Safran USA is a major player in commercial and military aviation, but its name is still largely unknown in the U.S.

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By: Robert W. Moorman

In French, Safran means "rudder blade." Which is an appropriate name for an international high technology group that has brought together disparate businesses from aerospace, defense and security and steered them in the same direction.

The transatlantic partnership between Safran and its continually expanding U.S. division, Safran USA, is particularly noteworthy. The company doubled in size in the past three years through organic growth and acquisitions. Its legacy companies have been operating in the U.S. for 30 years and employs 6,500 workers in 22 states and 56 locations, through 31 companies and joint ventures; it is the most extensive group outside of France.

For a division whose seat of power remains in France, Safran USA is well entrenched and respected. Why then does the company have an identity crisis? "We are not a prime [contractor]," said Peter Lengyel, president and CEO of Safran USA, whose headquarters is in Arlington, Virginia. "There are very few things that we produce nose-to-tail. Yet we are a tier-one supplier for the primes."

Indeed they are. Safran USA has facilities throughout the country, but its footprint in Grand Prairie, Texas is big even by that state's standards. Rotorcraft engine manufacturer, assembler and MRO Turbomeca USA, Sagem Avionics and Microturbo Inc. are in the Lone Star state. CFM Materials – a joint venture between CFM International and its parent companies, GE and Snecma, which supplies parts to CFM aviation customers worldwide – is a neighbor. Labinal, producer of electrical wiring systems for aircraft, is 40 miles down the road in Corinth, Texas. And CFAN, a Safran supplier in San Marcos, Texas, composite fan blades for the GE90 engine, powerplant for the Boeing 777. Sagem Avionics is a world leader in helicopter flight control and onboard information systems, and is in charge of the complete autopilot system for the UH-72A Lakota helicopter, and the flight controls for the Bell 429. In addition, Sagem is an industry leader in commercial aerospace avionics, including helicopter autopilot systems, airplane flight control components, aircraft condition and monitoring systems, flight operations quality assurance software, and an authorized repair and overhaul center for commercial aerospace components. Messier-Bugatti-Dowty provides landing gears, wheels and brakes for many aircraft.

In defense, Safran contributes significantly to the U.S. Department of Defense technology demonstrations, such as Snecma Propulsion Solide's carbon composite divergent seals for General Electric's F414 (F/A-18E/F) and Pratt & Whitney's F100 engines (F-16), which are currently being flight-tested by the US Navy and US Air Force, respectively. Vectronix, a Sagem affiliate, supplies laser rangefinders to the US Army and the US Marines. Turbomeca subsidiary Microturbo is currently supplying jet engines for US drones and targets, and recently won the US Navy Subscale Subsonic Aerial Target competition.

Safran and Honeywell recently signed an agreement to create an electric taxiing system that will use an airplane's Auxiliary Power Unit (APU) generator to power motors in the main wheels without using primary engines while on the ground. The decrease of 4% of total fuel consumption used during taxing will save airlines several hundred thousand dollars per year.

On a Mission

Lengyel said his primary mission is to raise awareness about the U.S. division, find what he calls "transverse synergies" within the operation to create a more effective message for commercial and government customers, and get back to basics.

Lengyel, president of Safran USA since late last year, is candid about the challenges that lie ahead for this U.S.
based operation, particularly on the defense side. "We know that this will be a challenging market in the near term as we face sequestration" – the automatic defense budget cuts that will take effect in January 2013, unless Congress can find a compromise.

Yet, he added: "the militarization of our commercially available products is part of our appeal from a pricing and speed-to-market perspective." Prior to joining Safran, Lengyel was a career U.S. Navy officer, last serving as the naval attaché at the American Embassy in Paris.

Despite the challenges, there is little doubt in France and among various industry experts of the value of Safran's U.S. based division. Safran operates in 57 countries and employs 60,000 people. In 2011, the Safran Group generated revenue of €11.7 billion ($16B). The U.S. division accounts for over 20% of total revenue, according to a Safran USA spokesperson.

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