

FACE

Protective dress spells success for Med-Eng

by Catherine Morrison

Bad times mean good times for Med-Eng Systems Inc., the world's leading manufacturer of bomb disposal suits and helmets. Take the Gulf War, for example. As a result of the war, according to Med-Eng President and co-founder Richard L'Abbé, sales for 1991 were "spectacular."

Although L'Abbé confesses to having had visions of "a Mercedes at the door and a yacht at the marina" in the early days of Med-Eng's existence, he does not come across as a hard-nosed mercenary bent on wresting a personal fortune from the political miseries of the world. The 40-ish father of two talks in terms of "protecting human lives" and "preventing some of the phenomenal pain and suffering" that is the human fallout of military conflict.

Richard L'Abbé graduated in mechanical engineering from the University of Ottawa in 1979 and went on to work in bioengineering, with a focus on the effects of impact on the human body. He was especially interested in the biomechanics of thoracic injury.

Tall and elegant, even with a cotton pullover draped casually over his slim shoulders on a steamy August morning, L'Abbé moves with languid grace and speaks with soft self-assurance. He comes into the corporate boardroom prepared to carry off an interview with *Summit* in a seamless narrative. Later, on a tour of corporate headquarters, he directs requests to Med-Eng staff members in a subdued tone that conveys both respect and a steely will.

This demeanour and will have served Richard L'Abbé well in bringing his Ottawa-based company to world dominance in the explosive protection industry. His determination to be polite and fight the impulse to walk out of a rude and arrogant gathering of potential clients in France resulted in Med-Eng's first major sale – six suits and helmets, sold for \$11,000 each in 1983. The sale rescued Med-Eng from the fiscal ignominy of 1982 when it sold only one helmet, to the German Federal Police for \$4,000.

Determination carried L'Abbé through a difficult period during the early 1990s, when American competitor was bent on destroying Med-Eng. They went so far as to buy out Safeco Manufacturing Ltd., the Mississauga-based company producing the suit part of the ensemble that Med-Eng was marketing around the world – and increasingly in the US. Luck was a factor, too, in Med-Eng winning this one. As it turned out, Safeco's licence to manufacture the suit, granted

by the RCMP, had expired earlier that year. L'Abbé and his team put together a proposal to acquire the licence and turned back his American rival.

L'Abbé is quick to point out that Med-Eng owes a great deal to its ongoing relationship with government organizations such as the RCMP, which originally contracted the design of a prototype bomb disposal helmet. The prototype had been developed by Biokinetics and Assoc., his first employer and the founder of Med-Eng.

Med-Eng enjoys ongoing research and development relationships with both the RCMP and the Department of National Defence. The company returns 10 to 15 per cent of its annual revenues to R&D; the quality and cost-effectiveness of its science are so widely respected that it is now expecting R&D investments from other countries. Britain and the US, for example, have virtually ceased doing their own R&D in the field because of the state-of-the-art products available from Med-Eng.

L'Abbé also credits the commercial services of Canadian embassies abroad. "Canadian exporters are among the luckiest in the world," he says, noting the help he was able to get in signing up agents/distributors in 25 countries around the world in 1983, Med-Eng's third year of operation. "We are a success story when it comes to the ideal of a private sector-public sector partnership." Med-Eng is two-time winner of the prestigious Canada Export Award, a distinction they share with such high profile companies as Bombardier and Newbridge Networks.

In 1996, having adapted the technologies from the bomb disposal garments and tested the new products against anti-personnel explosives, L'Abbé added land mine clearance ensembles to Med-Eng's product line. When Canada hosted the international signing of the Ottawa Accord on land mine eradication last December, Med-Eng's suit and helmet were featured in a showcase display of land mine clearing products and technology. Eight months later, as employees returned from summer vacations, Med-Eng was gearing up for the busiest quarterly production period since its launch in 1981.

As a further result of this exposure, and what L'Abbé characterizes as the "humanitarian, life-saving image it projected," Med-Eng was invited to mount a display in "the best booth" at a UN-sponsored Aid and Trade peacekeeping show in New York in September. At the New York show, Med-Eng was to unveil the latest lightweight version of the explosive disposal suit and helmet. L'Abbé also planned to launch a new footwear product created expressly for land mine clearance.

Med-Eng Systems is so confident in the science behind his products that saving limbs seems a certain outcome of the new footwear. It has already saved nine of 11 bomb disposal technicians; the two who did not survive were right on top of the bombs.

Recent terrorist threats have led to the development of suit and helmet systems to protect against biochemical agents. Escalating worldwide concern about the spread of terrorism, particularly on

the part of the United States in the wake of the bombings at two of their embassies in Africa, means that Med-Eng's sales are likely to soar even further.

"I'm still not driving a Mercedes, and I don't think I ever will..." says L'Abbé.

[Catherine Morrison](#) is a writer based in Chelsea, Quebec. Her work is also published in the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Globe and Mail's* print and online editions. She was a full-time writer/broadcaster for CBC Network Television and CBC TV and Radio, Winnipeg, a contributing editor and columnist for *Winnipeg Magazine*, and has had freelance work published in *Canadian Consumer*, *Asia Pacific Magazine*, the *Edmonton Journal* and *C.A.R.P. Magazine*. She is also Managing Director of [Morrison&Associates](#), which supplies communications and public affairs services to government and the high-tech sector.