

# THE NIAGARA FALLS REVIEW

THE NIAGARA REGIONAL

## Eurocopter flying high

By Dan Dakin, Niagara Falls Review  
Tuesday, April 24, 2012

FORT ERIE - In the electronics room in the middle of the 12,150-square-metre Fort Erie headquarters of Eurocopter Canada, Irene Tomlinson carefully wires up a small black box that will become an important part of a \$4-million helicopter.

Just outside the room, in a large open warehouse, half a dozen choppers are going through final assembly by a small army of workers who customize each aircraft to the specifications of the buyers.

All around the bright and clean Gilmore Rd. facility, highly-skilled technicians go about the business of building, maintaining and repairing multimillion-dollar helicopters.

It's a helicopter fan's dream.

The man at the controls is Guy Joannes.

Born in France, Joannes is the president and CEO of Eurocopter Canada, one of more than a dozen Eurocopter subsidiaries around the world. The company headquarters in Marignane, France likes to shift the different national CEOs around to keep things fresh, so Joannes came to the Canadian plant in 2009 after previously

heading up operations in South Africa, Australia and India.

He arrived at a challenging time for the company.

In 2007 and early 2008, after two years of strong sales increases, Eurocopter Canada expanded its workforce to more than 200 from 160. It also expanded the building by 4,500 square metres.

But slowly, over the past two years, those jobs have come back. Most of the laid-off employees have been brought back and sales have been consistently strong.

"We want to make sure we can be sustainable," said Joannes.

Making helicopters is not like making cars.



Things are looking up for Eurocopter Canada. Based in Fort Erie, the 12,150-square-metre plant now employs more than 200 people. President and CEO Guy Joannes came to the Canadian plant in 2009 after heading up operations in Africa, Australia and India.

But the growth may have been too much, too fast.

In 2010, Joannes had to cut 35 jobs — 15% of the workforce of more than 200 — to make the operation more efficient.

Unlike auto manufacturers, which pump out thousands of cars every month, Eurocopter Canada produces around 20 helicopters each year. And they're busting at the seams of their plant to do so.

**“ We have a strong appeal. People want to come work for us. We have a good reputation in the field”.**

*Guy Joannes,  
President and CEO of Eurocopter Canada*

“One of the things we want to do this year is reshape this facility to be more efficient,”

Joannes said. Rather than expanding, the plan is to redesign the Gilmore Rd. building to make operations smoother.

Brand new helicopters destined for Canada are built in factories in France and Germany and then shipped in crates to Fort Erie. That’s where the final assembly takes place, any

custom accessories are added and the choppers are painted in a large spray booth.

Once assembly is complete, the customers typically spent a few days in town being trained on their new bird and taking it for test flights before flying it back to its final destination.

More than 620 helicopters have been sold through the Canadian headquarters since it first opened in 1984. But since

900 of the helicopters currently operating in Canada are more than 30 years old, Joannes expects lots of new business in the near future. He said he

expects Eurocopter Canada will produce its 750th chopper in the next few years.

“North America is where the market is picking up

substantially,” he said.

The challenge in the aircraft industry is that order time to delivery time is often separated by years.

“Planning 18 months in advance to match the supply and demand is difficult,” said Joannes.

In Canada, Eurocopter dominates the commercial helicopter market with what it says is a 70% market share. It’s biggest rival, Bell Helicopter, has most of the rest of the pie.

That sort of market share also makes the company attractive to workers in the industry.

“We have a strong appeal. People want to come work for us,” Joannes said. “We have a good reputation in the field.”

While some of the jobs that open up at Eurocopter are for highly skilled workers specifically trained to work on helicopters, Joannes knows the job market in Fort Erie is grim and tries to hire locally as often as he can.

He said some openings at the plant are for more general assembly work or are in areas where people can be trained on the job.

“At the end of the day, we’re part of the community and I’m happy to help out,” he said.



Alain Longval works in the composite assembly department.