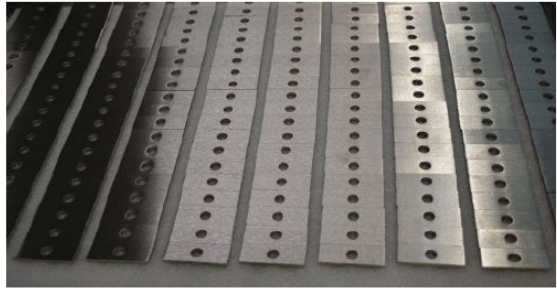




Photography by Ann Marie Harvey

An employee at Alabama Specialty Products examines one of the test coupons



Test coupons are the metal samples that started the whole business.



Photo courtesy of Don Johnson

From left: Son Tim Johnson, wife Peggy Johnson, Don, and son-in-law Sai Mudiam.

## A GLOBAL EFFORT: ALABAMA SPECIALTY PRODUCTS

By Ann Marie Harvey

Don Johnson knows full well the ugliness of war. The Mississippi native served for nine years as a U.S. Air Force pilot, flying more than 160 combat missions in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. For three years he flew in and out of the area, carrying tanks, personnel and unfortunately, his fallen comrades. After Don returned to the States, he spent the remainder of his military career flying a C-130 out of Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss., tracking storms and hurricanes. "The seas are terrible during a storm," he says. "If you do it right, everything is okay. If you have a problem, no one is coming out to get you."

### MUNFORD, ALABAMA

#### **BUILT FROM SCRATCH**

Returning to civilian life brought its own set of challenges. In a short amount of time, Don lost his job and went through a divorce. For years he had thought about becoming an entrepreneur, so he moved to Munford, Ala., to live with his brother and started his business from scratch in 1980. "I desperately needed a place where I would be fed," he says about those years. "I had previously worked for Monsanto so I called my professional contacts there and asked them to work with me. My first purchase order was from them."

From those humble beginnings, Don has grown Alabama Speciality Products to 200 employees and five subsidiaries that sit on a 60-acre campus in 17 buildings, servicing more than 70 countries worldwide. Known originally as Metal Samples, that subsidiary still manufactures test coupons. A test coupon is a small sample of a material that has been prepared in such a way so any failure in the piece can be detected before it is placed into a larger production piece. "We are the largest supplier of test coupons in the world and have 2,000 metals on hand—the largest array of different metals in the world," Don explains. "We have 50 different grades of stainless steel, 30 grades of aluminum, gold, silver, platinum, palladium, chrome and more."

Many of their customers include major international industries—nuclear, medical, aerospace, chemical processing, oil and gas, chemical, water treating and petroleum companies. "Most people don't realize there is an entire industry that manufactures chemical additives to reduce corrosion rates of oil," Don says. "We manufacture devices to monitor the corrosion rate and make the equipment to add the chemicals into the oil lines." With an engineering staff on hand, the company can create whatever a customer asks for, including a medical device invented by a University of Alabama at Birmingham doctor.

Don prides himself on being innovative and enjoys playing with the "big toys." "I love getting new state-of-the-art equipment and making it work," he says. "We can do almost anything with a piece of metal. We have made space components so intricate and small you can hold them on the tip of your finger." The company also has 40 lasers on site, more than any other private company. "Dad is aggressive about everything he does in life," says Don's son, Tim. "He is passionate about technology and has advanced the company to produce our products with greater efficiency. We even built a laser to make our own custom systems and added laser scientists to our staff."

### **LESSONS FROM A PANDEMIC**

Because of their defense contract work, Alabama Specialty Products was labeled an essential business and did not close during the quarantine. But like all

businesses, they have had to implement COVID-19 policies like social distancing and requiring masks. Employees are monitored daily for fever and if someone is sick they go through a query system to check for symptoms. "We can't let them come to work until they undergo testing," Don explains. "Results can take several days so that really impacts our productivity."

Since a substantive amount of their work is in the oil and gas field, much of their overseas business has been delayed. But as business has dropped off in some sectors, the company has pivoted as businesses need plexiglass partitions. "We train our employees to listen to the customer's needs and their deadlines," Don says.

### **MOVING THE LEGACY FORWARD**

As Don nears retirement, Tim and son-in-law Sai Mudiam are poised to take up the charge given them. Tim began working for his dad during the summers as a teenager, eventually becoming an engineer. Sai joined the company 33 years ago when Don flew his plane to Auburn University, picked up the international engineering student and took him back to Munford for his interview. "I didn't have a car at that time and wondered how I would get to my interview," Sai recalls.

Both men understand the firm foundation Don created. "I think there are bigger things ahead for us," Sai says. "We have a legacy with test coupons and now our company goal is to be number one in the world's best corrosion monitoring equipment."

As the company grows and changes, one thing remains the same—a family-friendly policy that focuses on its impact on people, often hiring recovering addicts, supporting an orphanage in India and running the company with Christian principles. "We ask ourselves two questions every day," Don says. "Are we having fun? Are we making an impact? We are here for more than money. There is a bigger purpose at work."



*Ann Marie Harvey is Vice President of Communications at Vertical Solutions Media. She specializes in creating dynamic copy that is both genuine and compelling. Editing the written word is her passion.*