

AMT MD-80 memories: It was almost a piece of art

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It was Oct. 1, 1990, and Harley Thomas admitted that he was nervous on that first day when he reported for work at American Airlines in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He'd just come off six years of active duty and had long thought that working for American would be his dream job. His first assignment was replumbing fuel tanks on the McDonnell Douglas MD-80 to stop ice from being ingested into the engine.

As his career as an aviation maintenance technician (AMT) at American progressed, so did his work on the Super 80. For more than three years, he worked on system-related assignments. He then performed acceptance checks on 10 brand new MD-80 aircraft as American continued to increase orders. In his 28 years working on the MD-80, Harley worked on a variety of projects, including systems, structures and cockpit maintenance — everything except avionics.

"When I began work on the MD-80, they were expected to have a relatively short lifespan," he said. "They ended up being the longest running fleet type in American's history. Our maintenance program was truly above and beyond. Our team kept these planes in great shape and flying safely for a long time."

Sheryl Thomas, Harley's wife, is also an AMT in Tulsa. The work, the love of planes — it's in her blood thanks to her father who worked for American for 26 years. She worked on MD-80s in 1996, but had moved on to other duties in the warranty department when she and Harley met at American in 2003. They were married in 2005.

While Harley doesn't work on the MD-80 anymore, his love for the aircraft continues. The couple purchased tickets to fly the Super 80 on its last flight to Tulsa later this month.

As Harley looks back at his nearly three decades with the aircraft, he said he will look back fondly.

“There’s something emotional about the silver bullet going away,” he said. “It’s the end of an era, but it’s also exciting. When that plane was freshly buffed leaving Tulsa, it was almost a piece of art. Hundreds of millions of people have flown on these planes. They retire to Roswell with many stories, and Tech Ops – Tulsa is a big part of their history.”

Harley Thomas poses in front of aircraft 426 in 2016, when the MD-80 came to Tulsa for one of its last checks. Aircraft 426 was the first plane Harley performed a heavy overhaul “C” check on as an AMT with American Airlines in spring of 1991.