

Sky's the limit

Aircraft Appliances reaching for the stars at age 65

By Mike Beggs

One of Brampton's oldest and most innovative companies has reached retirement age.

Brampton's Aircraft Appliances & Equipment Ltd. (AAE) just celebrated its 65th birthday, and this multi-million dollar company has tentacles reaching into the design, manufacture, and overhaul and distribution of equipment for aircraft and naval ships, adhering to strict military, government, and industry standards.

There's no chance it's about to kick up its feet and rest on its laurels.

For CC130 Hercules and CP 140 Aurora (P-3) airplanes, AAE provides everything from galley ovens to automatic flight control systems. And that only hints at the range of parts and services provided by AAE since it started out in 1949 with the repair and overhaul of aircraft accessories to the Canadian owners and users of U.S.-built aircraft — the bulk of this business Canadian defence-based.

Over the years, expertise was developed in the areas of design, engineering, and manufacturing. In 1949, AAE began to design fuel filters and coalescers for the separation of water from various marine fluids, and today this equipment is installed on U.S. and Canadian-built frigates, destroyers, aircraft carriers, and littoral combat ships.

"Directing the activities of a company dealing almost exclusively with the military and aerospace markets requires a lot of patience and diplomacy," says CEO and senior partner Bryan Dawson. "Aircraft Appliances capitalizes on the multi-year, multi-million contracts inherent in the industry by providing repair, retrofit, and new product offerings to its customers."

From its modest beginnings in a 3,000-square-foot Rexdale plant with seven employees, by 1970 AAE had expanded into its existing facility at East Drive and Torbram Road, with 80,000 square feet and a staff of 125.

Twenty-eight (28) years back, founder Laddie Myslevic sold the company to Dawson, an Alliston native with a background in food marketing and management with major players like Nestle (overseeing Taster's Choice Coffee) and General Mills (Betty Crocker).

"I thought, 'Okay, I've done cakes and I've done coffee, that should qualify me for aircraft and ship parts,'" he chuckles.

Raised on a farm, Dawson was familiar with machinery and equipment, while the management principles from his MBA at the University of Toronto held true. A long-time acquaintance, Myslevic handed the reins to him over the course of a year (helping fund the purchase), and remained on the board of directors for the next five years.

"It kept his finger in the pie, and it gave me a sounding board," he says.

In 2004, AAE claimed a Brampton Outstanding Business Achievement Award in the Hi-Tech category, while Dawson was honoured as Brampton Business Person of the Year.

Due to the recent recession, downsizing, government cutbacks, and outsourcing of services, its employee base has dropped to 50-plus and its repairs and overhead division has suffered. However, manufacturing has increased significantly. Marine has taken much of the slack, now comprising 60 per cent of sales.

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Roman Sachanowicz is longest serving employee at Aircraft Appliances and Equipment Ltd., checking in at 48 years.

Photo by Stephen Uhraney

Dawson and company committed to community

AAE boss chairs Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning

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"We design and manufacture filter equipment for the navy — and the U.S. Navy is our biggest customer," Dawson says.

On ships, they filter out pure air fuel, bilge water, lube oil, and diesel oil.

"The idea is, a destroyer uses the fuel for ballast. And it's tens of thousands of gallons. So in order to maintain the buoyancy, when the fuel is getting low, they pump seawater right into the fuel oil, and mix it. Our oil filters take the impurities out, so the gas turbine engines are getting 100 per cent fuel all the time," he explains.

AAE is the only Canadian manufacturer of such naval filtration products.

"One of the things we pride ourselves on is the level of service," he continues. "We're not a huge company, but when the U.S. Navy has a problem with filters, they call Aircraft Appliances — they don't bother with those huge companies in the States. If we tell them we can do something, we will do it. And they will let us know when they're building a ship. So we get in ahead of the game. We put our filters in the base design of the ship.



Aircraft Appliances and Equipment Ltd. celebrating their 65th anniversary. Pictured (L-R) Andrew Dawson, sales & contracts; Andy Willnecker, president; Bryan Dawson, CEO; and Jonathan Dawson, plant manager.

Photo by Stephen Uhraney

Dawson cites a strong loyalty among AAE's employees. One of them, Andrew Willnecker, has evolved into the role of partner and company president. His sons Jonathan (plant manager) and Andrew (spare parts manager) are also in the fold.

Dawson, 66, has "no plans to retire anytime soon." He aims to keep growing AAE's manufacturing business, while rebuilding the overhaul and repair, and spare parts divisions, "by supplying spare parts and pieces of equipment we put on military vehicles 40 years ago."

Meanwhile, he's serving as campaign manager for a long-time friend, Councilman John Sanderson, in the upcoming municipal election. With wife, Janet, he continues his 30-year commitment to the Brampton community (although they moved to Caledon three years ago).

He served as president of the Brampton Board of Trade in 1996-97, is currently chair of the board for Sheridan College Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning, sits on the board of directors for the Brampton

Safe City Association, and on two different boards for Brampton Civic Hospital.

"I do a lot. A lot of my employees come from here," he offers. "But I'm a strong believer (in community service). I get that from my mother. I enjoy people and helping people, so as a result volunteering comes naturally to me."