



# comes full circle

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANÇOIS ERCEAU

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hey're back! While the name Ashtech may sound new to younger folks in the precise community, its corporate predecessors, Ashtech, Thales and

Magellan have long been recognized by the surveying and positioning industries. I first interviewed the folks at Ashtech in 1997, and in 2003 I wrote about Thales Navigation's merging with Magellan. Always positioned at the forefront of technical innovation, venerable equipment such as the Z-12 receiver continue to be used all over the world, having survived several iterations of corporate branding.

Turning back the pages of company history, it's interesting to trace Ashtech's development, which combines the heritage from the original Ashtech Corp., Magellan Systems Corp., and Sercel. Magellan was founded in 1986 and Ashtech shortly after in 1987. Ashtech was the first company to take advantage of the GLONASS constellation in the mid 1990s and has always been at the forefront of GPS technology, beginning with Z-tracking incorporated in the Z-12.

Ashtech and Magellan merged in 1997, forming an important U.S. player in the global GNSS industry. In parallel, Sercel—a



Ashtech Vice President and General Manager François Erceau with ProMark 500.

France-based company that began with radio positioning in the 1970s—launched the first European-developed GPS receiver in 1985. (Sercel also provided the electronics for Wild's DI5 EDM in 1965.) Ashtech introduced the first differential GPS receiver in 1989.

Between 1998 and 2001 the two branches joined as the Thales Group acquired first the Dassault/Sercel Navigation and Positioning division (which had been renamed DSNP in

1996) and then Magellan Corporation, including the Ashtech division. With these acquisitions, Thales Navigation aggregated a large amount of expertise in GPS, navigation, positioning, radio and communications.

Most recently, Thales Navigation was acquired by Shah Capital Partners in 2006, and the professional products portion of the company was then renamed Magellan Professional. I wrote about it in our April 2007 issue. Shah had already

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Ashtech ProMark 500



Ashtech MobileMapper CX



Ashtech MobileMapper 6

acquired the Thales Electronic Solutions (TES) manufacturing group in 2001, which today produces most of the Ashtech GNSS boards and receivers.

I caught up with Ashtech Vice President and General Manager François Erceau after the February 2010 SPAR conference in Houston. He remarked about Shah's understanding of customer needs, R&D and bringing new products to the market. But Erceau freely admitted that Thales had been primarily focused on global consumer sales, and did not put the same attention on professional products.

Development of the Professional Division under Shah has been dramatically accelerating for the past three years, and several new products have been brought to market. It has created BLADE™ technology, which introduces a unique patented method for using multiple GNSS constellations for high-accuracy positioning. It has also introduced the MobileMapper® series of products for GIS and mapping, as well as the ProFlex™ 500 and new ProMark™ series, including the ProMark 500 and ProMark3 RTK. In addition to the manufacturing facility near Rennes and headquarters near Nantes, France, the privately-held corporation has offices in Santa Clara, Moscow, Beijing,

and Singapore and a sales force that spans the globe.

In 2009, the Magellan Consumer Division was sold to MiTAC, a Taiwan-based GNSS consumer products company. Although the deadline for the cessation of the use of the Magellan name wasn't due to occur until 2012, the Magellan Professional Division felt that there was a rising confusion between the consumer side—now with MiTAC—and the professional side, and decided to speed up the name change.

According to Erceau, Ashtech's strength lies in blending GNSS systems. It has constantly upgraded its products and expanded into OEM boards and sensors for the machine control industry, such as the ProFlex Lite single-board and ProFlex Lite Duo dual-board GNSS sensors. Responding to my question about Ashtech only producing entry-level products such as the ProMark, Erceau simply pointed to the ProMark 500, a full-blown, dual-frequency GPS+GLONASS+SBAS

receiver. Product reviews on the ProMark 3, ProMark 3 RTK and ProMark 500 are available on our website at [www.amerisurv.com](http://www.amerisurv.com).

Even though I've been writing about all these companies for the past 13 years, I'll admit that keeping up with "who's on first" has been somewhat confusing. Added to this has been disappointment in seeing a name and capability languish. Suffice it to say, however, that all the pieces seem to finally be in place. Because of the inherited strength in electronics, and manufacturing GNSS receivers for nearly 25 years, Ashtech understands all the various parts that are necessary. The company's pedigree is outstanding and product development is ongoing. In the words of Erceau, "The new Ashtech is a venture for the 21st century, up to the challenges of the new market environment. We are definitely looking ahead." 

Marc Cheves is Editor of the magazine.