

LOCAL



ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

Fueling stations, two of 12, undergo final assembly at Bryant Fuel Systems' 32nd Street location for delivery to Alabama. Bryant Fuel Systems demonstrated a helicopter "hot fueling" system at a U.S. Army base in Alabama in 1991, shortly after the company's founding. It left thinking it was on track to winning a federal contract. And it was. But because of bureaucratic and other delays, the contract to build and deliver 12 helicopter fueling systems didn't arrive until recently. Persistence finally paid off for a company that, in the meantime, has become an innovative leader in its field.



Assembled at Bryant Fuel Systems in Bakersfield is Jeff Peacon, left, vice president of sales and marketing; George Adam, director of sales; David Wells, president and CEO; and Eric Deavers, vice president of manufacturing.



This fueling station, one of 12, is ready for delivery to Alabama.



A welder works on a saddle for a 20,000-gallon tank for a local customer.

BRYANT

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certainly," he added. "But fast-forward 28 years and I'm very, very grateful and thankful that we have the ownership and the management that we now have that understand the significance of our system."

CAUSE FOR DELAY

Over the years he has gathered that the Army took so long to order the tanks not because it decided it didn't want them but because it was going to cost too much money to connect them to the necessary power source. The company says personnel changes at Fort Rucker, the Army's primary training base for helicopter pilots, may also have contributed to the delay.

Bryant has since addressed the power supply issue by building tanks with their own electrical generation. It has sold them to the U.S. military for use in remote regions of Afghanistan, Colombia, Kenya, Panama and elsewhere.

Working out of a cramped shop near the Garces Memorial Traffic Circle, Bryant has so far completed two of the 10,000-gallon, 18-ton tanks for Fort Rucker, and it's in

the middle of manufacturing two more.

ALL IN ONE

The 30-foot-long tanks come with a sophisticated fuel filtration system and 40-kilowatt generators mounted on a slide-out platform. There's a lockable, 12-foot-high "doghouse" where stainless steel pipes and electrical equipment are installed.

The system is capable of pumping 200 gallons of fuel per minute with a vapor return efficiency of 97.7 percent — safe enough that one is in use indoors at the Bellagio Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Bryant's tanks are certified as meeting the exacting standards of Underwriters Laboratories.

Retired Army Maj. Gen. Robert Thrasher worked with Bryant early on to guide the company through government permitting. He said the tanks' above-ground status was more important in the late 1980s — a time of concern about leaking underground tanks contaminating groundwater — than the ability to "hot-fuel" aircraft, which he nevertheless described as "a magic thing."

MISSED POTENTIAL

He noted that while military officials saw potential in Bryant's technology, the company was largely



Inside one of 12 fueling stations being manufactured by Bryant Fuel Systems, Dillon Allen, left, and Toby McCaslin work on final assembly for delivery to Alabama.

overlooked and badly underfunded.

"The need was there. The technology was there, and they had a unique technology," Thrasher said. "But either the marketing wasn't displayed properly or the

right people didn't get the message."

Someone else who was deeply familiar with Bryant's technological capabilities during the early days, retired Chief California Fire Marshal James F. "Jim"

McMullen, said the safety and mobility of the company's tanks made them very attractive.

Had the Army moved forward and bought Bryant tanks in the early 1990s, he said, it would have been a "huge order" for the company.

"It would've thrust them right into the big leagues, in my opinion," he said.

ON THE VERGE

By Bryant's count, its tanks can now be found on 61 military bases around the world and most of them serve aircraft fueling. But the individual purchase orders have been relatively modest, generally calling for one, two or three tanks at a time.

That's probably going to change soon, said Sales Director Adam and Sales and Marketing Vice President

Jeff Peacon.

They said the company's roughly two dozen employees are busy, sometimes working double shifts, to finish the order for Fort Rucker.

There's so much work that the company is weighing financing options as part of an expansion plan, Peacon said. He added the company's sales pipeline, which languished at \$350,000 just three years ago, now is nearing \$18 million.

Adam said Bryant is hearing lately from potential customers around the world, sometimes receiving multiple inquiries a day. In all his years with the company, he said he's never experienced such high customer interest.

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