

REVISION MILITARY

This Montreal-based eyewear company has become a global leader in its field, supplying Canadian soldiers with much needed eye protection in the process

BY PETER DIEKMEYER



Revision's Blanshay says Canada's military was one of the first to recognize the need for protective eyewear

*It's no secret that many Canadian defence sector developers gripe that if only the **Department of National Defence** would give their latest new widget, service or solution a chance, by issuing them an initial start-up contract, that they could use it as a base to develop export sales. During the past few years, Montreal-based **Revision** proved that it could do just that.*

Led by its president and majority owner **Jonathan Blanshay**, the company, which supplies "mission critical eyewear," parlayed a small initial DND order onto a growth track that has turned it into a global industry leader. "We are number one in sales in our category, market share and industry perceptions," says Blanshay. "And it all started with work we did with the Canadian Armed Forces. They were one of the world's first militaries to recognize the need for protective eyewear for soldiers."

"Today's battlefield requires protection from a growing list of threats," explained Blanshay, in an interview, earlier this year shortly after the announcement of yet another contract win, this one to supply eye protection gear to the Canadian Air Force. "Threats include IED shrapnel and flying debris to harmful laser wavelengths. Our products are designed to help protect against those threats." For example Revision's Sawfly Ballistic Eyewear is a single system that pro-

vides powerful ballistic protection, and, at the customer's request, the ability to protect against laser threats with high-performance, specialty lenses.

FROM SPORTS GLASSES TO MILITARY EYEWEAR

However Revision's initial success did not happen overnight. In fact, Blanshay got into the business through the back door. The hard driving entrepreneur started out as an investment banker. However years of working to help make other people rich made him want to try something on his own. During his search for the ideal situation a contact told him about the sports eye protection business. After initial discussions, Blanshay's interest quickly grew.

"I noticed that there were some really high quality protective products being made overseas, but that all of the best design work was done locally, said Blanshay. "We quickly figured that if we could combine top quality protective features and attractive comfortable designs, then we would have a winning combination." Impressed with the company's potential, Blanshay began raising the cash needed to grow the business. Today Revision has about two dozen private investors,

though Blanshay retains voting control.

Revision's orientation changed drastically one day when Blanshay got a call from the Department of National Defence saying that the organization was looking for a Canadian supplier for protective eyewear.

"DND had conducted an initial search but drew blanks," said Blanshay "During a second round of searches, they identified some providers, but none were deemed qualified. We recognized immediately that there was an opportunity."

Surprisingly, Revision, a novice in the field, managed to land an initial DND order, after its products passed a series of tough tests, including some by the soldiers themselves. The company eventually managed to sell 125,000 units under the initial contract, which worked out to about \$5 million worth of revenue. But that was just the beginning. Additional export orders soon followed, to the United States, Great Britain and other NATO countries.

"It's amazing how much credibility that a Canadian DND purchase order gives you on the international stage," says Blanshay. "Global defence organizations know that when Canada's military, which is strapped for cash, buys a product, it's because it really adds value."

A GLOBAL LEADER

As a result of its new found success, the company soon eased away from its sports glasses orientation. Today, Revision sells about 98 percent of its production to armed forces clients, with police forces accounting for the rest. The company, which has sold more than one million pieces over the past seven years has offices in Montreal, which house design and sales staff as well as a major subsidiary in the United States, which hosts its operational headquarters.

Research and development personnel, which include six PhDs with backgrounds in physics, chemistry and material sciences and many engineers, work in state of the art optics and ballistics laboratories, that are equipped with more than \$1.5 million worth of testing equipment.

Indeed, Revision's research and development competencies are a major selling point. For example the company successfully completed a \$1.2 million development deal to provide DND with an optically correct injection-moulded face shield which can be attached to soldiers' combat helmets.

Prior to that, soldiers' visors had been thermo-formed, which resulted in certain vision distortions. In part, as a result of the Revision prototypes, DND is now asking for visors that are moulded to shape. The company's R&D work led to a contract to deliver 30,000 operationally ready versions.

According to Blanshay, the need to protect soldiers' eyes, which became apparent during the Gulf War, is now increasingly recognized as a must. "The eyes are extremely vulnerable and even the slightest damage there can disable a soldier, possibly for life," says Blanshay. "As a result, the cost of protecting soldiers is far less than that of not doing so." These days, protective eyeglasses are now standard issue to Canadian military forces personnel and for those in many western armed forces. In Canada, protective goggles are also issued in deployment situations.

"Our products have to be comfortable, easy to use and attractive, otherwise soldiers simply won't wear them, which would defeat the entire purpose," says Blanshay. "As a result Revision goes to great pains to ensure that its products are lightweight, don't fog up, and can be used with prescription lenses."



The Sawfly protective eyewear product from Revision, has saved many soldier's eyes

OPERATIONAL HEADQUARTERS IN THE US

That said, as great as the company's Canadian success is, Revision's credibility really only began its vault into the top ranks when it began to land contracts with the US Army. However, before that it had to take a major step. "Because of hardening "Buy America" policies being enforced by the US government, we knew that if we wanted to sell there we had to have a presence there," explained Blanshay.

Revision started up its Vermont operation in 2004. Today its 55,000 square foot Essex Junction facility houses 160 production, marketing, engineering and quality control staff. However according to Blanshay, the move there was more than worth it. "The US accounts for 75 percent of our sales," said Blanshay. "However our presence there opened the door for us to sales in many other NATO nations."

Yet despite the company's success, Blanshay isn't resting on his laurels. In February, the company inked yet another international deal, this time a \$5.4 million pact to supply eyewear and goggles to the UK Ministry of Defence, which selected Revision following a strict tender evaluation and user trials.

UK experts in particular noted that Revision's Bullet Ant Goggle System would provide excellent protection for the country's troops in Afghanistan, particularly against that country's hard environmental conditions such as wind, sand and dust.

Revision is also keeping its R&D personnel busy, by moving into further areas of facial and

head protection. One major initiative was the company's recent development of a Modular Protection and Attachment System (MPAS) for helmets, to improve head and facial protection against blast, fragmentation, blunt impact and ballistic threats. "Many armies continue to use Kevlar helmets, which are good but there are far better materials, such as poly-ethylene out there," says Blanshay. "It's time that we take advantage of some of the opportunities in this area." ■

Peter Diekmeyer is CDR's Quebec Bureau Chief

CORPORATE SNAPSHOT

Company:

Revision Military

President

Jonathan Blanshay

Products

Protective eyewear, visors and head gear

Phone: 514-849-1874

Web-site:

<http://www.revisioneyewear.com>

Locations:

Montreal, Quebec;
Essex Junction Vermont, the Netherlands

Services:

Military protective eyewear

Number of employees: 200