



Father and son, Mr. Johan Pihl and Mr. Jonas Pihl, are looking forward to celebrating the centenary of Harald Pihl, and are certain the company is here to stay for years to come. They believe their company's stability, service flexibility and product expertise is highly appreciated by all their clients.

One hundred years on, Harald Pihl is here to stay

Now in its fourth generation, the family-run Swedish supplier of special metals and titanium celebrates its centenary in 2012. Founded by Mr. Harald Pihl in 1912, the company carries on the family tradition even today. Stainless Steel World was keen to hear what developments have been taking place since our last visit a few years ago. We talked to Mr. Johan Pihl and Mr. Jonas Pihl to learn how the company has boosted its exports, built a network of agents abroad, and upgraded its online services to make life easier for its customers. All this while retaining its essential character as a very solid, versatile, and reliable family-owned business.

By John Butterfield and Gillian Kersley

When he set up his company in 1912, Mr. Harald Pihl was already in business as a trader of primary materials such as copper alloys, zinc and nickel. Originally, the nickel he sold was re-melted to become nickel silver, metal finishing and alloy plates for military battleships. Nickel quickly became the mainstay of the company. Within a few years, Harald Pihl had become a representative in Sweden for the Inco International Nickel

Company, now Special Metals. When stainless steels became commercially available in the 1920's the company began to supply ever greater amounts of primary nickel in the form of pellets and squares - supplying major Swedish companies, such as Sandvik and Avesta. In the 1940s, technological advances increased the demand for more advanced alloys. Harald Pihl picked up on this trend and began to offer nickel alloys in finished products. Sheet, plate,

bar, tube, wire and welding consumables quickly became part of what the company offered. While nickel alloys remained Harald Pihl's primary trade, titanium was gradually added to the portfolio during the 50's and 60's. Mr. Johan Pihl tells us the story: "At first we worked with smaller titanium producers, but we soon joined forces with IMI in the UK, now owned by Timet. Our titanium business has grown considerably over the years, and we now buy and sell

titanium across the globe.”

During the 1970's, Harald Pihl also worked with American company Brush Wellman to make available a number of special copper alloys. These alloys demonstrated special qualities such as wire resistance, spring properties and electrical conductivity.

In 1974, Harald Pihl took a big step, becoming a stockist as well as a trader.

From Trader to One-stop-shop

“Today, we are one of the largest distributors of nickel, titanium and copper alloys in Europe and possibly the largest supplier of different alloys in different forms,” says Mr. Jonas Pihl. “We stock plates, tubes, round bars, wire and welding material among other items – in fact, we stock pretty much everything. Our only competition comes from companies who specialise in only one or two products such as plate or round bars, or who specialise in one particular alloy.”

Mr. Jonas Pihl continues: “We offer our customers a ‘one-stop shop’, where they can find everything they need under one roof. Our original market in Sweden was small but extremely diverse, so we had to stock a lot of different products: fifty kilos of this and fifty kilos of that.

There were no big customers that wanted to order just a pair of high-volume items. The market demanded many different products in various forms, so we were ordering small quantities of many things to meet the requests. But as the years went by, we had to order bigger and bigger volumes, as well as new materials – in more and more forms. Our portfolio has been ever growing, and today we supply more than 2,500 different products.”

The company ships all over the world, with exports accounting for over 60% of sales. Brazil, Argentina, Japan and South Korea are just some of the countries served. Usage ranges from petrochemicals to nuclear power generation, pulp & paper, steel, aviation and electronics.

Local Presence Abroad

Since our last meeting with Harald Pihl, the company has put in place an expansive network of agents across Europe. They now have local presence in Finland, Germany, Poland, the Czech



The warehouse is full of plates, sheets, coils, tubes, bars, wire and welding material – and clients can order most products in custom sizes and forms.

Republic, Italy, the UK, and Austria. Similar facilities in Spain and France are envisaged. “Our clients are primarily small companies, who make things for larger companies to use in their products. Turbines are a good example,” Mr. Jonas Pihl explains. “In order to reach these small companies and to serve them in the best possible way, we find it useful to have agents who understand the local market and speak the right language. This has really helped Harald Pihl find its home on the European market.”

Upgraded Online Services

Harald Pihl's online stock list is another service that sets the company apart from other suppliers – something that has led to many orders from overseas customers. The online stock list was already in operation at the time of our last visit in 2008, but has since been upgraded. On the company website,

customers can see exactly what products are in stock, in what forms, and for which alloys. The technical information is also provided. “The stock list is updated automatically on a daily basis – in some cases even twice a day. It makes it easy for purchasers to see if what they need is available before they contact us,” explains Mr. Jonas Pihl. “And if any product happens to be temporarily out of stock, our customers can even see when it will come back in. This is something that we are very proud of. We also have a rule that if a product is in stock, we will provide a customer a quote within one hour. If an order is placed before lunchtime, it will leave our premises the very same day. We can make all the arrangements; delivery straight to the airport with the right documentation, ensuring that it reaches our customers as quickly as possible. These routines make it possible for us to serve our clients around the world”

Harald Pihl will soon launch its new web shop, which will make the trade process even faster. Mr. Jonas Pihl goes on to explain: "Enquiries for smaller items will be priced directly, so you don't have to wait for a quote. Customers can order immediately and pay online by credit card. The order may be processed at any time, day or night. This is yet another way to make it easier for customers from all over the world, since any time difference becomes irrelevant."

With Service in Mind

There have also been some developments in the services Harald Pihl offers. "We installed a water cutter last year," says Mr. Jonas Pihl. "It has been in operation almost continuously. It has surprised us, to be honest. We thought we would only have it running for a couple of hours, once or twice a week. Practice has far exceeded initial expectations. At present, it is mainly used for cutting thick titanium plates, but we are thinking of using it for nickel plates as well. We also cut a lot of flanges and rings with it. It has been very useful."

New coil handling equipment has been added, and the company holds Europe's largest stock of thin plates or sheets: From 0.4 mm up to 1 mm, in all alloys used for plate heat exchangers. The standard length for thin sheet is 3,000 mm, but customers of Harald Pihl can now order sheets cut to an exact length, and save some money. Mr. Jonas Pihl observes, "This has been a good investment for us, and we are getting



Coil is cut, slit or recoiled and put on a spool – all according to the customers needs. Harald Pihl offers all coils in custom sizes as part of their service.

more and more orders all the time. We also have a recoiler, so if a customer needs 50 m it can be recoiled and delivered on a spool. We also handle coil slitting to tailor-made widths. Basically, we deliver coil with any dimensions you could want."

But coil is not all they deliver made to size, and the company is awaiting delivery of a new tube-cutting machine to cope with tubes of very small dimension – 3 mm OD with a 0.3 mm wall. This will lead to speedier cutting with perfect tolerances, as opposed to using normal cutting methods which can cause the tubes to squeeze together in the process. "With our new equipment we can deliver even more value to our customers – in addition to sawing, shearing, welding, laser, guillotine, and plasma cutting", adds Mr. Jonas Pihl.

100 Years of Product Knowledge

With a wide range of materials, comes extensive product knowledge. "We pride ourselves on our technical expertise and our knowledge regarding the products we keep in stock," Mr. Johan Pihl emphasizes. "We make a point of knowing exactly what we are selling. This knowledge is important to us, and it



With more than 2,500 different products in stock, Harald Pihl holds the largest stock in Europe of special alloys and titanium.



The board of the Harald Pihl company: Johan Pihl, David Pihl, Jonas Pihl and Klas Pihl. Jonas Pihl is the CEO and the fourth generation of Pihls to run the company which was founded by his great grandfather, Mr. Harald Pihl, in 1912.

certainly benefits our clients. Over the years, we have accumulated a wealth of expertise on issues such as heat resistance, corrosion resistance, controlled elongation properties, and welding properties. Of course this is not something that comes easily. The people we hire are all well educated to begin with, but they still receive extensive and continuous training. This applies to the whole staff – and I make no exception for myself. I have been with the company for over thirty years and on most days I still learn something new.” As a result, they can supply end users with a wide range of products and materials, as well as advise them on their requirements. Harald Pihl can sometimes offer a more cost-effective solution, which their client may not have thought of themselves. According to Mr. Johan Pihl, many clients now contact the company before they embark on a project and ask for recommendations in terms of materials selection. “We offer

them much more than just a standard solution,” he believes.

A Family Tradition of Customer Service

Finally, Mr. Johan Pihl reflects on family traditions: “Just as important as the direction that Harald Pihl is heading in the future, is the importance of continuing the rich family tradition of the company. This is one of the more obvious things that distinguish us from our competitors, and it works to our advantage. We have recently added another fourth generation Pihl member to the family-run business, and it is a tradition we hope we can carry on through future generations of the Pihl family.”

Mr. Jonas Pihl has a strategy for the future, “The focus of future growth will be on export markets. Our export business is expanding well, thanks partly to our user-friendly website. The web shop we are setting up will further

accelerate this process. We will keep looking for ways to make our customers’ dealings with us as easy as we can. We are very flexible, as we believe customer service is paramount, and at the same time you can trust our solidity. Our business growth is sound and steady: we have always been accorded the highest credit ranking of AAA in directories such as Dun and Bradstreet. We are definitely not a company who jumps onboard risky investments schemes, which could jeopardise the business.” Mr. Jonas Pihl knows exactly what he wants the company to stand for, as it enters its second century. “We want to offer a good, one-stop shop for



The water cutter is running at almost full capacity – cutting thick plates of titanium with ease.

customers, provide technical knowledge and – first and foremost – to be a solid and reliable partner. I think we certainly achieve this, and I truly believe that this family business is here to stay.”

Harald Pihl at a glance

Company name: Harald Pihl AB.

Offices: Täby, Sweden (head office), Tammisaari, Finland.

Products: corrosion-resistant alloys, heat-resistant alloys, creep-resistant alloys, special alloys, stainless steel, titanium alloys, low melting point alloys, copper alloys, welding material, de-misters, refractory metals.

Main markets: petrochemical, nuclear power generation, pulp & paper, steelworks, aviation, electronics.

Website: www.haraldpihl.com



The head office is situated north of Stockholm, where orders are processed and shipped within hours.