

Satellites, from the ground up

By Susan M. Menke, GCN Staff



Image:
Sonny Marshall, satellite entrepreneur

After a recent move to new quarters in Ashburn, Va., Veloris A. “Sonny” Marshall III and his 25 employees are back at work packing satellite receiving equipment into hardened “flyaway” cases for shipment from Dulles International Airport to federal sites around the world.

His 8(a) company, Marshall Communications Corp., resells commercial satellite services on the General Services Administration schedule. It provides secure satellite bandwidth, streaming media and other services to the Defense Department’s Global Broadcast System, the IRS, Immigration and Customs Enforcement Bureau, NASA and Social Security Administration, among others.

After retiring as a lieutenant colonel from the Joint Staff in 1991, Marshall went into the satellite consulting business.

The company he heads as president and CEO will do about \$15 million in government business this year.

Under a new service, EagleStreams, Marshall broadcasts real-time CNBC, CNN, C-SPAN and Fox programs to federal customers’ desktop and notebook PCs.

Marshall received a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from the University of Louisiana and a master’s in EE from the Air Force Institute of Technology in Dayton, Ohio.

GCN chief technology editor Susan M. Menke interviewed Marshall at his office.

What’s more

Age: 57

Family: Single parent; daughters aged 19 and 17

Last book read: The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown

Military service: Air Force lieutenant colonel, retired

Personal motto: “No excuses”

Hero: Colin Powell

Best job: Detachment commander on Levkos, Greece, during Vietnam War

GCN: How did you get started with satellites?

MARSHALL: It was a senior project at engineering school—rebuilding a radio telescope to receive Apollo 13 broadcasts. Apollo 13 was supposed to land but had to circle around to come back, and I was able to capture the signals, and I got credit for that.

The Air Force, instead of sending me to Vietnam where I had volunteered to go, sent me to school in Biloxi, Miss., and then to Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., working on satellite communications. So I’ve been in satellites from the very beginning.

GCN: Whose satellites do you resell time on?

MARSHALL: I have master service agreements to buy capacity with volume discounts from Americom Government Services Inc. and SES Americom [both of Princeton, N.J.], Loral Skynet [of Bedminster, N.J.] and NewSkies Government Services [of Washington] in support of government requirements.

GCN: Where does the network management happen?

MARSHALL: We monitor and remotely control all the satellite services out of this office. We’re basically a systems integrator providing a service, not just bandwidth.

We provide secure access to specific satellites. A satellite 23,000 miles up in space has 32 transponders, antennas up and down, and power supplies. It’s just a repeater. It amplifies and returns a signal whether it’s coming from a fixed or a transportable terminal on the ground. Some customers need only the space segment, others need earth terminals, too. Sometimes they need all that plus network management, or plus a fourth thing—maintenance.

We have vendor partners not only to lease the bandwidth but also to resell or lease terminal equipment. Some agencies already have a television studio—the Social Security Administration does, and its signal goes out to 1,400 sites. We monitor the transmission to make sure the quality is there.

We do the same thing for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Bureau in Homeland Security, not just the space segment but also the earth terminals, the management and maintenance. Not the studio where the content is created, but the distribution out to the end user.

We’re converting that system now over to digital IP so that it provides not only video but also content delivery—IP packets and files for disaster recovery, digital signage and scripting.

Digital signage means a big color plasma display at an entry point, showing content that’s remotely upgradeable from ICE headquarters through our network. If ICE changes something, it’s updated in the computers that drive the big screens. They’re using it for public safety, to get the word out really quickly. The content can be live or stored. They can change the order in which the content is displayed.

GCN: You do this with 25 employees?

MARSHALL: Yes. Some work here, some at customer locations such as the Navy and ICE.