

SUCCESS Yoke Har Lee

Designed to keep danger at bay

A sailing couple, high technology and the quest for safety at sea add up to a growing export business

ON THE ocean, no one can hear you scream — especially when you are on a collision course with a giant commercial vessel.

Deirdre Schleigh and husband Jeff Robbins were unsatisfied with the systems that existed to warn against that danger, so decided to build one themselves. The outcome is the AISWatchmate, a world-first, easy to install marine warning system that has proven popular with many sailing buffs.

The AISWatchmate can be used without running down major power supplies while a sailor is on the open seas. Its key selling point is that it is a well thought-out solution and easily plugged into a yacht. Another attraction is that it only raises alarms of real concern.

AISWatchmate's success rides on the back of a change in international maritime legislation

which made it mandatory for vessels of more than 300 gross tonnes to carry an identification device (an Automatic Identification System) to send out data about the vessel's identity, speed, location and course, among other things.

While there were existing products on the market, the couple say most were clumsy to use and unhelpful because of information clutter. As well, they often incorporated GPS data, depth sounders, radars and fish finders, and most were heavy power users.

Robbins and Schleigh wanted a product that was simple and useful. They cite the example of a sailing neighbour who could not use the chart plotter on his new boat without first attending an induction seminar.

"For us it was a no-brainer — the

system had to be a single-screen solution with a single focus as an early warning system. It is fair to say that this is the only product of its kind in the world," says Robbins, a former software writer who together with Schleigh founded their company, Vesper Marine, just over a year ago.

Schleigh says: "We looked at what's out there. We realised they weren't smart, weren't useful. With AISWatchmate, you knew miles in advance when danger is close."

The AISWatchmate came out last April, about a year after they began working on the prototype.

This February, influential US boating magazine *SAIL* awarded it an innovation award and in May Vesper Marine was joint winner of the Enatel Innovative Hardware Product Award category at PricewaterhouseCoopers' Hi-Tech Awards.

Wayne Norrie, chairman of the NZ Hi-Tech Association,

who was a judge, says Vesper Marine is a great company with a promising future. He believes that once it is able to scale its product and build the right distributing channels, it will grow in size.

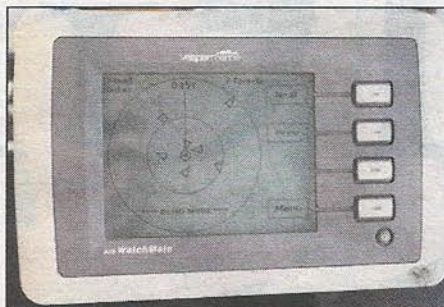
Robbins says the emails haven't stopped coming; every week there are distributors from around the world seeking to represent Vesper Marine's product in their countries.

Because of the strong growth, and a second product coming out in September, there has been demand for capital and for research and development funding.

Robbins and Schleigh are emphatic in their praise for New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (NZTE) and the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. NZTE has helped with building business capa-



AWARD-WINNERS: Deirdre Schleigh and husband Jeff Robbins' AISWatchmate (below) has won plaudits and a growing order book. Pictures / Paul Estcourt



bility while the foundation has helped with research funding to spur the next new product.

Since Vesper Marine signed its first distributorship agreement with a US company, the company has added others in Britain, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and Australia and now has resellers in 15 countries. Over 80 per cent of its products are sold overseas.

Around 600 AISWatchmate units were sold last year and Vesper Marine expects to sell four times as many this year.

Initially, manufacturing was done in-house, with Robbins and Schleigh guaranteeing the quality of every unit put out.

Manufacturing has since been outsourced to a New Zealand contract manufacturer. The firm has also employed a full-time software engineer who has moved from the South Island to Auckland.

It has now come to the stage where more investment may be needed to take the company to the heights it wants to reach. "There are lots of opportunities,

particularly in Europe," Robbins says, adding that resource constraints placed limits on the company's growth.

At some stage an investor will be needed, he says, to help lift the company's growth rate.

"We've proven we have the right product, we've got the market for it. The time is right, to ramp the business up — to bring on resources. Ideally, this [an investor] would be someone who can bring skills and expertise to carry on."

Schleigh says Europe presents a new challenge in terms of cultural differences, how business works and the regulatory differences.

For other businesses wanting to sell overseas, Robbins says, "You have to make it easy for customers. These cover transfers in multiple currencies, clearance duties, harmonisation issues ..."

The company, based in Auckland's Viaduct area, is named after the American couple's 40-foot yacht Vesper, which they bought in 1998. Their first trip to New Zealand was in November 2003 and they returned again in 2005 to settle.

In 2007 the couple took their prototype on a trip where its robustness was put to the test. At one point it was keeping tabs on 124 ships, of which only five proved to be of real concern.

This endorsed their belief that including systems to filter out the "noise" and concentrate on the vessels that really mattered was the way to go. They knew then they had a real winner. ■