

FOR BERT AND BEYOND

Lilburn Transport is a rural trucking company founded on the principles of hard work, service, and great relationships. Robbie and Niketa Lilburn are the third generation to head the central North Island trucking business, and their latest purchase shines a light on their intentions for the future.

■ Story by Dave McCoid ■ Photos and video by Gavin Myers and Dave McCoid



Arnold Rueben 1957 – 2020

This cover story is dedicated to the memory of Arnold Reuben. A loyal Lilburn man of 35 years' service, Arnold was known not just for his ability but his willingness to pass on the skills of his craft to those willing to learn. "He was one of my best mates. We had something different, me and Arnie." – Adrian Takiwa.



PART ONE

"I'm the seventh Robert Lilburn, I think," says Robbie Lilburn as he ticks off past generations in his head. "But in terms of the business today, you'd go back three, I guess."

"Oh hell, okay," I reply. "That's real cool. I love that generational stuff."

"Yeah, so there's Bob, my granddad, Bobby – that's dad, – me, Robbie, and our son Rob looks like being four, he's absolutely into it. The other kids – Caelen, Chelsea, and Jack – are too. They all 'get' it and understand it, what it provides and that. But Rob and Adrian's son Joey, they're best mates and both mad about the trucks."

"So, that puts the heat on your kids," I laugh. "I mean, you've already taken Bob, Bobby, Robbie, and Rob... they might have to use Bert?"

Robbie and his wife Niketa erupt into laughter. "Bert! That's it. Someone's going to have to have a Bert!" says Niketa.

I'm sitting with Lilburn Transport owners and

directors Robbie and Niketa Lilburn in the modest yet immaculate office, smoko room, and amenities building at Lilburn Transport's home in the small town of Raetihi on the North Island's volcanic plateau. It's a glorious day, and while youngest son Jack and his older sister Chelsea run around, full of the beans of life, we sit and chat, surrounded by framed pictures and mementoes in the company Robbie and Niketa are immensely proud of and totally invested in.

The southwestern side of the plateau is Lilburn Transport's 'backyard', and it's as tough an environment as you'll find in the North Island. The weather conditions are rarely benign, antagonised by Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu constantly playing their part in stirring the metrological melting pot. In addition, Lilburn's is a rural carrying business based around the ultra-versatile drop-sider truck and trailer configuration. That means the work is hard, and the skill level required is high.

Far higher than 90% of New Zealanders could fathom.

Then there's the issue of isolation. Yes, if you're living in Haast, you might well laugh, but think about it. If you have a small truck fleet in Raetihi, your nearest service agent of any size and capacity is Hamilton, Taupo, Palmerston North, or through the Parapararas to Whanganui.

"We do a lot here ourselves," says Robbie. "We have a good workshop, but anything big has to be worked into the circuits."

Yet, for all the obvious and constant challenges, 38-year-old Robbie Lilburn's full-barrelled laugh is as cheerful, honest, and cynicism-free as you'll ever enjoy. It's the laugh of a happy bloke who appears to have written the book on humility – ever grateful, always thankful. Niketa is no different – minus the booming laugh, of course. In fact, we soon learned that the air and tenor of our conversation perfectly reflected everyone who provides Lilburn Transport's inner soul and resilience.

What drew us here was

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1) The Commer TS3 with a proud and very young Bobby Lilburn standing beside it. 2) A Mitsi leaving a farm with a load of wool. You can bet there wasn't a set of cat-claws for that one! 3) The Mitsubishi Shogun Twin Turbo was a standout model in the Lilburn business. Photo: Rob van der Hoek. 4 & 5) Mitsubishis were the mainstay trucks in the fleet through the 1980s, 1990s, and most of the new century's first decade.

a truck that's turning heads wherever it's seen – fleet No.22, a gleaming new Kenworth K200 and MD Engineering drop-sider combo. Its driver, Adrian Takiwa, says plainly: "I left Barrett & Taura and went to Lilburn because Robbie did. He was my boss at the time, and he left to work solely on the family business. He's just a top bloke, and they're an amazing family. When you work at Lilburn Transport, you're part of the family. You're truly valued."

Farm it and they will come

The Lilburn Transport story starts down on the farm with Robbie's late granddad Bob Lilburn. Bob was from farming stock, his parents owned a 4856 hectare (12,000 acre)

sheep and beef farm on the Rangitaiki, roughly opposite Lochinver Station. In time, Rangitaiki was joined by two other holdings leased from Atihau Corporation, a 99-year lease on a block along the Parapara Road south of Raetihi, and another between Tohunga Junction (SH4 and 49) and Ohakune.

Tracing the bloodline of the Lilburn 'roll your sleeves up and get stuck in' work ethic is not hard at all. In 1959, aged 24, young Bob Lilburn found himself in charge of the family's significant farming business portfolio following his father's death. In terms of challenge, they certainly don't come any bigger. Below him in age were four siblings, the youngest of whom was 10; yet get stuck in is what he and his next eldest brother,

Stuart, did. Just how much 'can-do' these young blokes had coursing through their veins cannot be understated. Not only did they develop the Rangitaiki Farm from scrub to grasslands – a huge job – they also constructed their own power generation and supply on the Rangitaiki farm. They fared well. But servicing the farms' transport needs when 180km separated the farthest two holdings was an ongoing problem. Over time, the frustration got too much, and they started looking into taking care of the business' trucking needs themselves.

Having arrived on the scene in 1958 Bob's son Bobby Lilburn was more into things that burned petrol and diesel than grass and hay, taking far more of a shine to the

machinery side of farming. When the idea of owning trucks was mooted, it ticked many boxes for him.

"Dad was pretty much encouraged to leave Feilding Ag by the teachers," laughs Robbie. "He came straight home and began working on the farm, getting into the machines and then trucks as soon as he could."

Bobby got his HT when he was 17. Bob wrote a letter to the MOT explaining that he needed his HT because of location, and it was granted.

As with so many transports of the time, the first truck to fly the Lilburn flag on the farm was a TS3 Commer 4x2 complete with two-axle trailer, arriving about 1965. The first deployment was carting stock food from Ohakune back to Rangitaiki, followed soon after

by stock cartage. Like many TS3s of the era, when the famous 'Knocker' motor/anti-fatigue device gave up the ghost, it was repowered with a V8 Perkins.

As is often the case, the act of solving your own transport problems soon gets noticed, and it wasn't long before Lilburns began fielding calls from potential contract cartage customers.

But these were pre-deregulation days, which meant carting your own needs was one thing, contract cartage, on the other hand, was a whole different ball game. Undeterred by barriers to opportunity, the Lilburns purchased Kakatahi Transport in the mid-1970s. The wee transport company was based in the rural area of the same name near the junction of Fields Track and Parapara Road (SH4) between Raetihi and Whanganui. It was a significant moment in the Lilburn Transport history – securing the licences it needed to access Whanganui from the National Park.

Kakatahi came with a couple of Hinos, but they were well used and replaced, in fairly short order, with two 300 series V8 Fusos.

"That was really the start of a long relationship with Jolly and Mills in Palmerston North and Ron Berg," said Robbie. "We had Fusos pretty much from then right through until about 2008. We moved onto FV315s and then into the square cabs. We put a big turbo on one of the 315s at one stage. It was putting out about 380hp but never really seemed to go much better.

The two twin-turbo Shoguns were the best. They put out about 402hp and went bloody well. They made a great sound, too – one had straight pipes. Arnie [Arnold Rueben] loved his one." Bobby reckons adding the turbo to the 415 woke the big V8 engine up and made it hum.

The Lilburn business was

100% rural service work, with the trucks all having crates, sides, and timber and wool covers. They were as versatile as possible, an ethos that's still a key component to the business today.

"Yep, it was crates on, crates off, sides on, sides off," laughs Robbie. "We built up solid customer relationships with the big farming families in this area, like the Frews and McDonnells. Likewise, wool cartage was a mainstay of the company work profile from the outset, and it remains a key part of the operation today.

"We've worked with Elco Direct for 30 years now, and we cart wool pretty much every week of the year. We have a great relationship with Elco's Shane Eades that also goes back a long way. The wool cartage was a huge consideration in spec'ing deck lengths on the new truck. It's an area of work we're immensely proud of, from the perspectives of execution and relationships."

"No trouble at all"

"No trouble at all" is a customer service ethos that has driven many a young transport start-up, but it's in direct quote marks for a good reason, and anyone who knew Total Transport co-founder Matt Purvis will probably have a wry smile on their dial about now.

By the early 1980s, Bobby Lilburn had well and truly come of age, and although Bob owned the whole shooting-box, Bobby was running the cutter in terms of trucking affairs. Through that decade and into the 1990s, Lilburn Transport continued to evolve and grow, and like any small company on a trajectory akin to theirs, frustrating 'holes' in the circuits would pop up that impacted profitability. Enter Matt and Heather Purvis, and Total Transport.

Stock trucks, drop-siders, and a bunch of people willing



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1) Father and son, Bobby and Robbie. 2) Sometimes the work has a local flavour indeed. 3) Robbie took the plunge in 2005 and bought a new DAF XF set up as a drop-side unit. Here she's loaded with ... well, do you really need telling?

to work their cojones off – the name Lilburn must have been like music to Matt Purvis' ears.

"We were doing work for local stock agents and began helping Matt with some of his corridors, fat lambs from the Taihape area to Rangiora Freezing works at Te Puke in particular," says Robbie. "We always had a great relationship with Matt. The work was good, and he was always fair on the rates. He had his cut to take out obviously, but you certainly

weren't left out of pocket."

Stockwork morphed into timber and fertiliser work, with Lilburns servicing Waimarino and the western National Park locations.

"It was really good, with Total having all the Tenon, Pederson, and Carters timber. We'd be away all week, and on Friday, Matt would build loads that got us home. You'd pull in, and he'd be up on the balcony: 'Come up, young fella'. You'd go up and he'd say, 'We'll build a load and get you home.' It worked



Robbie's grand-dad Bob on a trip to the Hawke's Bay with either Bruce or Chris. No stopping him!



The association with Matt and Heather Purvis' Total Transport was a fruitful one and saw Lilburn's specc'ing trucks that suited both businesses. Photo: Rob van der Hoek.

bloody well. In fact, we started building our gear with not just our needs in mind, but his also, like curtain-siders built around 6m trucks and butt-out trailers.”

Of course, through the 1990s, the next truck-crazed Lilburn was well and truly on deck, living trucking's golden era of endless and varied brands through the wide eyes of youth. In terms of what rolled his coal, young Robbie Lilburn was every inch his dad. Every waking moment was spent at the yard or in the cab in full 'skill-acquisition' mode.

The mid 1990s saw significant changes in the Lilburn businesses. The Rangitaiki farm was sold, leaving the Parapara Road and Tohunga farms, although this still left three holdings as Bob had bought a farm at 1450 Mapara Road,

Kinloch, from his brother Ken some years earlier. This coincided with a decision within the transport business to discontinue contract stock cartage. There were three reasons for this: first, the downsizing of farming operations internally with the sale of Rangitaiki; second, Matt and Heather Purvis' decision to get Total Transport out of stock cartage; and third, the vagaries and inconsistencies of working with some stock dealers.

“Yeah, Dad had just had enough, really. He found it too frustrating,” Robbie says. “And with Total getting out of stock, it made everything that much harder again. We kept a set of crates for ourselves, of course, but that was the end of the contract work.”

As the company grew, local competition comprised Carmichael Transport

and Barrett and Taura. Carmichaels had downsized progressively over the years, and Barrett & Taura focused increasingly on stockwork as the new century progressed.

Doors might close, but they open also, and having a go is never something a Lilburn shies from. The start of the century saw them take on a contract carting containerised carrots from Ohakune to the port of Napier via Rangipo and the Napier-Taupo Road.

“They were overweight and on permits. On some bridges we had to slow to 30kph,” says Robbie. “We had a couple of Freightliner Columbias on it, and in the flush of the season Bobby's brothers Chris and Bruce would jump in to keep the trucks running 24/7. My grandfather Bob would tag along for a ride. He loved it.

“The trucks brought

packaging home for Emmerson Transport over the Annie. Grand-dad would be there and sometimes John Emmerson would be there helping load the packaging in the middle of the night. Those old guys were incredible, weren't they?”

The new century also heralded the next generation of Lilburn family blood arriving into the business proper. From school at Ruapehu College, Robbie had spent three years driving a snow groomer in the ski fields until he had the required licences to start full time with the family firm. He kicked things off behind the wheel of a 1983 FV315 Fuso drop-sider in 2001, honing his craft under the watchful eyes of his father and company driver Arnold Rueben.

“Arnold was a legend; that's all you can say. He was quiet and reserved and almost looked grumpy most of the time. But if you were willing to learn and listen, he would willingly teach you absolutely everything.”

Niketa points to an article hanging on the wall that *Truck and Driver* did on him. It's titled, 'Seems offhand – devoted, actually'. “That's him to an absolute T,” she says.

In 2005, aged 22, Robbie took the plunge and, with a little help from his grandfather, purchased one of two new DAF XFs coming into the company. His was a drop-sider, and Arnold got the other unit, a curtain.

For a spell there, grandfather, son, and grandson were all working in the business, something very cool that few get the privilege of experiencing. However, a changing of the guard on several fronts wasn't far away. Until 2008, the whole empire had been owned by Bob, but he was now in his 70s and it was time to herald a new era. That year the remaining farming interests were sold off, although the transport retained the depot on SH49 near Tohunga junction.

In order to understand the restructure completely, we'll need to fill in a little background detail. Bob got his helicopter licence in the farming heyday to improve travelling and mustering efficiency. Over the years, this had sidelined into a handy tourism enterprise, and so when the 2008 restructure occurred, Bobby's brother Bruce bought the whirlybird business. Bobby and Robbie took the trucking business, of course – goes without saying, doesn't it?

Skinning cats

A new business – not really – and a new son. Robbie and Niketa had met, wed, and all that stuff by now, and firstborn Caelen was on the scene. New horizons were everywhere, and Rob, Chelsea, and Jack were to follow over the next seven years.

Bobby continued to steer the day-to-day operations in terms of the business, while Robbie was 'DAFing' up a storm. By now, the work profile was taking the shape of what we see today, dominated by a mix of wool, timber, and tip-work plus anything else that needed loading, lashing, and locating.

Most of us take our OEs when we're young. Not Bobby Lilburn. In 2012, with things humming along, Robbie came off the trucks and into the office while Dad took flight for a bit of bucket-list-ticking in the form of road-train driving for Jamieson Transport in Western Australia.

“Yeah, it was a lot of fun, eh?” says Bobby when we had yarn later on. “I really enjoyed it. Imagine a combination 32m longer than these that weigh 170 tonne. She's different all right.”

Not only did it scratch an itch for Bobby; it also gave generation three the opportunity to steer the ship for a spell.

Then in 2013, local firm Barrett & Taura was looking for an operations manager. That coincided with the depot lease on Tohunga Road coming to an end. The Lilburns needed a new home, so they purchased the Barrett & Taura depot in the old Raetihi railway station on Railway Road – no imagination in those days – and moved in alongside. Robbie took on the job running both fleets, amounting to about six trucks.

Bobby was also back from desert duelling, and Lilburns added a new Freightliner Argosy day cab with DD15 power to the fleet. Suffice to say, there was a bit going on.

“I did the dual role thing for about three years but then reached a crossroads in my own heart about where I should be. I needed to get out of the Barrett & Taura job and focus on building the family business. So, in 2016 I did just that. I resigned from the B and T position, and shortly after that Foley's Transport took over the Barrett & Taura trucks.

“The next couple of years were tough. I went back out on the road from the B and T



Lilburn bought the Barrett and Taura depot on railway road in 2013. It was in fact the old railway station, as the before and after pics show.

operations job, but Dad and I were getting a bit scratchy. After all, we'd been working together my entire life. We'd lost a bit of mutual respect, and that's not good. In 2018, Niketa and I bought Dad and Mum out of the trucks, leaving the depot in the family. Dad took a spell and drove a milk tanker at Fonterra for three years, but he's been back about a year now and, honestly, we've never had a better relationship. We're bloody good mates. It's just amazing, eh?”

Today, the fleet comprises the new Kenworth K200, a 2005 ex-Total Transport K104 with a Gen-2 Signature, the Freightliner Argosy, and a 2015 35.540 MAN TGX bought new.

“Niketa and I want to develop and grow the business and set it up well for future generations,” says Robbie. “When we took over, we knew there were things we wanted to change, and ironically I understood that from things Dad taught me without even knowing. Whenever I had an idea, he'd say, 'Bring the facts and figures, and we'll look at it.' Sometimes that was frustrating – he's a hard bugger, but a good bugger with it. But it was saying that to me over the years that made me realise we needed help with some areas; we knew we had weaknesses, and it was around the numbers. We all work hard, and that's great, but it's no



The main yard today.

use working hard and not progressing.

“When we bought the DAFs, that was great, but I didn’t want to buy another round of DAF’s, even though there is a new Euro-6 coming,” he laughs. “No, what I mean is, I wanted to see a path to buying the gear we want to run eventually. We got hold of Bob Cleland in Palmerston North to help us [Had to be a Bob, didn’t it? – Ed]. Bob’s a business mentor and consultant, and I met him when he worked with Dairy Fresh. He’s been great and just helped with education around numbers and direction.

“We use MyTrucking, both in operations now and out in the field with the app. That’s a bloody great tool. Our electronic RUC is via iBright, so at the moment, there’s no interface with MyTrucking for automated CPK, so that’s a bit of a bugger. It’s all voiceless and works incredibly well.

Culture, the mother of desire

“Of course, we lost Arnie last year. I can’t tell you how sad that day was. He suffered a heart attack while his truck was being loaded with fertiliser bags at Ballance Mount Maunganui. It was just a terrible, terrible time. There were tears everywhere. He was such a great bloke, and

so many owe so much to him. Arnie was family. I’ll never forget receiving that phone call. He was so well respected in the industry. The K2 was going to be his – he had a lot of input into it from a lifetime of experience. And then just like that, he never got to see it.

“We have a great crew now though, and we’re thankful for that. Adrian on the K2, me on the 104, dad on the MAN, and Paul Tamati, who we’ve known for a long time. He’s relieved for us over the years and recently retired from 36 years in the army. He’s come onboard fulltime.

“We’ve tidied up the old rail shed, and built a lime bin inside, so now the trucks come home loaded all the time and we can sell ex-the shed here. We’ve put a Marsh weighbridge in, they’re great people to deal with, and honestly, that’s been the best thing we’ve done since buying the trucks.

“In terms of trucks, we’re settling on Southpac product going forward. Yes, that’s aspirational to a point, but I say honestly, it’s also back-up. The support they give us has been exceptional. We bought the K2 and DAF through Mark O’Hara, and he’s great to deal with.

“That’s pretty much it, really. Just improve, work hard, serve our customers well, and run the business as



Central in the picture, Robbie and Niketa Lilburn, generation three at the wheel of the business today. Surrounding them, the next wave! (From Left) Rob, Chelsea, Jack, and Caelen. Photo taken in front of the truck dad drives of course.

smart as we can.

“My boy Rob and Adrian’s son Joey have been best mates since daycare, and it’s great to watch the interest and love they have for it. It looks like we’re right for at least another round,” Robbie laughs.

Robbie Lilburn climbs into his 2005 K104 Kenworth every morning for three reasons. His family, his staff, and his love of trucks and rural trucking. Like farming, forestry, and fishing, rural trucking is vocational. You do it because you love it, because there’s nothing else

you want to do. As the old cliché goes, it’s in your blood. Like every Lilburn generation, fostering an interest, love, and understanding for the business at the age the ‘newest’ Rob and his siblings are now is how succession happens. Through that, they understand how food arrives on the table and the work that goes into ‘good luck’. They also learn that approach is everything and working hard is not the antagonist of happiness.

They simply have to look at their dad and mum to see that.



Culture is everything in rural trucking. It’s not hard to see why the small but tight Lilburn Transport crew gets through a powerful lot in a day. In short, it starts at the top.



PART TWO

WHERE LAND AND SKY MEET

Adrian and ARNEZ power up the Titiokura in the pouring rain.

Our first sighting of it was when approaching Elco Direct Wool Buyers on Bell Road, Taumarunui. Once seen, it’s not difficult to understand why Lilburn Transport’s new Kenworth K200 has created the fuss it has around industry traps of resent. The gleaming stainless, polished wheels, twin intakes, underbody and top lights, and the livery – when it appears in view, truck-heads of all ages are akin to possums in the headlights.

Pulling in and parking, we introduce ourselves to storeman Matt McKenzie. He is expecting our arrival and inducts us onsite. Then it’s a handshake and ‘G’day with driver Adrian Takiwa. He fits the Lilburn staff mould to a tee, welcoming and friendly. He hasn’t long started loading 181 wool bales for two drops in Napier the following morning.

It’s the first reminder that driving a drop-sider requires a broad skillset. Adrian’s

driving Elco’s fork hoist fitted with a set of ‘cat claws’, an attachment with claws that pierce the wool bales from the top, picking them up in groups of three, and able to rotate them through 360°.

“Beats loading them by hand,” he chuckles. A job that generally makes even the best of them shudder.

There’s a specific way wool is loaded, and the Lilburn team are masters of the trade with the old sheep’s coat featuring throughout the company’s history. Three rows, middle facing and cap to cap, and then the top tow is turned, three across and running longitudinally.

The Lilburn trucks are regulars here, and Adrian, Matt, and storeman Ringo Makiakama are a flashback to a time when business and communities everywhere were one and the same. Ringo keeps an eye on Adrian’s progress, and when the bales are on and the work really starts, he’s right there to help.

The second row gets a lineal strap (front to back), and every row is strapped over the top with two on the ends. Then out comes the wool covers, even heartier than 16 packet timber covers.

“I had a bit to do with the design and placement of the reefers on these. They’re bloody good, actually,” says Adrian. The fit allows for the left-hand sides on the truck and trailer being in place, but reaching to the combing rail on the right. The day is hot and humid, and by the time they’re draped and sitting true, Adrian’s already got a good bead of perspiration on his brow.

“It’s not much, really,” he says. “You never know what the weather on the Annie will be like, so peace of mind and all that.”

He tilts the cab slightly to ease access to the front of the truck. It’s an electric tilt, so it saves way more time than it takes. Obviously, ‘Adge’, (Age) as he is affectionately

known in the Lilburn family, is a master coverer, and 40 minutes later, we have a dead level set of wool covers over an impressive load. Woah to go? Two hours forty minutes. The fact there was no running and or double-tracking up and down the truck proves the old adage that speed comes with smoothness, not haste. He’s an impressive act. His shades never even slipped down his nose once.

Cab down, boots and bib-overalls off, Adrian bids the lads farewell and thanks them for their help. He climbs into the cab, and the big red Kenworth carrying the personalised plate ARNEZ, rolls carefully out the gate.

The only way is up!

You would think locating your trucking company in Raetihi might be challenging in terms of weather, but the logical pay-off is that every destination is down. Looking at an elevation map may well confirm that, but Lilburn trucks appear to



'Cat-claws certainly make loading wool easy.

climb everywhere. Their most benign routes would be to the Mount via Taupo and Rotorua or Wellington via Waiouru. Everywhere else has hills (big ones) and windy roads (lots of them). The Spiral, Piriaka Saddle, Hiwi, Waterfall, Te Kuiti to the north, Napier-Taupo or Gentle Annie to the east, and the Parapas out west. Delightful.

"Yeah, that's true," laughs Robbie. "That's why we're always looking over them. It's a tough life here. Our reality is you never really get much more than 700,000 or 800,000 from an engine – doesn't matter what it is really. We'd normally be rebuilding about then.

"Some people won't use the Annie anymore, and yeah, it's a tough track. But based here, it's still the quickest route to the Bay and, if we're doing timber over to the Bay and fert out, it's the only option really. We're permitted to run through at 54 [tonne] now, too, so that's good."

The Annie!

Yes, The Gentle Annie. We pulled out of the wool store and headed in her direction. Out of town, over the Piriaka Saddle and up the Spiral, we swing left at Tohunga Junction and exit SH49 in Waiouru, where we have a quick catch-up and a cuppa at the 'Z' station with Bobby Lilburn in the MAN. He's heading to Taupo but will see us again in the morning as he's on the same second-round job as us.

We roll on south, and Adrian swings ARNEZ left at the top of the Taihape Divi. That only means one thing for a Lilburn truck – Gentle Annie – a road that this big red jigger will get to know intimately throughout its life.

It's one of New Zealand's most famous and fabled trucking routes, the regional highway that dissects the North Island's spine, linking Taihape in Manawatu to Fernhill in Hawke's Bay. Like a ribbon dropped from a

height onto several piles of wool fadges, the Gentle Annie cuts through some of the North Island's biggest country. Although it saves travelling down to the Saddle Road, east of Palmerston North, or up to the Napier-Taupo, for anyone not at peace with their machine or driving skillset, accepting her enticing invitation may not be the ideal motoring decision. But if your thing is big hills, big country, steep and winding narrow roads, then Annie might just be your gal. For a seasoned rural carrier used to airstrips in the middle of 'Middle Earth', you'd wonder why anyone would shy away.

"It's my favourite road," says Adrian. "No question. I love it in there. Always have."

As we pushed deeper into the road, the rewards come thick and fast, not just in the form of trucking Nirvana with the Cummins X-15 and Jakes both in full voice as Adrian conducts the symphony from



A full load of wool strapped, and covered, we were gone two hours-forty minutes after arriving.

the Roadranger's baton, but the views also, like the one from the top of Bonney Mary down the row of crisscrossing sedimentary valleys. It's a view enhanced immeasurably by a bright red K200 Kenworth, loaded with covered wool, picking its way through a vast landscape.

Everything gets a workout on this road. It's the perfect stage, the perfect moment in time to assess just how well we've done over 80-odd years of heavy truck R&D. The singing of the brakes as Adge does that wee tap to rub the last 5kph off on the tightest bends, the air suspensions



Hard into the Gentle Annie. You can see the road in the background.

working, and the sweet sound of gears being picked off, like ripe plums off a tree.

We wait at the famous swing bridge at the bottom of Springvale. The swinger is no longer used, replaced years ago by the bridge adjacent. We see Adrian and ARNEZ round the top headland and wind their way to us, the Jakes in full song, down, across and into the big climb on the other side of the valley, up to the peak and the halfway point at Mangoahane turnoff. A further 25km, and we cross a small creek that marks the start of the section from which the road takes its name.

The route is now steeper, narrower, and windier, than anything previous. Gentle Annie was gravel until about a decade ago, but it is now narrow bitumen, void of fog or centrelines. Calls on the CB regularly help prevent untimely meetings on climbing or descending hairpin bends.

"Yeah, you try and avoid it,

but it has happened," says Adrian. "That's why we're usually through in the early mornings when it's dark. You can see their lights even if they're not listening or have the radio up."

At 54 tonnes, it's all bottom-box stuff for reasons of cornering speeds as well as grade. On the afternoon we went through, the weather wasn't playing ball at all, the day had turned to crap. Adrian held proceedings in third direct, allowing wriggle room on the throttle in the event he needed it. Even at the best of times, it is a road where tyre life and R&M become the key determiner over truck performance. The power show is best left for the Titiokura, Kiwis, and the like.

After another lock-to-lock, Jake-blazing descent, the bridge over the Ngaruroro River marks the end of The Annie, and things begin to mellow out considerably as we roll off the foothills into

Fern Hill. Adrian's dad Tracy lives there and he's going to stay with him for the night. We sign-off a great afternoon with a rendezvous time at the Wakatu Industrial Park Wool Stores between Napier and Hastings at about 7am.

Limelight

The wool came off in two drops – one at the stores and the other at Hawke's Bay Wool Scours. Side's on/sides off is a daily fact of life at Lilburn, and the MD Engineering gear has been set up to make this as easy as possible. Like all good operators, Adrian follows a routine, aided immeasurably by the planning and thought three truckers and a trucker-turned-engineer put into the build. Like the wool load, it's a smooth glide around the unit, and he rarely covers ground already covered. There's a place for everything, with a canny flip-up headboard cover rack providing easy access to the right-side posts. The

spring locks save pins, and it all saves time.

We meet Bobby again at Webster's Hydrated Lime in Havelock North, both trucks loading for the Bay of Plenty. Matt Webster shows us around and in no time, we're heading east.

We're in-cab with Adrian and we have to say, as odd as it seems, the Napier-Taupo looks like a motorway after The Annie.

The inside of this machine is faultless; you'd happily apply a five-minute rule to any food you dropped on the floor. In all reality it would likely be way cleaner than the hands that dropped it. Yes, it only has 42,000km on the clock, but that's a lifetime in terms of keeping a drop-sider's cab pristine.

"I offered Bobby a drive a few months back," laughs Adge. "He opened the door and said, 'Oh no. Bigger that. Not if I have to take my boots off.'"

"That's Adrian," says Niketa Lilburn later. "Doesn't matter what he drives; it's always immaculate."

ARNEZ is a pretty standard, proven, bullet-proof mechanical fare in 21st-century Kenworth trucking. Cummins X-15 in Euro-5 trim, banging out 448kW (600hp) at 1800rpm and 2779Nm (2050lb/ft) at 1200rpm. Behind that is an Eaton Roadanger RTLO209018B 18-speed manual, with twin Meritor MFS66-122 axles on parabolic springs up front and a Meritor MT21-165GP drive set with dual diff locks at 4.3:1. Holding up the afterguard is PACCARS



As big as it is, the Kenworth seems lost in the big country on the Gentle Annie.



Crossing the Ngaruroro River.



The K200 flat-roof sleeper is a cosy place to spend a couple of nights a week. The dash a classic and easy to use workplace.

venerable AG-460 8-bag air suspension, with drum brakes, ABS, and EBS.

It wasn't long ago that 448kW (600hp) was the top dog in terms of power. Nowadays, there are plenty of burners sporting loftier digits than big-red. Horses for courses-wise, this is an ideal spec, considering task, country and wear and tear – still over 10hp/tonne at 54 tonnes, delivering good trip times, and not leaving too much steer and drive tyre rubber on rural roads.

The big K'dub motored up the Titiokura in fourth

overdrive at 1650rpm and 35kph and the Kiwis half a gear up and about the same speed. Off the steepest part of Turangakumu, the Jacobs held the unit in fourth direct at 2100rpm.

The roll out beyond Taupo through Reporoa and Waitapu was like a magic carpet. Great trucking and great company. It makes me so sad to think of the fantastic life adventures that mindless bureaucrats have denied so many of our kids, fathers, and mothers.

The load tipped off in rural Rotorua, Bobby and



Unloading wool in Napier.



PAYING IT FORWARD

"We had something different, me and Arnie. He really was one of my best mates. I was talking to him the morning it happened and then when I heard, man, I cried alright."

Adrian Takiwa's reflection of the events of October 20 last year clearly demonstrate that it's still very raw. His family's association with the man go well beyond his own lifetime. Arnold Rueben and Adrian's dad Tracy were great mates as young fellas in the hay-contracting scene in Hawke's Bay, so Arnold's shock passing was felt right through Adrian's own family as well as his work one.

"Yep, I'm a Hawke's Bay boy originally," says Adrian Takiwa who's best described as the archetypal gentle giant. He's a big bloke, solid, and clear of six feet. Immaculately presented, polite to a fault, and genuinely interested in what you have to say. He takes it in, no question.

"I left school early because I knew exactly what I wanted to do. Dad's a truck driver, and there was always a fight between my brother and me over who was going with him in the trucks," he laughs. "Dad drove for a few local contractors on ERFs, Fodens, but his favourite – and ours – was the Eagle

he drove for Doug Whitfield. That was a cool truck. My brother Russell, he's got into combines and tractors in Aussie. Loves it, eh!"

Sixteen years ago, Adrian and partner Wiki-Lee 'Wix' moved to Raetihi from the Hawke's Bay. Adrian had got a job working for market gardeners Kim Young & Son, but there was an added benefit in being sort of a midway point between the Bay and Wiki-Lee's hometown of New Plymouth.

"I was driving a Ford N-series V8 from the field, back to the pack house through the paddocks and back roads. I was green-as! They had other cool gear, too, a Mack Cruise-Liner and Kenworth K104B. I got to have a play in those at times, too. I stayed there two years. It set me up well and I left with my class 2 and went to work for McCarthy Transport."

Still only 20 years of age, McCarthy's put Adrian through his remaining licences, and he ended up on a 700 Series Hino 8x4 and 4-axle trailer, carting logs from the Waimarino Forest back to the Tangiwai Sawmill.

"I really enjoyed that. It was a good truck, and real mountain goat. That thing could climb, man!"

Experience grows ability, and the confidence that comes with that heightens the sense of adventure. From McCarthy, it was to Barrett & Taura on an International 9800i eight-axle stock unit with Cummins ISX 525 power. "That was a cool truck too! Anything American," chuckles Adrian.

Moving to Barrett & Taura was a significant step in the broader context of Adrian's career. It was at Barrett & Taura that the friendship with his dad's old haymaking mate, Lilburn driver Arnold Rueben, really flourished. And it was there that he also began working for one Robbie Lilburn.

When Robbie gave away the Barrett & Taura operations role in 2015 to focus on the family business, Adrian followed him to Lilburn Transport.

"He's just a great bloke to work with and work for. They all are. Bobby, his dad – he's a great bloke and, like Arnie, I've learned so much from him, too. I mean, I've pretty much been here since 2015.

You wouldn't stay in a job if the people weren't right, would you? There's certainly something special here."

Adrian's first ride at Lilburn's was a near-new MAN 35.540, the one Bobby drives now. "It only had a few thousand on the clock."

He stayed on the MAN until the wheel of the Kenworth K104 came up for grabs. "That thing is a beast. I put a resonator on the exhaust, and she really barks. It's got a GEN-2 signature in it. She goes."

As we said in the main story, the skill sets acquired on drop-side work are formidable, and the variation in work, vast. However, there are long, tough hours and regular nights away from home. In early 2020, Adrian took a break and went back to McCarthy Transport to drive a bin-wood truck. It meant he was pretty much home every night and could spend more time with Wiki-Lee and their son Joey.

But there are some truisms in life and trucking. However good a job might be, you

have to be happy in yourself, and you can take the man out of rural carrying, but you can't take rural carrying out of the man. As great a place as McCarthy's is, Adrian soon longed for that varied skillset and work profile the bin-wood truck just couldn't deliver. While covering 181 bales of wool on a hot spring day might not be everyone's cup of tea; for others, it's like sipping a cup of freshly brewed English Breakfast.

"Yeah, it was the monotony that I just couldn't take. Arnie kept ringing me, too," he laughs. "Yeah, I came back, and of course, Arnie passed away. When Robbie offered me this, I was just blown away."

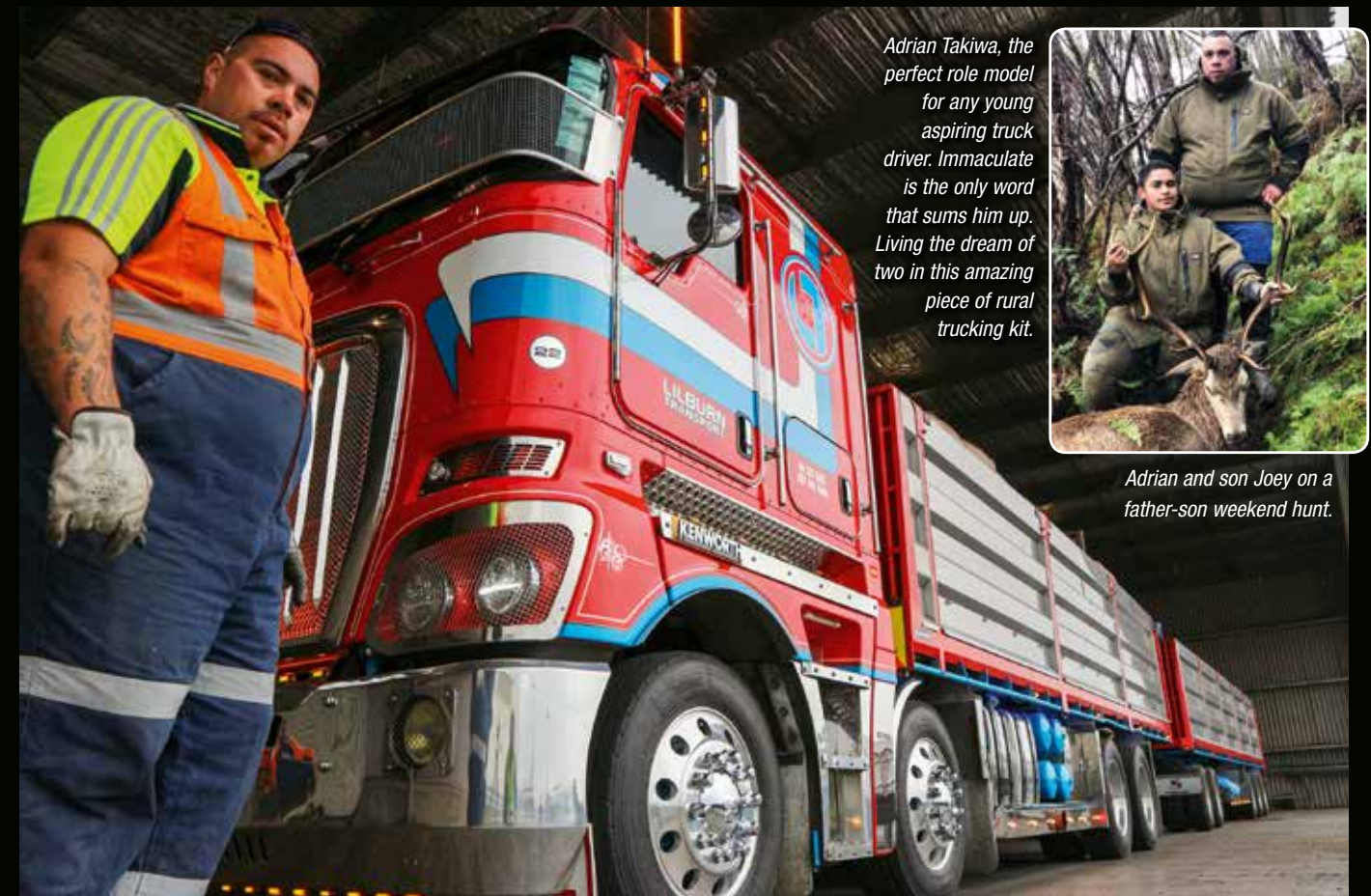
"I couldn't believe it. I mean, it's a dream truck for me – a flat-roof K2 – but there's also so much of Arnie in it. I asked if it could carry Arnold's ARNEZ number plates. It was going to be Arnold's truck, and it always will be. So, yeah, it's pretty cool."

Outside of life at Lilburn Transport, Adrian enjoys

family life, riding his Harley Davidson with his mates on their machines, and hunting pigs and deer. "Yep, when I'm not in here, home, or riding, I'll probably be hunting," he laughs.

Wiki-Lee works locally in hospitality, and 13-year old truck-mad son Joey attends Palmerston North Boys with his best mate Rob Lilburn, and Caelen the eldest of the new Lilburn generation.

Adrian Takiwa is an integral part of a wonderful story. Having met him, got to know him, watched him work, you're left with the feeling that obvious beneficiaries aside, some lucky young guy or girl out there will one day meet their own Arnold Rueben, someone with a vast knowledge they are more than willing to pass on. The relationship will be pivotal in that young person's life. They'll emerge from under Adrian's wing undoubtedly a better person, with a skill set few truckers ever achieve. You just have to ask yourself, how lucky will they be?



Adrian Takiwa, the perfect role model for any young aspiring truck driver. Immaculate is the only word that sums him up. Living the dream of two in this amazing piece of rural trucking kit.



Adrian and son Joey on a father-son weekend hunt.

Adrian de-side their rides, ready for the last mission of the day. You know watching them that if one Lilburn driver motored off and left another to deal with his sides alone, it would be a clear sign the planet had moved on its axis. There'd be more chance of dinosaurs returning, or Greta T buying a top fuel dragster for commuting.

Our next adventure was also a regular Lilburn gig ... the postal service.

One thing we noticed in our wonderings was the welcoming reception we got at all our pick-up points. That had to be a direct reflection of the colour of the trucks arriving and proving the old

point that whether it's cops or customers, your demeanour accounts for at least half the success of all interactions.

We meet Steve Hawkings at Perma Pine in Reporoa, and he caps the day off just nicely. Standing in the safe zone, we have a good old natter while Adrian loads posts for down the island. The Volvo loaders have a hectic daily schedule with a steady stream of trucks. The load-out pads are concrete, always a bonus, and it's a scene where everyone is well versed in the 'what, where, and how'.

And again, the set-up of the unit shone with chain hooks right there every time Adrian bent over and reached

underneath. Before long, we were rolling, heading for an overnight at home, on-carting tomorrow.

First past the post

The K200 flat cab's a lot more snug than the stand-up pavilion that is Aerodyne. That said, it's an uber cool place, and the absence of an engine tunnel means there's room aplenty, including ample storage. There's lockers above the bed, under cab on both sides, under the passenger seat, as well as the usual pull-out locker and fridge under the bunk. Adrian has a tele to watch on nights away. It's an easy place to live in for a couple or three nights a week.

The K200 cockpit is incredibly driver-friendly and always has been. They're an easy, comfortable truck to drive.

A quick cuppa in Taupo at the Mobil on the bypass and it's home to Raetihi (uphill, of course) via SH47 through an appalling windstorm whipping across the basin, and then left onto SH3 at National Park.

Adrian pulled the yellow brake valve about 7.30pm, and with a hiss of air, there she sat.

A powerful lot of work had been done in 24 hours, with some real driving to boot. That's life at this wee company.

As a tool of trade, the truck itself is all about choice. You

buy a philosophy when you buy a truck, regardless of brand. In Kenworth's case, it doesn't matter how many glitzy advertising pics you see of blinged-up gigs, Kenworth's reputation was built on tough trucks that last in shitty conditions. That's going to be tested as much with this machine in Raetihi as anywhere else. If you're a newly assembled truck and you emerge from the factory with a red cab and blue chassis, with a Raetihi sticker on the windscreen, then brace yourself – shit's about to get real.

Body and trailer gear, though, that's a different story. That's about finding

someone who will listen, certainly contribute, but in the end, build exactly what you ask for, because you know what it is you do, and what it is you need. For Robbie and Niketa, Michael Jelly and MD Engineering fitted that mould perfectly.

While the embellishments, the chrome, the stainless, the lights make ARNEZ look so damn good, it's the practicality and usability that really impress. Put in the right hands, this is a winning truck, and Adrian Takiwa is certainly the right hands. There may be a lot of truck, but he's a lot of operator. And, hey, we know by the number plate, he's not alone in this!

Loading posts at Perma Pine.



Loading at Websters Hydrated Lime in the Hawkes Bay.



What goes in must come out. Tipping off in rural Rotorua.



SPECIFICATIONS

Kenworth K200 8x4 rigid – 2.3m flat-roof sleeper

Tare:	12,500kg (Load Certificate)
GVM:	32,000kg
GCM:	97,000kg
Wheelbase:	5550mm
Engine:	Cummins X-15
Capacity:	15.4-litre
Power:	448kW (600hp)
Torque:	2779Nm (2050lb/ft)
Emissions:	Euro-5
Transmission:	Eaton Roadanger RTLO209018B 18-speed manual
Clutch:	Spicer 2250lb/ft Ezy Pedal Advantage 3-VCT+clutch (Manual Adjust)
Front axle:	Meritor MFS66-122
Front axle rating:	13,200kg
Front suspension:	Parabolic leaf springs and shock absorbers
Rear axle:	Meritor MT21-165GP dual diff locks at 4.43:1
Rear axle rating:	20,900kg
Rear suspension:	PACCAR AG-460 8-bag air suspension
Brakes:	Drum. ABS/EBSS
Auxiliary braking:	Jacobs Engine Brake
Additional safety:	ATC (Automatic Traction Control), DTC (Drag Torque Control), FUP
Fuel:	530 litres
DEF tank:	160 litres
Wheels:	Alcoa Dura-Bright
Tyres:	275/70 R22.5
Electrical:	12V
Cab exterior:	2.3m flat-roof sleeper
Features/Extras:	Stainless-steel drop visor, grille bars, twin air intake system, stainless-steel panelling and additional light bars (MD Engineering). Additional roof lights, back-lit grille and underbody lighting. BroLube greasing system.
Cab interior:	Crimson interior. AM/FM/CD player with Bluetooth. Full suspension driver's seat. Climate control, heated electric mirrors. Fridge.
Features/Extras:	TV, silver gauge bezels.
Custom stainless/light work:	MD Engineering Balclutha

WALK AROUND WITH ROBBIE



High-tensile construction keeps strength at a maximum, and weight to a minimum.



1) Rub pads on the sides prevent unsightly wear when stacked.
2) Springlocks prevent pin loss.
3) Angled post slots flick debris away from the shiny bits.

Welcome to the new show, Walk Around with Robbie. Jokes aside, it was by far the best way to get to the nitty-gritty on this unit. There's a hell of a lot to see on any drop-sider, but this one is something different again.

Take a family of multi-decade drop-side operators. Add a 35-year veteran of their business to the planning 'roundtable', then give the must-haves and ideas to a South Island transport engineer who is a former trucker himself, always building from the viewpoint of the person who has to work the thing. You'll end up with something quite spectacular.

There's no shortage of North Island trucking companies that go south of the channel for a drop-side build, and Lilburns is no exception with Cowan, TES, MTT, and MD all represented. The demographics and farming profile of good old Te Waiponamu still make it a sweet spot for trucking's most versatile gig.

Interestingly, there's an increasing number of droppies

popping up again in the North Island, and that has to be a reflection of margins and compliance costs.

"The South Island gear is all pretty good really, eh?" says Robbie. "This one's MD Engineering and so is the next one in the pipeline. Michael [Jelley, from MD Engineering] has a reputation for building high-class gear and being an ex-trucker driver himself, he gets right into the project, listens, contributes, and then builds it. You'll say, 'We need this', and he's like 'Oh yeah, okay' then comes up with a solution. Yeah, just a bloody good guy."

Right then! Off we go...
Tare and decks: "We're more than happy with the end result. It can do anything and sitting here, it's come out at 20,690kg fully kitted. At 54-tonne HPMV, that gives us a 33-tonne payload."

"There is a lot of truck, isn't there? But, honestly, we've had no issues. We deliver to farms and airstrips. It comes down to the operator. The trailer's been stable, the scissor makes a huge difference.

"The reason for the size is

twofold – wool and timber. The truck's 7.6m deck is designed to take 20 bales on the deck cap to cap, and the trailer at 10.6m is for wool and butt-out timber."

Sides: "The sides are all designed to fit neatly inside the deck width. To get that, we need the little wings at the front of the truck body, but they come off and store under the deck if needed.

"We've also put rub pads on the sides to stop them from chaffing against each other when stacked. The alloy blackens if they chaffe, and it looks horrible. I think Michael's fitting them standard now?"

"The sides are coated with PremoShield, a hydrophobic coating. It's bloody awesome stuff and makes cleaning so easy.

"The posts are all spring-lock fixed, so there's no losing pins anymore, and sides and posts on the left side of the unit are built slightly meatier than the right. That's because they're under pressure when the wool is on. The post slots on the front of the truck deck are angled to flick debris away from the polished bits."



Placing the load on the deck, not your mind.



How it arrived. Ready packaged.

Tailgates: "We don't use double swingers. They are light enough for one man to handle easily. They do need to have their lifting handles fitted though."

Cover racks: "Michael designed a system for us that allowed the headboard-cover racks to hinge up so the posts can be slotted in front of the headboard. Then it comes back down on top of them. It's mint! The whole thing can also come off when the covers need cleaning or airing."

Rope rails and chain hooks: "I don't like rope rails that break their lines over the drive wheels, especially if there's nothing up underneath to tie-off on. We wanted continuous rails for ease of use, cleanliness, and looks. Michael told us that would come at a small deck-height penalty, but that was nothing for us.

"We can tie off right along, and there are chain-hooks on every dropper. That makes diagonal securing of posts and all that a lot easier.

"There are vertical rope rails on the corners also. That's primarily for lineal strapping of

wool, but they're also bloody handy for everything. She's got to have the rope rails fitted across the back of the truck and trailer yet. That's on the way."

Toolboxes: "We just wanted everything easy. There are separated chain boxes in them and twitch locaters plus enclosed bearer and cover racks. The old-style twitches were the driver's choice."

Inflation management and central lubrication: "Yep, we roll them over the pit every 7000km and give them the once over. But both inflation management and onboard greasing just help.

"Always having air in the tires and grease in the holes can save thousands in this work. Fert and dust, it's all abrasive. The air system is PSI and came from TATES, and BroLube supplied the grease system."

SI-Lodec scales: "You've got to optimise your payload, but not 'over-optimise it!'. They're a no brainer in 2021."

Packaging and prep: "Mate, we couldn't have asked for better than Michael and Mark [O'Hara, at Southpac]. They've both been

bloody fantastic right through. We all sat down with the drawings, and then Mark got the truck built pre-packaged.

"Everything you see here – the stainless diesel and DEF tanks, where they're placed and all that – was how it arrived. I think Michael had to adjust two little things. I can't even remember what they were."

General: "We've used lots of stainless because it doesn't oxidise and is easy-care, as well as looks good. The work's not easy, so you want to be able to clean them up as quick as you can. Willie Malcom blanked out the sleeper vent because they bugged up the company logo. That man is a genius. There's no question about that."

But, there's the old adage, 'You can't have it all'. Robbie laughs, "Yeah, true. We wanted a Lilburn-stencilled stainless flash on the side of the cab, but the tolerances were just too tight, so we had to settle for a stainless light bar."



The unit is festooned with tie-down and lashing points. Full-length rope rails, vertical rope rails and chain hooks galore.



A place for everything and everything in a place.



Adrian places the trailer posts and the cover rack hinges back down on top. Note the flip-latches that allow the whole thing to come off.



No double swingers, but ease-of-use front-of-mind.



No double swingers, but ease-of-use front-of-mind.



PSI inflation management and BroLube help keep the wolf from the door between formal tyre and maintenance visits.



PSI inflation management and BroLube help keep the wolf from the door between formal tyre and maintenance visits.



Blanked-out vent so as not to ruin the company logo, and a stainless light flash.



SPECIFICATIONS	
MD Engineering – body and 10.6m five-axle drop-side, full tip	
Truck	
Body:	7.6m high-tensile
Side:	1.2m alloy
Lift gear:	Twin underbody with cordless remote
Additional:	Protective Coatings and Treatments – PremoShield on alloy sides and tail-door.
Trailer	
Chassis:	High-tensile
Body:	10.6m high-tensile
Axles/suspension:	ROR CS9
Brakes:	Disc-braked axles with Haldex EBS
Wheels:	JOST polished alloy wheels
Tyres:	265/70 R19.5
Sides:	1.3m alloy
Preparation/paint:	Creighton Sandblasting and Painting, Balclutha
Additional:	SI-Lodec scales, PSI inflation management on trailer (TATES), Protective Coatings and Treatments – PremoShield on alloy sides and tail-door.
Custom work:	MD Engineering, Balclutha

Acknowledgements

What a family. There's no question the best of all Kiwi traits reside behind the Lilburn Transport sign on Railway Road, Raetihi. Thanks to Robbie, Niketa, Caelen, Rob, Chelsea, and Jack for the time, welcome, and inspiration.

Adrian Takiwa only reinforced that New Zealand's finest carry the county. A wonderful bloke you should take time to meet.

(How do those shades never slip down?)

Thanks also to Mark O'Hara and the Southpac team for their relentless and enthusiastic help on everything.

And thanks, too, to Matt McKenzie, Ringo Makiakama, Matt Webster, and Steve Hawkings for the welcome mats you so willingly rolled out at all the stops. Hugely appreciated.

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ROR axles



PSI tyre inflation system



Haldex EBS



Alex A shine alloy wheels



V Orlandi coupling on the truck