



Brothers and business owners Damon Balch (left) and Tyson Grenzebach (right) stand in front of a newly painted aircraft.



LANDLOCKED AVIATION

BROTHERS' NAPKIN NOTES GROW INTO SUCCESSFUL AIRCRAFT REFINISHING COMPANY ~ BY EMILY FONTENOT

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Landlocked Aviation Services has been making time-worn airliners look like new again for nearly a year now in its giant paint hangars at Chennault International Airport.

The young company's rise to one of six major aircraft painting companies in the nation began as only the best do: a cup of a coffee, a great idea and a napkin.

It was New Year's Day, the start of 2017, and brothers Tyson Grenzebach and Damon Balch found themselves sitting at a Lake Charles coffee shop, catching up on the past 20 years.

They talked about wives, kids and careers. The older of the two, Balch, was raised in Washington State, while Grenzebach grew up on a sailboat in the South Pacific, and their lives had rarely intersected.

During those years apart, Balch made a name for himself in the world of media management, mainly running radio and TV stations, and Grenzebach built a solid reputation in the aviation service industry.

As their conversation progressed, it became clear both brothers were looking for a change, and that both had something the other needed: Balch had experience in advertising and sales, and Grenzebach had connections in the aviation industry, along with two decades of experience.

Grenzebach had put down roots in Lake Charles, providing aviation painting services as a sub-contractor, but was looking to expand and become a 145 Repair Station. At the same time, Balch was looking for an opportunity to walk away from his ad company.

"Ultimately, we sat down and, on a

napkin, put a business plan together and signed it," Balch said. "We still have that napkin."

Within eight short months, Landlocked Aviation Services was licensed by the Federal Aviation Administration as an airplane refinishing company; the two had signed a 25-year lease with Chennault for three massive aviation hangars; and Balch had settled into his new home in Lake Charles, near his brother.

THE BUSINESS

As Grenzebach phrased it, "It's not just a two-inch brush painting — a fence post kind of thing." Refinishing an airplane provides more than just a glossy new exterior; it plays a major role in determining how long the plane will last and how safe it will be, and it requires a "high-level skill set."

Crews must strip the plane's surface down to metal, treat it, prime it and apply the paint to comply with the airline's design.

The average airplane needs to be repainted every five to seven years because small objects constantly batter its frame. But taking an airplane out of circulation even temporarily is expensive. So airlines are interested in quick turnarounds and low prices.

That's where Landlocked has an advantage over the others. Because of its lean business model and 24-hour schedule, the company can have an airplane painted in eight days instead of 10, and at a much lower cost.

"They like hearing that," Balch said. "If they're painting 100 airplanes, and



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they're saving \$10,000-\$20,000 per aircraft, that adds up."

Since Landlocked is the youngest of the nation's six major painting companies, Balch said many of the airlines haven't heard of them yet. "When I call them up or I email them, they like the idea that there's another option," he said.

He said clients are also pleased to learn that one of the two owners will be onsite at all times overseeing the project. Landlocked's clients include Northrop Grumman, Delta Airlines and Virgin Airlines, and Balch said new business is coming in faster than they can take it.

EXPANSION

Chennault is in the process of upgrading and expanding Landlocked's hangar space so that the company can continue to grow.

"We're getting requests weekly to do more work, but we have to turn it away because we only have so much room," said Balch, adding Landlocked "could bring in two to three times as much business as we're doing now."

Landlocked is currently able to paint 70-80 planes a year. But with the additional space, it expects to paint as many as 160.

Renovations will allow crews to start

using Hangar E for painting and G for strip and prep work. The hangars should be ready in the fall.

Balch said a big benefit of working at Chennault is that the airport has room to grow, while many painting companies are jammed together with other tenants and competing for space. The airport's large runway, capable of handling any aircraft in the world, is also a plus.

"It's a state-of-the-art airport and landing runway, so there are no restrictions as far as that goes," Balch said, adding that its cavernous hangars can handle wide-body planes with ease.

MORE JOBS

Landlocked currently has around 80 employees: about 65 in Lake Charles and the rest at a small satellite facility in Oklahoma.

But Balch said they expect to hire up to 100 people as a result of the expansion. All new employees receive specialty training, and they come from vastly different backgrounds.

"It's fun to see a person come in that has zero experience in the aviation industry. They need a job or are working somewhere else, and want to change careers," Balch said.

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He said Landlocked is “committed to hiring people locally here in Lake Charles.” About 90 percent of its employees are from the surrounding area.

Balch said working with people is by far his favorite part of the job. He told the story of a Lake Charles man who worked as a fitness trainer before applying for a job at Landlocked Aviation Services.

“The guy had zero experience, and he’s one of our top employees now,” Balch said. “He’s been here a year and a couple months — a great family guy, and he works hard. It’s fun to see that he’s making way more money. We’re giving him raises all the time.”

Grenzebach, too, said his favorite part of the job has been watching people’s lives change for the better.

“I love taking part in the community and hiring people and seeing people raise families,” Grenzebach said. “It’s pretty exciting.”

THE NAME

If Balch is the polished vice president, Grenzebach is the CEO who prides himself on never wearing a tie.

He’s had a lifelong love of all things travel, from boats to racecars to airplanes. “I have wanderlust in my blood, for sure,” as he puts it.

Grenzebach said that through the years he often used the word “landlocked” to describe how he felt working jobs in

the Midwest, away from the sea, and he eventually incorporated the term into the company’s title.

Grenzebach said he “fell in love with the romance of aviation” early on and enjoys how it allows him to travel, most recently to New Zealand on a marketing trip.

He seems to have rubbed off on his cautious older brother, who recently got a sailboat of his own.

The two said they feel fortunate to have crossed paths at this stage in their lives and to have found a network of support in the Southwest Louisiana community. “We’ve been very fortunate as a small business to have incredible support from Chennault, the community, the state, our customers, our vendors and our employees,” said Grenzebach. “We’ve been very, very fortunate.”

Chennault’s executive director Kevin Melton called Landlocked a shining example of how Chennault can help a business to start, expand and grow jobs in the community.

“We, at Chennault, don’t consider Landlocked Aviation Services a tenant, but a family member,” said Melton. “This is a relationship we foster for all of our tenants. We want to ensure a collaborative approach so they have benchmark facilities to enable their growth — an effort that is a win-win for both of us.”

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