Tucked inside the southeast corner of the Foothills Industrial Park sits a company that quietly goes about their business. The five-acre yard blends into the landscape – unassumingly – unless you’re looking for it. Inside the yard, a layer of sand covers sections of the ground - an uncommon site in Calgary. As the workers suit up, they are ready for the next job: they are industrial sandblasters and painters.

Air Pac Enterprises Ltd. plays an integral role in the oil and gas industry: they are one cog in a massive wheel that helps get product to the market that consumers use everyday, yet they go about their business with little consumer awareness. At times, their work is challenging although not leading edge, but it is at the forefront of the energy sector. They are one of the largest abrasive blast cleaning and anti-corrosive coating facilities in southern Alberta.

Air Pac paints energy services equipment from pressure vessels and pipe spools to skid packages and everything in between. They are also involved in the construction industry and undertake structural steel and trusses for large-scale commercial buildings in addition to infrastructures such as bridges. All the
blasting and spray-painting is done by hand with exact precision and expertise. Each project is prepared and coated according to rigid specifications and quality control standards that enhance the intended life expectancy of the item.

Wes Mar founded the original company, Air Pac Contractors Ltd., in the 1960s as a commercial paint shop located in Ogden. In 1971, the focus changed from a commercial painting business to include shop and field operations.

In 1974, Nizar and his then fiancée, Yasmin, had moved to Calgary from England, although both were originally from Tanzania. They had met in England while pursuing post-secondary studies in accounting. Two weeks after they arrived in Calgary, Nizar and Yasmin were married and started their new life. Shortly after, Nizar joined the business as an accountant and as fate would have it, he would own the company one day.

During the early months of his employment, there were times when Nizar would not receive a paycheque as cash flow was tight and they would make do with Yasmin’s income – not something that most people would do, but then again, Nizar’s compassionate demeanour was rare.

Over the years, Nizar’s role continued to grow as the company expanded, but in order to maintain steady growth, Air Pac needed more capital. Wes and Nizar sought a financial backer who would inject the much-needed cash.

In 1978, Larry Steer, of Costa Petroleum Ltd., provided the capital and became a silent partner. “Nizar played an important role in expanding the business – helping it grow from a commercial painting business to an energy service provider,” adds Yasmin.

Seeing Nizar’s loyalty and perseverance, both partners made him a minority shareholder. As the business expanded, they needed a larger facility and moved, in 1979, to their current location. At the time, they rented a section of farm land that was outside the city limits. Today the same five-acre parcel is part of the city’s vibrant and busy Foothills Industrial Park and is now owned by Air Pac.

In 1987, Wes decided to retire and that provided Nizar with an opportunity to purchase more shares in the company.

As the business continued to grow, they hired more staff and expanded their operations; they built a new heated paint shop and an all-weather blast shop to accommodate the growing demands of the oil and gas industry. This larger facility allowed them to serve the industry more efficiently year round.

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Air Pac experienced solid growth until 2002 when quite unexpectedly Nizar became ill and was hospitalized for a short time. He passed away in November 2002.

Nizar loved people. He was well known for his huge heart and his wonderful spirit. He was extremely mindful of the needs of the less fortunate – particularly the needs of the elderly and the poor. He was regarded as a hero in the community supporting many worthy causes within and outside of the Ismaili Muslim faith.

His contributions to the Aga Khan Foundation and other Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) institutions proved to be one of his favourite ways of giving back to the world – a world that had given so much to him. Nearly a decade later, he continues to live in the hearts and prayers of those he touched.

Just as fate landed Nizar as the sole owner of Air Pac, it seemed the same destiny was set for Yasmin although she had only helped Nizar with the financial decisions. Yasmin along with their two children, Zameel and Natasha, were suddenly faced with the unforeseen decision to either sell the company or carry on Nizar’s legacy – one he had built from the time he arrived in Calgary.

“I still remember the day, in the hospital, when Nizar told his senior management team that he would not be returning to work and that Zameel and I would be looking after the

Vessel and Frame on a skid.
business,” Yasmin reflects. “Nizar had run the business extremely well, but it was that particular day in the hospital that solidified our decision to keep his legacy alive.”

“The early years without him were very tough,” recalls Yasmin, but Zameel’s decision to leave his career in hotel management and join Air Pac gave her the much-needed courage to carry on. As well, support from the senior management team of Nick Kozuska and Lorne Kostiuk, along with the other employees, was crucial in helping Yasmin and Zameel take over the reins.

Air Pac has a reputation for looking after their employees and in return, the employees have stayed for decades. Given Nizar’s nature, often agreements with employees were done on a hand shake, but they were always honoured — even years after his passing, his word was his word.

Air Pac’s reputation as an industry leader has helped them weather Calgary’s economic climate — surviving the boom-bust cycles for many decades. Today, Air Pac’s goal remains much the same: to continually enhance their services. “We are able to achieve this with the help of our employees who share a common work ethic: honesty and integrity,” adds Yasmin.

Quality is monitored and recorded on every job. Each job is inspected to ensure the customer’s specifications are met. Most of the items that leave Air Pac’s shop are destined for oil and gas production projects all over the world — from Alberta to Argentina to the Middle East.

“These components tie into a larger operation — often processing materials at extremely high temperatures,” explains Zameel. “All these components are interconnected and help to form part of the whole processing facility. If one pipe fails
because we had the wrong specs that pipe would have to be disengaged from the whole operation in order to fix it. Thus, strict compliance of the customer’s specifications is critical.”

Zameel adds, “Our culture of quality is the foundation of our success as our crew collectively brings over 100 years of experience to each job.”

In early 2008 and 2009, two long-term employees retired. It was almost akin to the passing of an era. Today, Air Pac’s present team is headed by Stuart Maven-Hazelton, general manager, who is busy working on many ongoing projects like Flint Energy Service’s Federated Co-op Line (FCL) and Southern Pacific’s STP-McKay Thermal Project.
In the past, Air Pac has had the privilege to work on high-profile projects such as Suncor’s Voyageur and Firebag in-situ operations, Cenovus’ Christina Lake and Foster Creek projects, Connacher’s Great Divide and Algar projects, and a host of other large-scale jobs.

“We work with both the large and small corporations in the energy sector. Our large, clean heated facility allows us to accommodate any large-size project; customer satisfaction is key for us,” says Zameel.

Air Pac is proud of their safety program – creating a safe and healthy environment for their employees, customers and suppliers. They are COR certified, a member of the ISNetwork and they recently passed the three-year mark with ‘No Lost Time’ accidents. “With our work, everyone has to be very safety conscious. It’s a heavy industrial site and we are committed to creating a safe and healthy environment for everyone,” asserts Zameel.

Part of this commitment is also to ensure the environmental footprint is minimized; all the painting is completed inside the paint shops that have been constructed with air-makeup systems, and the used sand is also recycled.

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All things in life are cyclical – just like Yasmin’s work week. Nine years later, she has returned to her part-time hours and has started to think about retirement again. Zameel is sitting squarely at the helm while business has picked up again after the recent economic slowdown. “In our line of work, we are tied to the oil and gas industry: the higher the price of oil, the busier we will be, but we have also diversified our business so it protects us from the economic peaks and valleys,” adds Yasmin.

“It has been nine years since Nizar passed and I still hear people talking about him. I credit Nizar for the choices we continue to make today,” says Yasmin. “All of us, Zameel, Natasha and myself, tend to follow in his footsteps and being able to fulfil his dream has been most rewarding.”

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