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PEENING TECHNOLOGIES

VALUE 'BELOW SURFACE'

East Hartford Company's Success Lies In The Result Of A Process The Eye Can't Detect



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WALTER BEACH, left, is vice president of Peening Technologies in East Hartford. Tom Beach, right, is the company president. The company uses compressed air to fire millions of tiny BBs at engine parts, making the metal more durable for years to come.

By **MARA LEE**

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EAST HARTFORD — When you use compressed air to fire millions of tiny BBs at engine parts, it makes the metal more durable for years to come.

It's not really visible, but at 10-times magnification, the metal is dimpled all over.

"The benefit is really below the surface," said Walter Beach, vice president of Peening Technologies, a small service company founded by his father in 1966. "What you don't see."

The same could be said for Peening Technologies, which is in an unassuming brick building on a dead-end street in East Hartford. Inside, the noise is relentless as giant automated machines hurl those balls no bigger than 33-thousandths of an inch.

But it's what you don't see that explains why the company has been able to grow, if slowly, in Connecticut — even as more aerospace manufacturing moves to the southern states and to Poland.

Peening President Tom Beach estimates that the company has captured about a third of the outsourced peening business for the region's aerospace manufacturers and overhaul plants.

John Tornatore, outside vendor service coordinator at Barnes Airmotive in East Granby, said both the East Granby overhaul facility and the Windsor manufacturing plant have contracted with Peening for more than 20 years.

"I don't think there's anybody that doesn't know the Beach brothers and the quality of work," he said. "They work with us closely,



WALTER BEACH shows some of the bearings used at Peening Technologies in East Hartford.

they're very knowledgeable, those boys grew up in the business."

Tornatore has worked at Barnes — and with Peening — for 16 years.

"They have a good team. Their employees, I see the same faces there that I've seen when I started working with them 16 years ago, that says something about them," he said.

Tom Beach said if an employee stays a year at Peening, "he's here five years. If five years, 10."

Walter Beach said their dad's first employee, who is now 70, still works full time.

They had a little wave of retirements a couple of years ago, but several of them un-retired.

The company has 45 workers in Connecticut, including 28 machine operators working over two shifts. Machine operators start at \$10 to \$11 an hour and have opportunities to move up they learn set-up skills or quality inspection. Those who do set-ups can make hourly rates in the high teens, or even over \$20, an hour.

"It's a nice little job for a nonskilled person," Tom Beach said of the operator job.

Ken Anderson, the general manager of the

plant, started in shipping and receiving, and within five years, he was promoted to his current position, which he's held for more than 20 years.

Connecticut is not the only location for Peening. Tom Beach started out in the early '80s running an outpost on Long Island, which served Grumman and Fairchild Aircraft, but closed after seven or eight years when "it didn't quite get off the ground."

In 2003, Peening bought a small shot-peening company with five employees in Georgia, and it's grown to 30 people over the decade. A cousin runs that facility. The family expanded in the South not because it found Connecticut a difficult place to do business, but because one of the big manufacturers wanted them to move as they shifted work there.

Peening had done a lot of work for Kaman Aerospace's Moosup plant, and when it was closing in 2002, the company asked Peening to open a branch in Florida, where the work was moving.

"We didn't feel it was enough work to set up a dedicated facility," Walter Beach said, but the Georgia plant does serve Kaman, as well as GE, Lockheed Martin and Boeing.

The Connecticut plant serves GE in Lynn, Mass., and about 70 percent of its orders are from Connecticut plants. It does service parts that come from Ohio, California, Poland or China from time to time, via FedEx.

A few years ago, Peening started manufacturing and selling shot-peening machines to large aerospace manufacturers. The machines cost between \$225,000 and \$900,000, and account for 25 percent to 35 percent of revenues.

The family said the Connecticut branch had less than \$10 million in sales last year and this year is expected to be flat. "We're not hearing anything bad, but weren't not hearing anything great," Tom said of the local trends in aerospace.

The Georgia sales are slightly lower, but may pass Connecticut in the next year or two, he said.

While Tornatore said Barnes sends less work to Peening since buying a computer-controlled peening machine, Tom Beach said overall, the equipment sales is not cannibalizing the service contracts.

"We've been able to bill out our process engineering," Walter Beach said. "It allows us to have a few extra people in the job."

The company is slow to hire, preferring to use overtime to meet demands. Nearly all production employees work at least 45 hours a week, and some work as much as 60 hours. Part of that is because the work flow is very unpredictable. Because peening is a quick, low-cost service, customers don't give a lot of advance warning for future orders.

"Boy, do we get busy in December.

Everyone wants their parts to make their numbers," Tom Beach said. "We work harder than Santa's helpers in December."

Typically, parts are returned within a week, but customers often pay more for overnight rush orders.

Anderson remembered that two or three times over his 24 years at the company, workers came in on Christmas Day to fulfill a rush order. "It's always an emergency somewhere," he said.