

DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

JULY 26 – AUGUST 1, 2002

War effort takes Colo. companies far from home



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DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Two Colorado companies are supporting the war on terrorism by building projects on the tiny, faraway tropical island of Diego Garcia, a British territory in the center of the Indian Ocean.

Jeff Groom San Juan Construction, a general contractor based in Montrose, and CTL/Thompson Inc., a soils and materials testing firm based in Denver, are building an aircraft maintenance facility, underground ammunition bunkers and a berm around a fuel depot on the U.S. Navy Support Facility, the only thing on the 17-square-mile atoll aside from an old coconut plantation.

The two are working with British construction firm John Laing International.

The island, reachable only via military transport, was used as a refueling base for U.S. bombers launching attacks against Iraq during the Gulf War and more recently against Afghanistan after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The \$13.4 million contract, scheduled for completion next April, is just one in a string of federal contracts San Juan Construction has landed since the company's owners decided in the late 1980s that working in exotic locations was more fun than working in the southwestern Colorado town of Norwood.

"We were driving up the road to Norwood and we started throwing out names of places where we could work that were warmer, like Hawaii," said Carl Hawk, one of three brothers who owns the Montrose company.

"But we knew we couldn't just break into the market, we knew that we'd have to get federal contracts to get in," he said.

And in 1989, the company landed its first federal contract, renovating 56 homes with solar heating for the Navy in Hawaii.

Since then, the general contractor has worked on a number of Pacific Ocean islands and bid projects all across the world. The company post-

ed revenues in 2001 of about \$15 million and counts federal contracts as about 95 percent of its work.

"It's logistically challenging," Hawk said of working in faraway locations.

The contractor is responsible for getting every tool and piece of equipment, as well as every item of material, to the construction site.

"We have to take everything in -- from housing to construction equipment down to the Dixie cups for water. We bring in batch plants, copiers, computers, you name it. If you're missing one part or one piece, it takes a minimum of three months' shipping time to get it over there [to Diego Garcia]," he said.

"If we make a mistake and don't have the right materials, it's a nightmare."

Part of the project is testing the soils on the base as well as the materials used in construction to make sure everything meets specifications.

That's where CTL/Thompson comes in.

The Denver company resulted from the 1977 merger of two older



Building \$13.4 million worth of construction projects on the tiny island of Diego Garcia, in the center of the Indian Ocean, means shipping tons of sand and aggregate, carefully bagged for transport. Two Colorado companies are working on the project.

companies, Thompson, founded in 1971, and CTL, founded in 1947. The largest geotechnical testing firm in the state, CTL/Thompson has about 290 employees and posted revenues of \$25.6 million last year.

CTL/Thompson has worked on projects ranging from offices to testing the ground before construction of Interstate 70 through Glenwood Canyon.

San Juan already had a soils and materials testing and quality control firm it had worked with on previous projects, but the Diego Garcia project required a higher level of certification, Hawk said.

After several phone calls, he was referred to CTL/Thompson last fall -- right around the time of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

CTL/Thompson gets high marks on professionalism and flexibility from companies that have worked with them before.

"If there's a concern, they're very willing to step up and say, 'in our expert opinion, it could be remedied by this and doing this,'" said Lauren Nelson, general superintendent and safety director for Calcon Constructors, a general contracting company that often recommends CTL/Thompson to project owners for quality-control efforts.

"They step up and are willing to go the extra mile," Nelson said.

But the attacks complicated an already tight construction time frame.

The Navy was on the verge of canceling the project, awarded in March 2001, until the Hawk brothers said they were too far along in the mobilization process to stop. Workers were sent to the island Oct. 4, Carl Hawk said.

And the materials intended for the construction project were about to be shipped to the island from the Middle East -- and 4,000 pounds of material had to be tested before the rest of it could be shipped, Hawk said.

So he shipped 2 tons of material to CTL/Thompson's offices at 22 Lipan St. -- unbeknownst to the testing company.

"It was a nightmare; some got stuck in customs in the U.K. and

in Denver we had a problem getting it out of customs," Hawk said.

"These crates showed up in the parking lot, and they're marked Dubai [in the United Arab Emirates], and 15 minutes later Wayne [Hawk] called and said they needed our resumé and qualifications immediately," said Jeff Groom, vice president for CTL/Thompson.

The company has offices in Colorado and Texas, and is planning to expand, but the international operations -- including working on a tropical island in the Indian Ocean -- weren't on the horizon before the Hawk brothers called, Groom said.

"This is the classic 'blind squirrel gets the nut' scenario," he said.

Working on the Diego Garcia project has been an interesting opportunity, Groom said.

As with most projects, durability is an issue when testing materials, he said.

"Durability concerns, here, we think of as freezing and thawing. There, they're worried about salt and corrosion," Groom said.

The project also needed an on-site quality control person to test materials as they're shipped to the island.

Groom sent an e-mail asking if any employees were interested in spending more than a year in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Seth Buckman, a young engineer from CTL/Thompson's Fort Collins office, volunteered for the job 15 minutes later, Groom said.

"I like a challenge," Buckman said -- via Internet chat room -- of his decision to volunteer. "How many people do you know [who] get an opportunity to work on a project like this? It makes life interesting."

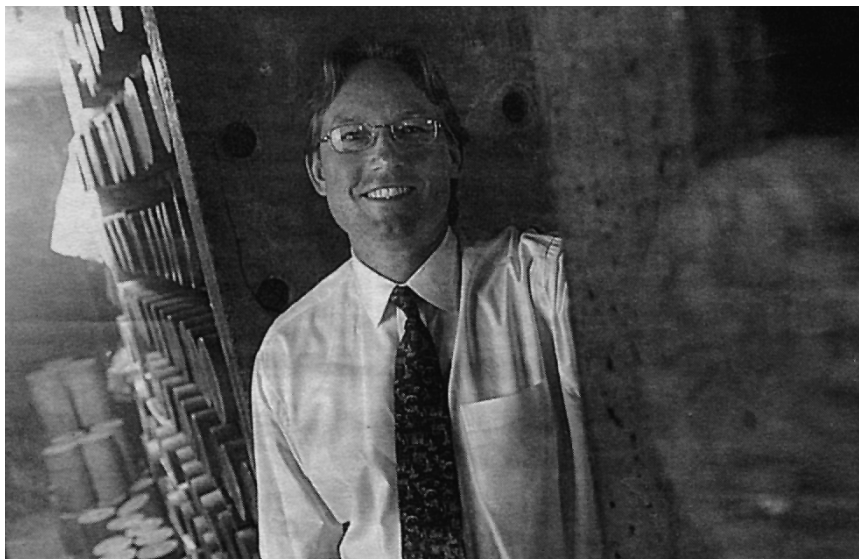
The biggest challenge has been dealing with the language barrier between the U.S. workers and the 78-person Filipino work crew, Buckman said, adding that he's also surprised by the relaxed attitudes of people on the island.

"It's like a small community, which I guess it is," he said. "Everyone here realizes that they're in the same boat."

The two companies stay in touch with their people on Diego Garcia, who work 12 time zones away from Colorado, via late night or early morning telephone calls and e-mail.

And the Hawk brothers are already planning to bring CTL/Thompson on board with other projects.

"It was really a great find to work with CTL on this, to find someone with the requirements and who was willing to go work down there and work with us and the Navy," Carl Hawk said of bringing CTL/Thompson to the Diego Garcia project.



Jeff Groom vice president of CTL/Thompson, said the company is planning to expand.