



AS FEATURED IN **RESOURCE IN FOCUS**
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NO COMPROMISE



Tough by name, and tough by nature. Twenty years on from the first Tuff Trailer, this forward-thinking Queensland company is the manufacturer of the strongest custom-built truck trailers for large and outsize loads to be found anywhere.

Written by John Boley

Denis Di Pasquale actually started up in business in 1993 as a general fabrications company, but one of his first products was a trailer for a well-known Toowoomba-based trucking company, SEDL Transport. This was the result of, in essence, a chance meeting with SEDL's owner during an ambitious trip Denis made, as a forthright 20-year-old, across much of Queensland to promote interest in a design he had developed for a trailer featuring hydraulic widening decks and an airbag suspension.

"Most of the places I stopped at, people thought it was a crazy idea," Denis recalls. "But the last place I stopped at was SEDL Transport." He bumped – literally – into Michael, son of the owner, who described his company's own requirement for a special quad-axle low-loader trailer.

Funding the business and convincing bankers and lawyers of the abilities of someone still fresh from apprenticeship was far from easy, but ultimately Denis raised the money, acquired the premises and built the

trailer, working all the hours he could for six weeks straight. "I designed it and built it as I went," he explains. The decision on the name was equally empirical – Denis recalls his extreme nervousness as SEDL's owner Max took delivery and studied the 'Tuff Trailer' decal on the gooseneck. Finally, slowly, he nodded his approval and a brand was born.

Two decades later, the trailer is still in action, having run up more than five million kilometres. Is that a mixed blessing, as there would appear to be little or no replacement business? "I promote my business on a product basis, not on replacement business," says Denis. Many people build things – not just in the automotive business – with a set lifespan (although thankfully, the old practice of 'planned obsolescence' is less prevalent than it used to be). "But we don't – we build it to last." In fact, resale values of Tuff Trailers remain high; at the ten-year mark they typically sell for their original purchase value. Denis sold early units to shire councils, most of whom bring them back for an occasional service and repaint but are still using them nearly 20 years on. ➡





► Not content to stand still, however, the company continually introduces innovations in design and refinements of ideas that help transport companies move more efficiently or cut costs. Denis says these changes in specification provide a stimulus for customers to replace their trailers. In a reasonably favourable economic climate, customers also like to expand, so demand for new units is healthy.

“When a customer calls for a custom design for a specific application, Tuff Trailers can have it up and running faster than almost anyone else in the industry.”

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As with most businesses nationwide, the early part of 2014 has been slow, but in the case of Tuff Trailers, that merely means reining in the recent years' expansion rate of around 50 per cent. The strongest driver for new business is probably word of mouth, Denis explains; these units do not fall apart even under the harshest treatment or conditions, and their reputation precedes them. Some Tuff Trailers have survived nearly

two decades up in PNG and the Solomon Islands in conditions that have reduced rivals to pieces in months.

Despite the recent downturn, which Denis believes to be a temporary lull rather than the edge of a cliff, Tuff Trailers continues to recruit skilled staff. "We have actually hired more boilermakers in the last three months, in order to reduce lead times." In ►►



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► a static market the company can garner a greater share by delivering faster and on time, further improving customer service. It is also true that when, as is often the case, a customer calls for a custom design for a specific application, Tuff Trailers can have it up and running faster than almost anyone else in the industry. As conditions improve, those customers remain loyal because the product is so strong.



Early this year, the company released its first eight-rows-of-eight steerable low loader, in a range offering payloads from 50 tonnes to more than 200 tonnes. "We designed it to be the best," says Denis. "We use the best of everything in that trailer." Denis is a boilermaker by trade and understands quality in materials – all steels are Swedish and no corners are cut in specifications. Wherever possible, Australian materials and equipment are specified; regardless of any cost implications, Denis has no interest in moving all



or even part of the company's manufacturing operations overseas, and he identifies strong relationships with his suppliers, and the high quality of the parts and materials they provide, to be key to the company's ongoing success. Transport companies large or small know that Tuff Trailer is not cheap, and it never will be, Denis says. It is a premium product, designed to enable the customer to impress his customers with efficiency and economy, and obtain more business for that customer.

"The company's units do not fall apart even under the harshest treatment or conditions, and their reputation precedes them."

Compromises on product quality or design shortcuts, of course, would ruin that premise. "When we design, it is all about the best – not about dollars and cents." But the price tag of a new trailer is only part of the story; some of the company's designs are intended to provide extra cost-effectiveness in service. There is ►

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► the patented automatic-loading spare-tyre carrier, for example, that can be stacked alongside the gooseneck, so the operator does not have to climb up or roll heavy wheels around – a significant saver on the H&S front.

There is also the load and lift ramp set-up on the trailer rear, also patented, which is proving a massive fuel-saver. Hydraulically controlled, this design keeps the



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ramps themselves out of the airstream, so they can be lowered to the deck level. Even when the trailer is loaded with a machine, ramps in the air prove a huge drag factor and increase fuel consumption; running back empty is a crippling on-coast. Denis says he has one customer who has measured the savings of the Tuff Trailers design over other trailers with conventional ramps at a phenomenal \$20,000 per year per trailer in diesel. That renders any sticker-price premium almost irrelevant over a 20-year trailer life. To be sure, "fuel and tyres are the biggest cost in the transport business and these are the kind of ideas that have kept Tuff Trailers leading the way."

Everything is designed in-house, and the company's facilities include a high-definition plasma profile cutter and all cutter equipment, a large blast room, and a huge paint room with full water scrubbing and 2-pack paint throughout. "We control everything – we even cut out the vinyl stickers here." Control is vital, Denis believes – if you don't have supervision of the complete process, any aspect is liable to let you down. "If I can't build a quality product and get sales from building the best, there is no point in doing it."

Denis and his wife Nicole were invited late last year to Sweden, where on behalf of his company he was able to accept an award for innovation given at the annual ceremony of SSAB ►


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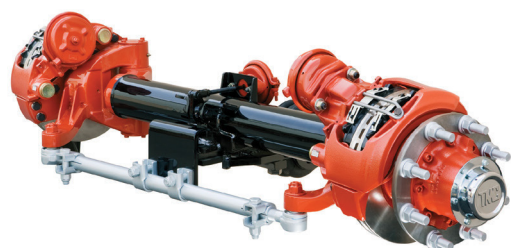
► (Swedish Steel). It's a long way to go for a gong but it was worthwhile – Tuff Trailers placed second worldwide for its innovative steel forming and unique steel application, chosen by a panel of international judges who examined its designs alongside those of high-speed train manufacturers and other advanced users of high-tensile steel. The company's reception at this function was awe-inspiring, says Denis. "It made us stop

and think that we are making an impact, not just in Australia but across the world."

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Tuff Trailers is operating in every state in Australia and Denis is now focussing new efforts on expansion abroad, based on demand from his top customers and the brand's growing reputation. It seems like Denis would like to try to find a load to challenge him – whatever it might be, he will be happy to pen a trailer to take it. ■



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