

AT THE HELM

‘Prepare for a ride – it will be adventurous’

Shipyard De Hoop CEO and sole shareholder Patrick Janssens talks to contributing editor John Oliver about the commitment to interesting ships, what gives him grey hair and seeing flying tugboats from his office window

As a child, Patrick Janssens remembers many hours making and sailing self-build boats on one of the Netherlands’ myriad inland waterways. Additionally, growing up in a home that was his father’s ongoing DIY project meant he learned the basics of carpentry, construction and even welding. So it is perhaps surprising that his initial career was as a management consultant.

Not that he wasn’t successful: with a bachelor’s degree from Eindhoven and an MBA in international business from the UK, Janssens initially specialised in quality assurance and management information systems before setting up his own consultancy company with two partners. With a broader spectrum of services, clients were initially among the top 500 companies in the Netherlands, but they slowly started to focus increasingly on the maritime sector.

“Working in many different companies gives you the opportunity to learn a lot when you can peek behind the curtains,” is how Janssens sums up his early working life and the experience he gained from it.

The business, by then comprising two consultancy firms, was sold in the early 2000s and at the age of just 32, Janssens joined the board of historic Shipyard de Hoop in 2004. The yard’s main facility at Lobith, near Arnhem, has been on the bank of the Rhine since 1889.

His arrival saw the business develop a more focused, strategic approach: additional shipyards in the Netherlands and Louisiana in the US, purchased either side of the Millennium, were sold although the combined shipbuilding and design knowledge were regrouped as a comprehensive engineering department. This allowed the business to concentrate on more innovative shipbuilding,

► Patrick Janssens joined Shipyard De Hoop in 2004, becoming CEO three years later

Photo: Ingmar Timmer



as well as making it financially stronger, in turn ensuring its independence.

In 2007, as the perennial economic cycle of shipbuilding turned upwards, De Hoop expanded again by buying a second yard in the north of the Netherlands at Foxhol, near Groningen. The same year saw Janssens lead a management buy-out of the company, becoming CEO and sole shareholder as one of a three-strong board of directors.

The subsequent decade has seen Shipyard De Hoop take on a wide variety of projects from innovative newbuilds to ongoing repair and maintenance contracts. Among the former are several series of vessels from customers around the world – including a current contract to build six shallow-draft Ice Class tugs for client COC in Kazakhstan.

Recently completed contracts include five fast supply intervention vessels (FSIVs) – the first of their type and offering the operator 45 per cent fuel savings compared to similar vessel types thanks to the hybrid propulsion system that was part of the De Hoop design. Also, the last of 10 high-tech PSVs has now been delivered to Abu Dhabi national oil company, ESNAAD, in what Janssens says was a very large order for the company.

“What makes us proud is that these vessels are doing very well; the first one is now working for over 24 months without any downtime,” he added.

This high-quality workmanship is provided by a permanent team of 150 craftsmen – with a further 200 locally-available subcontractors – based at the two facilities in Lobith and Foxhol, while a smaller facility is maintained

in Rotterdam for final fitting out of larger ships. But whichever of the company’s facilities is carrying out the work, they are united by a common goal.

“Shipyard De Hoop is a special yard because of its unique, boutique approach towards shipbuilding, [with] a dedicated group of people realising interesting ships. Client relations are central in the approach as well as the fact that we try to maximise the value added. The yard has all key disciplines in-house – including design and engineering, steel-cutting, pressing, carpentry, piping, machinery, etc – which allows better process and quality control as well as flexibility during the build,” explained Janssens.

“The focus is on custom design and building commercial vessels. The types of ship may often vary, but the projects always start with a clean sheet of paper. First, we try to understand our client’s business model – ie, how do they want to earn money? We cooperate to translate this into the right design and specifications, including performance criteria for the vessel. Our aim is to design the best money-maker for our clients, the best fit-for-purpose ship. Where we can, we try to apply the KISS (keep it simple, stupid) principle, but go high-tech or work with beautiful designs in areas or functions where it is needed or important.”

Of course, running a successful company is easy when times are good: it’s when things get difficult that tests an individual’s business acumen – and difficulties are something the shipbuilding industry is very used to.

“We, like many other shipyards, have faced challenges over the years. Besides the many technical challenges which form our day-to-day business, it is the unforeseen or unexpected things that can all of a sudden



◄ Karina was the first of five FSIVs built by Shipyard De Hoop



cause a serious domino effect. Since I started at this yard in 2004, we had to close down a daughter yard twice, due to a heavy downturn in the market. We also experienced the sudden default and bankruptcy of a very large client for whom we were building seven vessels at the time. In 2015/16, we were faced with two subcontractors which went bankrupt and one was non-performing during the build of a tightly-planned 10-ship order. Managing such events causes grey hair and sleepless nights, especially when you work in a small team.”

This is where Janssens’ previous experience and expertise in management consultancy undoubtedly helps. “We aim to build economic vessels with a good value for money, but the sheer size of our projects sometimes exceeds the value of the entire company: project financing then also becomes a challenge. Hands-on project management, understanding risks and clear communication are the key factors in getting the job done and dealing with changes.

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“We are lucky that we have built up a strong client base – with people who know and trust us – as well as a solid financial position, otherwise such projects would not always be possible.”

And as Shipyard De Hoop approaches its 130th anniversary next year, it is safe to assume there are more challenges – and opportunities – lying in wait. Certainly technical advances will play a key role in design and production. Exciting developments such as 3D printing and welding, as well as assembly robots, will impact the manufacturing side, while an increasing focus on fuel consumption and alternative forms of energy and propulsion

▲ *Shipyard De Hoop has been at Lobith on the Rhine for almost 130 years; a recent contract for six Ice Class tugs, right, includes four ASD push boats and two harbour tugs*



will focus the minds of designers.

In the short term, Janssens cites increasing regulation as a challenge not conducive to Shipyard De Hoop’s boutique business model. “More and more paperwork seems to be needed to build a ship, which may threaten the flexibility and freedom of mind which you need to design and build the next generation’s ships.”

Those vessels will also require skilled labour; not only does the existing De Hoop team need to stay ahead of the technologically-advancing curve but thought must be given to attracting the next generation of shipbuilders. What should anyone considering a career in the industry be ready for? “It is never a dull moment. You have to be very precise in what you do, don’t give up if things are difficult but never break any promise you make. Prepare yourself for a ride: it will be a demanding job, but very adventurous.”

Away from work, that sense of adventure appears to run through the whole Janssens household. Just over a year ago, Patrick’s wife realised a long-held ambition to open a concept store selling clothes, food and beverages and living accessories. “The store is a success, which makes me proud of her.”

The couple’s 13-year-old son is thriving at college and also excels at football as well as enjoying many other sports, while their 10-year-old daughter is already showing signs of creative entrepreneurship as well as playing field hockey.

Helping to coach her hockey team is one of the ways Janssens enjoys life beyond the shipyard, while his own sporting preferences include – inevitably – sailing, along with mountain biking, tennis and skiing. Going to concerts and stand-up comedy shows also help maintain a work-life balance.

The family home is in a small village in the heart of the country, convenient for getting to the yard as well as for Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport – a regular destination for Janssens as the role demands a lot of international travel. On the day *IT&O* spoke to him, he was in the office where the view from his window comprised “a new 135m river cruise vessel, *Amadeus Queen*, on the slipway, as well as two 55m hybrid FSIVs and also a steel section for a tugboat flying through the air” – prompting the important clarification that this last element was being moved by crane.

That proximity to the day-to-day activity in the shipyard more than compensates for the various frustrations and problems that running any business inevitably throws up. Asked what gives him most pleasure in his role, Janssens instantly responds: “The team effort and the fact that the end result is so tangible – a great ship and happy client. I really enjoy joining a sea trial every now and then. Then one can see the result of an extremely wide variety of people with different backgrounds – sometimes different worlds – each bringing their part of the puzzle, and when it comes together they can all be proud.”