

NELSON YARDS MEET THE CHALLENGE OF NORTHERN QUEST

BY KEITH INGRAM



In September 2007, Steve Sullivan and Ross Harvey from Challenge Marine approached Richard McBride with a potential new project ... a new vessel for a previous client ... a mussel farmer from Coromandel. Ultimately, the result of that project was *Northern Quest*, launched in February 2009 in Nelson. This story is about the build process, the companies and the people behind the project. These are the same folk who are now revitalising Nelson's once proud shipbuilding and repair industry.

Yes, it would be fair to say that in recent years, Nelson has seen the boom to bust years as its waterfront faced some serious challenges and vessel numbers significantly decreased in this traditional fishing port. Competition for this diminishing trade gave rise to waterfront scrapping with little desire for companies of the past to work together. This caused a number of casualties. Hopefully however, on our recent visit, we saw the tides of change as the success story of one of Nelson's quiet achievers began to unfold.

Nevil Basalaj is the owner of Challenge New Zealand Limited, the parent company recently established to provide strategic direction, product and marketing development to four engineering companies in which he has a financial interest. The four companies are: Challenge Marine Ltd, Fluid Power Solutions Ltd, Aimex Ltd and the most recently acquired Nelson Reliance Engineering Ltd. An engineer by profession, Nevil has a philosophy of surrounding himself with successful people with the right skills to succeed.

Challenge New Zealand Group now employs 120 fulltime staff and 20 contractors. It's a long way from 1986 when, as

a 22 year old marine engineer and at his father's urging, Nevil borrowed the family's *Triumph Herald*, threw his tool kit in the boot and started trading under his own name.

Nevil's dad was a child refugee from Russia who arrived in New Zealand after WWII on an American warship before being interned at the refugee camp in Paihiatua. He then grew up in Nelson before settling in Petone where he built *Liane*, a 48ft Athel Burns designed cray or small trawler, in the family backyard. He then sailed for the Chatham Islands as the cray boom was on and reportedly did OK, before returning to trawl out of Wellington. This led him to scalloping in Nelson before coming ashore in the mid 70s when he started building boats. But it was not his original intention to start a boat business. He just wanted to build a new boat for himself but always ended up being talked into selling it before he could launch it. Boats like the *Odene*, *Jan* and *Louisa*. He managed to hang onto the *Louisa* long enough to return to fishing in the Cook Strait for a few years.

By this time a young Nevil, now 13, was doing a lot of wagging from school to be on the boat with Dad. This routine continued until, at 16, he was told he had to get a trade and started a fitter and turner apprenticeship with Nalder and Biddle. Meanwhile Basalaj senior came ashore to build another boat, the *Nancy May*. Because of his quality shipwright skills he was soon in demand servicing the fishing fleet.

Meanwhile the younger Basalaj, after getting dad's boot, went on to establish Challenge Marine in 1986. Nevil quickly realised that he was a hands on tools man and, if the business was to grow he needed to employ a manager to run the show while



Carrying out a crane load and stability test

he remained on the factory floor. Essentially, what he did was employ his own boss. It was a policy that worked as the company has grown to include the others in the group, all working in a successful partnership.

The *Northern Quest* build was a result of the collaborative efforts from this group partnership, a partnership that has now attracted the attention of local boat designer Richard McBride. While Richard retains his own counsel, he is mindful that as a sole trader, one has to think about developing an exit strategy and in doing so, either set up systems or join other like minded ►

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