

# High Steel, High Stakes

**Falcon Steel specializes in multi-story buildings, including the new World Trade Center**

By Bob Yearick

**T**he secret to working on high iron, says Stan Rybienski, is to "lean forward and walk fast."

As it turns out, that's a fairly accurate description of both his career and the company he serves as vice president—Falcon Steel.

Rybienski, 68, has spent most of his working life walking the beams and girders of tall buildings as they were being erected. Born and raised in a house at Fifth and Van Buren, he graduated from Wilmington High School, then served a tour in the Marines. He returned home in 1960 and began looking for work. At the suggestion of his brother-in-law, Bill O'Brien—an ironworker—he applied to the local Ironworkers Union.

"I needed a job and it paid good money," he says.

Apparently, Rybienski was a quick learner. Four years after serving his apprenticeship and getting his Union card, he and O'Brien, along with Helen O'Brien, Bill's wife and Rybienski's sister, formed Falcon Steel. Slowly but surely, they began building a stellar reputation as they built structures.

Today, the company is recognized throughout the East and Southeast as one of the leading builders of high-rise steel structures. Falcon also has extensive experience in rigging, millwright work, metal siding, decking and structural renovations.

The company's first major project was local—an addition to the powerhouse in Millsboro in 1977. Working with a fabricator in Allentown, Pa., Falcon erected more than 16,000 tons of steel to build a unit that still supplies most of the electrical power to lower Delaware.

The work soon expanded beyond Delaware's borders. In the early '80s, Falcon built a Corvette plant in Bowling Green, Ky. that required 5,000 tons of steel. Other projects in the '80s and '90s included a United Airlines hangar in Indianapolis, a convention center in Savannah, Ga., a stadium for the '96 Olympics in Atlanta, and two 60-story buildings in Philadelphia: Bell Atlantic (17,500 tons of steel) and Liberty Place II (13,000 tons). Locally, Falcon built the Manufacturers Hanover Plaza and Three Christina Centre.

## Staying Afloat

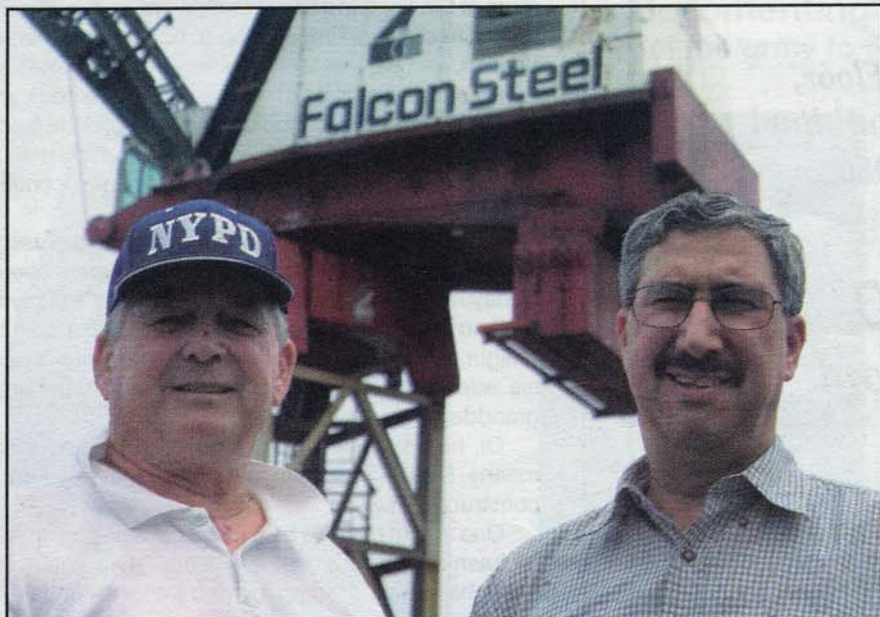
In 1999, the company took on one of its most challenging jobs: a 240-foot-long, 36-foot-high bridge. Falcon fabricators constructed the bridge in the company's Wilmington yard, finished it with five tons (count 'em) of paint, then loaded it onto a floating barge. The destination: lower Manhattan, where the bridge serves as a walkway for school children over a busy highway.

"It was 250 tons," Rybienski remembers. "We took it up the Christina to the Delaware Bay, made a left turn into the Atlantic, then up the Hudson past

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Falcon Steel vice president Stan Rybienski (left), and Alan Katz, executive vice president.

*Photo by Les Kipp*



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the Statue of Liberty. We unloaded it at night. Had to shut down the West Side Highway for the weekend, which cost us about 40 or 50 grand, what with signage and cops.”

The \$1.5 million project gave Falcon Steel a respite from the effects of the recession. “There’s no profit in bridges,” a Falcon vice president said at the time. “But it is letting us pay the bills and stay in business.”

With construction work drying up in the Philadelphia area, Falcon cast its corporate eyes northward, and found jobs in New York and New Jersey. In fact, a Falcon crew was constructing a building in New Jersey directly across the Hudson from the World Trade Center on 9/11. Rybienski says Falcon ironworkers were on the opposite side of the building when the first plane struck the North Tower. Hearing the explosion, they made their way around the building in time to watch in horror as the second plane smashed into the South Tower.

Since that tragic day, Falcon’s work has included two projects in the World Trade Center area: renovation of the Deutsch Bank offices, from the 10th to the 22nd floors of World Trade Center, and construction of the 52-story Seven World Trade Center (just north of the two Trade Center Towers). “That’s the only major [Trade Center] building that’s been replaced so far,” says Rybienski. Falcon is about to bid on another Trade Center structure, which calls for work to start in about a year. The bidding process, involving six other companies, is expected to take three months.

### Towering Cranes

Handling such jobs requires a major investment in skilled tradesmen as well as mind-bogglingly mammoth equipment, like the eight self-climbing tower cranes (internal and external jacking) with luffing booms owned by Falcon. Developed in Australia, the 150-foot-high cranes were brought to the U.S. to work on the original World Trade Center buildings.

“You can take them as high as you want by tying them back into the building for support,” Rybienski explains. “If you had to, you could go up to 200 stories.”

The capital investment represented by these *uber*-cranes demands that they be kept as busy as possible. To accomplish that, Rybienski says, “We probably took some jobs cheaper than we should have during slow periods, instead of stepping back and letting some go.”

“But,” he adds, “you have to feed the beast,” referring to both equipment and payroll.

Business has picked up in the last year. “The jobs we’ve been doing lately we’ve been making a pretty good profit on,” Rybienski says. And most of the towering tower cranes are being utilized. “Two of them are in West Chester, working on a court house; one is in Manhattan on a job for Verizon, and we just took one down in town on Pennsylvania Avenue.”

An erection affiliate of Helmark Steel, Falcon currently employs about 90 people in its fabricating shop and 120 in the field. During boom times, employment reached 350, according to Rybienski. He is vice president of erection for Falcon Steel, while O’Brien continues to be president. Helen O’Brien is president of Helmark.

Rybienski, who lives in Henderson Heights near St. Mark’s High School, plans to retire in two years. Retirement offers several possibilities. “I may learn to play a musical instrument,” he says. “I have a guitar and a piano in my living room, and I don’t know how to play either one. Or I might take some college courses. I’ve never been to college.” He and his wife also will no doubt spend more time with their daughter and granddaughter, who live in Newark.

Or, he could do some consulting. He has a rigger’s license, which means he’s licensed to supervise the erection of tower cranes on construction sites.

One thing he won’t be doing is walking the high iron, something he hasn’t done for about five years. Then again, Rybienski, and Falcon Steel, have been leaning forward and walking fast for 42 years. **CL**