

REMOTE RUNNING IN

QUEENSLA

There are certain things most trucking operators need to be able to do, but there are challenges to tasks like remote running in Queensland, which require a specialist with the ability to handle a complex operation in difficult conditions.

After starting out in the trucking industry working for a number of well known characters in the trucking industry, Kent Baillie has become one of those characters himself, running an operation from Pittsworth in Queensland and hauling general freight west from Brisbane into all of the remote areas of that vast state.

His job title is now Managing Director of Mt Isa Carriers, but it has been a long hard road for Kent, both figuratively and in reality, a long dusty road across the Sunshine State and into the Northern Territory.

Originally from Millmerran, on the road from the Queensland/NSW border at Goondiwindi to Toowoomba, Kent, did mess around with trucks in the paddock as a child, his father worked as a truck driver.

“By the age of 10, we were loading trucks,” says Kent. “It was expected every day after school, every week and every holidays. He worked for Lill and Alexander. Later, he became the boss of Lill and Alexander but prior to that he had his own truck. Dad was a Darwin runner with an old B-model Mack. He also ran across the paddock to Perth and then in those later years, he became a manager, but he had been Lill and Alexander’s first employee.

“When he retired, he retired from there as the boss, so for all us

boys our first job was with Lill and Alexander, they were a very reputable long-standing company and when the owner died, they just decided to close it up.

“When we stopped working for Lill and Alexander, in 1993, I bought my first truck and everyone reckoned I was a fool for doing it. I bought an old day cab, a W-model Kenworth, and my brother had one as well. A lot of people thought we were nuts. We would run Brisbane to Darwin in a day cab and sleep on the load or across the seat or whatever. Often a pillow against the window, we couldn’t afford a bunk.”

They were carting for TNT Express and Brambles. He recalls banking his two checks for those first loads. Time and experience taught him some hard lessons, and through hard work gained a reputation for reliability.

The business had three trucks running to Darwin when Kent’s wife left him and he had to look after his children, the youngest of which was youngest 10 months old. At the same time a family friend, Graham Porter, who had his own transport business, suffered a heart attack. They asked Kent if he would come and run their operation for two weeks.

“I went and helped Graham for two weeks and the rest is history,” says Kent. “I invested in the place when times were tough and we became



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Kent Baillie and his wife, Cassie.

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Kent, Cassie and Operations Manager, Darren.

partners, and just five years ago, I bought out his share and we just kept managing Mt Isa Carriers.”

STARTED IN THE SIXTIES

The original Mt Isa Carriers operation was established in 1965, in Mount Isa, by Graham, and Kent used to subbie for him. By the time Kent took over they were running some old gear and the operation was spending too much money on maintenance, a situation which Kent has turned around since taking over.

“I’d done all the figures and we bought one our first new Mack in 2012,” says Kent. “I said to Graham, we’ve just got to have it otherwise we’re just not going to survive. We had it for five years, six years, and we put 1.4 million kilometres on that thing. He was against M-drive and he was against the MP 10, but over the six years we never once put a spanner on that truck. When we traded it in, Mack was shocked it still had the original turbo.

“Now, that’s all we’ve got, the MP 10s, and then we’ve got the 700 and a 600 Volvo. Everything we run is road train. Plus we’ve got a few local trucks that run to Brisbane and around. We own our base here in Pittsworth and

our depot in Townsville, but we lease in Brisbane.

“We’re doing a daily service across from Townsville to Mt Isa, so we cover all of that area too. We’ve been up there for seven years, we have a perfect crew. That’s where the latest Mack went to, ‘Hillbilly Deluxe.’”

The Townsville depot services direct to Mt Isa, while the trucks heading West from Pittsworth make a number of stops heading West, starting in Barcardine, where the operation has got a number of agents around that area, covering Longreach down to Tambo and further West.

The operation runs a wide selection of trailers from mezzanine deck curtain sides to flat tops, drop decks, ramp trailers and pantech trailers for some parcel freight (as agents for most of the major players in parcels). The operation can service, virtually, the whole of North-Western Queensland.

“We’ve done nothing but grow, and the reason is a mixture of things,” says Kent. “However, what we’re seeing now, is people are sick and tired of the big boys, who are my only opposition and I won’t get that work because they are part of national deals with them for the whole country. We handle every drop of grog to Cloncurry and Julia

Creek, so every drop of alcohol in those areas comes from us.”

One of the strengths of the operation is their local agents, and the policy is Mt Isa Carriers don’t care if it’s a parcel or if it’s a full load, whether it’s a few boxes or a stack of tyres.

A BIT OLD SCHOOL

“It’s all about the driver now and I’ve been old school,” says Kent. “I think they’re spoiled, compared to what we had. People can’t believe that I ran to Darwin without a bunk. That’s just what we had to do, and now we’ve got tracking on everything. The new trucks have got bloody TVs and microwaves. On the Macks, we’re running the 60-inch sleeper and the Volvos have the XXL.

“The whole scope of the industry has changed. Like the fatigue management and everything else. Do I agree with it 100 per cent? No. Do I think it’s working? Yes, but I think it could be made somewhat easier on the driver. I would like to see us go the way of WA, where the focus is not on the driver, it’s on the company. It forces businesses to do the right thing. We’re a small business and we do the right thing. So why can’t others?

“I think with electronic work diaries,

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we're going to end up there. We'll have electronic diaries ready before the end of 2023. I'm all for it. We do trip plans now. I want to do it, to make sure that these boys are not pushed. Everyone knows our schedule and we're pretty good at it.

"If it helps clear scum out of the industry, which I think still needs to happen."

Mt Isa Carriers has 27 trucks on the road and there are 52 staff altogether. The largest depot is at Mount Isa, because it's a receiving depot where there are van drivers, body truck drivers, semi drivers.

"This year I brought on a general manager, he's an ex-corporate exec and he's helped us make even further changes, because he understands the systems," says Kent. "Then I've got Darren in here handling operations and I'd be lost without him. Five years ago, I was doing all this myself and now Cassie, my wife has come in here and taken a heap off me, as well.

"You only survive by change, you've got to constantly change. It's the little things that these guys handle for me, they're picking up things that used to take up time, and we've

had another record year. The whole scope of buying has changed now. Somewhere like Mount Isa and the surrounding area have discovered online shopping. The parcel freight in 2022 tripled, so we've changed from the old consignment notes and gone electronic

"We use TransVirtual, and it tells me everything. We used to have customers ring up and say, could you send a POD? That would take time, but now they can have it within minutes of delivery. Because we're agents for various customers, we've got it set up so it appears as an offline consignment note under the customer's name.

"We also went over to Xero and now everything's live real time. We can invoice and bill every day. When I go back 10 or 15 years ago, at the end of the month we're sitting around the kitchen table with a pile of paper until two o'clock in the morning, and we were tired. That was a big killer years ago, cash flow."

THE JUGGLING ACT

"When I first started doing Darwin, you knew absolutely everyone on that run," says Kent. "If it was nighttime,

we could still pick out any truck going the other way, by the time and by the configuration of their lights or whatever. It was only in the early 90s and for triple road train drivers, there wasn't many of us.

"Back then, we had to hook up our triples in Mount Isa. Then it came back 230km to Morven and then it came back another 90km to Mitchell. Now it's another 85km closer to Brisbane, at Roma. Apparently, soon we'll be talking about Toowoomba, which is 350km closer. There's more and more road trains on the road, whereas we were the big boys back then."

Getting trailers in the right place at the right time is always a bit of a juggling act.

The operation has single trailers coming up the Toowoomba Range on the 160km drive up out of Brisbane, arriving at the Pittsworth depot. At this point, they are hooked up as double road trains and head West. One of the trucks will be doing a 'dog' run, heading out of the yard as a double road train and traveling to Roma.

At Roma the dog trailers are separated and then added to the other doubles, turning them into triple road



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trains for the run to Mount Isa, another 1330km further. The dog runner picks up a couple of trailers returning from Mount Isa and runs them back to Pittsworth. The whole system works like a sort of constant conveyor belt.

The system for running to and from Townsville with triple road trains is much less complicated. Triples can run all of the way from Mount Isa into the pads at the Port at Townsville and these are then broken up to run as doubles, under permit, across from the Port to the Mt Isa Carriers yard.

Every driver works on standard hours trips have been arranged to ensure drivers do not need to drive any more than 12 hours a day. The relationship with customers has developed to the point where Mt Isa Carriers will tell a customer when any freight can get delivered, and not the other way round.

"I refuse to be pushed," says Kent. "So, my drivers all work on standard hours and we are constantly checking them, every week. When a driver comes in, he'll hand his logbook sheets into Sharlee and then we'll check them against the tracking. We don't want them breaking any laws. I refuse to overload, we're old school, and I want to keep it that way. It's a really

fine line between wanting to keep that old school culture and when you've got to bring the technology into it.

"I have done million-dollar deals on a handshake. People these days still find that hard to believe. If a customer's got a problem, every single customer that I have, has my mobile number. You're not going to go to a call centre. If they've got a problem, they're going to ring me and I'm going to sort it out for them. The only thing I have to sell is a service, that's all I've got, and that's what wins them over.

"A lot of companies fail to understand that it is a service industry. I have had a delivery from a major company recently. They lost it, then delivered it to the wrong place. It took six weeks for them to actually acknowledge they'd stuffed up and would replace it. Every time I spoke to someone different and so you'd have to start again from scratch. We don't have that here."

KEEPING THE TRUCKS ON THE ROAD

Mt Isa Carriers has got a workshop, but a lot of the maintenance is outsourced on the newer trucks, under maintenance contracts. They also have good relationships along the routes

with people who can help out if a truck or trailer has problems.

As it is for many in the industry getting drivers is an issue, with the fleet's drivers having an average age in the early fifties.

"I've got a young driver here, Jayden is just about to turn 23," says Kent. "He wanted to drive road trains, so we've brought him through. He was in a body truck, we gave him some local work, then a couple of dog runs. He's now in one of the new Macks and he's not 23 yet, and a lot of big businesses won't do that. I've had to take special insurance coverage on him.

"You've got to be able to do this, you've got to give them a go. To Jaydon's credit he is unbelievable, a good kid, a good operator, he listens, but they are few and far between.

"He will go a long way. I hope he stays forever, but being young, who knows. Someone has to have this trust and put them in a truck. I'm running trucks and trailers worth a million dollars and then the freight on top of it. You don't want idiots behind the wheel and that's why a lot of big companies won't employ people under 25. I'm unprepared to take that special coverage out on them." **PT**