

Craig Cooning has put Boeing's satellite business in higher orbit

The vice president and general manager of Boeing's space and intelligence systems took over the struggling business in 2008, and it has doubled its backlog from five years ago.



Craig R. Cooning, who became vice president and general manager of Boeing's space and intelligence systems in 2008, said it "had some struggles. But I knew there was an opportunity to succeed." (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times / September 26, 2011)

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By W.J. Hennigan, Los Angeles Times

October 23, 2011

The gig: As vice president and general manager of [Boeing Co.](#)'s space and intelligence systems, Craig R. Cooning, 60, leads one of the world's largest satellite operations with major facilities in El Segundo and Seal Beach.

A retired Air Force two-star general who oversaw military purchases of rockets and satellites, Cooning now oversees 6,400 employees, including workers at Boeing's 1 million-square-foot facility in El Segundo near [Los Angeles International Airport](#). It is there that the company builds school bus-size satellites that provide the military with high-definition video, radio communications and data services.

Tough task: In 2008, just a few years after joining Boeing, Cooning was put in charge of the struggling satellite business, which was plagued by cost overruns and mismanagement. Boeing had lost so many lucrative government contracts that the company was rumored to be considering exiting that business. "Boeing had some struggles," Cooning said. "But I knew there was an opportunity to succeed."

Hunker down: Cooning said that any successful business has to focus on what it does well. "We returned to our roots," he said. "At the core of our capabilities is communications. That's what we focused on."

The company now has a backlog of 27 satellites. This is a long way from the 50 or so that were typical during the plant's peak in the 1990s, but it is about double the backlog of five years ago.

Born to fly: Even as a child, Cooning was interested in aerospace. He spent hours building fleets of model airplanes, mainly [World War II](#) and Cold War-era planes. "My bedroom ceiling was covered with model airplanes hanging," he said.

Military brat: It was hard for Cooning to have a hometown. His father was a lieutenant colonel in the [U.S. Air Force](#), so he grew up on military bases around the globe, including Norway and Germany. When he was old enough, he joined the Air Force himself. "Of course, I wanted to be a pilot," he said. "But because I wore glasses I didn't qualify."

The Air Force paid him to go to school, and he earned a bachelor's degree in aviation management from the school of engineering at Auburn University and later two master's degrees. At his first assignment at Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, Cooning met his wife, Susan, at a party in the officers club on the base. They married a year later and now have two adult sons.

Settling into the Southland: After spending time at Los Angeles Air Force Base, he fell in love with the region. "The coast of California is a true treasure that should be preserved for the enjoyment of the public," he said. Cooning and his wife now live on the Palos Verdes Peninsula and are active in the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy. He is also on the board of directors for the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach.

Staying fit: Cooning, with silver hair and a trim build, keeps healthy by using an elliptical machine. He used to be a runner — averaging 50 to 60 miles a week — but had to stop six years ago because of bad knees.

Full circle: It wasn't long after Cooning left the military that he began receiving calls from major defense contractors. One company stuck out. Thinking back to his childhood, his dad was a navigator in a Boeing-made B-17 during World War II. "My dad thought Boeing was the best. It becomes part of your DNA. You get imprinted with that as a kid."

Word from the wise: "My advice for engineers at the start of their career is to have a great attitude," Cooning said. "Attitude, which can be measured in enthusiasm, a desire for increasing responsibility and an interest in continually expanding one's experience, coupled with a solid technical foundation, is what I look for and reward."

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