

# HEAVY HAULER

- GREG SHEEHAN



**G**REG SHEEHAN IS A NAME THAT'S synonymous with heavy haulage in this country, and in particular the art and science of piloting over-dimension loads. The subject of this month's Southpac Trucks Legends was for many years a board member of the NZ Heavy Haulage Association and between 2007 and 2009 served a two-year term as Association chairman, becoming the first-ever pilot representative in that role.

During his time as a board member he was heavily involved with the planning and rollout of the BESS (Bridge Engineering Self Supervision) scheme. BESS represented quite a change to the way overweight and over-dimension permits had been handled previously, he explains: "Up till then the NZTA (NZ Transport Agency/Waka Kotahi) provided its own supervisors who monitored the crossing of every bridge. Often, that could mean they'd be out with a job for up to a whole day or more.

"Under the BESS system, when a permit is issued to a company, it's a requirement that its drivers have to be certified for BESS, so they understand and can implement the various conditions specified in the permit – things like the speed across various bridges,

positioning (for example, whether in the lane or straddling the centreline) and other aspects of that nature."

During the same period the BESS scheme was being implemented, Greg was also working closely with Tranzqual and MITO to set up the framework for industry qualifications nationwide...and somehow found time to also write a guide to the Vehicle Dimensions and Mass Rule (VDAM). The guide is currently in its fifth update, and remains the go-to resource for people needing to untangle the Rule's complexities.

Greg happily admits that heavy haulage has been his life – and passion – for a long time...yet despite always having an interest in the sector, the arc of his career had swung through a lot of other activities before taking its proper shape, when in 1999 he set up a heavy hauling piloting company.

That was 22 years ago, sure, but consider that he'd been working 33 years before that, and never directly in heavy haulage. However, trucks were generally a key part of every job he had, even if several positions were more of the corporate stripe, in heavy vehicle sales and marketing.

His first job, in 1966, was as a truck

driver with Smith & Davies. At just 19, with a new licence and the youngest driver in the fleet, it was inevitable that he'd score the oldest truck, he quips. But with time and experience he rose through the ranks to eventually become the firm's transport manager.

After 15 years with Smith & Davies a change of scenery beckoned and Greg headed off to Melbourne, where he took up a position selling Mercedes Benz trucks and buses in that city and Victoria. This was an introduction to what Greg terms the 'corporate' phase of his career.

Back in Auckland after a two-year taste of Oz, he worked for a time as a supervisor for RFL before shifting to Bridge Freight as operations supervisor.

1986 saw a return to truck sales when he was approached by CablePrice, at the time the regional distributor for Mercedes Benz. When the franchise shifted to the German Motor Distributors division of the Giltrap Group in 1990, Greg went with it. During his time with GMD he was involved in the launch of the Freightliner brand in New Zealand and developed strong friendships that are still thriving.



However, by the late 1990s he felt the need for a change, says Greg: “Things were happening in the industry that were out of my control, so I was keen to move on. The long commute from the North Shore to the city was also getting to be tiresome. Arly in 1998 I saw an ad for an operations manager with Hiway Stabilizers, at Silverdale just a few minutes from where we lived, applied and got the job.

“I enjoyed the work, but it wasn’t long before things were ticking over so smoothly that by mid-morning all the crews would be set up on their various projects and I’d be spending the rest of the day reading the Herald.

“I’d long had a hankering to get really involved in heavy haulage, especially the piloting side, so six months later I decided to set up my own overdimension piloting company, Sheehan’s Transport Assistance. Originally I was working as a B-grade pilot, but in 1999 I completed the course at the Police Training School at Porirua and gained my A-grade certification.”

Income during the first few years was supplemented by a contract with GMD to look after that company’s vehicle movement logistics. Son Mike joined him in helping build that side of the business, which eventually grew to become an independent entity, Truck Moves NZ, that Mike bought from his parents in 2007. Truck Moves now looks after a high proportion of the new-truck shifts across the country as well as offering port logistics, Customs liaison and vehicle inspection services.

Sheehan’s Transport Assistance quickly expanded from straight piloting to offer a wide range of associated services, including permit applications for overdimension or overweight loads, route planning and other logistics, plus training for heavy haulage drivers.

Over the years the company has been involved with piloting overdimension loads

for several major projects, including bridge beams for the Newmarket viaduct and Transmission Gully.

Early on in his company’s history it was involved with trials conducted by NZTA prior to changes in the VDAM Rule, Greg recalls: “The Agency arranged with the Road Transport Association to supply trucks with a conventional B-train lead semi and towing a 40ft rear semi, loaded with steel plate to the maximum permitted weights at the time and to carry out trials between Albany and Warkworth with the help of Peter Baas’ road research team. They observed the off-tracking of the semis and dropped paint markers as they tracked through curves at various speeds.

“This was carried out over several days, with me being the long load pilot on the job. A permit was provided by NZTA for the loads, with the proviso that an A-grade pilot was used. At that time I was still a B-grade, but the requirements were amended to allow me to do the job, as I was very familiar with the local district.

“The results from these trials eventually led to the introduction of H-permit trucks with greater dimension and load capabilities.”

Now semi-retired in Taupo, Greg still does a certain amount of training, but late in 2019 he sold the pilot vehicle. He also regularly advises companies on overweight permit applications, and even tenders applications on behalf of owner/operators who might not have the time (or experience) to wade through the paperwork involved.

From the beginning of his piloting career, Greg was a committed member of the Heavy Haulage Association, throwing himself into efforts to further the industry.

In 2016, his dedication was recognised with the Gus Breen Memorial Award, given for outstanding contribution to the Association over a period of time.

Receiving the award, he says, was both

humbling and thrilling: “Being involved in this industry is my life. It’s what I do, and what I love doing.

“The other award I’m very proud of was given by the NZ Defence Industry Association in 2015 for an outstanding performance in the uplift and delivery of the NZ Navy’s 10 new Seasprite maritime helicopters from the Auckland port to Whenuapai. We carried out the job in conjunction with three independent Auckland transporter operators, provided all the piloting and permitting services as well as the cartage, and won the tender in competition with some of the big heavy haulage firms. We handled every aspect of the project.

“The helicopters had to be craned off their shipping trolleys onto the transporters and lashed down in strict accordance to the specifications laid down by the manufacturer, all supervised and checked by Defence Force personnel. It was a challenging but fascinating job.

“It has turned out to be quite a win-win, even now. One of the operators, Ian Spedding, has subsequently gained consistent work transporting helicopters around the country.”

And now that Greg has eased back from full-on work, does he have a hobby to fill his time? He laughs: “As you might expect, it’s still to do with piloting. I’ve set up a 1998 Toyota Hilux as a pilot vehicle of the era when I started out, complete with all the lights and signs of the time, and authentic even down to a 20-year-old CB tuned to Channel 11. Other guys might have full-sized classic project trucks, but this is my toy.

“I’ve entered it for the Bombay Truck Show, and I’ve heard that people on the show committee were wondering about the idiot who was putting in a Hilux, until it was explained to them.

“But it has also been properly set up and complies with all the current requirements, so it. 

