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By *Bruce Edwards* Staff Writer

A Montreal-based maker of combat eyewear has landed \$9.5 million in U.S. military contracts that will help boost employment in Vermont.

Revision Eyewear employs 30 to 35 people at its Williston location, assembling what's called ballistic eyewear — combat glasses and goggles to protect troops from shrapnel wounds.

The company was awarded a \$5.8 million contract for 178,000 sets of its Sawfly eyeglasses and a \$3.7 million contract for 85,000 sets of Desert Locust goggles.

To meet worldwide demand, Revision Eyewear president Jonathan Blanshay said the company expects to hire 20 workers at its Williston design and assembly plant, boosting total employment to more than 50 by the end of the summer.

The company's combat eyewear is made from a proprietary polycarbonate developed for fighter jet canopies. The lenses can withstand shrapnel from improvised explosive devices like the kind used by insurgents in Iraq. Blanshay said the eyeglasses and goggles are also able to withstand a 12-gauge shotgun blast, using No. 6 lead shot, from 15 feet with no penetration.

That's significant, he said, because combat eye injuries have increased from 2 percent during the Vietnam War to 16 percent in Iraq, where troops face the danger of improvised explosive devices or IEDs.

"That's really the ultimate test in today's environment in Iraq and Afghanistan with IEDs going off and shrapnel and fragmentation devices," said Blanshay, who started the company five years ago. "Being able to withstand that level of blast or that level of impact means that soldiers are coming home with their eyes intact."

According to Blanshay, Revision Eyewear is one of the few companies dedicated solely to designing and manufacturing ballistic eyewear. He said most competitors are sunglass or industrial eyewear companies that make a combat version. In fact, Revision Eyewear started out making sports eyewear before concentrating on ballistic eyewear for military and police forces around the world.

The company first contract was a Canadian Department of National Defense order.



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Sawfly eyewear and Desert Locust goggles, manufactured in Williston by Revision Eyewear, are pictured above.

Photo: PHOTO PROVIDED

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"That kind of launched us into the military eyewear area," Blanshay said. "Nobody else was out there designing products to meet military requirements."

He said ballistic eyewear not only has to offer sufficient protection, but also has to be durable, lightweight, comfortable and compatible with night vision and weapon sighting systems.

Each ballistic eyewear kit comes with two sets of lenses, one for daytime and the other for nighttime use.

The Sawfly glasses are used in a low-threat environment while the Desert Locust goggles, which are worn over the helmet and seal to the face, affording more protection.

Blanshay said when the company decided to bid on U.S. military orders it made sense to have a facility in the United States that was also close to Montreal and Vermont fit the criteria.

He said the assembly, quality assurance, research and development, and shipping functions are carried out in Williston, which opened in the fall of 2004. The Montreal headquarters, which has staff of 15, takes care of international sales and marketing.

"Wherever possible, we decided Vermont will be the focal point of our growth," he said.

In addition to the U.S. and Canadian military, Revision Eyewear has military contracts in more than 40 countries, including Singapore, Australia, Great Britain, Belgium and most NATO countries.

The company, which does 70 percent of its business in the U.S., expects to double its sales this year to \$20 million.

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