



Weatherhaven CEO Ray Castelli with one of the partly-assembled moveable shelters. The Burnaby-based company is expanding into new markets across the globe, including remote and hostile environments. RIC ERNST — THE PROVINCE



Weatherhaven's Polar Haven model gets a scientific field test in the Antarctic, as the local residents (left) look on.

Burnaby shelters defy Arctic wrath

WEATHERHAVEN: B.C. firm aims to double revenue from its remarkable fabric 'tents' over five years

BY PAUL LUKE
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The Baffin Island mining camp was a picture of almost total devastation.

Matrix Aviation Solutions, which operates camps across the Arctic, flew a crew into the exploration site in June to ready it for summer drilling.

"Severe winds in the winter had blown down all the plywood buildings and scattered the pieces over the tundra," Matrix operations manager Mike Kenney says. "The floors were in place but everything else was gone."

In an act of stunning defiance, 11 fabric shelters made by B.C.-based Weatherhaven were still standing. The structures' fabric walls and roofs had withstood gales that pulverized seven wood buildings.

Weatherhaven CEO Ray Castelli chuckles at this incident but won't make a big deal of it. If he tried, he could probably find similar stories from Weatherhaven clients in 50 countries across seven continents.

From its factory in a mild corner of Burnaby, Weatherhaven makes portable shelters — fabric and hard-walled — that brave unimaginably harsh environments. The company protects humans from the ugliest weather the planet can hurl at them, from sandstorms in the Gobi Desert to blizzards on Cornwallis Island in Canada's High Arctic.

The privately owned company decided this year that it wants to double its revenues over the next five years. Two entwined global trends give it a good shot at reaching that goal. But they will also stretch its capacity to keep peo-

ple cozy or cool to the limit.

Mining companies, having exhausted the world's nearest mineral deposits, are exploring hellholes of hitherto unthinkable awfulness. Jungle hellholes, desert hellholes, Arctic hellholes. High-altitude hellholes.

More and more, they want to do that exploring — and, eventually, mining — with the comforts of home. They want air-conditioning, heating, good lighting, bathroom and kitchen systems, sewage treatment. And they want the ability to pack up and move those shelters to other locations.

That's where Weatherhaven's arch-shaped shelters, which secure polyvinyl chloride skins to metal frames — are just the thing.

"Even though mining companies are deploying employees in very remote areas of the world they have increasingly high standards for living conditions," Castelli says. "Governments or corporations are coming to expect that living accommodations be as good as what they would receive if they were doing a project in the middle of the United States."

"If you want Western world living conditions regardless of whether you are in a desert or on a remote mountain, we can deliver that. It's all a function of what you want to pay."

A basic sleeper unit from Weatherhaven could cost \$10,000 to \$20,000. An ultra-elaborate shelter may run into hundreds of thousands of dollars, depending on its destination.

The company is about far more than just a fabric roof over your head. Its medical shelters and mobile hospitals — many of which house well-equipped surgical theatres — are widely used.

"There was a nasty dengue fever outbreak in the favelas [slums] of Rio de Janeiro earlier this year and it overwhelmed the hospital and medical facilities," Castelli says.

"The government responded by establishing some temporary medical treatment facilities and we sold field-hospital-type units there."

Military installations currently account for about half of Weatherhaven's market, although that share has ranged from 25 per cent to as high as 70 per cent. A 2,000-unit camp in Afghanistan for the Canadian military is Weatherhaven's largest single project and has caught other nations' attention. The company has recently won contracts with militaries in Australia and South Africa, who join similar clients in Japan and Switzerland.

While Weatherhaven faces no rivals of its own global scale it has regional competitors, Castelli says. To limit costs, it has invested in production partnerships at factories in South Africa, Peru and Brazil.

Weatherhaven was born in 1981. Since then, it has grown to 70 local employees and a new factory in Burnaby. It's owned by five partners, including Castelli, a man who blew in from the wind energy sector to become CEO in March.

Weatherhaven, which is financing its expansion from cash flow, has no plans to go public but a stock-exchange listing remains an option down the road, Castelli says.

Asked to identify the roughest conditions his shelters face, Castelli is inclined to give the nod to Afghanistan's wind, sand and temperature swings. But he's open to handing the worst-weather-in-the-world award to Antarctica.

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