

# HIGHWAY TO HEAVY

Lack of availability of a previously preferred brand for a particular application led Russell Transport to consider DAF prime movers.



A new DAF CF450 in Yatala bound for Russell Transport.



Aerial view over Eagle Farm where Russell Transport's main depot is located.



For 97 years Russell Transport has been a family run business, having commenced operations in 1925 as RB Russell Transport. Now in the hands of the third generation of Roy Bayley Russell's descendants, the enterprise has expanded and diversified to become a leading provider of transport solutions including oversize and over mass heavy haulage, third party logistics and the Metro-Lift crane hire operation. Service is a key part of the culture in the overall business, which is divided into two divisions, one which encompasses industrial resource services including heavy haulage, lift and lock and lift and shift type operations, including lifting equipment, crane dry hire, terminal services, general transport, and specialised transport. The heavy haulage fleet is capable of handling loads up to 200 tonnes and has earned a reputation for successfully handling tricky loads ranging from locomotives to helicopters. The other side of business involves contract distribution. "We class it as a cookie cutter," says Russell Transport Director Ken Russell. "It's the same offering each day with a

base fleet performing a similar process with the same products to destinations within a geographical area so we know where each vehicle will be operating." If there is work which involves a longer distance away from the operational depots the base fleet can be supplemented with vehicles from other parts of the Russell business to perform the long-distance task. In this highly competitive contract distribution operation Ken looks for economical and reliable vehicles which are also driver friendly. "We're in stop-start traffic conditions and tight environments so the vision from the cab is important, and so is matching the truck to the application," he says. With its diverse operations, Russell Transport runs a variety of prime movers from brands such as Isuzu, Mack and Kenworth. "We run some big horsepower Cummins engines in many parts of the overall business where they match the applications such as A-doubles, roadtrains, and heavy haulage," Ken explains. In addition to being an approved AIS

inspection station, the workshop at the Eagle Farm head office has been the setting for a number of in-house engineering solutions to the emerging needs and changing demands of the company's operations. Russell Transport employs approved personnel for modification and alteration work to ensure compliance with the Queensland Vehicle Standards and Safety Regulations. "We've turned single drive prime movers into bogie drive body trucks, and four or five times we've taken out manual transmissions and fitted Autoshifts into different vehicles," says Ken. "I bought two brand new Isuzu Giga prime movers and we put X12 Cummins engines in them. One has been on the road for about a year doing container work at the Port of Brisbane and I think we've got a world first – an Isuzu Giga with an X12 and an 18-speed Autoshift." Isuzu's decision to delete prime movers from its current available range meant Ken had to look at alternatives to service a particular contract the company had secured. "I never place an order until I have actually signed the contract with my

customer," he says. "When you pick up 30 trucks' worth of work in three months, you're going to have a challenge to meet the additional demand. I was speaking about Kenworths with the guys at Brown and Hurley at Yatala, and they said we should really look at the DAF product. I've had some reliability issues with European trucks in the past and we've always mainly had American or Japanese trucks." Looking through fresh eyes has led to 15 DAF CF prime movers being added to the Russell Transport fleet. Eight DAF CF450s are now in Southeast Queensland mainly transporting 40 feet lengths of 'I bar' steel from an intermodal rail terminal and doing local deliveries of steel building products to construction sites in and around Brisbane. Seven of the DAF CF540 models are based in Adelaide performing deliveries of coil steel. "We think we have got the application right," says Ken. "It's all on bitumen and it's 50,000 kilometres per year type of work." The DAFs commenced work in December 2021 and to date the team



The new DAF CFs are Euro 6 rated.

at Russell Transport have not fielded a complaint about any of the 15 trucks. "After seven or eight months of operation not to have people whinging is a very good testament to the product," Ken says. "When the DAFs arrived we had some of our people actually say these are the best trucks they had ever driven due to factors like comfort and vision." The DAFs are pulling single trailers and performing a single drop so at least half of the time they're towing empty trailers. Ken is convinced the PACCAR MX 11-litre engines are a good balance of economy yet still have enough power to

do the job safely and efficiently, which matches the requirements in this type of urban distribution application. "If the Japanese trucks had been available I probably would not have looked at the DAF product," says Ken, "Yet I've now become a loyal user of DAF in this application because they had the product there and they've supported it well." As the trucks are spread across two states, contract preventative maintenance programs apply to all of the 15 CF450s as well as six Kenworth T410s. "We want that type of support," says Ken. "We've done it with other European





The DAF CF450s are operating around Brisbane moving 'I bar' steel.

products in the fleet and that takes some of the pressure off us as well in our own workshop."

Ken and his managers are very methodical when costing jobs, and take what he calls an "accountant's view" on factors such as maintenance costs, to the point of conducting a detailed comparison of repair and maintenance costs of a number of European trucks in the fleet versus fixed contract arrangements.

"Over five years in 80 per cent of cases we would have spent more than what the contract cost," Ken explains. "Some of us were against the idea of paying up front and wanted to get the lowest cost over the life of the truck and pay for repairs as they happened, but the other side is knowing your cost up front, budgeting for it and you've protected yourself."

At first, as Ken observes, it can be a bitter pill to swallow as it still needs to be

factored into the cash flow.

"Once you get your mindset right it's a steady cost, not peaks and troughs over the next four or five years," he explains.

"Without a service and maintenance contract you mightn't actually pay anything for three years but you don't want to spend that money because you're still going to need it in years four or five."

Russell Transport's almost 100 year history in the hands of the same family (Ken's dad Phil and sister Julie are also directors and well known and respected in the industry) provides some unique perspectives to current operations and challenges. Russell Transport was prepared to investigate alternatives when it came to obtaining trucks such as the DAFs to fulfil the needs of a specific application, and that same preparedness to consider the best way of handling particular circumstances extends to the industry's well-documented shortage of

skilled operators.

"What's changed in our industry is you had to wait for someone to leave or retire until you stepped up into the next vehicle," says Ken. "We used to put a new person in the smallest truck and by the time they hopped into a 'big banger' they had performed every type of task along the way, and I guess they were a more rounded operator. We now find people can be very narrow in their skillset and in many cases that's fine, because all they have to do is pull buckles and open a curtain."

For almost 100 years Russell Transport has provided transport solutions across a broad spectrum of sectors which benefit their clients and their clients' customers. Winning the 2021 Primary Connect Small Carrier of the Year is just one of many indications that the team doesn't merely pay lip service to their "Service You Can Depend Upon" statement, they embrace it and deliver upon it. 