



Chief Operating Officer Paul Slater

# Keeping a close watch

*Maritime Security* talks to Paul Slater, COO of WatchStander, as the marketing drive for this anti-piracy device steps up

**N**on-lethal deterrent WatchStander was unveiled in September last year, and this year has seen its move into the market boosted with the appointment of Robert Toney as Chairman and Paul Slater as Chief Operating Officer, joining founder, David Rigsby, and retired US Navy Admiral Mark Fitzgerald on the management team.

WatchStander is a new system that fully automates and integrates the anti-piracy process, from detection to identification to non-lethal deterrent and disruption. The system eliminates the element of surprise and greatly reduces the probability of a successful attack. WatchStander has been

successfully tested on the water and is currently, in the final stages of product development at the Applied Research Laboratory of The Pennsylvania State University.

As Chairman and CEO of First International Corp and a global financial advisor to the maritime and energy industries, Slater's knowledge of the shipping and finance industry will play a strong part in further developing the investor base required to bring WatchStander to market.

He explains that Toney has bought the majority of the company and now owns about 85% of it, along with founder David Rigsby. Toney is the Chairman

of Toney Capital Holdings, a marine related holding company headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and the original investor in WatchStander, providing funds for the software development provided by Applied Research Labs. Toney Capital also owns US-based National Liquidators and the global shipping organisation National Maritime Services.

"Toney brought me in as chief operating officer to put the company into shape and get some more investment capital to finish off the development of the product – and then get out there and market and sell it," Slater explains. This process has already started, he says.

The WatchStander product has been successfully tested over several days on lakes in Virginia with simulated attacks being made on the vessels that formed part of the testing process.

According to Slater: "We are comfortable with that and we are now working with the maritime administration to get it deep-ocean-tuned. We know it all works; it's now a question of tuning it, principally from a location point of view on the ships and getting it on a big ship. We are hoping to get it on one of the very large ro-ros that the Maritime Administration or the Military Sealift Command have and tune it."

The next stage will be finalising the research and development side of the process to be followed by a "much more aggressive marketing programme to get it installed" Slater says. He adds that he has had a lot of discussions with owners and ship managers. "The reception has been extremely good because it provides a significant, non-lethal level of real protection by reason of being able to find potential attacking units at a far longer distance and deal with them with various unpleasant measures that will hopefully persuade them not to come any closer."

Unpleasant measures include a PeakBeam strobe light that exposes potential attackers to the risk of temporary blindness if they continue to approach the vessel. Directional "warbling" loud hailer could be used to emit sounds at decibel levels that would progressively prove intolerable.

The techniques were pioneered by the US Navy through the advance research laboratory in Penn State University. The navy, along with all other elements of the US military, has established a special division that is concentrating on non-lethal deterrents covering a range of areas. "I think we are very lucky to have the exclusive rights to this



licenced to us and patented. It is really up to me and the rest of the team to get people to use this, install it and pay for it.”

Slater has already visited a number of conferences this year with the objective not so much of directly selling the product, but getting reactions to it. These have been extremely good, he says.

Obviously, the product can be marketed as an anti-piracy deterrent. It is essentially an IT product, all the components of which can be bought off the shelf, Slater explains, but the key is bringing them together with a standard radar and a standard radar screen. “All the information that the radar picks up is then completely re-mangled by the black box. “That is where the advantage comes that you can see, identify and track potentially dangerous things at sea, but you can also do it on land,” Slater says.

“I am very fortunate that one of the people who is working with me is Admiral Mark Fitzgerald, a four star admiral in the US Navy. He is tremendously helpful and is somebody who really understands not just piracy, but the protection of assets. Our objective here is to keep these people away.”

While there is another school of thought that advocates shooting the attackers, Slater

describes this as a “Victorian” approach. “I think it is a hazardous route to go down because who is going to make the decision when and where to shoot them?”

Slater says he respects some of the armed guard companies, but says there is no active licencing method and the companies operate at different levels with different price structures. He does not disavow other methods, but “our objectives are completely different. With the sophistication of the black box that has been created, this is a system that learns and memorises things, which is not something that is used very often on ships. We believe that, if this is successful, it will be a turning point in ships’ radar. Ships’ radar is really very unsophisticated.”

He believes that the product will be of assistance in collision avoidance, for example. The system can also be used on land. “We took the view with some conversations with the military that if the system had been on the BP gas plant in Algeria, it would probably have given the plant a couple of hours to do things before the terrorists arrived.”

In the same way, he says, if on a ship with armed guards as watchkeepers, they will be using binoculars and the radar, “but the radar doesn’t

specifically identify anything, and if the rules of engagement, which still haven’t been agreed, are that you have got to identify the pirates and make sure you can be certain they have guns, you can’t do that beyond about 300 metres. You have a situation that by the time you see them, you have about 10 minutes before they arrive. That is not much time to get prepared. What we are doing is pushing this back miles, hoping to give the ship another hour or hour and a half.”

The plan is to market the product not just to shipowners, but offshore rigs and platforms and onshore installations looking out to sea. “The key is the black box, which is a thinking computer that is constantly updated and we will be upgrading it as you would with any other IT product.” It can be tailored, and equipment could be varied from light and sound to other things, either of an observant or deterrent nature.

One issue on ships is where to place the equipment to ensure that the system does not interfere with the existing radar system and the placement of counter measures depending on the size of the ship.

“Our objective is to install some of these systems on a test and buy basis and work with major owners or managers to get feedback from them.”