

Home Made

Zodiac Milpro now builds in the U.S. with U.S. materials.



The new company supplies inflatables and rigid inflatables to military, government, and professional clients.

By KATHY BERGREN SMITH, CORRESPONDENT

Manufacturers of government boats are bemoaning the contraction of the market, but that hasn't stopped **Zodiac Milpro** from expanding.

In February, the military and professional division of Zodiac was sold to **Oaktree Capital Management**, a Los Angeles-based global investment firm. Marc Lavorata, a 30-year veteran of Zodiac, is now the CEO of the Paris-based manufacturer.

"We are focused on our mission of building boats for those who work on the water," said Lavorata. Zodiac Milpro supplies inflatables and rigid-inflatable boats (RIBs) to military forces and government and professional users worldwide.

While the name might be new, the change in ownership did not result in a company upheaval. Lavorata said that the Milpro division had always

operated autonomously while serving its specialized clientele. Zodiac Milpro makes 60 different models of boats ranging from simple inflatable rafts to high performance tactical RIBs.

The U.S. headquarters of Zodiac Milpro is in Stevensville, Md., just across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge from Annapolis, Md., and less than an hour from Washington, D.C. The facility was originally developed as a sales office for Zodiac's North American market. The boats were manufactured in Europe, Australia and Canada.

That was before the U.S. government decided to apply "Buy American" regulations to one of Zodiac's biggest selling products, the FC-470 inflatable boat. The boat, used by the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, is a rubber raft with removable floorboards and an outboard. In 2010, the Defense

Department decided that the boat's rubberized fabric must comply with the Berry Amendment, which specifies that certain products sold to the government must be made in the U.S. with U.S. materials.

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Rather than lose the contract, Zodiac found a domestic source for the material and transformed the Stevensville offices of Zodiac North America into a manufacturing facility.

"We were able to transfer the technology from our Spanish plant and train local workers," said Jake Heimbuch, technical director and sales operative who oversees contracts for the FC-470. "We worked with a domestic manufacturer and helped them create a polyester weave coated with neoprene and chlorosulfonated polyethylene that meets the spec. Within a matter of months, our workforce went from 10 to 50 when we began making the boats here. We are delivering an average of 20 boats a month."

In the production area behind the office, sheets of the fabric are cut and prepared for gluing, and two sewing machine operators sew accessories like D-rings into the fabric. Then the rafts are assembled and glued together, tested, tested again and prepared for



Small FC-470 inflatables, once built in Canada, Europe, and Australia, are now manufactured in Stevensville, Md.

delivery.

The testing is rigorous because the boats are used in difficult conditions by Navy SEAL teams and other commando units. These boats function as a vehicle for lightly armed teams to slip over the horizon and get to shore quickly and quietly. The RIBs must be able to be disassembled, rolled up, discharged from a submarine, dropped from an airplane or deployed by a helicopter. They are designed so a crew can use the boat to land and then hide the

vessel by submerging it until they need to move out.

"These boats are all made by hand," said Heimbuch. "They have to be very tough."

Zodiac Milpro is hoping to land another large contract to produce a boat for the Army and Navy that requires different construction techniques. The boats must be welded together instead of glued.

"We have preemptively taken steps to increase our footprint, our workforce and our equipment in order to hit the ground running should we be awarded the contract," Heimbuch said. "We are transferring technology from the Spanish plant for this project in the same way we did for the FC-470. We have brought trainers over and sent people to see the operation there." A total of 50 additional employees will be needed when production begins.

Beyond the inflatables built in Maryland, Zodiac Milpro also produces a second brand, the Hurricane RIB. These high performance RIBs are manufactured in Vancouver, British Columbia.

"We believe we have set a new standard for a special operations boat with our newest Hurricane MACH II 955 RIB," said Lavorata.

The Military Air Channeled Hull



The Hurricane MACH II RIB has a two-step hull.