



Don Ludlum

Don Ludlum is the president and founder of Ludlum Measurements, Inc., a radiation detection company in Sweetwater, Texas, that has grown to become one of the leading suppliers of such equipment in the U.S. with exports reaching throughout the world.

Creating a successful company against stiff competition and under fluctuating regulations, taxes, and economics is not for the faint of heart. What kind of character and life experiences create the type of person who can navigate a company into becoming a world leader, bless thousands of lives in a small community for nearly five decades, and make the world a safer place to live in?

Here is one story ...



The Early Years

Don was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on May 18, 1932, but he grew up in Elsmore, Kansas. He was the middle child and only boy of three children. His parents were George and Grace Ludlum.

His earliest memories involve the Dust Bowl days in 1938 when he remembers his father having to auction the family farm. Due to this tumultuous economic time, Don's family moved back to Tulsa where his father ran a filling station. They stayed there for a short time to get back on their feet.

When Don was in the first grade, they moved back to Kansas where his father and grandfather bought a hardware store. Don said he was unhappy with the move because they went from having indoor plumbing to an outdoor privy. However, it was at the hardware store in Kansas that he began to learn what running a business was all about. From his father and grandfather, he learned basic business practices that he uses today.

Don described himself as a difficult child, and putting him to work at the hardware store after school kept him out of trouble. From the time he was in the first grade until he was 14 years old, he worked alongside his grandfather John Jacob "JJ" Ludlum. Don's father took care of things "inside" the store, and Don and his grandfather took care of things that needed to be done "outside" of the store. This included making deliveries and taking care of the farm they had as a result of the business. Don explained that during those days

Don Ludlum is grateful for a series of fortunate "accidents" that have brought him to where he is today. He is the owner and founder of a thriving company where he still contributes his engineering skills daily after retirement age. He is a husband, a father, a grandfather, and a great-grandfather. He is also an active member of a community he now calls home.

customers would sometimes make part of their payments in livestock and such, so they had a farm as a side business.

Both Don's father and grandfather taught him the importance of customer service. "They were very strong on customer service," Don said. He explained that it didn't matter if a customer ordered a part that was 50 cents or 50 dollars. The Ludlum men would always have it delivered to their customers when needed.

As a freshman in high school, Don faced another move. His sister had severe asthma and was having related health problems, so the family moved to



Don Ludlum (right) with parents George and Grace

Greely, Colorado where they were able to get her asthma under control. Although Don was happy for his sister's health returning, his social life took a downturn. Upon the move, he had to give up his driver's license and went from being a freshman in high school to a 9th grader in junior high school.

However, it was at his new school that Don met Joe Slater. Mr. Slater was a teacher that introduced him to science. "Science always intrigued me, but I had never had the opportunity to see it in school," Don pointed out. There was also another chemistry teacher that started an advanced math class that Don joined. Don said he and a group of boys had grown obnoxious. Their teachers wanted to offer something that challenged them, and it worked.

Moving to Colorado ended up being the best thing that happened to Don. That move brought him to a place where he had the chance to discover his interest and talents in science and math.

Military, College, New Family

When Don graduated from high school, the Korean War had begun, and he decided to join the Marines. However, a recruiter talked him into joining the Navy instead and enrolling in a Navy electronics school. Don said he waited and waited for an assignment. Then he was told he could not attend the electronics program because the Navy did not correctly process his test. Don's naval career ended before it ever started.

He then chose an academic path as Plan B. In 1950 he enrolled at Kansas State University to major in architecture. It only took him a month before he realized that architecture was "not his thing." One day while walking through the engineering department, he saw some guys working on a color television. This intrigued Don. He asked them what they called themselves, and they said "electrical engineers."

He knew then that's what he wanted to be.

Don soon changed his major to electrical engineering, and in another 4 ½ years he graduated from Kansas State with a degree in the field. Don noted that he still enjoys designing buildings for fun, but does not consider himself artistic enough to do it professionally.

After his first year in college, Don went home for the summer where he developed a relationship with an old high school friend, Joyce. He and Joyce married in 1953.

While in college, Don continued to pursue the military and joined the Army ROTC. When he received his commission, the Korean War had come to an end with a cease fire, which delayed his entering the Army for about a year. He chose to attend graduate school while he waited.

Don and Joyce lived in Manhattan, Kansas while he attended graduate school. They had their first child Cathy, while they lived in Manhattan.

After another year passed, Don entered the Army and he served at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey and at Fort Riley, Kansas. He was discharged within six months and assigned to the early ready reserves for eight years because the Army had a surplus of officers at that time.

Entering the World of Business

With Don's experience and education, he had several job offers once he was out of the Army, but he had one friend that worked at a radiological company, Eberline, as the chief engineer. This friend had been an instructor at Kansas State. Don was intrigued by this field of work and chose to take a job with Eberline. He and his family relocated to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where his next three children, Larry, Wendy, and Jill, were born.

Don worked as an engineer for Eberline for five years, and in that time he worked his way up to chief engineer. He learned a lot there that helped him develop his own company. One of the most significant things he learned came out of a disagreement with his friend who managed the company. His friend went for the large contracts, but Don thought it was better to serve the basic industry. He said, "It's better to have 10 small contracts rather than one large one." In fact, this disagreement was part of what led Don to leave Eberline to start Ludlum Measurements.

The Beginnings of Ludlum Measurements

In 1961, Don chose to set out and start a radiological company of his own, but he had one very important thing he had to do first. He had to find a town where he could build his business. Don and his father took the trip together to begin looking at locations to begin this new venture and settle with his young family.

"I looked for a declining agricultural town," he said. Those towns would have a surplus labor pool and low-cost buildings available. He knew this would require him less initial capital, and he assumed such a community would be cooperative in helping a new business get started.

He did his research and focused on eastern Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma. The day he and his dad were ready to start visiting some of the communities he had picked out in Nebraska, a severe snow storm came to the state. He then decided to visit West Texas where it wasn't so cold.

Don had a friend who had lived in the Midland/Odessa area, so he decided to start in Odessa and work east. The first night they stayed in Big Spring (in between Odessa and Sweetwater), a "blue northern" hit the area, and Big Spring had no restaurants open for breakfast the following morning. Don and his father then ended up in Sweetwater because that was the nearest town with an eatery open for business.



They ate breakfast at Starr's Restaurant that day, and his father enjoyed the local fish stories from area lake goers. They decided to stay and look around and began to see the things they had been looking for in a community. He said Sweetwater was small, but it still had the workings of a city. (It now has

a population of approximately 11,000.) Sweetwater had a good school system, a quality fire and police department, and other city services. Agriculture was the biggest part of the town's economy, and agriculture wasn't doing so well in the 1960s in West Texas. That meant Sweetwater was primed for a new business to come along.

In addition, Don was a young father looking for a good community to raise his children in, and a good school system was a critical part of that decision. That was another factor that led him to settle and start his business in Sweetwater, Texas. Don moved his family to Sweetwater in January of 1962 to coincide with a new school semester. Don and Joyce's family continued to grow. Their last two children, Jennifer and Robert, were born in Sweetwater in the mid 1960s.

After the move to Sweetwater, Don immediately went to work on his first design, which is now known as the Model 3 Survey Meter. The design was complete by July of that same year. He then drove to Dallas to purchase equipment for a machine shop.

The third machinist Don hired in 1967, Cranston Ballenger, still works for Ludlum in the machine shop today, and his brother and sister are also now long-time employees with the company.

Another person who was one of Don's first hires was sales manager, Dwayne Stevens. Don had learned the importance

of a sales department when working at Eberline. His former company did not have sales personnel at that time, and Don saw the need for it. Mr. Stevens was that first sales manager, and he also still works in sales for the company today after 42 years of service.

Longevity is not uncommon at Ludlum Measurements. There are over 30 people who have worked for the company over 20 years with almost a third of those employees with 30 or more years of service under their belts. Another 15 people have worked for the company for at least 15 years.

Ludlum's product longevity is also not uncommon within the company. The predecessor of the Model 3 was the first Ludlum instrument, and a version of that product still sells well today.

The first run of the Model 3's predecessor totaled 11. Don said he originally thought the best selling points of the Model 3 included the fact that it could work on regular batteries and that his prices were significantly lower than the competition. However, one of those first customers later told him that it was his willingness to design a holster to go with the instrument that sold him. In other words, customer service sold his first instruments.

Don explained that when the customer asked for a holster or harness to carry the detector, he was unsure about the best way to make one. That's when he met Monte Huckabee, a local police officer. He showed him how his gun holster worked best for him, giving Don the ideas he needed to develop one for his instruments. Now, Huckabee's son, Bill Huckabee, works in sales for Ludlum and has been with the company for over 20 years.

Don's experience at Eberline also led him to design a basic instrument for the health physicist. At that time a health physicist in the field had to purchase a different instrument for measuring each of the four types of radiation. "A guy had to buy an alpha counter, then a gamma counter, and so on," Don said.

So Don developed a basic counting instrument that could be operated with several different types of detectors. The customer could purchase the detector or detectors to go with the counting instrument that best fit his needs.

While at Eberline, Don also learned a thing or two about priorities. He had designed a product that was named the Gadora. "That was the worst thing I ever made," he said. "We spent more money naming the thing than we did designing it." That's why he started a simple numbering system at Ludlum Measurements to name his products.

Don categorized different types of instruments in certain number groups. This allows the engineers to focus on the design rather than naming their designs. It also allows those who work for the company to learn the system quickly.

A Family-Owned Business

Family has been an ongoing presence for Don and the Ludlums in starting and continuing the business. Don's father, George, was significant in getting the fledgling company off its feet. Don said George put up a significant amount of initial capital to get things going.

George lived in Sweetwater for the first year to help Don. His experience in the family hardware store back in Kansas, as well as running a sporting goods store, was very beneficial to Ludlum Measurements. He went back to his own business, then a few years later when Ludlum's product line was more developed, George began working as a sales representative for his son's company. Don said he took care of all the customers west of the Mississippi. He still called Colorado home at that time.

When George retired, he and Don's mother, Grace, officially moved to Sweetwater. George handled the scrap metal for Ludlum Measurements until he was in his mid-90s. He passed away in 2008 at the age of 99. Grace passed away in 2002, also in her 90s.

In 1978 things changed for Don on a personal level. His wife, Joyce, passed away from ongoing health problems.

Later he married Irene. She had two children of her own, Rick and Max. She had worked in the company for several years, and they became friends after Joyce's death. They have now been married for 30 years.

Since Irene had worked in the company, not only did Don have a chance to get to know her, so did his children. Ludlum's children grew up working summers in the company, mostly in assembly or in the machine shop.

Family continues to be instrumental to Ludlum Measurements, and Don has enjoyed running his business as a family-owned business. He currently allows members of his family to work in the company wherever their gifts may serve the company best, but they are not allowed to serve as chief financial officer or assistant to the chief financial officer. This is to avoid a conflict of interest as far as finances are concerned.



Larry, Don, and Robert Ludlum

Currently Don's oldest son, Larry, works as an engineer for Ludlum Measurements and manages the ETEL/ADIT photomultiplier tube business. Don's youngest son, Robert, worked in sales. Robert passed away in 2007. Don said his two sons chose to work for the company as adults. Working summers as teens for their father's business helped them have a better overall understanding of the company.

All of Don's children are now part owners of Ludlum Measurements.

Looking Back and Forward

When asked what he thinks Ludlum Measurements' most significant contribution to the radiation protection industry is, Don quickly says "customer service." "We support products long after we produce them."

The company will continue to service a product that has been superseded by something else more than once. That's because Ludlum Measurements is a company that works hard to serve customers as individuals. The fact that Ludlum's products have long lives is something Don is proud of, and he wants to allow customers to continue using a product as long as it meets their needs.

However, Don says that Ludlum Measurements' greatest success in the area of customer service is the thing that will be its greatest challenge to sustain in the future. Don said he believes it won't be easy to continue the caliber of customer service they are used to providing because "we have lots of customers, and it's difficult to continue treating them as individuals." However, he plans to strive to continue with that same level of customer service and believes his family-owned business will strive to do that with the next generation of Ludlums.

Ludlum Measurements is an integrated company and rarely goes outside the company to make parts, specialty items, or accessories for its products. Don said he was compelled to become more and more integrated because the radiation detection field is a niche market. He only goes outside the company if he needs a large volume.

This homespun practical wisdom flies in the face of many business experts who for decades have claimed that vertical integration did not make good business sense. There are now well over 400 people working at Ludlum who would disagree, many of whom would be hard pressed to find a better job in the small community of Sweetwater.

Another testimony to this is manifested by many of Ludlum's competitors who followed the more popular business philosophy but are unable to match Ludlum's personalized service, quality, on-time deliveries, and affordable pricing. In our current economic turmoil amidst unprecedented numbers of failed companies, countless jobs exported overseas, and huge government bailouts, Don's homespun

wisdom has not only been vindicated, but serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration for our country.

The worst time for Ludlum Measurements, according to Don, was during the banking crisis of the late 1980s. It was tough securing funds, and they were forced to change banks several times. He added that his toughest decisions have involved having to terminate people from his company.

Don has received many offers for his company over the years. He actually considered selling the company in the early 1970s when he faced some difficult times. During this time he actually flew to meet a potential buyer. By the time he got off the plane, he was second guessing himself on selling.

After meeting the person, he decided to hold onto his company and flew back home to Sweetwater. He didn't want to see Ludlum Measurements become another corporate giant that forgot about customer service. "In order to help the customer, you have to stay small," he says. He added that this works well for integrated companies like his. He believes he survived those tough times in the early 1970s and later during the 1980s banking crisis because the company focuses on the individual customer.

Part of a Community

Another important aspect of Ludlum Measurements is the company's involvement in the community. Don has been active in the community of Sweetwater for years. He has served as a city commissioner, as a member of the Chamber of Commerce board of directors, as a member of the economic development board, and has been active in his church, among other things. Don was also selected as Sweetwater's Outstanding Citizen in 1986.

Don encourages and supports his employees in volunteer endeavors. "I like to encourage employees to contribute to the community, their school, their church," he said.

In 2001 Ludlum Measurements was recognized as the Business of the Year by the Sweetwater Chamber of Commerce. The main criterion for the award was the amount of time the company's employees volunteered in the community. In a letter to Ludlum employees, Don complimented the volunteer work of his employees and co-workers. He pointed out that Ludlum employees were involved in an "impressively long list" of worthwhile community volunteer organizations such as Meals on Wheels, Lions Club, Rotary Club, Kiwanis Club, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, youth sports, Gateway Family Services, United Way, school organizations, and more. He then added, "The name on the plaque is Ludlum Measurements, but the award is yours. I am proud of your willingness to contribute to your community and congratulate you for your efforts."

Ludlum employees are able to volunteer because Ludlum

management allows its employees the time off for volunteer work. They simply make up their time another day.

Summing Things Up

Don's favorite part of his business remains engineering. He describes himself as "basically a designer." However, he also points out he is a "fourth generation businessman." He says being a businessman goes all the way back to the first grade when he started helping out in his father's and grandfather's hardware store, learning about pricing by selling hammers. This part of his life and work has become part of who he is.

The instrument that he is most proud of designing is the first Ludlum instrument, which evolved into the Model 3. This product has been updated many times since 1962, but it remains a popular basic Ludlum instrument. "We still sell a couple thousand a year," Don pointed out. He described the Model 3 as a "good workhorse instrument." That's because he knows customers who have owned them and they have lasted for over 25 years.

Don is glad to have been part of the radiation industry because "except for the bomb, it's a fantastic tool." He cited the advances in medicine due to the use of radiation and the use of radiation as a tracer for chemicals as important uses.



He said he believes the greatest success of Ludlum Measurements is that it's still here. It has lasted almost 50 years, and under the same ownership.

Don has one philosophy. "Everybody gets breaks. You just have to take advantage of those breaks, even when you don't think it's the right time."

He is a living example of this philosophy – a man who took an opportunity to start a new business in a little town he had barely heard of, and a man who picked up and started over with a wife and four children, all of whom were under the age of 7. Thanks to taking that risk, he has survived many hard times, but has experienced many successes while working alongside his family and making lifelong friends. He has also contributed greatly to the small community of Sweetwater by providing hundreds of jobs and by making use of buildings that would otherwise be vacant.

When asked when he finally felt like he made it in the business to the point where he could breathe a little easier, he says, "It hasn't happened yet. Once you think you're there, that's the end."



Three generations at LMI honored
Three generations of the Ludlum family are honored at the annual banquet. From left, the late Don Ludlum, Don Ludlum, and Larry Ludlum. The three generations were given the Award of Merit by the Sweetwater Chamber of Commerce. Photo by the author.

LMI award partly based on its civic involvement



Photo by Kimberly Gray

Ludlum Measurements was selected to receive the first "Business of the Year" award at the Sweetwater Chamber of Commerce annual banquet Monday night. Shown above left to right are Robert Ludlum, Don Ludlum and Larry Ludlum. Gay Nell Cherry, outgoing chamber president, presented the award.



Ludlum breaks ground for expansion
Ludlum Measurements Inc. has broken ground for a new expansion project in Sweetwater, Texas. The new facility will be a state-of-the-art laboratory and office building. The project is being led by Don Ludlum, president of Ludlum Measurements. The new facility will be a state-of-the-art laboratory and office building. The project is being led by Don Ludlum, president of Ludlum Measurements.

