

# WELDING *Journal*

## Making Waves in the Gulf Coast Shipbuilding and Repair Industry

*Four experienced professionals share their views on the state of the maritime business*

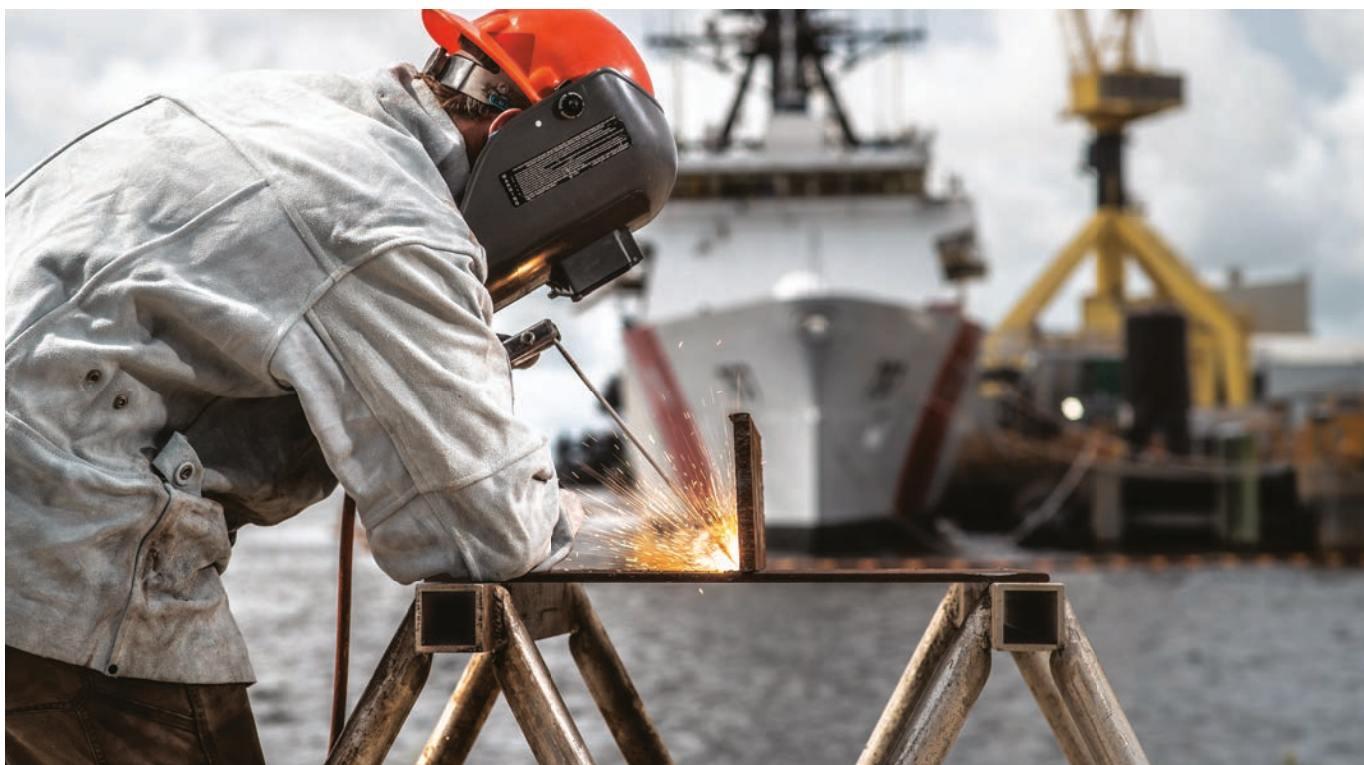
BY RYAN  
BLYTHE

Formed following Hurricane Katrina in 2006, the Gulf States Shipbuilders Consortium (GSSC) provides a forum for interaction among the shipbuilding and repair industry in the Gulf States. The GSSC has worked to expand the number of technically skilled workers in the

region and share best practices among its members. This cooperative of industry, education, suppliers, and workforce development officials covers five states and more than 50 companies.

Following their annual meeting in Pensacola, Fla., which took place this

year from April 9 to 10, four of the member companies, including several members of the GSSC board of directors, provided their take on the state of the maritime industry. This feature article contains various questions they were asked, as well as their array of answers.



*Ingalls Shipbuilding is the largest manufacturer in Mississippi with more than 11,000 employees. It produces the majority of ships for the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, and Marines. (Credit: Ingalls Shipbuilding.)*

## Ron Pierce's Input



Ron Pierce

Ron Pierce is a familiar name to American Welding Society (AWS) members. An AWS Life Member, he has served as chairman of the board, president, and vice president, plus currently serves as a trustee emeritus of the AWS Foundation. He's also chairman of WESCO Gas & Welding Supply Inc., Prichard, Ala. Here are his viewpoints when asked a variety of questions.

**Q:** You have been a leader in the maritime and welding industries for more than a half a century. How do you feel about the state of both?

**A:** I am pleased to share that maritime, and even the welding industry,

is showing some signs of growth after several years of being slow. The welding industry continues to grow with new technologies. We must exert more effort in encouraging the young and share with people the various opportunities in these industries.

**Q:** As a past president, tell us about the relationship between the AWS and the shipbuilding industry?

**A:** The American Welding Society is increasing its offerings to the shipbuilding industry. This is through educational, certification, and training courses that will help the industry to find ways to help them succeed.

**Q:** You serve as the chairman of the board of the GSSC. Why is the consortium important, and what innovations has it made in workforce development?

**A:** The Gulf States Shipbuilders Consortium continues to be very active in workforce development. Initiatives include the Mark Landry Memorial Scholarship, which supports up to five students in an approved GSSC

training program. These scholarships are funded with proceeds from our annual golf tournament.

**Q:** As the chairman of WESCO Gas & Welding Supply, how significant have the safety advancements in personal protective equipment (PPE) been for welders and fabricators?

**A:** We are vigorously encouraging and implementing the proper safety practice in PPE. We share this with all our customers whether they are welding, fabricating, or erecting. They can't afford not to use all the proper safety gear and practices, or they will have financial consequences.

**Q:** Will labor continue to be our most significant challenge? What other challenges and opportunities do you see for the maritime industry?

**A:** The challenge is to continue to upgrade to the latest technical advances. We see a lot of opportunities if industry accepts the challenge and the workforce follows through for continued education.

## Mike Haughton's Views



Mike Haughton

Mike Haughton is the corporate risk manager at Gulf Copper, Houston, Tex. Below are his responses to various queries, including the ship and vessel assistance that the company provides.

**Q:** Can you tell us about the ships Gulf Copper repairs and refurbishes?

**A:** We provide services to a wide range of ships and other vessels. Our Port Arthur, Tex., locations primarily service ships, tugs, and barges engaged in coastal trade. The Galveston, Tex., facility has targeted the offshore oil and gas industry — Figs. 1, 2. Typical vessels include offshore drilling rigs and a variety of other ships and barges that work offshore the Gulf of Mexico, exploring and producing.

Historically, our Corpus Christi, Tex., location worked on the mine countermeasure vessels that were stationed at Naval Station Ingleside until the base's closure several years ago.



*Fig. 1 — This overhead picture shows Gulf Copper's Galveston, Tex., facility. The rigs have been cold stacked; some will also be reactivated for a new contract. (Credit: Gulf Copper.)*

Personnel from Corpus still frequently service U.S. Naval ships, traveling to locations including San Diego, Calif., Guam, and Bahrain. We also service a variety of commercial vessels at the Port of Corpus Christi and at our Harbor Island location.

**Q:** In the late '90s, Gulf Copper became an employee-owned company.

How has that impacted recruiting and retention?

**A:** The ship repair industry is project oriented, so there is always some amount of turnover depending upon current work load. However, there are many people who have been employed with us for years (and even decades) throughout all departments. The em-





Fig. 2 — The large dry dock at Gulf Copper is featured with Southwest Shipyard's Dry Dock #9 on it. (Credit: Gulf Copper.)

ployee stock ownership plan program provides not only financial incentives to employees who stay with us, but also creates a family atmosphere that people like.

**Q:** Can you give us the Texas perspective on the state of the shipbuilding and repair industry?

**A:** Things are on the uptick after a significant downturn. We are moderately busy and seeing more projects to bid. The offshore oil and gas segment has picked up somewhat but remains slow overall at this time.

**Q:** You serve on the GSSC board. What makes the consortium unique,

and how has it changed the landscape of the maritime industry in the region?

**A:** The GSSC started in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The crisis that ensued created a shortage of skilled labor in the Central Gulf States, and this brought competitors together to find solutions in an industry where cooperation among competitors was not common. The GSSC has continued to bring the industry together long after the crisis. We are stronger as an industry group than as individual companies.

**Q:** Gulf Copper is known for producing a premium quality service. What traits do your pipe welders em-

body in terms of both their hard and soft skills?

**A:** We have some sizable assets in terms of facilities, dry docks, and equipment. But our biggest asset by far is our workforce, which consists not only of pipe welders, but also structural welders and pipe and structural fitters, in addition to other trades. All welders are certified by classification societies. In terms of traits, I would say there is a wide array of diversity. Everyone brings their own set of skills and experience to the table. Certainly, a great work ethic and technical competence are common traits.

## Carlos McGilvery's Responses



Carlos McGilvery

Ingalls Shipbuilding, a division of Huntington Ingalls Industries, is one of the most prominent defense contractors in the United States (see lead photo).

"Each job in shipbuilding has a multiplier effect to nearly another three jobs, and the economic impacts are so widespread that directly, indi-

rectly, and induced, they can be found in all 435 Congressional districts," said Jeff Allman, GSSC president and Ingalls Shipbuilding international program manager.

The answers in this section were given by Carlos McGilvery, lead manager, workforce training and development, at Ingalls Shipbuilding.

**Q:** Can you provide our readers with a snapshot on the scope of the work being done in Pascagoula, Miss., and how it affects our security?

**A:** Ingalls Shipbuilding leads the way in innovative design, engineering, and manufacturing of the world's most powerful warships. What keeps Ingalls on the path of success is that we're always searching for new ideas and new talents.

**Q:** The economy is booming, and the labor market is tight everywhere. Shipbuilders were already challenged to find qualified talent. How difficult is it right now to locate welders and fitters?

**A:** Locating welders and fitters can be challenging without a plan. In the past, we have had difficult moments in attracting talents due to uncontrollable circumstances; however, to date, our senior management team has reached out across America, offering opportunities that are just not offered in other places, and we have been able to attract new talents from both local and abroad.

**Q:** Ingalls takes a very aggressive approach to recruiting and training. Can you discuss those efforts from school recruiting to in-house training?

**A:** Through partnerships with some of the local community colleges, Ingalls has introduced several pre-employment programs that are free to the qualified candidates. Successful completion of any of the programs gives candidates a very strong chance at employment with Huntington Ingalls. Skill sets can vary depending on individual experiences; therefore, skilled labor are tested either at our facility or at any of various locations by a qualified craft tester to offer those skilled candidates a justifiable and very competitive pay scale.

Ingalls Training Center has only one focus, and that is the longevity of our workforce. Most of our employees can vouch that jobs are offered anywhere, but Ingalls offers careers.

**Q:** With more than 11,000 employees, Ingalls Shipbuilding is a city onto itself. How much of an adjustment do welders have to make, assuming they likely came from a smaller environment?

**A:** We often refer to Ingalls as being a city, but as large as this company is, we are family driven, oriented, and focused. We ensure that everyone is re-

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**Ron Pierce**

spected, treated ethically, and with dignity regardless of backgrounds or lifestyles. We can't possibly know everyone here, but we share that same Ingalls spirit, so new employees are able to adjust very easily.

**Q:** Can you tell us about the relationship Ingalls has formed with Australia? This appears to be one of the most significant Naval projects in the world.

**A:** The type of American relationship with Australia you're referring to started during World War II. Since then, our military is highly engaged with Australia as one of our core allies. Australia recognizes the capability of our shipbuilders and has a need for that capability to gain the sovereign shipbuilding workforce we have here in the states.

## Danny Burgess's Feedback



Danny Burgess

Danny Burgess is the director of Gulf Coast operations at HKA Staffing Solutions, Mobile, Ala. His replies to several questions are listed here.

**Q:** HKA serves employers across several nations with staffing needs. Can you tell our readers about the specific needs in the skilled labor arena your company fills?

**A:** That's shipbuilding, construction, aerospace and defense, nuclear, transmission and distribution, power

plants, and industrial.

**Q:** How difficult is it to locate first-class craft workers? Also, what are the distinguishing features between first-, second-, and third-class shipbuilders?

**A:** Not hard to locate. First class are your more than five-year guys with solid skill sets. Second are skilled guys who have some experience but need to become more well-rounded. Third class are helpers/trainees with some knowledge and skill.

**Q:** You serve on the board of the GSSC. What makes the consortium unique, and how has it impacted the maritime industry in the Gulf Coast region?

**A:** I think our organization is doing a great job making the shipbuilding industry appealing to future workers, especially high school students.

**Q:** What is your outlook for the next 12 months in the shipbuilding in-

dustry? Will staffing continue to be a major challenge?

**A:** Our outlook is an extremely challenging one. The construction industry is outbidding shipbuilding with more money and hours. Supervision on our shipyards has little interest in developing their contract labor. It's fire him and send another. This is much less prevalent in other industries.

**Q:** In the more than ten years you have been finding hard-to-locate talent, what innovations have you made? And what about training partnerships along with standardized curriculum?

**A:** Social media has stepped to the forefront of recruiting. I'm proud to be on the ground floor of standardization of well-written curriculum. I'm really looking forward to seeing the whole program come to fruition. [WJ](#)

RYAN BLYTHE (rblythe@georgiatradeschool.com) is the founder of Georgia Trade School, Acworth, Ga.

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June © 2019 American Welding Society.

