

# SKILL, INGENUITY AND STEELY RESOLVE

Marking 35 years: *Tri-State Steel Erectors, Inc.*  
continues to seek new challenges

by Ralph Fuller

**N**o matter how steel might be used in a construction project, companies like *Tri-State Steel Erectors, Inc.* (Tri-State Steel) are front and center in putting it there.

“Any building you see go up that involves steel, we’re the people who make it happen,” says President Ron Umlandt, whose Glen Burnie, Maryland-based company this year is marking its 35th year of embedding steel in building projects throughout Maryland, northern Virginia and Washington, D.C.

Tri-State Steel’s work could mean erecting the beam-and-girder skeletons for new buildings under construction, adding steel support to floors in existing structures under renovation—“structural” ironwork. It could involve installing steel staircases or catwalks in difficult places for maintenance workers, creating rooftop support structures for mechanical equipment upgrades or simply installing handrails—all “miscellaneous” ironwork.

It could also entail building a steel cable safety system into the Lincoln Memorial’s upper reaches or helping the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum move a massive steel sculpture. Ron has done both.

“We’ve worked on hotels, hospitals, office buildings, churches, universities and schools throughout the region,” Ron says. “We’ve put steel into Senate office buildings and we’ve worked with the Architect of the U.S. Capitol’s office numerous times.”

After 35 years, “There’s hardly anywhere you can go in D.C. without seeing something we’ve worked on, although, often, the things we’ve worked on are hidden from public view,” he adds.

## HEAVY LOADS WHERE HEAVY EQUIPMENT CAN’T WORK

But just saying that Tri-State Steel is involved in many kinds of steel installation doesn’t quite capture its special focus. Where many companies would find it challenging to put heavy steel into places where cranes can’t do the work, Tri-State Steel has a knack for making it happen.

“We specialize in handling heavy loads without heavy equipment. Not everybody knows how to do that,” Ron says. “We excel at jobs like putting 100 tons of steel through a 10th-floor window. It’s a niche that sets us apart.”

He adds, “I like to take on projects that are difficult—that not everyone else can or wants to do; jobs that typically require steel to be installed in unusual places.”

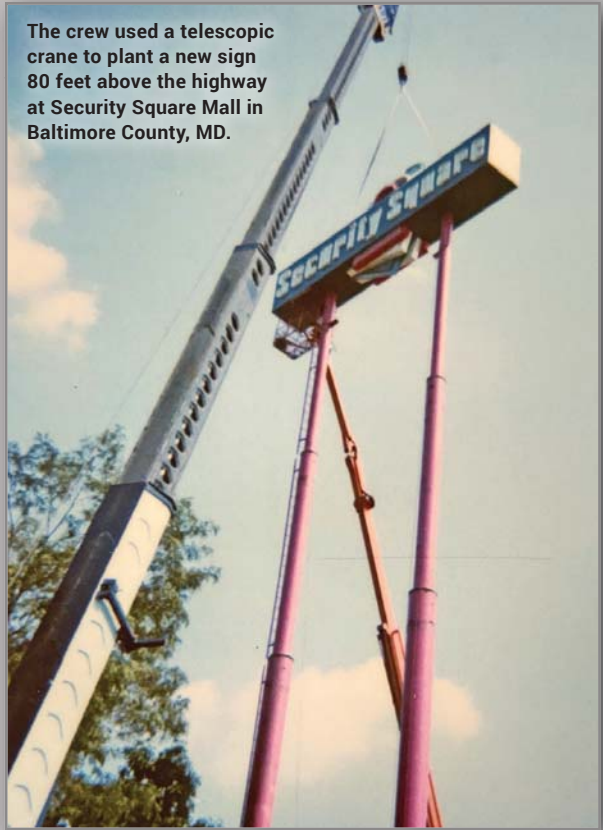
Tri-State Steel does use cranes, of course, and it has access to rentals both large and small. But it uses them as far as their limits allow and then relies on tools like Sumner Roust-A-Bouts, manual chain hoists and other lifting and rigging equipment, assorted forklifts, its 17-ton boom truck—and lots of ingenuity.

To pass that 100 tons of steel through that building’s 10th-floor window, Tri-State Steel installed platforms

Ron Umlandt atop steel beams at the Fort Meade Commissary in Maryland in 1984, the year before he founded Tri-State Steel Erectors, Inc.



The crew used a telescopic crane to plant a new sign 80 feet above the highway at Security Square Mall in Baltimore County, MD.



A boom truck, a variety of manual hoists and ingenuity assist Tri-State Steel Erectors, Inc. President Ron Umlandt (pictured here) and his team in delivering steel to difficult spots.

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outside of the window, lifted the steel to the platforms with a crane (carefully controlling the steel's center of gravity), and rolled the steel through the window on carts. Inside, the project involved levitating a new floor of structural steel and plate 1 inch above the existing floor surface by welding I-beams into the building's support columns.

To protect a Baltimore computer company's electronic equipment from risks of water leakage, Tri-State Steel built a new steel building inside of an existing building, roof and all. At Washington's Union Station, after two other firms declared the project undoable, Tri-State Steel created and installed a shoring tower of "super-duty" steel to support the concrete bus deck above it.

Ron may get excited about unusual challenges but his company continues to work in the full range of projects, typically with a half-dozen or more underway at any time. In a recent stretch, jobs involved straightforward structural ironworking on two Holiday Inns in Baltimore County and a multistory apartment structure in Washington. Others involved rooftop reinforcement to support new mechanical equipment for structures as varied as the U.S. National Security Agency in Maryland, three Amazon facilities in Maryland and Virginia, and five schools in Maryland's Prince George's and Baltimore counties.

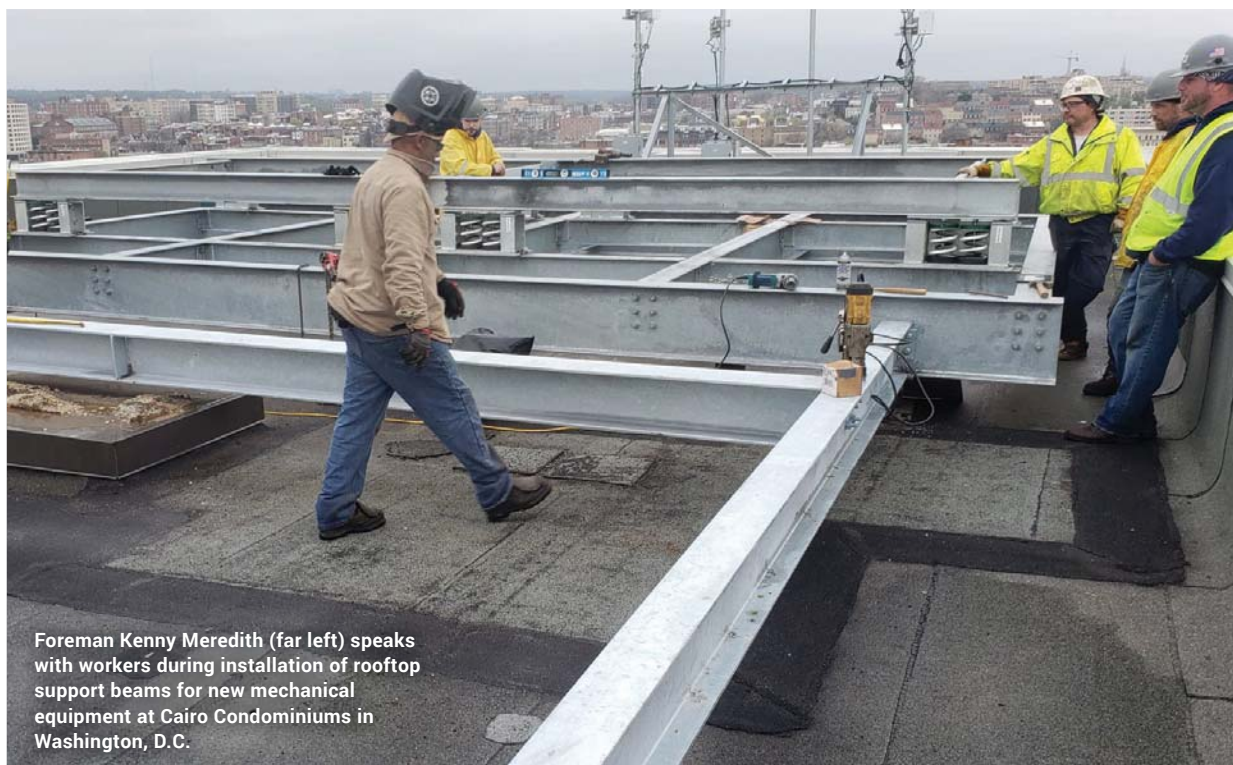
## A HOT ROD FOR A TRUCK AND A WELDING MACHINE

Ron's parents came to the U.S. in 1958 when he was 9 months old to pursue the American dream. Today, he's proud to emphasize that he's a naturalized American citizen continuing to do exactly that. After the family settled in Maryland, his machinist father started a steel fabrication company, contributing to construction of the Washington Metro transit system in the 1970s.

Ron became interested in the steel business while working with his father in high school. Following graduation in 1976, he served an ironworking apprenticeship, receiving a two-year credit for his experience with his father's company.

"At 28, still with my father, I decided I wanted to be in business for myself," Ron says. "So, in 1985 I sold my hot rod—a 'Smokey and the Bandit' Pontiac Trans Am—and bought a truck and a welding machine. I started the company from my rented basement apartment."

Kenny Jamerson, his helper at his father's company, came with him. They started by erecting for Washington Stair & Iron, a large fabrication company. "The business grew slowly," Ron says, "but it grew."



Foreman Kenny Meredith (far left) speaks with workers during installation of rooftop support beams for new mechanical equipment at Cairo Condominiums in Washington, D.C.

Today, Tri-State Steel employs a core group of a dozen expert ironworkers, a number that works well for managing multiple projects. Turnover is low. Kenny is still with him, now his main Foreman. Another Foreman, Kenny Meredith, has been with Tri-State Steel for some 20 years.

Ron pays special tribute to one person who was not an ironworker—his former Partner, Sheldon Bolotin. “For the first year it was just me running the company,” he says. “Then I realized I couldn’t work both in the field and run the office. In 1986 I brought Sheldon on to handle all the office functions, estimating, financials, paperwork and the like.

“He was my 50-50 partner for 28 years. I bought him out after he retired in 2014, but he still comes back to volunteer.”

Since he never is sure when he might need to create something to make a job happen, Ron saves specialty equipment at his 4-acre headquarters in Glen Burnie, close to Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport. As an example, he has a stack of steel platforms and attachments saved over the years, including the platforms from the 10-story window project.

And, he’s accumulated over 25 welding machines—gasoline-powered, diesel-powered and electric. “Pretty much anyone working for me has to know something about welding,” Ron says. “All of my core of guys are certified welders and we’re able to weld almost anything we come across.” He notes that the machines illustrate the march of progress. Today, a 30-pound welding machine can do the same job that required a 250-pound machine two decades ago.

## RENOVATION, MONUMENTAL SAFETY AND A SCULPTURE FROM VENEZUELA

Tri-State Steel still pursues new builds, but 35 years into his business, Ron has developed a penchant for renovation. Again, he relishes projects that present a challenge by being out of the ordinary, he says.

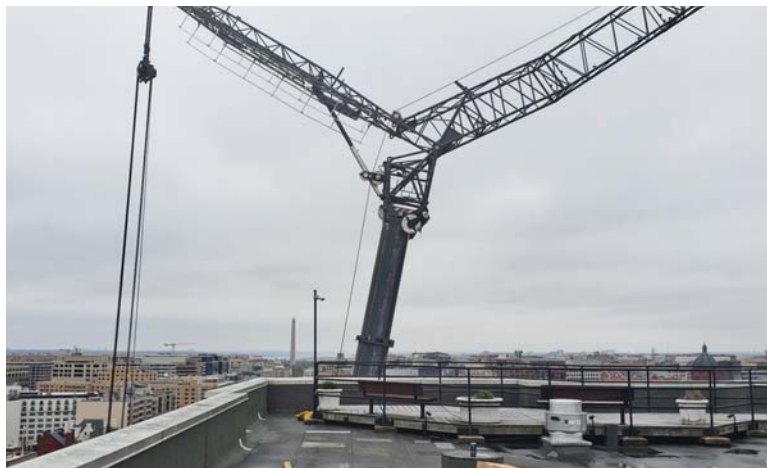
His firm’s work on the Lincoln Memorial, located at the National Mall in Washington, fits into that category. Nearly a century after it was opened, a marble panel in its ceiling fell 60 feet or so to floor. It was one of a series of thin translucent panels of Alabama marble installed



After an aluminum marquee at Baltimore’s Pimlico Race Course blew over, Tri-State Steel Erectors, Inc. replaced it with a white-coated steel structure.

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Ron Umlandt, President,  
Tri-State Steel Erectors, Inc.



Lifting steel beams to the top of the 10-story Cairo Condominiums in Washington, D.C., is the first step in installing a rooftop platform to support upgraded mechanical equipment.



A steel structure erected in 1995 for the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's new embassy in Washington, D.C.

to allow light to filter down on the 19-foot-high Lincoln statue. No one was injured but the National Park Service staff realized that it represented a risk for workers who ascended into the upper reaches to replace lightbulbs and perform other maintenance.

Tri-State Steel was engaged to install a fall prevention system, an arrangement of stainless steel cables to which a worker could tether a safety harness in case of another marble failure. "It was very cool to contribute to a national monument and a once-in-a-lifetime thing," Ron says. "It's an improvement that probably will never have to be done again."

Working on "Delta Solar," a massive sculpture at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, was a twice-in-a-lifetime thing. Created by sculptor Alejandro Otero, the 27-foot-high artwork was a gift from the government of Venezuela to mark the American bicentennial. It arrived as a collection of expansive stainless steel pieces, each more or less shaped like a sail. As an apprentice ironworker in 1976, Ron was part of the crew that assembled it.

Fast forward to 2019, and the assemblage needed to be moved during Smithsonian renovations. "The rigging company hired for the move called me because they knew

I was good with challenging jobs," Ron notes. "I told them I had helped put it together. They wanted to take it apart and move it in pieces. I said, 'You don't want to do that. Just move it, intact.'"

Which they did. "In the '70s, we used three or four 'chokes' to pick the whole thing up in one piece," he notes. "When they moved it in 2019, they were so worried about loading and safety factors that they used more than 20.

"It's like the welding machines. That's how much the world has changed in 35 years." 🐼

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*Freelance writer Ralph Fuller has more than 30 years' experience explaining topics as diverse as rare tropical diseases, alternative fuels, highway safety technologies and the fishes and critters on coral reefs.*