

Tru-Marine with an eye for opportunity

By **RONNIE LIM**

FORMER Singapore Navy regular David Loke, 58, is now looking West for new “ports of call” in Europe and the US for Tru-Marine – a leading repairer of turbochargers in marine diesel engines – which he helped co-found and now helms.

It is all part of his ambitious plan to establish Tru-Marine as a true global brand.

From its home-base in Tuas where it first set up in 1977, Tru-Marine has spread its wings throughout Asia. It has facilities in Tianjin, Guangzhou and Shanghai in China, in Sharjah in the Middle East and Mumbai in India and it is starting another one soon in Vietnam, where it has just secured an operating licence.

As part of its expansion Westwards, Tru-Marine has just acquired a repair yard in Rotterdam, Mr Loke told BT. The Tru-Marine group managing director declined to give out further details for reasons of competition.

Next in his sights, possibly in three to five years’ time, is a repair facility in

the US, somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico area where there is extensive offshore oil and gas activity.

“My vision is to transform Tru-Marine into a global marine SME with a facility at every important, strategic port worldwide,” Mr Loke said.

There is little doubt that it is his outward-looking stance which helped Mr Loke clinch this year’s Marine Engineering Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

After life as a Navy regular – “I was chief engine-room artisan, which was like chief engineer of the ship” – he went on to join Dutch precision engineering firm Watt & Akkermans (now GE Capital) as a service engineer for a couple of years before he was approached by a friend, Chan Fook Kee, about setting up their own business.

“I was not married and felt I had nothing to lose. Besides, I was feeling restless and always thought I could do something better,” he reminisced. So at age 28, his adventure in co-starting Tru-Marine with four others began.

“Of course there were

many risks. When we stepped out we had no idea what business was about.

“It was a 15-year struggle. To ensure there was enough cashflow in the beginning, we forced ourselves to plough back all our profits into the company,” he said.

Tru-Marine started out as a sub-contractor in the shipyards and later became a ship-repairer.

An eye for opportunity saw Mr Loke steering Tru-Marine towards niche repairing of damaged turbocharger components in ships’ engines in the early 1990s.

“There was just too much competition in general ship-repairing then, so instead of fighting in a market with squeezed margins, we made the switch to focus on specialist engine repair,” he explained.

At that time, there was no company certified to repair worn or damaged turbocharger parts in diesel engines, and shipowners had either to re-use the parts and put up with a loss of efficiency, or replace them at great cost.

This is significant, he said, as turbochargers are

the heart of the ship’s engine, and can account for as much as 20-25 per cent of engine repair costs.

So by offering shipowners a good cost-saving alternative, Tru-Marine’s own fortunes grew.

Armed with certification from various international bodies including Det Norske Veritas, and a solid reputation gained from years of experience, the group has since grown exponentially.

Starting with revenues of \$2.5 million in the early 1990s, group revenues have since shot to \$20 million in 2002, with this figure doubling to \$40 million today.

Tru-Marine has invested about \$750,000 to \$1 million in each of its overseas facilities, and today employs over 200 workers, with 125 of them overseas. “Measured in terms of number of employees, we are the largest turbocharger repairer in the world,” Mr Loke said.

Despite his ambitious plans to go West, a cautious Mr Loke stressed that the company is not in too great a hurry to expand.

“We are careful with our

expenses and our rate of expansion,” he said, adding that it wants to consolidate in Europe in the next two to three years with its latest Rotterdam yard before venturing next into the US. “We want to pace ourselves.”

That perhaps explains why Tru-Marine is not planning a stock market listing, after aborting its earlier plan in 1997 to do so. “It was the Asian crisis then,” he explained. “Most go for a listing for a couple of reasons. Firstly, they need capital for expansion, or they may need the money and want to call it quits.”

Certainly, Mr Loke – who is born in the year of the Ox, with such persons believed to possess hard-working traits – is not ready to retire yet, given his global ambitions for Tru-Marine.

Asked if he has any advice today for would-be entrepreneurs, Mr Loke says that one has “to be able to exploit opportunities presented in a situation, and to rally all your resources behind you so as to come up with initiatives or solutions which are different or better than your competitors”.



Thirst for adventure: David Loke who helms Tru-Marine is a former Navy regular. It was his ambition to ‘do something better’ that drove him to steer his company towards the profitable business of niche ship repair services