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Local Company, ATA Aerospace, Plays Key Role in Record-Breaking Red Bull Stratos Mission to the Edge of Space

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — On October 14, 2012, more than eight million viewers tuned in to YouTube and an estimated eight million more tuned in via television to watch the Red Bull Stratos Mission to the Edge of Space. The mission, in which Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner ascended to over 128,000 feet in a high-altitude balloon and jumped toward Earth becoming the first man to break the speed of sound in freefall, was a success. Even those that were not part of the millions watching live have likely heard something about the mission through one of the numerous media outlets that have covered the story. What is not widely known is that New Mexico's very own ATA Aerospace, a joint venture between Albuquerque-based Applied Technology Associates (ATA) and ASRC Aerospace, provided the high-altitude balloon launch and recovery services that helped make the mission possible.

In the calm hours just before dawn at the Roswell, New Mexico launch site, a team of 22 men and women, assembled by ATA Aerospace, unfolded the fragile 3,708-pound balloon that would carry Baumgartner to his record-breaking jump site. According to unofficial figures, Baumgartner's jump broke the records for highest jump from a platform, longest freefall distance and fastest vertical velocity, but the jump was not the only part of the mission to make history. The ATA Aerospace team was the first to launch a balloon of that size, 30 million cubic feet, with a human on board.

For the ATA Aerospace team, the journey to the history books began nearly fifty years ago with the early phases of what is now known as the Air Force Research Laboratory, Space Vehicles Directorate's (AFRL/RV) high-altitude balloon program. Current members of the team have been conducting scientific high-altitude balloon launch and recovery missions since the 1960's in locations worldwide, including Alaska, Antarctica, Hawaii, Panama, aboard aircraft carriers, and throughout the continental United States. In the early 1990's, ATA began working on various scientific high-altitude balloon programs with the Air Force, which planted the seeds for the collaborative relationship that grew between ATA and the AFRL/RV at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M. The relationship continued over the years and flourished with the creation of ATA Aerospace in 2006. The work that ATA Aerospace has

done with the AFRL/RV, as well as the Cooperative Research and Development Agreement (CRADA) that exists between the two entities, has equipped ATA Aerospace with the extensive high-altitude balloon mission experience and capabilities needed for an endeavor like the Mission to the Edge of Space.

In 2010, the Red Bull Stratos team began the search for a company capable of successfully carrying out the massive balloon launch and recovery services their mission required. Arthur Giannetti, a high-altitude balloon expert, was working for ATA Aerospace on an AFRL/RV balloon program when a member of the Red Bull Stratos team contacted him and informed him of their needs. Giannetti endorsed ATA Aerospace for the job and initiated discussions between the two teams. With the support of AFRL/RV and the CRADA, the two teams ultimately became one in their determination to accomplish the same groundbreaking mission.

After coming on board for the Mission to the Edge of Space in 2010, ATA Aerospace assembled a team of experts that included ATA Aerospace employees, consultants and sub-contractors from ARES and ARTS. Ed Coca served as crew chief and was responsible for the overall logistics of the launch and recovery. These logistics included everything from laying out the balloon to calling for the release of the balloon and an extensive checklist of activities in between. Coca's logistics were dependent on the weather, so he worked in coordination with Meteorologist Don Day, who was responsible for monitoring the weather, ensuring the conditions were ideal for launch, and helping Coca determine the proper positioning for the equipment. Once Day confirmed suitable weather conditions, ATA Aerospace Employee Tracy Gerber took her place in mission control as Flight Director. Employing a Command, Control, and Communication (C3) system, Gerber and her team guided the launch of the balloon, as well as its ascent and descent.

The entire ATA Aerospace team worked tirelessly to ensure a safe and successful launch and recovery of the balloon and capsule used for the Red Bull Stratos Mission to the Edge of Space. Twelve hours after the team first began unfolding the balloon at the mission launch site on October 14th, they had finished packing the deflated balloon into a large truck just 55 miles from where they began. They had accomplished their final mission for the project.

The ATA Aerospace team was fully involved with two unmanned and three manned test missions and over two years of work on the project, but according to those involved, such as Gerber, the time and effort devoted to the mission was well worth it. "It has been such a privilege to work with the entire Red Bull Stratos team," Gerber said. "I'm beyond words to be a part of this historical project and the scientific research leading to the production of a more reliable space suit that will provide future flight crews, whether private or government, with a better chance of surviving a flight malfunction."