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Friends' vision pays off
Leslie Wright
Staff

The Burlington Free Press

Canadian duo carves out niche in military for protective eyewear

By Leslie Wright

WILLISTON -- It was over a few beers that Jonathan Blanshay and Brent Sheldon -- friends since the sixth grade -- came up with the idea for their **business** venture -- high-performance eye protection for athletes.

Blanshay, 37, was in banking and would run the financial side of the **business**. Sheldon, 38, worked in his family's sunglasses **business** and would be the "mad scientist inventor" side of the **business**, according to Blanshay.

"The idea was to raise the bar in terms of performance eyewear," Blanshay said.

Their company, Revision Eyewear, was born in 2001, in their hometown of Montreal.

But the venture didn't turn out the way Blanshay and Sheldon had planned.

Interest from the Canadian military prompted Revision to shift its focus on an even narrower niche -- protective glasses for the military.

The bet paid off. Four years later, Revision has raised more than \$10 million in capital. Sales have doubled every year. This year Revision is expected to turn a profit.

And with an American office established in Williston in January, the company has breached the supply chain for the U.S. military, supplying technical eye protection for this country's elite troops.

Passing muster

Revision caught the eye of the Canadian military in 2002 at a



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trade show in Indianapolis where Harley Davidson, the motorcycle manufacturer, was displaying motorcycle goggles made for Harley by Revision.

Blanshay and Sheldon decided to meet with the military. They were surprised by what they found.

"They were seriously wearing stuff that looked like it was from the '60s and '70s -- big industrial eyewear that you know soldiers just don't want to wear," Blanshay said.

The military wanted to trim its inventory of protective eyewear from seven or eight types down to two or three, said Ian Craigie, equipment program manager for personal protective equipment with the Canadian Department of National Defense.

Blanshay and Sheldon knew they could produce a product better than what the military was using. They decided to go after the military contract. Long lead times, rigorous testing and a competitive process that offered no guarantee of a sale might have deterred other companies, but where others saw obstacles, Blanshay and Sheldon saw opportunity.

"It's a totally different niche and it's why we have a protectable niche, because it takes a long time," he said.

The Canadian military would take eight months evaluating Revision's eyewear, testing it against 12 competitors before awarding the contract to Revision.

"We knew we had a good product. We didn't know how much better it was," Blanshay said.

The Canadian Department of National Defense placed a \$5.4 million order for 100,000 pairs of the Sawfly, a wrap-around that looks similar to popular styles of sports eyewear but is designed to higher optics.

The Sawfly can also withstand a shotgun blast at 16 feet.

In addition to passing rigorous technical standards, Canadian soldiers like the look of the Sawfly, which means they wear them, Craigie said.

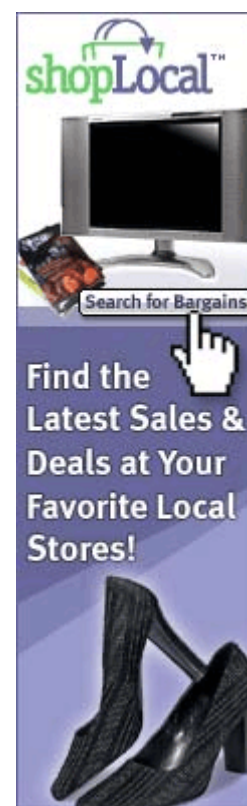
"I hate to use the term, but it has a certain appeal in what we call the 'look cool factor,' which has no technical bearing or anything, but you can't make a soldier look silly and have them like it," he said.

Revision shipped its glasses in 30 lots, which gave the military the chance to test each lot to see how consistent the overall quality was, Craigie said.

"Nothing's come back from the field except good word," he said. "I see this product at least for the next five to seven years, if not longer."

Top-down marketing

The next step was to pursue U.S. defense contracts. Doing **business** with the U.S. military is not impossible from Canada, but having offices on this side of the border would be a distinct advantage in winning contracts from the government, Blanshay said.



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Revision began to look for locations in the southern U.S., a strong region for military contractors, and in the Burlington area. Blanshay knew about another Montreal company, Triosyn Corp. -- a biotech company that makes a filter used in masks and fabric that protects from disease and chemicals -- that moved to Williston in 2002.

Burlington is attractive to Revision because of its proximity to Montreal. It also helps that Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., sits on the Senate Appropriations Committee, which approves defense spending.

Leahy was pleased to see Revision join a growing number of small, specialized defense contractors in Vermont such as Triosyn, Newport helmet maker MSA, and Applied Research Associates in Royalton, which makes a mine detector.

"We're not only providing really good jobs in Vermont, it helps all the way down. It encourages our schools to do a better job in math, science, engineering," Leahy said of the defense companies. "The synergistic aspect of it is amazing and you feel the effect far more in a little state like ours."

As in Canada, winning acceptance by the U.S. armed forces was a long process. Revision did manage to get on a list of approved military suppliers in February at the end of an 11-month process. The Army's elite 82nd Airborne Division bought 2,800 pairs. Other elite units have purchased the glasses, including the 101st Airborne and the 10th Mountain divisions. A total of 10,000 pairs have been sold to the U.S. military so far, Blanshay said.

The total U.S. market for military eyewear is estimated at \$70 to \$80 million annually, Blanshay said. Revision glasses are also being tested by the military in the United Kingdom.

The U.S. military is starting to look at issuing protective eyewear to every soldier starting with basic training. Revision is one of three brands being tested for that purpose at Fort Benning, Ga. Outfitting Army basic trainees alone could be worth about \$2.5 million a year, Blanshay said.

For now, starting with the military's elite is a good way to go, Blanshay said. Winning acceptance by the elite troops gives Revision credibility in the same way as endorsements by start athletes. The sporty look helps, too.

"Believe it or not, image is important," Blanshay said. "They don't want to walk around looking like supervisors in a Ford plant."

Revision is allowed to display its logo on its glasses it sells to the U.S. military. The military wants soldiers to identify with the brand and wear the glasses to achieve the ultimate goal -- eye protection.

According to the Department of Defense there were 345 eye injuries from March 2003 through April 27 in Iraq, accounting for 16 percent of injuries. That's up from 7 to 9 percent in the Gulf War of 1991 and the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967, 1973 and 1982, according to a report in the British Journal of Ophthalmology.

The type of warfare in Iraq where roadside bombs and other improvised explosive devices, known as IEDs, are common. These often detonate close to soldiers without warning. Though he admits selling retail sunglasses would have been an easier way to go, Blanshay has no regrets about deciding to focus on military applications.

In a way, Revision is getting invaluable feedback on its product from the best in the **business**.

"The goal is to be the world's leading military eyewear company," Blanshay said. "Ultimately that will translate to retail."

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BOX: Company profile

COMPANY: Revision Eyewear

FOUNDED: 2001

LOCATIONS: London, Montreal, Williston

FOUNDERS: Jonathan Blanshay, chief executive officer, and Brent Sheldon, executive director

EMPLOYEES: 15

PRODUCT: High-performance eyewear for the military and law enforcement

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