1975.

“We got into the painting business about 11 years ago. Even though it is a labor-intensive business and not very highly profitable because of the labor, it does help draw other work in for us. When you’re doing quality paintwork, people see it and think if the paint looks that good they must do good electronics work and good interior work, too. Plus, some contracts we bid on require that you do paint,” he said.

The company’s EPA-approved, downdraft paint booth, a modified version of one used for tractor-trailers, features a two-million-BTU heater. It controls the temperature, slows down the fans, turns out the lights and bakes the paint for about 15 to 20 minutes, which helps the paint dry better and adhere to the surface better. The quick drying time decreases the time between coats, which in turn speeds up delivery.

“The downdraft system makes for a lot cleaner paint job, too, because with the downdraft you’re not sucking air in from the outside as much. You’re blowing it in, which is all filtered,” Steve said. “If you have a cross-flow booth, you get a lot more dirt in the paint and you have to buff all that out. In a pressurized downdraft booth, you get virtually no dirt in the paint. We also go back and clear coat the aircraft, which helps the paint last longer and makes it look a lot nicer. You don’t have any rough edges where the lines are.”

Avionics Installation Trends

As for avionics installations, Wysong Enterprises is seeing a great deal of interest in flat panels. The company recently modified an OH-58 law enforcement helicopter, transforming it with a state-of-the-art glass cockpit with Sagem Avionics flat-panel displays.

“We’re also doing a lot of the flight following tracking systems,” Steve said. “One of our customers is using the system by SkyTrac. We can bring it up on the computer here and see where every aircraft is anywhere in the country, whether it’s flying or on the ground, its heading and speed.”

Traffic alert and collision avoidance systems (TCAS), a staple in the fixed-wing category, are becoming more popular in the rotorcraft segment, especially among EMS operators, according to Steve.

“There’s also a lot of newer technology to aid nighttime flying,” he said. “We’re starting to put in more of the small infrared cameras in helicopters for the enhanced vision systems, which allows operators to see the area under them in the dark, showing up obstacles they might not see otherwise.”

XM weather systems are especially popular among helicopter operators right now, especially because they do not have to invest in an onboard radar system, according to Steve.

“Helicopters really don’t have an area where you can put on a weather radar anyway. The system gives them better weather updates than an onboard radar, and they can do it all through their existing displays,” he said. “We do a lot of the Garmin 530s, where we’re putting XM weather radar in there. This is a big plus for the helicopter guys because most of them are flying VFR and they need to stay out of the bad weather.”

Everyday Challenges, Sound Advice

After 35 years in the industry, Steve has faced a fair number of challenges and garnered enough experience to offer some sage advice when asked.

“My comment to these TV stations over these years has been that you want to report the news not create the news. It seems like they lost focus — sometimes, they get so busy trying to promote the helicopter and talk to the pilot,” said Steve, referring to mid-air collisions among TV helicopters.

While today’s complex avionics systems might be user-friendly and easy to operate, Steve’s not sure all operators understand what it takes to install them. He continually has to educate customers who have unrealistic expectations.

“Technology is changing and everything is being upgraded,” Steve said. “It seems like the equipment is changing out before it has time to have much usage on it. One of the big changes we’ve seen is that when we used to do an install, we would bring all the wiring out and turn on everything, and if something didn’t work, it probably had a box problem. Now, we have to spend two or three days setting up the interfacing between all the equipment to make sure this box is talking to that box, that everything is compatible, before you can even figure out if you have a problem or not.

“It’s kind of a whole different way of doing avionics. You just can’t pull a radio out and slide a new one in and go fly. You have to actually go in there and calibrate your OBS indicator to the radio, and that’s done through a software set-up. It’s not necessarily plug-and-play. I don’t think some people really understand that,” he said.

Although panel-mount systems must be installed by qualified service centers, Steve suspects an increasing number of portable systems might need stronger regulation.

“It’s almost like having a whole radio package in a portable unit that you set on your dash. While you’re only supposed to use it for reference, I’m seeing a lot of pilots relying on it. I think they have to be a little careful. It’s not really certified to be used that way,” he said.

For Rodney, changing regulatory demands from various governmental organizations is one of the company’s biggest challenges.

“They are making it harder for smaller organizations to stay in compliance with the requirements for our industry. A small business owner in our industry must now deal with many issues other than aviation safety and expertise,” Rodney said. “We have regulations that must be addressed concerning security, immigration, account-

ing and social issues. ‘HR’ has become a common term and department today, and I don’t think the word existed a few years ago.

“All of these requirements cost the small business operator money, so effectively, it means that companies must grow in order to afford the manpower to address these issues,” he said.

Keeping Customers Happy

For Wysong Enterprises, keeping the business growing means keeping customers happy and treating them like family.

“I’m old-school,” Steve said. “I try to treat each customer like a person, not just a number, and show them that their aircraft is important to us.

“We really stress aftermarket support.

If a customer has an issue, they can call us anytime and we’ll try to help. This came from our days in the TV helicopter business. Those aircraft had to be able to fly 24 hours a day in case of a big, breaking story like O.J. or Katrina,” he said.

Aviation and electronics have been Steve’s life-long passions. Although it can be hard work at times, he truly enjoys owning and operating his own business.

“Except for a couple of years, I’ve pretty much always had my own business. I’ve found once you’ve had your own business, it’s hard to go to work for someone else when you’re used to being your own boss. I like what I do. I don’t feel like it’s a job. It’s kind of like a hobby. I get paid for the hobby, which is kind of neat,” he said. □