

Globecomm CEO rules the sky

by Ambrose Clancy

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When David Hershberg was an 11-year-old boy in Albany, he tuned in China via a home-built HAM radio.

Sixty-two years later, same guy, pretty much the same thing, albeit with a bigger rig. Today, it's the global satellite communications company [Globecomm Systems](#).

Headquartered in a 123,000-square-foot Hauppauge facility, Globecomm has a staff of 400 working in the diversified fields of wireless communication, satellite infrastructure development, government and military contracts, maritime communications and satellite-distributed entertainment.

If you're making a cell phone call or watching on-demand TV, there's a decent chance Globecomm's involved. Ditto if you're building a nationwide communication system or dabbling in geo-political policy.

Walking the floor

To compare the pleasantly rumpled Hershberg to an unmade bed is an insult to careless housekeeping.

Patrolling the Globecomm facility, he walks in a brisk slouch, fists sunk in pockets, shoulders hunched, head out in front while the rest of him plays catch-up. The middle part in his long, graying hair looks like an afterthought.

In a cool, gray-carpeted hall, he spoke to a passing engineer, asking if a project could be done by the weekend, and received a nod.

"By the weekend," Hershberg said. "We can do it."

Louis Zacharilla president of Alan/Anthony, a Manhattan-based consultant for the satellite communication industry, said Hershberg commands respect from his staff by pure presence.

"He keeps people loose and they respect him because he does what they do," Zacharilla said. "He can look at engineering technology and a lot of algorithms and say, 'You know what? Here's how we solve the problem.'"

As a result, turnover at Globecomm is 3 percent a year, extremely low for a tech company its size.

"I probably overpay them," Hershberg said with a smile.

Nerd turned consummate negotiator

Though coming from the pocket-protector side of the business, Hershberg is a savvy player in the board room, a skilled negotiator who convinced the fledgling government of Afghanistan to let him link its ministries together - then parlayed that into a deal to build a communication infrastructure for the entire country.

Hershberg's management skills were put to the test when the recession struck three years ago. Globecomm held its own through the worst. In 2007, stock in Long Island's publicly traded companies fell 11.5 percent overall, but Globecomm's remained in positive territory.

In February of last year Globecomm reported a 75 percent loss in fiscal second quarter earnings on declining sales of its infrastructure business due to cutbacks by government and private industry on large-scale capital expenses.

But Hershberg shepherded Globecomm over the suddenly barren terrain of the infrastructure business through acquisitions and new directions, including securing a stake in the maritime communications field by acquiring New Jersey and Dutch firms. Globecomm now supplies communications for more than 2,200 merchant ships.

Another new direction is entertainment. Hershberg scored a deal with Showtime to provide satellite feeds, bringing in \$26 million over five years.

A \$28 million NATO contract to fit satellite dishes on vehicles has also kept the Hauppauge complex humming. Hershberg also became a bean counter, cutting bonuses and salaries to avoid layoffs.

Since 2007, Hershberg's own compensation has shrunk more than \$176,000, to \$709,000. Car allowances and perks were cut across the board.

But it's the technology that makes his eyes shine.

"You can't talk about this, you've got to see it," Hershberg said, holding up a backpack on Globecomm's vast, brightly lit factory floor.

About the size of a pack a serious hiker would strap on before heading into deep woods, the ruck's sand-colored camouflage gives it away as a piece of military gear. Inside: Globecomm's newest communications satellite for NATO and American troops.

From just a few components stored in the pack, a soldier can assemble a satellite dish in under three minutes and communicate from anywhere to anywhere.

For the moment, Hershberg looks as thrilled as that 11-year-old bringing the world to his Albany home.

Bored with circuit boards

Fresh out of engineering school in 1959, Hershberg took a job with IT&T Defense Communications in New Jersey, working on circuit boards for the giant, room-sized computers that were cutting-edge at the time.

"God, I was so bored," he said. "I hated it."

The Russians had launched Sputnik two years before, and when the chief of engineering asked if anyone was interested in working on satellites, Hershberg spoke up.

"Nobody else wanted it, so I said, 'Sure.' If I'd stayed in computers I might have done OK," he added with a sly smile.

He's done OK with satellites, too.

He founded three satellite companies before launching Globecomm in 1994 with his partner, Kenneth Miller, who died two years ago.

"First of all, when you meet Dave, you're not meeting a person," said Zacharilla, who also runs a think tank on satellite communications with New York University.

"You're meeting a legend."

Hershberg's career bears this out. Every American satellite program, from the beginning, has Hershberg's stamp on it. He worked on the first artificial communication satellite called Project SCORE and the Courier program in the 1960s, performing communication tests at ground terminals in New Jersey and Puerto Rico.

Courier is the basis for every communication satellite that has since come on line.

He holds patents for facilitating two-way Internet-via-satellite services as well as for Earth terminal architecture that are the brick-and-mortar foundations for satellite sending and receiving systems.

Hershberg has also been in the forefront of developing voice-over Internet Protocol, or VoIP, the digitized voice traffic carried via satellite.

Present at the creation, using a slide rule to chart primitive programs of "dumping" tape-recorded material from space to Earth, Hershberg is very much in this present moment, walking into what looks like the flight deck of the Starship Enterprise behind a door in Globecomm's headquarters.

A darkened hallway ramps up past current movie posters leading to a control room where the time in New York, Hong Kong, Dubai and Greenwich Mean Time is displayed.

Here in shadows broken by pulsing lights from more than 100 monitors, technicians beam Showtime programming to satellites which are downloaded into living rooms across the country.

Glancing skyward

Asked if he was looking forward to retirement, Hershberg gives a look that suggests no one has ever suggested it.

Roaming the Globecomm facility, from suites of modern offices to hangar-like assembly buildings where tool-and-die makers work, past tech labs and into garages where large vehicles are taken apart and reassembled, then taking a turn into the Showtime facility, retirement seems like throwing the kid out of the candy store.

"I enjoy what I do, I enjoy the people I work with," he said simply.

Hershberg was asked about the future.

The rumpled figure was specific. It's streaming HDTV video to 6-inch screens. It's developing state-of-the-art 3-D TV in Globecomm's labs. It's increasing maritime communications.

But it's also being cautious.

"You have to always have focus," he said. "We had three acquisitions last year and when you become this big, it's easy to lose focus."

But then he added: "We're always looking for the new."

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