



Raising the bar

Keeping ahead of compliance and regulation changes is a matter of course for Herb Blanchard Haulage, where everything is done to promote safety for drivers and all road users and all avenues taken to maintain high standards.

Herb Blanchard Haulage is based in Grafton in the Clarence Valley on the New South Wales north coast, the company operating a diverse range of services across the eastern states with a fleet of 19 prime movers, a variety of trailing equipment and six rigid trucks. The company commenced business in 1955 when the late Herb and Noreen Blanchard started with one rigid truck carrying fish from the Co-operative at Maclean to Brisbane Markets. In those days, when transport refrigeration equipment was unheard of, it was a matter of packing fish into tubs with ice

before tarping the load and driving up the highway. In the 1960s, Herb Blanchard became an operator ahead of his time when an AEC Mandator was put into service, complete with a sleeper cab and, somewhat unusual at the time, a diesel fuel tank installed under the bunk to extend its operating range. Cartage at the time was supplies back to Grafton Brewery, drums of bitumen from Lismore and supplies for the Peter's Ice-Cream factory in Grafton, the site now occupied by Herb Blanchard Haulage since 1994. The AEC gave way to an International Loadstar, although the flat top trailer was retained, and a timber jinker bought, with Herb carting poles out of the bush

to Hickson's Timber Mill in Grafton (later to become Koppers Logs, which still has strong ties with the family haulage company). In late 1969, he began transporting treated poles to western New South Wales and Landsborough in Queensland with a mate by the name of David Rook assisting in this transport task. "The truck used to travel over Mt Lindsay to Queensland. My father was once asked at the border gate if he had two trucks, due to the fact there was constant movement over the mountain," says Robert Blanchard who is today Chief Executive Officer of Herb Blanchard Haulage. Today, they wouldn't bat an eyelid, but in the late 1960s a load a day, six or seven days a week, with two drivers was both

Michael, Robert and Christopher Blanchard do their utmost to have everything by the book to promote safety across their truck operations.

unusual and a sign of things to come! The Inter worked hard until 1972 when Herb bought his first Volvo, a white N Series, from Brown & Hurley in Kyogle, at the time a dealer for the Swedish make. The firm's long association with the Volvo product was cemented with the white truck traded for a red N12 in 1976. By 1980 and the launch of the Volvo F Series, the company had expanded. The growing Blanchard family, particularly sons Robert and Michael, had developed an interest in the business and Herb instilled into them the creed that

things had to be done correctly with no half measures. This not only covered maintenance, but also all dealings with customers and regulatory requirements for correct management practices. "Our father always fixed things properly – fixed once and fixed for good – which meant less downtime and unequalled reliability. He always impressed on us that all things in truck operation were to be handled in the right manner, including actions on the road. That is something still firmly in place today," Robert points out. "It is a part of our culture and if an issue

arises it is attended to immediately." After Herb invested in an F12 Volvo, Michael, who had been working in Sydney as an apprentice electrician, returned to Grafton to drive the N12. He worked with his father until the unthinkable happened.

The next generation

It was 1984 when Herb passed away, a blow to the family and its growing business, but Michael and Robert took over the reins to continue their father's dream. That same year Volvo released its FH trucks. The brothers immediately

bought one, expanding the fleet to three, as they looked to diversify and further expand the business in the growing Clarence Valley and Coffs Harbour coast region. That year the company bought the Grafton Peter's Ice-Cream factory in Fry Street, establishing its operations from a site that would allow expansion and storage facilities for a growing customer base. A decision was made in 1987 to buy Kelsall's Bricks, the year two more family members came on board, sister Donna Greenhalgh and brother Chris, a motor mechanic. The family involvement and

diversification gave new impetus to Blanchards, plus the acquisition provided return loading from Brisbane to Grafton, minimising empty running. This diversification continued in 1993 with the purchase of Yamba Brick Supplies, while the family set about establishing an unequalled regard for not only its client base, but what Robert Blanchard says is its most important asset – people. "Our drivers are very valuable to us and very early we recognised the fact they deserve a decent way of life, so we developed a culture that would provide a safer and more enjoyable workplace. For

example, we aim to have all of our trucks off the road between the hours of 11pm and 6am as we regard that period to be most fatiguing for drivers," Robert says. "Our father always insisted that if you were tired you pulled up and rested, simple, that no freight was ever so urgent you had to push on. The best manager of fatigue is the driver. It is our philosophy that everybody working for us must do everything right and not break the law and it has worked. "If a driver needs rest and that results in the load running late, it is easy to ring the customer and explain the reason for the arrival time. I have rarely had a customer



Herb Blanchard Haulage has found 19-metre B-Doubles allowing general access fit better into freight requirements than larger combinations.

The company has had an association with the Volvo product since Herb Blanchard put an N Series into service in 1972.

complain that the truck would be later than estimated because, I am happy to say, they know we do things the right way resulting in the loads arriving safe. You form strong relationships with your customers and they know what you do and how you do it," he adds.

The company was one of the first to install satellite tracking into its vehicles and it quickly became an extremely handy tool for both the firm and its customers. Now Robert comments he does not know what they would do without it.

"GPS has been a real boost for us and there were absolutely no driver issues when they were first introduced. One of the best things was if we needed to find out when a truck would arrive at its destination it was a matter of ringing the driver, but now if he is resting we do not have to make a call and disturb him, we simply look at the screen.

"It can also be used to manage driver fatigue if it is necessary. If a driver is in breach of driving hours, an email is sent automatically when time spent driving is one minute past the five-hour period," he says.

Strength through flexibility

Innovation is a hallmark of the company, inspired by Michael Blanchard. With cartage of poles being a major earner, its flat top trailers used to frequently endure spells of empty running. Michael quickly looked for an alternative that would provide increased efficiencies and productivity.

He came up with an idea that few considered possible: a curtainsider body that would tilt sideways, allowing the poles to be loaded by forklift and restrained, with the body then tilting back into position and closed with a normal buckle and strap operation. Known as the Tiltliner, there are now three in the Blanchard fleet.

"This has been incredibly successful," says Michael. "It gives enormous flexibility and allows us to load and unload the poles and return with normal general freight in a seamless operation. It has always been a problem fitting out a flat top with all of the equipment needed to carry general on the return leg, including tarps, so it is

very much self-contained and offers quick turnaround time while meeting the needs of our customers," he says.

The Tiltliner has been effective in promoting valued relationships with customers, forming partnerships with firms as they grow together with Herb Blanchard Haulage. In fact, an understanding of the importance of technology has and continues to form a large part of the company's management of operations, with all new ideas very much investigated and applied where suited.

"We employ technology to look after not only our on-road operations, but our staff as well, and that is another part of our culture. If you look after your staff, they look after you and I am happy to say most of our people have been with us long term," Robert says.

Looking at his computer he reveals one driver has been with the company for nearly 21 years, with several more up to as much as 18 years.

Training is an ongoing presence at Blanchard and the company is committed to keeping well ahead of mandatory requirements in fatigue and OH&S, in fact all areas of regulation and compliance. The firm was a pilot operator in the National Transport Insurance System of Compliance and Training Modules, for example, and has Mass Management, Maintenance Management and Fatigue Management accreditation. When it comes to the new fatigue regulations coming into force on September 29 this year Herb Blanchard Haulage is well advanced and ready to go with Advanced Fatigue Management (AFM).

"More than half of the drivers have completed the course and reaction has been good with them embracing the change. We try to keep well ahead of change and always ahead of the need to do things, always looking forward," Robert remarks.

A recent independent audit of the company awarded 94 per cent compliance in all areas, well ahead of most in the industry, but the Blanchard brothers say they are not satisfied with that result and will strive for improvement.

Chain of Responsibility compliance is

high on the priority list, as it will be for all operators under new regulations, however at Blanchards there have been procedures in place for some time with driver scheduling, including driving and rest times calculated on all runs.

"If a driver runs from Grafton to Melbourne, for example, our system calculates a distance of 1,470 kilometres requiring 17.3 hours of driving. The system gives a better fatigue management plan by calculating when and where rest breaks should be taken. It identifies when a driver would have to leave to arrive at a predetermined time, doing the run legally," Robert explains.

"If we need to get a truck out earlier to accomplish this, we talk to the customer and explain what is involved. This works well because they have an understanding of the task, plus they too can comply with COR. It allows both us and the customer to better manage our businesses.

"Because we cover regional and metro New South Wales, the system covers a host of destinations and we have pages of detail on runs, from departure to arrival." Blanchard's equipment includes standard flat tops, extendibles, curtainsiders, dropdecks, a prairie wagon, 19-metre B-Doubles and a convertible in its diverse operation. It has one 25-metre B-Double, but Robert points out this combination doesn't suit the nature of most freight carried.

"The two 19-metre B-Doubles work well for us due to general access, but the 25-metre combination is too restrictive. We have not had the need to venture into larger B-Double units and at this point in time I don't see that changing," he comments.

A sea change

The Clarence Valley and Coffs Harbour region is growing, mostly due to people undergoing a sea change and moving north from Sydney, and Herb Blanchard Haulage is playing a vital role in meeting the transport needs of the community and industry. The company's customer base is constantly growing in line with the population shift and plans for the future are always in place.

"When opportunities arise we consider



"When opportunities arise we consider the benefits."

the benefits. We put together rules and regulations in our business and sometimes we need to bring in outside consultants to help with management.

"I am a member of Family Business Australia, an association that deals with family businesses only, which has been invaluable. It works the same as any other business consultancy, with the difference that it is your business you are dealing with," Robert says.

He also recognises the role suppliers play in the company and the importance of building strong relationships.

"Suppliers are extremely important because we are all in the industry together, for example Translogix has worked with us since 1999 to develop better systems for us. People like Dick Kyle have done much for our business in fatigue management and when it comes to costings, Rick Copping had a model all could learn from. "It is a matter of looking at what can help you best in your business and utilising

the information properly and applying it where needed," he smiles.

Herb Blanchard Haulage is a well respected company on the road, mostly attributable to its actions in achieving high compliance. Even enforcement officers recognise the lengths the company goes to in operating legally and, importantly, safely. To demonstrate, Robert cites a recent random drug and alcohol test carried out at the Grafton depot.

"I pulled a snap test that involved 33 of the 38 people here, including ourselves, and I am pleased to say everybody returned a zero reading. The five people not included were away at the time but I'm sure there would be no problem with anybody and I'm proud of that."

"The other day I was in a shop when a person approached me after seeing the company name on my shirt to congratulate me on the actions of one of our drivers. Apparently he had a youngster in the car learning to drive and said a

Blanchard truck travelling behind his car had stayed a fair way back until it could overtake on a long stretch of road, making it more comfortable for the learner.

"It is this type of comment that makes you feel good and realise you are doing something right. We have a good crew and one of our drivers, Des Bailey, was awarded NatRoad National Professional Driver of the Year in 2004 and Australian Trucking Association Professional Driver of the Year in 2005," Robert says proudly.

Robert is a member of the NatRoad board and points out all operators should be a member of an association, enabling them to have their say on industry issues and work together for the betterment of road transport.

Blanchard family members are fulfilling their father's dream to be at the forefront of road transport and recognised as leaders in service with safety. Robert says as CEO he is proud to be at the helm.