

INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN APSEY, PRESIDENT OF ODOM HYDROGRAPHIC SYSTEMS INC.

Old Soldiers Never Die

Some people in the hydrographic community show up in every part of the world and it looks like they never age and stop working. Nevertheless they sooner or later reach the moment of retirement. Do they clearly leave the scene or do they fade away? Such a person is Brian Apsey, President of ODOM Hydrographic Systems Inc. In March this year he celebrated his retirement, but will still be active for the company. Hydro international interviewed him to look back on a fascinating career and to hear of his plans for the future.

You are an Electronic Engineer by profession. Can you inform our readers briefly how and why you became involved in Hydrography?

Like a lot of people, I became involved in hydrography through a series of coincidences, opportunities and determination. I started my career in 1951 with a five-year apprenticeship with Marconi Instruments in the UK. During this period I attended college part-time, but never did finish my degree, being too involved with bicycle racing, a passion I still pursue today, but now at the Senior Olympics level. On completion of my Marconi apprenticeship I was immediately drafted into the Royal Air Force for two years as an electronic technician and was shipped out (literally on a troop ship) to a maintenance base in Singapore. I seemed to spend more time racing my bicycle for the RAF than I did working on aircraft, but I soon developed a deep interest and love for the Far East and foreign lands and started searching for an overseas job upon my return to the UK.

After being rejected as an officer in the Hong Kong police force and almost taking a job as an engineer on a tea estate in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), I met up with an old RAF colleague from Singapore who told me about this great job with Decca Navigator, Overseas Project Division. I was hired the following Monday. For the next thirteen years this job took me to some of the worlds most remarkable places, including two years in former Netherlands New Guinea (now Irian Jaya), The North Cape in Norway, four years in Surinam, British Guiana (now Guyana), five months in a tent in Newfoundland, and finally three years in the Netherlands Antilles. The job was to provide Decca (later Racal, now Thales) radio positioning services to navies and to keep it running.

At a certain moment in your career you have decided to shift from fieldwork to design and production of equipment. What was the reason to start as an entrepreneur?

I did not go straight from field engineering into manufacturing. After working with the Netherlands Navy for a total of seven years, we finally ran out of territory to survey and my very happy association with the Navy came to an end. Still not wanting to return to the UK, I transferred to Decca Survey (Latin America), headquartered in Houston, Texas. I moved to Caracas, Venezuela doing some customer support work, but was mainly involved in sales throughout South America. I had married in Gibraltar in 1965 and my first two children were born in Surinam. After seven years in Venezuela, and another child, it was time to think about their long term education. Although we greatly enjoyed our fishing expeditions to the interior, the political and economical situation in Venezuela was deteriorating and I decided to leave. By chance, Colin Weaks put Harold Odom in touch with me as Harold was looking to get his Odom Offshore Surveys company into the Venezuela market. Harold came down to Caracas, but I persuaded him to offer me a position as a sales manager with Odom in Baton Rouge. Eventually this led to me becoming President of a new Odom company, Odom Hydrographic Systems, Inc, which to this day designs and manufactures hydrographic echo sounders. After a number of years of running the company for Harold, myself and then Vice-President, Richard Byrd, bought the company.

We were told, that your wife played an important role in the development, when you went into business. Can you give our readers some details?

When I joined Decca they only hired non-married field engineers because of the remote areas of many projects. However, after I had earned a degree of seniority, I did marry as I said in Gibraltar. My boss was very understanding and arranged for me to take on the long term jobs where I could take a wife. That's why my first job as a married man was the four years I spent as project leader with the Netherlands Navy in Surinam. The relationship worked well and we then moved to Curacao for three years where we surveyed the waters of Curacao, Aruba, Bonaire, Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten.

What is the difference for your company in approaching American, European and Far East markets? Which one is/was the most profitable market?

Because of my international background I tended to focus a lot on the European and Asian markets and let my colleagues concentrate on the US domestic market. When the economy or markets are slow in some parts of the world, things are looking not so bad in others. This has proved to be a successful strategy for Odom. Our overseas sales have consistently been at the 50 per cent level and we are the

market leaders in several territories. Our success overseas depends greatly on our agents. You are only as good as your agents and finding the right one and supporting him with personal visits is the key to success. We used to sell at higher prices overseas because of the extra cost of travel, commissions and support, but now with instant communication and increased competition it is impossible to maintain a two-tier price schedule. The customer will find some way to buy at the lower price level. From this standpoint, as we mostly sell direct to the customer in America, this segment of our market is more profitable.

In retrospect, what was your biggest hit and what was the greatest fiasco? Can you also express it in money?

Our biggest hit was buying the company from Harold Odom. Our biggest fiasco was selling 51 per cent of it to Atlas in Germany. Fortunately, we were able to turn this later into a success by buying all 51 per cent back. â€˜Biggest hitâ€™ sale was I suppose the US Naval Oceanographic Office standardisation on Odom echo sounders, a large order to the US Coast Guard and becoming a market leader in various Asian countries.

What do you feel to be the major key for success in hydrographic business? Having the right people around you? Technical knowledge? Working 24 hours a day? Having some financial backbones available? Anything else?

Having the right people around you. A strong design team is essential. People who can keep up with the latest developments in technology. Odom has always funded R/D through sales. We have never gone to outside investors to increase the size of our design team. This means slower development times than we would like due to our limited engineering capacity, but it ensures we retain ownership of the company. Reputation helps a lot. Reputation for building the best product, and of course customer support. I feel that Odom has deservedly earned a reputation for having the best customer support in the industry. This is something we preach to all of our employees.

Your company is producing acoustic equipment like echo sounders, multibeam equipment, etc. What competition do you foresee from airborne/ laser bathymetry?

I don't see the market for acoustic echo sounders slowing down. The ongoing need for marine construction and marine security ensure this. The airborne/laser bathymetry business is still pretty much confined to government agencies, whereas our day to day business is mostly with commercial organisations.

Being involved in hydrography for such a long period, can you tell the readers something about the turning points you noticed in hydrography in the past? What changes in the hydrographic profession do you foresee, not only as a result of new technologies but also by, for example, environmental requirements?

The biggest changes I have seen since I first became involved in 1959 is in positioning. GPS has really changed the way we do things. It required three semi-permanent, manned sites, 200 ft. antennas and a staff of eight to provide positioning for the Netherlands Navy in Surinam. In the Caribbean we had stations in three different countries at one time, which make for some tricky international diplomacy. Environmental requirements do not appear to have effected our business much. Coastal security concerns have recently focused attention on inshore bathymetry.

We have been informed, that your son is succeeding you in the company. Does he also have extensive practical field experience like you?

Stephen grew up in Surinam, Curacao and Venezuela and lived on stations in Surinam and Curacao, but he was too young in those days to really get involved. Since he joined Odom in 1991 and graduated from LSU with a degree in electrical engineering and computer science, he has been involved mostly in product R/D. However, he has extensive experience in field testing, installation and training. My former partner, Richard Byrd, has taken over my position as President, whereas Stephen is now Vice-President.

In particular from your days working in the field you must have some good stories to tell. You have already contributed to our magazine, but may we count on some more submissions in the near future?

Oh, I have stories. I do not know how many of them I dare publish but I promised Admiral Ritchie. I would come up with some stories about my Decca days with the British and Dutch Navies. The trouble is I seem to be busier now that I'm retired than when I was working. So many places to see, fish to catch and miles to ride.