

Low-key approach to high-powered success at dB Control

BY JONATHAN XAVIER

FREMONT — In 1990, Joe Hajduk took \$2,000 and the equity from his house to start dB Control Inc. The concept: Bring engineering and manufacturing together as a cohesive unit, and foster an environment where high-quality products, not money, are the primary goal.

Nineteen years later, with sales up about 33 percent over the past three years and expected to hit the \$25 million mark this year, it looks like dB Control is doing all right on the money front, as well.

“When I first started, my goal was not to become rich. I told people, if I can build five amplifiers in my garage, and make a better product than everybody else, and get paid as much as I got paid as an engineer, then I would be happy,” Hajduk said.

Hajduk isn’t just making amplifiers in a garage, though. The company designs and manufactures high-voltage power supplies and microwave amplifiers for the U.S. military for use in everything from radar to electronic countermeasures, from fighter jets to state-of-the-art unmanned drone planes such as the Predator UAV.

“I would say our success is due to the constant goal of trying to achieve quality and reliability,” Hajduk said. “You know, if you have something commercial, and it dies, you replace it. If you replace it in a timely manner, then the customer is happy. But we’re a critical component, say a jammer aboard a jet. If the jammer doesn’t work, somebody could get killed. A pilot could lose his life.”

Developing technology for the military creates certain challenges, Hajduk said. Military technology is constantly changing because the enemies it’s designed to fight constantly change.

“We’re on the leading edge of technology, so some of these things have never been built before, never been used before,” said Tom Palmer, program manager of supplier development for General Atomics Aeronautical Systems Inc., a dB Control client. “We keep asking them to get better and better, and they keep responding in a positive manner.”

General Atomics manufactures the MQ-1 Predator, a remote control aerial vehicle that has seen combat over Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Serbia, Iraq and Yemen. dB Control is the sole supplier of amplifiers for the Predator’s

dB CONTROL INC.

Location: 1120 Auburn St., Fremont, 94538
CEO: Joe Hajduk
Expected 2009 revenue: \$25 million
Founded: 1990
Employees: 120
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Phone: 510.656.2325

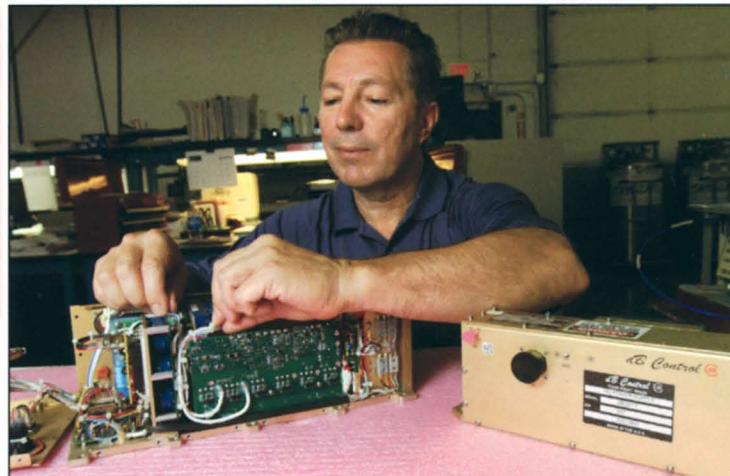
synthetic aperture radar, having provided parts for every UAV since the first one rolled off the assembly line in 1994.

Synthetic aperture radar or SAR, such as the system on the Predator, is an area of growth for the company, Hajduk said. Originally used in reconnaissance and space exploration, SAR is finding more and more commercial applications. SAR uses multiple overlaid radar images and complex algorithms to construct a high-resolution image in real time. The result is functionally similar to a black and white photo, but because it uses radio waves instead of light, SAR can see through clouds, rain, smoke, and even trees and foliage.

That makes it ideal when needed to see through obstructions. Hajduk said he has sold systems to companies that were creating autopilot maps for commercial airliners, allowing them to fly even in poor visibility conditions. Planes equipped with dB Control-powered SAR systems are also being developed for use by firefighters, who can fly them over a forest fire to monitor the blaze in real-time, despite smoke that would make a conventional camera useless.

Hajduk said his business will grow because demand is increasing, and there are a small number of companies entering the market. And many of the larger companies that have traditionally done a lot of things in-house are beginning to outsource, enabling smaller contractors such as dB Control to pick up more business.

One customer that has outsourced some of its functions to the Fremont-based firm is Thermo Fisher Scientific. Fifteen years ago, Ther-



VICKI THOMPSON

AT THE WORKBENCH: dB Control CEO Joe Hajduk began the company with \$2,000 and the equity from his house and has built it into a \$25 million supplier of components for the U.S. military used in everything from radar to unmanned drone aircraft.

mo Fisher manufactured the power supplies for its portable X-ray equipment. It outsourced the high voltage block to dB Control, a move that proved so successful that five years later Thermo Fisher handed over manufacturing of the entire power supply to Hajduk’s company. Now it relies entirely on dB Control for that function.

“We’ve pretty much been able to eliminate all that assembly work,” said Laura Monnig, operations manager for Thermo Fisher Scientific in Scotts Valley. “It allows us to just plug and play our X-ray tubes, which are our core competency, into those power supplies.”

Monnig says she’s been impressed with dB Control’s continued focus on its customers, even as the company has grown.

“dB Control when we started with them was quite a different company. It was much smaller,” she said. “Although they’ve grown their business, we still continue to feel that we’re a valued customer. And that isn’t always the case when a company grows like that.”

Not losing sight of the people has been a goal for dB Control, Hajduk said.

“I think a lot of business people lose sight of that,” he said. “If you take care of the basics, take care of your people, take care of customers, work hard to achieve reliability, then, well, like someone I once knew once told me, if you work hard, the money will follow. But if you chase the money first, you’ll never get there.”