



By *Andy Rosen*



John Gerrish stands proudly in his warehouse as he unscrews the lid of a wooden crate to reveal a pristine, deep red 1932 Indian motorcycle.

Gerrish's company, Airpack, has been hired to get the old chopper ready for shipment from Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport to a museum in Italy.

He looks over the carefully-constructed packing crate, girded by several wooden panels designed to hold the motorcycle steady as it travels. Satisfied, he screws the lid back on.

The bike is just one of hundreds of dangerous, fragile or otherwise problematic shipments that Airpack readies each year. Some of the cargo is unusual, like the original spaceship from the movie "Aliens." Some of it's hazardous, like chemical warfare agents and weapons for troops overseas.

Much of the time, Airpack deals with more common materials, like panes of glass, adhesives and paints. What all of these things have in common, Gerrish explains, is that they are not designed for transportation.

The motorcycle, for example, can't just be put on a plane as is. It has to be packaged in such a way that meets federal

regulations designed to prevent the release of fuel and oil, which are classified as hazardous materials. It must also be protected from damage and from harming other cargo in order to be insured by the company that will ship it.

“You just don’t walk up to an airline and say ‘here, take it,’” Gerrish says. “It has to be packed and certified according to regulation, depending on the mode of transportation.”

Airpack, based in Glen Burnie, doesn’t actually send or ship cargo. That’s the business of freight forwarders and shipping companies. Airpack packs the shipments and arranges for their transit to make sure they’ll be carried safely.

Gerrish founded the company after he spent 10 years handling dangerous goods in the U.S Air Force.

Airpack, which opened in 1986, filled a need for packaging expertise in the area’s cargo business, and has grown substantially since then.

Sales increased between 20 and 30 percent each year through the 1990s, and the company continues to do \$2.5 million per year in sales in Glen Burnie and at a Charlotte, N.C. location. Airpack has a profit margin of between 20 and 25 percent.

In a given week, Airpack prepares anywhere from 20 to 40 shipments, which are carried on both passenger and cargo flights, as well as by sea, truck and rail.

Airpack has about 24,000 square feet of warehouse space in Glen Burnie, and 20,000 square feet in North Carolina. The company employs 23 people.

Terry Booth, past president of the Baltimore Washington Air Cargo Association, says Airpack plays an important role in the area’s shipping industry, helping to make difficult shipments possible. Gerrish now heads the association.

“John is a very, very helpful factor here in the air freight

community,” Booth, a domestic operations clerk at AIT Worldwide Logistics, says. “Whenever there’s a shipment like hazmats, we rely heavily on Airpack.”

Shipping rules have become increasingly complicated and more strictly-enforced since the 1990s, especially with enhanced security after Sept. 11, 2001.

That’s helped business for companies like Airpack. The company not only packages goods and brings them into compliance, but also trains shippers about the rules and how to work within them. In October, Airpack rolled out a new online program to recertify workers who have already been trained in packaging.

Gerrish educates hundreds of clients about the ins and outs of transportation regulations every year. His students include members of the U.S. Presidential Fleet who fly on Air Force One, along with workers from Coca-Cola and spice maker McCormick & Co.

He says he’s not concerned about losing business by training people to provide packaging for themselves, because there’s enough business to go around in the BWI area.

“This is a disconnect in the business of transportation,” Gerrish says. “The cost of packaging is very expensive, and until insurers and underwriters take a more aggressive approach to educating the shipper, there will always be a need for our service.” ::

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## **RISKY BUSINESS**

It can be risky to ship dangerous goods or hazardous materials. To control that risk, the federal government has stepped up its enforcement of cargo rules in recent years.

Shippers who don’t follow regulations, often times because they’re not aware of them, can get hit with fines ranging from \$200 to \$200,000 for improper marking or

packaging.

Shipments that aren't labeled to identify their dangerous contents, for example, can trigger fines starting at \$15,000.

Several agencies enforce the rules through inspection and oversight, including the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Transportation Security Administration.

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