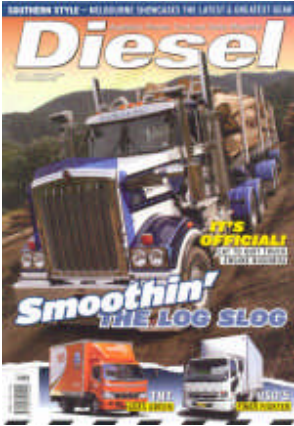


RICHARDS

HARVESTING & HAULAGE



We first came across the pristine T904 and extendible mini B-double set on Kennedy Trailer's stand at Trucks in Action earlier this year. With a view to finding out more about the operation, PAUL MATTHEI recently paid a visit to the central Gippsland town of Morwell which is also the home base of Richards Harvesting & Haulage.

Diesel in the Blood

Having spent a sizeable chunk of his youth knocking around the high country of Victoria with his old man who was also a logger, it's hardly surprising that Danny 'Diesel' Richards ended up in the timber harvesting game, albeit on a significantly larger scale.

Diesel's first occupation after leaving school was as an apprentice motor mechanic but the lure of the forest was too strong and the day his apprenticeship finished Danny left to pursue his real passion.

"That was my background, my father was a logger and I spent most of my early life in the bush with him. I guess that was where I was always going to end up," he relates. "When I was 21 I went working for a bloke who gave me a bit of a start for one year and the next year I began working for a contractor full on. Then in 1980 I bought a job off an old logging contractor who wanted to get out of the game and from there I just progressed along."

And progress he certainly has. Back in 1980, Danny started with that one job and just one employee while today the payroll stands at 50 and the company harvests and hauls within the vicinity of 250,000 tonnes of timber each year from five separate jobs. The haulage is shared between 16 company trucks, the majority of which are Kenworths, as well as a number of subcontractors as need dictates.

When asked about his initial truck, it was a surprise to find out that for the first decade of his timber harvesting operation, Richards didn't have one truck to his name.

"A second hand International S-line with a jinker was the first truck I bought in 1990," he relates, followed by an old 1981 W-model Kenworth I bought off a bloke who had been subbying for me.

"I've still got that truck (the W-model)," Diesel adds with just a hint of pride, "The old banger's still floating around – actually she's out working today."

"Is that a testament to the longevity of Kenworths?" I ask.

"Yeah, yeah," he answered somewhat reservedly, "but its cost me a bit of money over the years. I've had a fair bit of engine trouble with it."

It wasn't until the year 2000 that Danny bought his first pair of new Kenworths. That's right, two new T950s in the one hit and he was invited to the factory at Bayswater to see them both coming down the production line together.



“I’ve always been a Kenworth sort of person,” he admits. “At the end of the day when you sell them you know you’re still going to get something for them.

“I’ve got some that are nearly six years old and probably need turning over soon. But I know I’m still going to get good money for them when I do. That’s probably a big reason why I’ve stuck with Kenworths.”

That said, Richards admits he doesn’t have a strictly regimented turnover policy and suggests that the reliability and durability of the Kenworths allows some flexibility in this area.

“It depends on what we’re doing. Once you get a bit of equity in them you feel like you can start to get yourself ahead a bit. It’s like any business; you can’t afford to have everything on finance. Even if trucks that are five or six years old start to cost you a little bit of money, at the end of the day they’re still making you money too.

The next question about engine choice in the fleet draws an intriguing response from Richards.

“At the moment I’ve got a mix of Cummins and Cat but with the latest trucks I’ve started to lean back towards Cummins,” he explained. “Back when I was buying the first new trucks they were having trouble with the Signatures, so I sort of swung away from them a bit and went to the Cats. But then we seemed to have a few problems with them too, mainly with injectors and turbos. I think it’s because there’s a few of them – one will do a turbo, then the next one and the next one, and the same with injectors. It seems to happen when they reach a certain mileage. You can pretty well mark it on the calendar and order in the parts I reckon.”

Danny went on to explain that most of the turbo failures in the Cats have been due to a problem with the stainless steel inserts incorporated into the exhaust manifold gasket which are designed to give the engine better response. The problem is “they fall to bits and go twang through the turbo,” he describes.

Interestingly, Caterpillar’s new emission reducing ACERT technology which includes a twin turbo setup had no bearing on Danny’s decision to tend back to Cummins engines.

“I was moving away from Cat anyway,” he declares. “I’ve just ordered a new T908 and it will have a 620 hp Signature under the bonnet.”

The Kennedy Connection

Danny Richards’ experience with Kennedy logging trailers goes back almost as far as his contact with Kenworth trucks. In fact, the old W-model he bought came complete with a McKee jinker, a brand which Kennedy Trailers subsequently bought the rights to. As with the trucks, Diesel started purchasing new log trailers around 2000 although he still runs a number of units which came as package deals with second hand trucks.

“I’ve got a bit of Blackwood gear I’ve sort of inherited with other trucks,” Richards remarks. “That company went out of business about five years ago.”

Turning the conversation back to Kennedys, he mentions that the company has pioneered many of the developments in log trailer design, particularly the folding skel arrangement.



“They’re a bit more set in what they’re doing now,” Diesel continued. “Once you would go and buy one trailer then the next one would have different components, but now most of their trailers are pretty standard.”

The current fleet includes four mini Bs and a tri-tri B-double, the latter was put through special trials with Richards to enable its endorsement for traversing the narrow mountain roads. However, subsidence in the road caused by recent heavy rain has meant this unit has been split up and is currently being used for single trailer roles. Still, talking to Danny you get the impression that the mini Bs are his firm favourite in this operation.



“These mini Bs, you can take them pretty well everywhere,” he enthused. “We cart off most of our jobs in the state forest with them.”

Taking a closer look, it’s easy to appreciate the remarkable versatility of the Kennedy mini B-double. For example, it features an extendible tag trailer which at full stretch takes overall length to 22 metres. In this state it can carry either 11 metre lengths at the back and 5.5 metre lengths up front or three bays of 5.5 metre lengths. Alternatively, for general access it can be retracted to an overall length of 19 metres in which three bays of four metre lengths can be accommodated.

After covering the mechanical components of the business from front to back, it was time to discuss some of the other equally important aspects such as staff, fuel and maintenance.

First and foremost, Danny acknowledges the vital role each of his employees plays in the success of the business.

“Any business is only as good as the people you’ve got out there doing the job for you. I would say that 95 percent of our employees are really, really good people. We’ve got good truck drivers, good operators, good office staff and mechanics.”

Workshop staff consists of four mechanics, an apprentice and a boiler maker and Danny says having his own mechanics is vital. “The business revolves around the harvesters cutting the wood and the trucking force as its own identity to cart it. They’re what make the money to make my business function,” he says. “I have a full time field service guy and the others can go between the workshop and the field as required.

“That’s actually the part of the business that I’m trying to tidy up at the moment – the workshop’s been a bit of a headache to me. We’ve started to get ahead but still have a bit to do there.”

He went on to explain that the company is embarking on a new maintenance program to streamline the workshop operation.

As the topic of conversation rolls around to tyres, Richards concedes to lately getting a good run out of Bandag retreads on the drive and trailer positions and Michelin, Goodyear and Toyo tyres on the steer. This leads to a thought-provoking line of dialogue relating back to earlier discussion about maintaining a happy workforce.

“To a certain extent I let the drivers make their own decisions. I have drivers who like one brand of tyre but not another. I’m not going to say, for example, ‘we only run Toyo steer tyres in this business.’ If they want to run Michies I’ll say ‘fair enough’ because we get a good case out of them and the price difference isn’t much anyway. I’d rather keep drivers sitting behind the steering wheel. As soon as you start to bully them they won’t be here.

“I deal with Vic Tyres (Tyrepower) and Bandag. Again, because their pricing is roughly the same I let the drivers use whichever outlet they prefer. That way they’re more likely to treat the truck as their own.”

On oil, Danny currently uses Castrol in the machines and Cat oil in the Cat-powered prime movers while those fitted with Cummins engines are lubricated with Valvoline as a warranty requirement. Engine oil change intervals with all the machinery including trucks is a standard 250 hours. This tends to average out around the once a month mark. According to Richards, this is a more accurate measure of actual work done than distance traveled.

“The trucks work pretty hard in the forest – plenty of hours and not many kilometers. But at other times they could be running down the highway so it varies a lot. With our industry it’s better to stick to hours.”



With the seemingly endless upward trend in diesel fuel prices, every business that uses a large quantity must try to maximise efficiency at every turn. While Richards believes there’s not much he can do to reduce fuel usage, he does have his finger on the pulse when it comes to passing on rising fuel costs to his customers.

“Most of the companies I work for have an indexation system with trigger points so that once the fuel goes over a certain price I can pass it on,” he explained. “But at the end of the day you still never get the full cost back.

“We use around 180,000 litres of fuel every month which works out at over two million litres per year,” Diesel continued, before adding, “I’ve just purchased my own fuel truck to feed the machinery in the harvesting operations. I’m now going through the process of working out which fuel company will give me the best deal.”

Mountain climbing



Morwell in Victoria’s central Gippsland district is a relatively sleepy town, particularly at 5.30 on a chilly Autumn morning, as I found out while waiting to be picked up by one of Danny Richards’ gun drivers, Cliff McBride. Before long a set of orange marker lights in the characteristically square rigger formation accompanied by the unmistakable deep burble of a big bore Cummins materialised from the mist. Opening the passenger door of the T904, I was greeted by a jovial bloke in his mid 30s who has been driving for Danny Richards for the past two years. A fleeting glance around the cab reveals a spotless interior, right down to the Kenworth floor mats; suggesting Cliff takes a lot of pride in looking after the truck he drives.

As logging trucks go, this one is just a pup having at the time of my visit covered just over 60,000 km since it was put on the road late last year. Possessing a typically robust logging truck spec, it’s powered by a Cummins Signature engine which churns out 620 hp at 1900 rpm and 2050 lb ft of torque at 1200 rpm feeding into a heavy duty Eaton 18-speed transmission and 46,000 pound rated rear axles riding on Kenworth Air-Ride 400 suspension. At Cliff’s request, a 4.56 diff ratio was specified which gives the truck slightly better mountaineering ability than the usual 4.33 item. On flat running the engine sounded sweet with the tacho registering 1650 rpm at 100 km/h.

As we head out of town I note the absolute professionalism of this driver who like his current boss spent a decent chunk of his younger years working in the bush, felling trees and operating machinery before graduating into the road transportation side of the industry. As such, he's been navigating log trucks up and down the narrow winding mountain roads in the Victorian high country for the past 18 years. Later on while watching Cliff load the truck, it was easy to see his prowess in operating logging machinery was equal to his truck driving ability.

Our destination was Connor's Plains fire salvage operation which is about 225 km from Morwell. This area was subjected to a ferocious bushfire a few years back which rendered the trees unsuitable for sawn timber due to the massive cracks that are caused by the heat of the fire. Therefore, the Richards operation is moving through and harvesting the logs which are trucked to various pulp mills and eventually turned into paper products.

The road wends its way through Hayfield and on to the little town of Licola nestled in the foothills of the Victorian Alps before spiraling up the mountain side. As a first-timer to this area it was difficult to judge the steepness of the grade because the 620 horses of the Cummins Signature combined with an operator who seemed to know every cog in the transmission on a first name basis were just doing it so easy. But looking out over the expansive valley, below the thin ribbon of blacktop, provided a sobering reminder as to just how elevated this mountain range is. In fact, Cliff informed me that a few days prior the area had been blanketed with the first layer of white powder for the season.

Through a multitude of tight sweepers the Kenworth/Kennedy combination never failed to impress with its precise steering and minimal track-in, and the UHF radio providing an effective 'bush telegraph' to allow drivers to prepare for the inevitable meetings where one would invariably need to pull into a siding to allow the other past. All the corners are signposted with numbers and the drivers regularly broadcast their current position with phrases such as "10 empty" or "15 loaded" depending on whether they're heading up or down the mountain. No GPS required here!

Arriving at the jobsite, McBride expertly backed the combination alongside a stockpile of logs and readied the trailers for their load. In the empty travelling state only the rearmost set of tyres touch the road with the remainder either suspended mid air or resting above the truck's drive axles. Two hefty chains fasten the lead trailer which is folded in half and rests on the robust headboard constructed from aluminum tube. Once all the tyres are on the ground, the rear trailer is extended by driving the prime mover forward while the rear trailer brakes remain engaged.



In the fully opened position the trailers were swiftly loaded by two machines, one stacking 11 metre lengths on the rear and the other piling 5.5 metre logs on the lead unit. Little more than 15 minutes later McBride was deftly throwing the straps over and another five minutes later it was time to head down the mountain. While on the topic of straps, the ExTe Luftman powered units fitted to these trailers provide big safety gains compared to chains and dogs. As the name suggests, the Swedish made units are pneumatically operated and feature self-adjusting tensioning. Any slack that develops in the strap due to settling of the logs during transit is automatically taken up – sheer brilliance! Another strapping feature of this Kennedy trailer that saves much time and effort when unloading is the simple mechanism that allows the operator to release the strap and unhook the end from the same side.

The trip down was even more exciting than coming up. Talk about hold on to the edge of your seat stuff! Rounding the corners sitting in the passenger side you're looking down at 150-odd metres of almost sheer drop and nothing but fresh air between the truck and the valley floor. Yet the experience and skills of the driver and the calibre of the equipment does much to instill confidence.

With this type of work engine braking performance is arguably more important than outright power since the trucks are ascending the mountain unladen and going down fully loaded. In this case, both measures are close to parity with Cummins' Intebrake offering a gripping 600 hp of retarding effort which is generally recognised as the best in the business. The key to this awesome performance lies in the dual overhead camshafts, one of which is dedicated solely to developing the 28,000 psi fuel injection pressure while the other takes care of normal valve operation in addition to engine braking duties. The impressive tracking ability of the mini B on the way up was seemingly duplicated on the return run, even with the tag trailer extended to its maximum.

Such is the effectiveness of the Intebrake system, both Danny and Cliff concur that even under these extreme conditions, in the hands of a good steerer it's possible to achieve 250,000 to 300,000 km between brake lining changes.

Back on the level, the run back to Morwell was simply a doddle and back in the yard there was an opportunity for further discussion with Danny Richards. Asked whether he could see the company expanding in the future, Danny intimated that he would prefer to keep employee numbers around the 50 mark.

"I don't want to get any bigger than what we are now," he replied. "We've diversified a bit into dozing, road making and some heavy haulage but we always want to keep timber harvesting as the core business."

With that, it was time to contemplate the factors behind a successful enterprise such as Richards Harvesting & Haulage in a demanding environment both physically and financially. It's logical to conclude that when it comes to the principal equipment chosen for the road transport side of this business – namely Kenworth and Kennedy products – outstanding durability and versatility play a major role in an efficient and sustainable logging operation.

