

AT THE FOREFRONT

MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, BLANCHARD'S HAULAGE EMBRACED A BURGEONING PERFORMANCE BASED STANDARDS SCHEME TO FIND AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION TO A DIMENSIONAL TRANSPORT DILEMMA. THE END RESULT IS A FLEET OF DISTINCTIVE 8X4 VOLVO CRANE TRUCKS THAT HAVE PROVIDED A CRITICAL SOLUTION FOR A MAJOR CUSTOMER WHILE STILL DELIVERING MUCH NEEDED VERSATILITY.

For the best part of 45 years Blanchard's Haulage, based in Grafton in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, has partnered with Volvo Trucks Australia to obtain efficiencies and innovations in performance as it goes about delivering the best solutions for clients in infrastructure and the pole transport industry. Robert Blanchard, the Executive Officer of Blanchard's Haulage, considers it a ground breaking business – and with good reason. Although the association

with Volvo can be traced back to 1972 when the company purchased its first truck from the commercial vehicle manufacturer, it has consistently looked to adopt new technologies including the latest safety suites offered in the 1990s to global positioning systems (GPS) in the mid-2000s, and, during the same era, the then nascent Performance-Based- Standards (PBS). Over a two-year journey the company, in collaboration with some of its most trusted industry partners, would pioneer,

through an involved process of repeat designs and testing, an innovative solution of engineering that would change the game for many. Blanchard's Haulage, according to Robert, was required to rethink its operations delivering power poles, which, as it so happened in 2007, was one of the major revenue streams of the business. "Our major customer, Koppers Wood Products, was quoting on a contract and in the contract it was stipulated that the receiver of the goods, Essential Energy,

wanted the contractor to ensure they were responsible for unloading the power poles into the yards," he recalls. "So what that meant was we had to come up with a solution and the solution that was most favourable was the introduction of a specialised log handling crane mounted on the back of a prime mover." It was unfeasible, says Robert, to move cranes into the yards, as it would require an additional operator for the machinery and a Dogman. Securing the slings beneath the power poles presented another safety issue and some of the delivery locations were in remote areas making it difficult to deliver an external crane on time. Mounting a crane to a single trailer combination soon became the goal, as it would limit the staff present and the workers in the yard could go about their jobs without interruption. Borrowing an idea they had seen in operation by the Southeast Queensland Electricity Board, in which a crane with a log grab had been mounted on a 6x4 prime mover, Robert and his team set about tackling the challenge of load restrictions given his trucks were going to push the envelope on gross concessional mass limits over long haul distances.

An Epsilon 180z crane, recommended by a trusted industry partner, Marc Pisani of Palfinger, was eventually agreed upon for the job. The next task was to find a manufacturer. Volvo Trucks Australia was, Robert recalls, the first point of contact. There were three main requirements: the prime mover would need to provide 1000 litres of fuel, feature a sleeper cab and have twin steer, as the crane load was too heavy for a 6x4. After some discussions with its partners Jason Mann and Michael Parker at Southside Truck Centre, formerly Volvo Commercial Vehicles in Coffs Harbour, Robert says they took the plan to Volvo application engineer, Tony Brown in Wacol, Queensland. "He did some drawings and after some back and forth, came back to us and said it's not going to work," recalls Robert. "You see we were limited by 19 metres overall length. Putting a twin steer into a 45 foot trailer, a standard trailer, meant we were too long." The challenge was to bring the equipment under size with the three stipulated requirements. In the mean time Tony was putting drawings together and digesting, at least conceptually, the various combinations to see if it could be installed

given the 'z' style crane needed to be fitted next to the chassis behind the right hand side bogey wheel and the fuel tank. Not soon after, Robert contacted the National Transport Commission (NTC). At the time prime movers on the east coast of Australia were limited to 42.5 tonnes gross mass. After factoring in the crane dimensions they would be down to 17.5 tonnes payload, a reduction of over 30 per cent. Speaking with Marcus Coleman at the NTC, Robert learned that the Council of Australian Governments had agreed, in principle, to increase the mass on twin steer vehicles but that in the mean time he would have to apply for a Level 1 general access approval from Performance-Based-Standards (PBS). "That would give us up to 20 metres overall length as a general access vehicle," says Robert. "All of the sudden the penny dropped that we could go back to Volvo and Tony Brown and say look, 'this isn't such a big issue now to be slightly longer than 19 metres because we're allowed up to 20 metres overall length under the PBS scheme.'" Tony, at the urging of Robert, completed more diagrams of the proposed twin steer Volvo prime mover. At 19.052 metres it

Epsilon 180z crane with log grab.





was decided not to fit a bullbar so as not to increase the overall length any further. They were going with the bumper straight from the factory. Once the eventual truck was made to specification with the team at Wacol, Blanchard's Haulage was able to move the turntable back 52mm to make it exactly 19 metres according to Robert. Adhering to the 19-metre total combination length provided Blanchard's Haulage with versatility, not only with back loading but also with trailing equipment. Setting the prime movers up to fit within the 19-metre envelope enabled all trailers within the fleet, even those not afforded PBS approval, to be swapped without sacrificing productivity. The company, as a result, would maintain the productivity of PBS with the versatility of General Access. "Back in 2008 PBS was very new to the industry. The project provided us all with more than a few challenges but from our perspective we had to come up with a solution," Robert says. "With the VCV people at Coffs Harbour, who did everything they could to make it come to fruition, we got the crane fitted and the vehicle we wanted."

Robert's brothers Michael, Operations Manager, and Chris Blanchard consulted on the technical and dimensional aspects of the project, proving pivotal in helping achieve the desired results. It was Chris who assumed responsibility for driving and operating the first of the new units, a FM13 480hp, as part of prioritising customer satisfaction during the infancy of the service.

Blanchard's Haulage then commenced the process of demonstrating what it could do for Essential Energy. It was a major moment in the history of the company. The operation has since expanded to five vehicles all of which are unloading power poles across the NSW, Victoria and Southern Queensland regions, allowing the business to add customers through the successful new style of loading.

"Unlike a normal crane, the operator of the truck also controls the on-board specialised log handling crane. Because it has a grab there's no chains or slings involved. It's a very simple, efficient process

that is safe and productive."

As of 1 July this year the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator approved an increase of the operational mass limits for twin steer prime movers from 42.5 to 46.5 tonnes in the eastern States. In that regard, Blanchard's Haulage has been 10 years ahead of their time.

"Under PBS Level 1 we are allowed to go to 48.5 tonnes overall gross mass whereas today's PBS permits 47.5 tonnes under concessional mass limits so we gained an extra tonne by sticking with our PBS approvals. That's quite a big efficiency gain there."

Of course the initial plan was to move

a load of power poles long distance to locations such as Melbourne and come home with a return load that was profitable on a viable 45 foot semi-trailer. The PBS scheme helped facilitate this according to Robert. If they had have been limited to 17.5 tonnes, under the initial concessional rating, they would have been forced to drive back empty – not ever an option. From late in 2009 until the first vehicle approved for operation, Volvo Trucks Australia, Robert explains, were exemplary during the entire process.

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truck manufacturers are able to do that," he says. "Most will tell you, 'this is the truck made in Europe or the States and this is the truck you need to have whether it fits your standards or not.' So it gave us a big increase in productivity." Indeed the 7.5 tonnes of increased volume was tantamount to seven or eight power poles. Poles range from six metres in length to 23 metres. Blanchard's Haulage now runs five PBS approved twin steer prime movers with cranes and 15 PBS certified trailers. The company has built its business strictly on single trailers, as the average measurement for a pole is 11.0 metres, making it too long to utilise a front trailer on a B-double. According to Robert his operations have been required to use extendable trailers for power poles longer than 14 metres, which involves a lengthy process of gaining permission to exceed the authorised length of 20 metres with the same mass allowed on their Level 1 PBS unit. NSW Roads and Maritime Services issued Blanchard's Haulage a Class 3 permit. "That allowed us to operate those vehicles up to 25 metres long at the PBS approved

mass of 48.5 tonnes in NSW," he says. "Our PBS is a little different to a lot of other PBS applications running out there because we are a standard vehicle and up until 1 July this year the only way we could have increased mass was via PBS." At the moment the company is trialling a new system with forward facing and rear facing cameras to improve the overall safety of the drivers. Robert confirms Blanchard's Haulage recently took delivery of an FH Globetrotter fitted out with a microwave, the first to be wheeled out from the Wacol factory. He expects it will help with driver health in allowing for more regular meals, another entitlement deprived of most truck drivers over the years. Safety and driver wellbeing is a high priority for Blanchard's. Company policy dictates that no trucks are on the road after midnight explains Robert. "We get them to pull up and rest during what is statistically the most dangerous time of night to be driving and ensure that they are well rested for the day ahead," he says. The company has also adopted a

temporary speed limiter, which is installed from the factory, as part of its voracious appetite for improving safety. It allows the driver to set a speed limit while on the move. Robert says it can assist drivers negotiating long stretches slowed by road works. In 2009 PBS offered Blanchard's Haulage an immediate, less expensive and safer solution to what it regarded as the alternative solution, a solution that would make conditions less than ideal for its operators and customers. "PBS allowed us to provide a solution for our customer and in turn it provided a solution for their customer. It certainly gave us an opportunity to perform the task seamlessly," Robert says. "There were costs, time and money involved in the process of getting approval. Now you no longer have to wait for a certified engineer to inspect your vehicle. Volvo provides us with a letter of certification and paperwork goes back to the PBS panel at the NHVR and it is approved and amended. It's a very quick turnaround getting a vehicle added to our current PBS approval process." PM