

# Make It HAPPEN

Australian marine engineering business Birdon is making waves in the American market after securing a significant contract with the US Army.

Images by Ross Bothwell

**I**n the late 1970s, Jim Bruce purchased a small cutter suction dredge to extract sand from the Hastings River in Port Macquarie, New South Wales. Birdon was born. The family-owned and -operated business quickly progressed to become a successful and diversified marine engineering group in Australia, and has recently expanded its operations into the US.

When Jim passed away in 2008, his son Jamie took over as CEO, supported by his sister Tammy Bugler as CFO. “We operate across four main divisions,” Jamie explains. “The Marine division has

a longstanding reputation for producing high-quality outcomes in marine vessel manufacturing, refurbishment, and maintenance; the Defence division is well regarded within the Australian and US defence industries by providing innovative, value-for-money products and services; Engineering & Contracting services is where our core capabilities have opened up highly successful opportunities in non-marine fabrication and other diverse activities such as disposal of defence assets; and then there’s the Dredging side of the business, which is how it all started. We mainly operate cutter suction dredgers and backhoe

type dredgers throughout the South Pacific.”

Birdon’s headquarters are in Port Macquarie, and divisional offices are located in Sydney, Melbourne, the Gold Coast, and Denver in the US. Jamie says the company’s involvement with the Australian and US defence forces has been a huge coup for the group. Between 2003 and 2005, Birdon built 24 Bridge Erection Propulsion Boats for the Australian Army. Last year, following an extremely competitive four-year tender process, Birdon secured a US\$260-million contract with the US Government to construct up to 374 Bridge Erection Boats (BEBs) for the US Army over six years. >



As featured in  
*The CEO Magazine*  
For more info visit  
[theceomagazine.com.au](http://theceomagazine.com.au)





“There is no doubt the US Army contract is by far our biggest accomplishment,” Jamie says. “To win this contract as an SME from Australia with no track record at all in the US is certainly right up there. Each year in Australia, as we grow, there are a lot of exciting

things that happen because we are always looking for opportunities. As part of our US venture, we acquired the water jet propulsion manufacturer NAMJet LLC, and we incorporated that system into our BEB design. NAMJet is a very exciting business for us. It’s

managed from our base in Denver, and it’s just a fantastic product that has enormous potential. NAMJet is working on a number of other military programs in many countries, including the US. For example, NAMJet has recently secured a major deal to repower the Amphibious Assault Vehicles (AAVs) for the US Marine Corps as a subcontractor to SAIC Inc.”

Jamie says the expansion into the US would not have been possible, and nowhere near as successful, without the support Birdon received from Australia. The most significant came from the federal government initiative Efic, an organisation that helps to provide finance for Australian exporters. “Without the support of Efic it would have been very difficult for us to fund the program and meet the US Government’s contract requirements,” Jamie notes. The National Australia Bank, in collaboration with Efic, also played an integral role in helping Birdon to set up its US operations.



to look beyond the norm, and that’s led to our diversification.

“Particularly in Australia where it’s a relatively small market, we’ve found over the years that you have to be diversified. Our people need to be multiskilled and to adapt to varied market conditions across all four main divisions. We leverage this very valuable resource, and our people enjoy the opportunity to work on different project teams both in Australia and in the USA.”

While there are many challenges facing the manufacturing industry, Birdon is focused on increasing its competitiveness and using its scale, agility, and high-quality workmanship to continue to secure profitable growth.

Birdon’s management structure is flat, so that decisions can be made easily and the group doesn’t get bogged down in bureaucracy. ‘Looking outside of the box’ is encouraged, and the team is always assessing and revising risks to achieve a successful outcome.

In addition to its core team of experienced and loyal employees, Birdon has established longstanding relationships with many key subcontractors and suppliers. Jamie refers to them as partners and recognises the crucial role they play in the long-term success of the business. “We certainly view them as a part of us—and that, of course, develops into partnerships built on trust.”

Birdon operates much of its business in sensitive environments and is therefore committed to sustainability, safety, and quality. It has management accreditation for ISO 14001 (Environmental), AS4801 (Health & Safety), and ISO 9001 (Quality), which provide a clear guide to employees about what is expected of them on every project, and is equally important to provide peace of mind for customers.

The company is currently focused on consolidating its operations to meet the company’s long-term goals. Jamie believes it is important for all people involved in Birdon’s operations to be aware of where it is heading in the future and the path it is taking to get there. “The key thing for us is maintaining sustainable growth,” Jamie says. “There are plenty of things we could be doing, but it’s about looking at the things we are good at to allow us to grow profitably and in a controlled way.

“Having acquired the NAMJet business, our desire is to drive that into an internationally well-known product and brand. Just recently, we opened a UK office, which is focused on selling the NAMJet product range throughout Europe. In addition to NAMJet, the UK office will allow us to pursue new opportunities for our other products and services in that region.

“The emphasis for us is to continue to develop innovative products. We’ve always been a build-to-print manufacturer, but we will really be concentrating on products that differentiate us from our competitors. The BEBs and the NAMJet product range are just a few examples of the products that will help us achieve that.

“Importantly, we haven’t lost sight of where we’ve come from. We know how important Australia and Australian business is to us. Sure, the opportunity in the US is enormous and it will probably continue to be; however, none of it would have been achievable without the professional support of our people in Australia.”

According to Jamie, Birdon has always had a vision to expand overseas, due to growth limitations in Australia. It was a risk to go up against some of the bigger US companies and tender for the Army contract, but Birdon was confident that it had a great product. “We also developed strong relationships with the US Army, making sure we understood their requirements, which I think helped get us across the line for the BEB contract.”

Being a business based on family values, Birdon believes that people are the backbone of its operations. With the marketing tagline ‘Make It Happen’, staff are customer focused and ensure they deliver an efficient, on-time, and quality service every time. “Our employees are very dedicated,” Jamie notes. “Longevity is a big thing for us. Two of our employees actually started their employment with my dad in the late 70s and still work with us today. Obviously, that’s very hard to replace. I think the other thing that sets us apart from others is the level of lateral thinking we encourage. We inspire our people

“Importantly, we haven’t lost sight of where we’ve come from. We know how important Australia and Australian business is to us.”

- Jamie Bruce



**COMPLETE HYDRAULIC SOLUTIONS**  
www.southcott.com.au



**SAFETY + QUALITY + RELIABILITY**

Hydraulic system design, supplier and manufacturer of hydraulic components and fluid connectors.

With the complete range of hydraulics, Gates hose, Child and Gates couplings designed specifically for all your needs.

*Southcott congratulates BIRDON on their achievements in design and quality*



S1009



Brisbane 07 3375 4499 • Adelaide 08 8228 2411 • Sydney 02 9838 9033 • Newcastle 02 4964 2123 • Emerald 07 4988 1800  
Mackay 07 4952 4056 • Melbourne 03 8551 0500 • Laverton 03 9371 9000 • Tasmania 03 6427 0908 • Perth 08 9454 9311