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Heat gun takes aim at military

By *Dave Cranshaw*, Staff Writer



HOT COMMODITY The MCH-100-A battery-powered heat gun, distributed by Malcom Company of Portsmouth.

In 1998, Jonathan and George Bixby, of Malcom Company Inc. in Portsmouth, made a presentation to a group of U.S. Navy officials for a new battery-powered heat gun that could be used to repair equipment damaged in battle.

George, the former president of the company, remembers the group being skeptical of the first-of-its-kind tool used for soldering because other attempts at a battery-powered source for heat guns were unsuccessful. The Navy was sold when son Jonathan, the current president, showed that his new tool, the MCH-100-A, could accomplish the job in half the time and make the process much safer.

“They loved it,” said Jonathan.

This year, Malcom Company expects to gross about \$3 million, is hiring more employees and is on the verge of moving into bigger headquarters.

All this is quite impressive considering the company started with two people in their garage just over 15 years ago.

George bought the company from his former employer, The Malcom Company, in 1989. One-tenth of the company’s work was as a distributor for Leister, a Swedish company specializing in the production of welding and hot-air equipment. George recognized the potential of this product line and transformed the

company into a full-line distributor and service center for Leister products.

In 1992, the company hired two more employees and opened a warehouse in New Jersey that would ship parts to Rhode Island every week for manufacturing. Working primarily with Leister, the Malcom Company distributed and serviced heat guns around the country to companies including Titleist, Texas Instruments and Gillette.

In 1998, still working out of their home, the company was contacted by the Navy with a reference from a competitor, said Jonathan. The Navy was in immediate need of a tool to help their maintenance personnel repair equipment that was damaged in battle.

Jonathan met with Leister officials to present the idea of altering one of their original 120-volt motors to a smaller version with 42 volts, he said. With the motor and heating equipment in hand, the company looked to vendors for batteries, a charging unit, and a case.

In two months, the company was able to source out suppliers for the major components and began the process of assembling a prototype. After the original meeting with the Navy, the tool was refined and put through stringent military-standard testing that gauges a tool against explosion, drop and rain.

After passing all the tests, the tool was pitched to military vendors. There are currently more than 400 units in the field being used by the Navy, Army and Air Force. Each unit costs \$5,000. The best part of the tool was that it did not require extension cords, which made it possible to repair equipment almost anywhere, and it was safer without the use of propane or an open flame, said Jonathan. The gun can produce heat of 1,000 degrees for 35 minutes before the battery needs to be charged. Most repair personnel can use the tool for a full day's work without charging the battery because the average use of the tool per repair is about 15 to 30 seconds, he said.

The entire kit (case and charger included) weighs about 14 pounds with the actual gun weighing less than a pound. Malcom Company also produces various custom nozzles for the gun depending on a customer's needs.

In the past, aircraft carriers would have to be taken back to the hangar for repair. Now the turnaround time is much quicker, said Jonathan.

With the increase in demand for the military version of the tool, Malcom Company is producing a similar tool to be used by commercial airlines. The company recently separated the military production from the work they continue to do as a distributor for Leister.

Last year, the revenue from the Leister products was nearly double that of the revenue from the new battery-powered counterpart; Jonathan expects those numbers to soon be equal, with the revenue from the military product growing quickly.

“This is just the tip of the iceberg,” he said.

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