

## Small Runs, Big Success For Aerospace Composite Products



By Jennifer Sikorski,  
CF Assistant Editor

**CF: How many employees does your company have?**

**GS:** Ten.

**CF: What is the nature of your company?**

**GS:** We have two roles. We supply raw materials to people making motorcycle parts and any type of composite part where they're doing a wet lay-up. That's one area. The other side is we manufacture parts for guitars, guitar manufacturers, NASA—we run a variety of different customers in the manufacturing end. We have presses, an auto clave, and ovens in that end that we're running composite parts. The majority of our business is recreational.

**CF: What is your company's niche?**

**GS:** I'd have to say mostly small runs in composites in the musical instrument area, mostly in guitars.

**CF: How did you get started in the industry?**

**GS:** I have a mechanical engineering degree in aircraft maintenance. So I came through the aircraft industry, and I started working for Ciba-Geigy. They manufacture a lot of resins and were making a push into composites in the early '70s. I was working for them in their plastics group and moved into the composites industry with them—I was one of the few people who had some aircraft experience. I worked for them for about 15 years in new product development, sales and marketing. I started my own business after I left Ciba. I saw a niche for small companies doing the small jobs that were not profitable for larger companies to attack—companies looking to do a handle for a softball bat or a neck for a guitar or something like that. The volumes just weren't there to entice a Ciba of the time.

**CF: Did you face any problems when getting started in the industry?**

**GS:** Cash flow and equipment. Having the equipment necessary to bid the jobs—that's always the problem we still face. We'd love to have a 10-foot autoclave, but just can't find the job that merits the commitment of funds for it. And when starting a new company, you have no financial backing other than what comes out of your own resources. We're not a publicly traded company; we don't have investors. You have to look at the resources you have available.



George Sparr, President  
Aerospace Composite  
Products, San Leandro, Calif.

**CF: Do you face any obstacles in the regulatory arena?**

**GS:** No, we've been in contact with them and we don't do any wet lay up, so in that respect I think it's easier. All of our jobs are either autoclave or press cured or oven vacuum bagged with prepregs. We don't have much of an issue with that.

**CF: Does your company face any other challenges?**

**GS:** The problem we always face is—a customer calls and says, "I want to build a composite widget," and you have to look at it, and say, "does it makes sense?" Sometimes a customer can't see that—they're blind about it; they want a composite. What I try to do as fast as I

can is cut to the quick, because what really makes or breaks a job is the tooling. Some of the jobs we do just don't merit a \$5,000 or \$8,000 tooling charge. I think that's the hardest part of trying to break into a new area. Most of the customers we attract are just not in that league. Some of them have worked out extremely well for us, but we get calls from people who are sitting in an office saying, "Should we make this product out of composites? Let's go see if we can find someone to help us design it, develop it, or manufacture it." We don't do many build-to-print at this moment.

When we move to our new facility, we will surely go after more certified parts. We're going to about 750,000 square feet. We have an autoclave and three more presses sitting in a warehouse that we'll bring online, and we're going to build an oven that will be 8x10 feet. It's in Livermore (California), and we're moving onto Stealth Court. The whole complex has aircraft names for streets. I saw it and thought, "Someone has to be telling me to take a good look at this!" My goal is to move into medical applications and areas like that.

One of the challenges we're facing is more and more of our work going overseas, especially in the recreational market. You have to keep on finding new niches.

**CF: Can you describe your marketing efforts?**

**GS:** Mostly, our marketing at this point is the Internet and advertising in appropriate magazines. The Internet seems to be covering a majority of our customer base. We're getting people who are out there searching for companies to buy raw material or companies to manufacture one of their parts. We're a little limited in that area because we don't have a big staff—it's me. A lot of the times, fortunately for us, the phone rings, and  
*("Pulling Strings" continues on p. 45)*