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It may sound more like a tale pulled from the script of "Gilligan's Island," but for one local contractor, a real-life scenario of being stuck on a small piece of land surrounded by ocean was anything but imaginary. How that experience shaped the life and business of Pete Spencer is just as real.

Spencer, 54, is the owner and president of **Audio Associates**, an electrical subcontractor based in La Mesa. He began the company in the early 1980s, but a situation from years earlier while Spencer was in the U.S.



Coast Guard would come to define how his business operates today. That situation revealed the problem-solver within him.

"People come to me with problems, on our own team, and I say, 'Well, let's play the what-if game,'" Spencer said. "Let's not talk about money. The world is ours. We can do whatever we want. What if we had every means at our disposal to fix this problem? What can we do?' And we start brainstorming."

That's today. Back then, it was thousands of miles from the mainland United States and 6,000 from Japan where Spencer's brainstorming literally saved the day when he was stationed abroad in 1976. With no radio or telephone and on a small island 60 miles from Midway, he was part of a team designated to send signals to planes and ships - what he

refers to as the "early version of GPS." A transformer broke on one of the transmitters used to send the signals out, leaving Spencer and the rest of the crew without communication to the outside world.

Spencer figured out how to rig up a temporary transformer by wrapping wires and other on-hand material around the outside of the broken unit. His idea worked and brought the system back online. When the new custom parts came in some time later to appropriately fix the unit, the commander, Spencer recalled, asked to view the signal of the transformer they had built.

"I said, 'Sir, you flew in on it,'" Spencer said. "He couldn't believe it."

Insisting that there's a solution to virtually any technical situation that comes up in any job, Spencer recalled that storybook-type experience in the South Pacific as the most difficult of such challenges he's ever faced. It's that sort of creativity he tries to bring to his work today, and it's landed him some big projects over the years.

Spencer led the way several years ago in bringing the first commercial audio system to the now-decommissioned USS Constellation, starting with the replacement of a \$50,000 amplifier with his \$7,000 version. Currently, Spencer's list of projects includes the paging system at Orange County's John Wayne Airport, work on a new turtle exhibit at SeaWorld and a large contract with the San Diego Unified School District to create "smart" classrooms.

Audio Associates also recently completed more than \$1 million of work building a TV studio at San Diego High School and is about to build a second one at another high school. To say Spencer specializes in audio and video might not mean much to those who haven't seen what he does. If it's got to do with AV, Spencer said, he can do it. But he prefers to target the big jobs -- the complex jobs that require thought.

"Everybody says they do AV, but they can mean anything from hooking up a home entertainment system to doing something as big as Petco Park," Spencer said. "We tend to gravitate toward the larger projects -- the more sophisticated systems."

And yes, projects like Petco Park are on Spencer's résumé, as are others like large-scale improvements at the Convention Center and the expansion of Qualcomm Stadium more than a decade ago. Resting in the



company's La Mesa warehouse are giant wooden spools that once held wire used to replace Qualcomm's gutted electrical infrastructure. It's no accident they're still there. To Spencer, they're more than just hunks of wood, but rather a reminder of some of his, literally, biggest accomplishments.

"Really, it takes someone with a lot of experience reading blueprints and being very, very meticulous," Spencer said about being successful in landing the types of jobs he has.

While baseball fans are waiting in line for food between innings at Padres home games, it's Spencer's work at Petco Park that keeps the game in sight. There, Audio Associates installed all the speakers, media systems and TVs. Several 100-pound speakers needed to be moved 2 inches after their placement because the sightlines obscured some of the advertisement, illustrating just how much attention to detail matters in the industry.

With his dog, an American Eskimo named Jessie, by his side, Spencer said he puts in around 12 hours per day at the office. It's been nearly three decades of meticulousness for Spencer now, and that's an impression that's kept him busy.

The company, Spencer said, has average annual billings near \$5 million. As of the beginning of this year, Audio Associates had its biggest backlog of work in company history. Lower margins because of the down economy may be the only thing keeping it from being his most profitable year.

But Spencer's reputation around town may go beyond just that of an experienced contractor that knows how to tackle tough jobs. Apparently, his hairstyle -- which leaves his whiting hair standing on end -- mixed with his creative thought, has brought another impression to mind for at least a few people he's come across: Einstein, as in Albert. It's a comparison. Spencer isn't sure lives up to its claims. But he didn't mind acknowledging, albeit with a laugh, he's heard it a few times before.

"I don't know if it's justified, but a lot of people have said that and I do a lot of out-of-the-box thinking -- there's no such thing as 'No' in my vocabulary," Spencer said.