

Plant celebrates 30 years of making tanks in Lima

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SHAWNEE TOWNSHIP — Workers at the Joint Systems Manufacturing Center celebrated 30 years of Abrams tanks in traditional fashion Friday. That means about 20 minutes of speeches, a quick slice of cake and right back to the business of pumping out the world's greatest tank.

For 30 years, the men and women of what was long known as the Lima Tank Plant have been manufacturing and upgrading some version of the Abrams tank. To date, more than 13,000 M1s, M2s and variations on the two have rolled off the assembly line. Employees, dignitaries and former and current plant and labor leaders gathered at the plant Friday to celebrate the anniversary.

“Yes, we build the best tanks in the world and we put them in the hands of the best war fighters in the world. We should be proud,” said Plant Commander Lt. Col. Ted Epple.

When the first Abrams tank contract came to Lima in 1980, it meant maybe 10 years of good jobs and the hope of keeping the tank plant going a while longer. Now, 30 years and 13,000 Abrams later, the Buckeye Road plant is one of the nation's go-tos when it comes time to manufacture the latest in mobile military weaponry.

“It was a 10 year program and here we are 30 years later still going strong and very proud of it,” said plant manager Keith Deters.

For all the lauds the Abrams tank receives today, it hasn't always been a rosy story. As early as 1981, government watchdog groups criticized the tank as too expensive and prone to breakdowns. Over the years, funding for the tank has been brought into question. The manufacturing center has survived inclusion on five Base Closure and Realignment Commission lists, in 1988, 1991, 1993 and 1995 and as recently as 2005.

During the cold war, the very need for tanks came into question and manufacturing slowed. Employment at the plant went from a high of more than 3,800 workers to a low of 400.

“Have they all been easy years here? We know they haven’t been,” Deters said. “But we should be very proud and we should never lose sight of the importance of what we do here”

The Abrams has evolved over time, from the M1 “Thunderbolt” that launched the series in 1980, to the more advanced M1A1 that came out in 1985 and the current M1A2 model produced since 1993. Along the way, upgrades, resets and foreign sales helped keep the plant busy. Close to 600 Abrams tanks have been sold to foreign governments, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Australia.

The Shawnee Township facility has changed along with the Abrams. The once-small plant is now a 1.6 million-square-foot secured facility with more than 1,100 employees. In addition to the Abrams, the facility produces the U.S. Army Stryker, the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, a Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle, a Joint Light Tactical Vehicle and a variety of gun weapons systems for the U.S. military and international customers.

It’s a big change from the plant that was there when the first Abrams rolled out, said Howard Roberts, plant manager from 1980 through 1986.

“There was a lot of energy and a lot of change when (the Abrams) first came here. The plant was nowhere near this size,’ Roberts said. “Based on our performance, we got subsequent contracts and we were adding to the plant for years and years and years.”

The first Gulf War helped confirm the Abram’s value to the military. Later fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan established the tank as a favorite among the fighting men and women in the field.

“Throughout the Cold War, through two wars in the deserts of Iraq, and today in the battle against terrorist ...the M1 is there. The Abrams is second to none,” Epple said. “And what makes it best is the soldier, American soldiers crewing on this tank that keeps America safe and protect our way of life.”

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