Steeling himself against the competition

Sarah Fister Gale

Hank Bonstedt spent most of his youth dodging bullets. He was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in the 1930s, and as a child his family moved frequently to avoid bombing raids.

"I lived at 21 addresses before I turned 18," he says, "so my education was interrupted a lot."

When he was 18, his parents came to the United States and he continued his education, and despite not yet having finished high school, the University of Pittsburgh let him enroll. He completed a bachelor's degree in English, then he was drafted—even though he wasn't yet a U.S. citizen.

During his three years in the Army, Bonstedt was sent to logistics school and learned how to jump out of an airplane with the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Benning in Georgia. Then he was discharged just nine days before his unit was deployed to Vietnam.

He landed in Atlanta, Ga., where he used his logistics training to get a marketing job with a paper and packaging company, which allowed him to travel the world and live abroad. Later he worked for an insurance company in Philadelphia, Pa., then eventually started his own marketing and consulting firm after getting downsized in 1984. "You reach an age where it's tough to get a new job, so you have to start your own," he says of the decision. That's when he discovered precast concrete.

His marketing firm dealt with people from many industries, including a team running the Prestressed Concrete Association of Pennsylvania (PCAP), which later became Central Atlantic Bridge Associates (CABA), a not-for-profit organization for prestressed concrete bridge beam manufacturers in the mid-Atlantic region. In 1987, they asked him to take over the association, and he happily accepted. "It was a chance to apply all of my marketing know-how to the concrete industry," he says.

When he took over the role, Bonstedt was initially frustrated by the risk-averse nature of the government stakeholders, though he understood it. "We were selling a product that had a 75-year life span."

Every day he met with government decision makers, attended meetings, and spoke at conferences, espousing the benefits of precast concrete bridges and advocating for competitive design options at all levels of government. Over time, they came around, he says. "Marketing isn't one big thing. It's a thousand little things."

One of the biggest successes during his time at PCAP/CABA was when the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) adopted alternative design contracts, allowing contractors to redesign steel bridges using precast concrete as part of the bidding process. "It was the springboard for the industry," he says. PennDOT had already approved precast concrete for bridges, but it was hesitant to make changes. "The alternative contract allowed contractors to show that they could beat the competition on price and schedule, which was the incentive that the decision makers needed," he says. Precast concrete designs started winning more projects, and now more than 80% of all bridges in the state are made from precast concrete.

Bonstedt also became a rising star at PCI, which he joined when he first took the job at CABA. Over three decades he contributed to many PCI committees. His contributed significantly to the *PCI Bridge Design Manual* was recognized by the PCI Technical Activities Committee with a Certificate of Merit, and *Concrete International* published his analysis of the National Bridge Inventory, which pointed out that prestressed concrete significantly outperformed the competitors on a life-cycle cost basis. He was also named a PCI Fellow.

"It was a time of great change," he says of his years at CABA and as a member of PCI. He points to the many innovations that emerged during his career, including changes in load and resistance factors, the use of polystyrene in box beam voids, the adoption of bulb tees, and the introduction of accelerated bridge construction methods.

"All of these innovations made us stronger and more efficient," Bonstedt says. He was always ready to get the word out to owners about how these innovations made precast concrete an even better choice for their projects. "Innovation is what this industry is all about," he says.

He says he hopes that the next generation of PCI members will take the time to learn from their predecessors so they can push the envelope even further. "You have to respect the past before you can take on the future."