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BY HUGO MARTÍN, LOS ANGELES TIMES

## MERGERS MEAN GREEN FOR AIRLINE PAINTING COMPANY

**Leading Edge Aviation Services has been expanding in Victorville to keep up with orders brought on by the latest big deal, between Continental and United airlines.**

■ Airlines typically profit from mergers by making cuts: combining ticket counters, uniting reservation systems and laying off excess staff.

But a spate of airline mergers in the last three years has had the opposite effect for a small company operating among the desert yuccas and Joshua trees of Victorville.

Leading Edge Aviation Services Inc., which bills itself as the world's largest airplane painting company, is expanding its facilities and hiring workers to keep up with the orders to repaint hundreds of aircraft with the colors and logos of the newly merged airlines.

Even the smallest jet painting job can cost up to \$50,000.

"We've been on a huge hiring spree," the company's chief executive, Mike Manclark, said from an 80,000-square-foot hangar next to Southern California Logistics Airport, on the grounds of the former George Air Force Base. "We have flown over the recession."

After United and Continental announced in May that they would merge, Leading Edge won a contract to paint the first 350 of the overall fleet of 1,250 planes of the two airlines.

About one-third of the work will be done at the Victorville facility, with the rest to be completed at smaller Leading Edge operations in Texas and Mississippi.

This is not the first merger handled by Leading Edge.



Jesus Galvan, left, and Victor Orduno put the finishing touches on a United-Continental... (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

In 2008, the company won a contract to paint about 400 Northwest Airlines planes when the carrier was swallowed up by Delta Air Lines last year.

Leading Edge has also done work for Southwest Airlines, and Manclark hopes to add to that when the Dallas-based carrier completes its acquisition of Florida-based AirTran Airways this year.

Most commercial aircraft must be repainted every five years, he said, and Leading Edge painted about 560 commercial and military planes in 2010. But when carriers decide to merge, the work orders nearly double for Leading Edge and other aircraft painting companies.

Manclark said he was excited over the news of the United-Continental deal because the airlines decided against repainting all Continental planes to resemble United's or all United planes to look like Continental's.

Instead, the plan is to give the aircraft a completely new look that includes the United name and the blue, white and gold colors of Continental.

For Leading Edge, painting the first 350 jets of the merged airline will take at least 2 1/2 years.

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The merger has been approved by federal regulators, but the two airlines won't operate as one until the Federal Aviation Administration grants a single operating license, possibly later this year.

Painting a Boeing 777 takes up to 11 days and costs between \$100,000 and \$200,000, depending on the number of colors, Manclark said. A smaller commuter jet, such as an Airbus A320, can be finished in seven days at a cost of about \$50,000.

To keep up with the orders, Manclark said, the company plans to double its staff to 1,200 nationwide, with the workforce in Victorville expected to grow to nearly 300 in the next three months. He also expects to expand the Victorville facility to an adjacent 80,000-square-foot hangar next month.

The work is labor-intensive. The operation runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including holidays. Most employees must put in at least 50 hours a week, Manclark said.

William Jenkins, 20, of Hesperia was hired two months ago to sand and prepare the planes for painting, among other tasks — a job he took to pay his way through mechanics school.

"It's a lot of hours and it's man's work," he said. "You got to tough it out. It's not for everyone."

The work on a \$270-million wide-body jet resembles repainting a car. The old paint is removed with solvent and

sandpaper. Tape and paper are applied to seal off windows and engine parts.

It takes about 180 gallons of paint — high-solids polyurethane — to cover a typical wide-body. Workers, strapped in for safety by ropes attached to the hangar ceiling, are lifted 40 to 50 feet off the ground on scissor lifts to spray paint on the wings and fuselage.

Heaters and air filters have been installed in the hangars to control the temperature and air quality during the drying process.

In addition to the United name, workers must also apply nearly 700 stenciled markings for mechanical panels and other engine components.

Manclark, who started out running an airplane washing and detailing business at John Wayne Airport in Santa Ana, said he demands that his employees be meticulous because airline executives expect perfection.

"In the airline industry, perception is reality," he said. "If you look out the window and the plane looks shiny and polished, it gives you confidence."

On a recent weekday, Manclark supervised his workers as they finished painting a United-Continental wide-body jet and a smaller Delta commuter plane. He spotted a crooked stenciled label on a panel and ordered that it be repainted.

"There is no cheating on an aircraft paint job," he said.