



John Gerrish is the Complete Package — Businessman, Educator and Humanitarian — as His Airpack Company Turns 20

BY BLAISE WILLIG | Photography By Kathy Bergren Smith

John Gerrish has no plans to run for political office. His military days are over. And he's definitely not auditioning for a pageant. In his own small way, Gerrish just wants to help this planet of ours become a little less scary.

"My first priority is I'm making the world a safer place," says the President and owner of Airpack, Inc., which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year.

His company — with its slogan, "We fix the freight and educate the transportation industry" — specializes

in the packaging of dangerous and sensitive cargo. Gerrish, 50, has long been an expert in the field, having started Airpack in 1986 after recognizing "a need to provide the airlines and shipping industry with competent, quality packaging and crating." Gerrish learned the ropes as a Load Master for the U.S. Air Force and honed his skills with Allied Bendix Aerospace (now part of Honeywell).

By Gerrish's count, Airpack is one of fewer than 20 companies across the country with expertise

Right: Airpack's Barbara Gerrish and Operations Manager Charlie Hicks package another shipment. The Glen Burnie-based company celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Below: President John Gerrish instructs a class at Airpack, which considers educating the transportation industry one of its core values.



in hazardous materials, or hazmat. Gerrish explains that "hazmat shipments can be difficult due to the highly technical, complex and regulatory nature of the product, procedures and documentation involved — not to mention the liabilities and insurance."

"Proposed rules and regulation changes are being reviewed and proposed by DOT (the Department of Transportation) on an ongoing basis," he adds. "It takes time and focus to stay up with these changes."

Airpack handles about 10,000 packages each month at facilities in Baltimore and Charlotte, N.C., while priding itself on delivering creative solutions to unique freight situations. This includes bringing air, ocean, truck and rail cargo in line with federal and international safety regulations.

"We're very diversified," Gerrish says. "We're not doing the same thing every day — we're working with all types of materials and products."

Over the last two decades, Airpack has helped safely package chemical warfare agents, explosives, weapons systems, Air Force medical supplies and sensitive electronics like airline flight simulators. Zodiac of North America, the world's largest manufacturer and distributor of inflatable boats, began seeking Airpack's help 15 years ago with the manufacturing of special packaging for everything from delicate components to entire boats.

"I would recommend Airpack to anyone," says Zodiac Warehouse Manager Peter Molnar. "Their personal service is great."



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AIT Worldwide Logistics, the third-largest freight forwarder in the United States, is another satisfied Airpack client, according to Mark Kloch, AIT's Baltimore-based Director of International Operations and Information Systems. "When Airpack handles your shipment, you know it will be 100 percent correct," Kloch says. "It will stand up to the most stringent scrutiny of any carrier."

Though Airpack usually concentrates on freight weighing less than 5,000 pounds, Gerrish recalls a few years ago when he was called upon by a Virginia publishing company to custom design crates for various parts of a 450,000-pound printing press. Airpack then carefully arranged the crates in 11 40-foot containers for ocean travel.

"There will always be a demand for the subcontracting of difficult packaging requirements," Gerrish says. "It's just too complex — the average shipping department doesn't have the skills or the budget."

The packaging part of Airpack's business offers many interesting challenges. But first and foremost, Gerrish sees himself as an educator.

"Training is the fundamental basis for the whole business," says the internationally certified instructor, who has gone from working with 100 students per year in a public format to more than 500 students in both public and private, customized, on-site classes. Clients include Fortune 500 companies like Coca-Cola and Harley-Davidson, but Gerrish is also "down at the Port (of Baltimore) two to three times a month, working with steamship lines and freight forwarders and brokers."

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Gerrish says the federal government requires that his students first be furnished with a "general awareness" — a basic understanding of hazardous materials in transportation. "Then we go over job- or function-specific skills, and then we install safety in the workplace," Gerrish adds. "And now, DOT has added a fourth component — to install security training. Terrorism loves hazmat."

Robert Shaffer, the Manager of Cargo Development for the Maryland Aviation Administration, notes, "John has always been well-regarded as a person who knows what he's doing. And he fills a special need in terms of supplying training."

Shaffer also applauds Gerrish's humanitarian efforts, such as welcoming a group of officials visiting from Beijing or being the first to volunteer his business for an Air Cargo Apprenticeship Program with local high school students.

"John is really community spirited," Shaffer says. "And by reputation, his business is one of the very best at what they do on the East Coast."

For the future, Airpack's 18 employees are ready to go wherever the customers' needs take them. In fact, Gerrish recently expanded the company's warehouse space to accommodate the "explosive growth" of Airpack's specialized wood packaging division.

"We already offer a complete line of services," says Gerrish, "but we are always willing and able to assist our customers with their ever-changing challenges and needs." 

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