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Manufacturing a smooth ride

BY JEAN HENDERSON, Tribune Staff Writer

As one of the oldest manufacturers in the Morristown Airport Industrial District, Tuff Torq keeps buzzing along ensuring a smooth ride for lawn mowers and garden tractors and an easy glide across a lake anywhere.

"The simple answer is that we manufacture transmissions for the lawn and garden and marine industries," said Frank Freeman, Sales and Marketing manager for the firm.

Some of Tuff Torq's customers are household names, such as John Deere, Husqvarna, Simplicity, Snapper and Craftsman, which is now a significant portion of the company's business.

With John Deere as its single largest customer and a large increase in orders from Husqvarna, there will soon be a pretty good chance that a quick look under the seat of a lawn tractor may reveal the Tuff Torq red, white and blue gear symbol.

"We supply all of John Deere's hydrostatic transmissions. We are their largest supplier.

Tuff Torq was also one of the first international companies to come to town. Parent company, Kanzaki Kokyukoki Manufacturing Company in Japan, made the decision to locate its only United States presence in Morristown based on a number of factors, Freeman said.

"This area is very similar to the Osaka area in Japan in climate and terrain. To have the workforce available was a big plus and there was a great group of Chamber of Commerce officials and Industrial Board representatives that recruited the company," Freeman said. "Dwight Nelson made several trips, as did Jack Fishman. That kind of support for us to locate here was a very important part of the decision."

That was 1989 with a handful of employees in a small work area.

Now the company employs a workforce of approximately 310, which is a multi-lingual blend of English, Japanese and Hispanic employees, in a 225,000-square-foot facility.

One of the primary successes behind the company is its business philosophy, according to James Brooks, a member of the Tuff Torq marketing team.

The philosophy, known as yawaragi, pulls from the company's Japanese heritage and "hopes to help create a better society while achieving harmony with the natural environment. Through friendly and active exchange of constructive opinions and mutual wisdom and cooperation, Tuff Torq's team of design and production engineers, manufacturing experts, assembly associates and visionary staff work in harmony with each other to assure growth and prosperity for the company and its customers."

"This is family here. We get along as a family, we disagree as a family. We're together so much that we can't help but feel that way," Freeman said.

There have been rough patches along the way in the company's 18-year history, Freeman said. But each of those challenges were met successfully and lessons learned then are still utilized today.

During an industry soft period a few years ago, the core employee contingent streamlined many operations to become more efficient, Freeman recalled.

The initiatives implemented then serves the company well today, Freeman said. Tuff Torq is building more products than ever before at its current level of production.

Tuff Torq produces up to 4,500 parts per day on three primary production lines on three shifts. With approximately 1.7 million units manufactured annually on an industry-wide level, Tuff Torq's market share is in the lion category. It's not only parts for the U.S. market, either, having captured 80 percent of the European market.

Tuff Torq also is a supplier back to its parent company, Kanzaki, procuring US made parts for their agricultural transmission manufacturing in Japan.

The company celebrated its 2.5 millionth unit off the line in 2001 and is on pace to celebrate another milestone soon.

It's not just luck that keeps all of the production lines moving at the company, since much of the equipment used in assembly and machining is manufactured by Kanzaki Kokyukoki.

Production of quality products on a consistent basis is another strong point for the company.

The quality ratio of the number of rejects to good parts is remarkably low, Brooks said, and the warranty rates of returned units from consumers is just one-quarter of the industry norm.

A test track at the facility is used to ensure quality standards remain high.

"We run the machine until it falls apart. We test every one of its functions to make sure they're doing what they're designed to do," Brooks said.

"What we try to do is to make consumers' lives easier so they accomplish what needs to be done. We match the needs of the consumers.

The overall focus for the company is about to expand even further into the marine division. Kanzaki started out as the "work horse" manufacturer for boats in the fishing industry in Japan, but is now eyeing a broader market.

"It's a new line for pleasure craft and the target market will be companies like SeaRay and Mastercraft.

Tuff Torq Corp. is located at 5943 Commerce Blvd. in MAID.

Company President Koji Irikura and Vice President Lyons Hamblen oversee the company's day to day operations.

The company's Web site is www.tufftorq.com.