

## **HUGH SAUNDERS'S MEMORIES OF EARLY DAYS IN CONTAINER SHIPPING**

### Chapter One

My first job in Australia after arriving early in 1968 was with Seatainer Terminals Ltd.

STL was the operating company of the first dedicated container terminals in Australia. It was owned 50/50 by OCAL, the Australian arm of Overseas Containers Ltd. , and Associated Steamships Pty. Ltd. ASP was the result of a merger of Adelaide Steamship Co. and McIlwraith McEachern, two old established Australian shipping companies.

The STL terminals at Fremantle, Melbourne and Sydney were being built for the new Overseas Containers Ltd/Associated Container Transportation joint service between Australia and UK and European Continental ports. There was another similar terminal being built by Brisbane Wharves and Wooldumping to handle the OCL and ACT ships there.

ASP had in 1964 built the "Kooringa", the first cellular containership built as such in the world. All other such ships had been converted. She traded between Fremantle and Melbourne, carrying 16 foot 8 inch long containers. From memory, there were fully enclosed boxes, open-tops and flat racks with cage sides. She also had 'D Boxes, small containers that were grouped in fives by frames that fitted on to the tops. "Kooringa" had two gantry cranes to load and discharge. The terminal in Melbourne was at Victoria Dock and the containers were ferried by trucks to and from a depot at Sudholz Street, West Melbourne. There, there was an overhead travelling crane with a spreader which lifted the boxes in and out of stacks, three high I think, for packing and unpacking on the ground.

This was the forerunner of the system that was to be established in the STL terminals where 20 foot and 40 foot long containers would be stacked five high. A similar terminal was being built at Tilbury in the Port of London where the OCL and ACT ships were to load and unload. (I have never been clear as to whether STL or OCL had the original idea for this system. I feel that it was Adrian Boehme, General manager of ASP and a director of STL.)

I joined STL at 90 William Street, where ASP's and STL's head offices were and where the STL Victorian office was temporarily. After some months, I was appointed Control Supervisor of the Melbourne STL Terminal and we of the Victorian staff moved to the ASP Victoria office at Sudholz Street.

At this time, the development of Swanson Dock and the terminal on its west side was going on. The dock was completely new, dredged on the north side of the Yarra and designed specifically for the overseas container ships that were going to be much bigger than the conventional cargo ships that they replaced. It was named after Vic Swanson, chairman of the Melbourne Harbor Trust. (It was also often misspelt in newspapers as “Swanston Dock, like the city street.) It was built on Coode Island, east of the chemical tank farms that fronted the Marybyrnong River. The ground was all sandy, reclaimed, as I understood it and, in fact the river had originally flowed through that area. The whole area south of Footscray Road had been known as Dudley Flats and had been swampy and home to rabbits and old hobos living in humpies, or so I was told by several taxi drivers who called the road “Swamp Road”. I even heard of an airstrip there.

On my first visit to the terminal, all there was to be seen was one steel column, a pile driver and lots and lots of sand. The column was the first of what was to be the container stacking area. Let me explain the five-high stack because it has long been consigned to history and deservedly so because clever though it theoretically was, there were things about it that didn't really work. Here I deal with the STL Melbourne terminal but those in the other Australian ports were essentially the same, as was the one at Tilbury.

Containers were stacked on top of each other, five high, in rows, under a system of overhead travelling gantry cranes (OHT's). These travelled on rails supported by steel columns which rested on concrete piles driven deep into the ground. Across, there were bays. They were referred to by letter whilst the rows had numbers. Thus a stack might be called 15B and the container on the third height of that stack would be said to be in 15B3.

The bays were divided in the middle by Centre Road along which travelled Internal Transfer Vehicles (ITV's). These were tractors towing skeletal trailers on which the containers were placed by the cranes for transfer between the stacks and the wharf. On the west side of the bays, was another road where the commercial trucks ran under the cranes, bringing in exports and taking away imports.

The northern most bays were covered by a roof which was where refrigerated containers were stacked. Each container position in these bays was connected to the reefer plant. OCL and ACT reefers were of the “porthole variety”. That is they were insulated but did not have refrigeration motors. They had two portholes, one above the other, and these were connected to the terminal plant by hydraulically operated bellows. Similar connections were in the reefer bays of the ships.

Each reefer stack could operate at whatever temperature was required – either for hard frozen or chilled products.

The other part of the covered area was the “D Area.” This was where ASP D Boxes were framed for the ASP coastal ships. (More of that later.)

Now what was the theory of the five-high stack operation?

Before a ship arrived, we would be presented with a stowage plan – a “bay plan”. This was like a set of sections through the ship showing which container, by its number, was in each “slot”, a slot being a space where one 20 foot container fitted. The slots were numbered somewhat similarly to the terminal stacks, the first two digits being the bay number (forward to aft), the next two the cell number (athwartships) and the last two the height, which went up to 06 below deck in the early ships. So a container might be in 110206.

It was the job of the terminal planning staff to work out where each import container would be stacked in the terminal. For example, our box from 110206 could be allocated to the bottom of a stack, say 5C1. The next container out of the same cell would be allocated on top of the first one – 5C2 – and so on. This planning was recorded on “sequence sheets” which had to be followed meticulously so that the position of every import container in the terminal when discharge was completed could be seen. This terminal plan was then used to programme the availability for delivery to the consignees’ transport. Boxes on height 5 would be the first to be available, height 4’s next and so on.

For export containers, the preparations for loading involved the OCAL and TOC planners as well as the STL planning staff. (TOC, Trans-Ocean Containers, was the name of ACT’s Australian company. Later it was renamed ACTA). As containers were received, they were grouped in the stacks according to the destination port, commodity type, weight and, in the case of reefers, temperature and compatibility. (e.g. apples and pears could not be stacked with butter which they could taint.)

The ship planners at the terminal worked to instructions from their Sydney head offices and produced bay plans showing where all the booked containers were to be stowed. Again, the same categories as in the stacks applied. Generally, Melbourne exports would be stowed in the ship’s slots vacated by the Melbourne imports, although, of course the quantities were never exactly the same. The whole procedure was known as “exchanging”.

The below deck sequence sheets were compiled with the import containers’ details (stack position, container number and ship stowage position) in columns on the left and the exports’ details (in reverse) on the right. (Of course, on-deck sequence sheets were either

discharge or load only.) For below deck exchange, the first six lines in the export columns were left blank as the whole cell had to be emptied of imports before exports could be loaded. So the wharf crane driver lifted the first container from the ship and placed it on an ITV which drove under the OHT. This crane lifted it into its sequenced stack and then the ITV returned to the wharf. Once the first six import containers were in the stacks, the OHT started reloading the ITV's with export containers and the wharf crane loaded them into the ship.

The ships' bays were designed in such a way that there were two bays under each set of hatch covers. This allowed for twin lifting. So the wharf and OHT cranes had twin lift spreaders and the ITV trailers could carry two twenty foot containers or one forty footer. The first wharf cranes were American designed Paceco Portainers.

Visitors to the terminal often asked how the containers were lifted by the cranes – "Are they magnetic?" Then it had to be explained that the spreaders had twistlocks which fitted into the elliptical shaped corner castings of the containers and they twisted 90 degrees before lifting.

So the pre-exchange process produced a stack plan which showed where each import container would be located. Then I had to give the OCAL and TOC terminal representatives a list showing on which days each container would be available for delivery. It had been agreed that all containers were to be available within three days of completion of the ship's exchange. The OCAL and TOC transport officers then made arrangements with the importers' truck contractors to come on the appropriate days.

That all made sense. However, what it did not allow for was any interruption to the smooth operation of the exchange. There were many of these, mainly to do with crane breakdowns and industrial disputes. When an OHT broke down, it was often decided to continue discharge by placing containers under the Portainer on the wharf. There, of course, there were no marked bays so they were randomly stacked. Once the OHT was repaired, the containers had to be carried on ITV's to the stacks but, by then, the sequence sheets were no longer valid and the containers were stacked somewhat randomly and their numbers and stack positions had to be manually recorded.

The stack was represented in the Control Room (which was in the office building with no view of the operational area) by a board with racks on which small aluminium blocks were placed. These had the container numbers written on them with "Black Magic" lead pencils. (Typing this on my home computer 40 odd years on, it seems like something from the days of horses and carriages!)

Once the import sequence sheets had become invalid, the transport officers had to stand at the board and copy down the container

positions so they could call the truck operators and tell them which ones were in top positions and could be delivered. That sounds fine – but often by the time a truck came for a top container, it had been moved to get at another one underneath and had been overstacked and was no longer on top. It was a shambles.

## **CHAPTER 2. Seatiners Ltd. (STL)**

ASP built two brand new container ships, Kanimbla and Manoora in Whyalla and Kanimbla was actually the first ship ever to arrive at Swanson Dock – on Sunday 23 March 1969. That was not without incident. Some publicity had been organised for what was a momentous occasion in Melbourne’s shipping history and the Chairman of ASP, Jack Patterson, was there to make a speech.

Sitting at my desk in the Control Room, I became aware that the Assistant Secretary of the Waterside Workers Federation Melbourne Branch, Mick O’Neill, was confronting Des Craig, STL’s Victorian Manager, just as Kanimbla was coming up the river on her way to Swanson Dock. He said that, unless the WWF members at the terminal handled the mooring lines, they would not work the ship. We had expected that Melbourne Harbor Trust mooring gangs would do this as was customary throughout the port – and their gang was there ready to do so - but O’Neill argued that the new award gave the WWF the right to this work. My recollection is that the award listed a number of functions to which the WWF “may be entitled” and that this included mooring and unmooring but did not specifically say that they had to do this. Certainly STL had not allowed for wharfies to moor the ships and all the labour had been allocated jobs driving cranes, ITV’s etc. The MHT gang moored the ship and the wharfies stopped work. Somehow, some time later, the dispute was resolved – I can’t remember how – but not without delay and some embarrassment because there were a number of spectators there to see the dawn of an new era in shipping. There was a cartoon in Monday’s “Sun” showing a dignitary declaring “The opening of a new era in ..... industrial disputation.”

That turned out to be no joke. The WWF and the Federated Clerks Union in particular used the “container revolution” to attempt to increase the numbers of their members being employed in the terminal. Manning scales were a continual cause of disputes and there were countless stoppages. Demarcation disputes were frequent too.

Presumably, the unions foresaw that containerisation would eventually reduce the workforce and indeed that seemed to be part of the reason for the lines to introduce it. The history of unrest and poor productivity on the Australian waterfront was decades long.

The two new ASP ships and Kooringa, when she returned to service after being converted for the carriage of 20 foot containers, operated on a schedule which involved transshipping containers in Melbourne. Kooringa continued the shuttle between Melbourne and Fremantle whilst the other two ships ran from Brisbane to Sydney and Melbourne and back. Cargo from the eastern ports bound for the west was discharged in Melbourne and reloaded on Kooringa for Fremantle – and vice versa. In the case of D Boxes, the two bigger ships carried these in frames of 10 but Kooringa still carried frames of five. Thus the D's had to be reframed in Melbourne for oncarriage. This operation took place on a concrete slab, the D Area, in the terminal using small fork lifts to handle the D's.

Kanimbla and Manoora also had special decks which held "Cartainers". These were platforms that could be lifted by the Portainer and uncased motor cars were lashed on them.

Kooringa's design included sponsons which required large rubber fenders to be fitted to the wharf by the Portainer before she berthed and to be removed before the next ship came in.

So whenever an ASP ship arrived at the terminal, there were plenty of operations simultaneously taking place and, often, an OCL or ACT ship had just left or was due soon afterwards. The work at STL was unrelenting.

Although for the overseas ships, all the stability calculations were done by the shipping lines' people, for the ASP ships, STL's staff were responsible. We had a Casio calculating machine which could be programmed – pretty sophisticated for 1969 – and some of us landlubbers, I and some of my control clerks, had to learn about moments and GM, quite mysterious matters.

Working at STL was rewarding in that we were making procedures up as we went along. There were no precedents to follow and each of us in responsible positions could contribute. It was also exhausting and stressful. There seemed to be no limit to the things that could go wrong. Strikes, machinery breakdowns, mistakes made in stowages, damage to containers etc. meant that plans were always being changed. Work went on 24 hours a day, seven days a week and, before leaving for home any evening, one had to try to anticipate what needed to be done and leave instructions. In my case, the control clerks had to know exactly what had been planned for the remainder of the twilight shift and the whole of the midnight shift. I introduced a duplicate book in which I wrote what had to be done, tearing off one page to take with me. One day, a clerk told me they thought of that as their bible. This was quite flattering and the name stuck, even to the point of my writing BIBLE on the cover – until one day, the delegate, a

particularly unpleasant man devoted to disrupting work, said it was blasphemous and so I had to change it to “Night Orders Book.”

I had been used to starting work at 9.30 am and finishing at 5.00 pm in the head office of Port Line Ltd. in Leadenhall Street, London and so starting before the day shift, which began at 7.30 was a bit of a shock. It became even more unlike my previous life when it started getting difficult to get away before late evening. On three occasions that I can remember I worked round the clock, going home just as the midnight shift was finishing. On one of these days, I arrived home at about 6.00 am, flopped into bed and had just fallen asleep when the phone rang. Robyn told me it was Des Craig. I said “Yes, Des” and he replied “I just wanted to tell you not to come in at the usual time.” I couldn’t be cross as he had been there all the time too – and still was!

### **Chapter 3.**

This seems to be the time to talk about some of the people I was working with. Many of them were first class men who were all dedicated to making the new way of handling cargo work. Nearly all possessed the qualities that I most admire in workmates and others with whom one must deal – cooperative attitudes and a sense of humour.

Des Craig was my first boss in Australia. Phil Kelly had introduced him to me, Phil being the newly appointed Manager of TOC and I had met him in London when he visited Port Line. He had been with Port Line’s Australian agents Gibbs Bright.

When I told my wife Robyn that I was going to accept the offer of a job with STL, she asked me what they did. I said “I’m not quite sure because Des was so Irish I couldn’t understand everything he said but I think I’d like to work for him.” I never regretted the decision. He was a very good man.

Des had been master in Shaw Savill, commanding “Knight Templar” in the Crusader Line trade. He had come ashore in Melbourne as Marine Superintendent and was appointed as the first Victorian Manager of STL. Of all the ex-seagoing officers in STL, he was the only one who had been in command but it was he that said that it would be best if he and the others, who as stevedoring supervisors had been called Captain, should be called Mister.

Don Ede, originally from England, had come ashore as a supervisor with Victorian Stevedores. He was appointed STL Terminal Manager. Don was my immediate boss and a great man to work with. I recall that on several occasions, I was anxious, bordering on panicking, because I couldn’t work out what to do when planning terminal stacks

and suchlike and I went to Don with a worried look on my face and said "I've got a problem" which I would then explain. Don would say "There's only one thing we can do." "What's that?" I would reply and he would say "We'll go and get a cup of coffee." Then we would walk slowly along the passage to where the Café Bar was, pour ourselves cups of instant and walk slowly back to his desk where he would calmly work out a solution to the problem. Even when things were seriously bad, like when empty containers blew over in the stacks, Don was unflappable.

Barry Beech joined STL just after me from Shaw Savill and we soon hit it off. He was appointed Terminal Supervisor and we were quite a good team working under Don. Just as I had the clerks to deal with – in an ongoing state of confrontation – Barry had the wharfies who were no less tricky to deal with.

Eddie Hide, another from Shaw Savill, was the accountant and a thoroughly nice man to work with. He came to me after the first ship had gone to ask how many containers had been handled. He had to compile the account, multiplying the volume by the "base rate" which I think was then \$20. I had given no thought to this, being totally occupied with getting the exchange planned and implemented. The "business" side seemed quite remote to me.

Steve Alty managed the STL depot where LCL containers were packed and unpacked. He was another Englishman from Vic Stevedores and another nice colleague. DTV, short for Depot Terminal Vehicle, was the transfer of LCL's usually in the evening shift. The depot wanted import LCL's as soon as possible to meet the three day availability target. Quite often, terminal operations couldn't keep up and Steve and I played a little game on the phone on many a morning:

*Alty – "Hot Water Service (my initials are HWS), not enough LCL's last night."*

*Saunders – "State Registered Nurse (his initials are SRNA), we.... " then I'd give my explanation – strikes, breakdowns etc.*

*Alty – "Not interested in excuses, just results."*

Luckily all this was good humoured. Steve later got promoted to head office and Alastair Reid, another Vics man, took over. He was a Scot with an accent to prove it and good fun. He waged a seemingly endless battle with The Storemen and Packers Union and spent days in the Arbitration Commission before Justice Moore.

I had three master mariners under me in the planning room, Peter Coghlan, Peter Johnson and Hans van Weel. I think they had all quite recently come ashore and they were good practical and conscientious men. That has always seemed to me to be typical of seagoing men.



The equivalent men under Barry Beech included John Coffin, who had been the man controlling crane movements at the ASP Depot, and Hank Smit. Hank was an amusing Dutchman. One day when things were particularly hectic, he took his walkie-talkie radio into the toilet. He came out saying “I was just about to sit when a foreman on the radio to the crane driver called ‘Don’t lower!’”

The representatives in the terminal from the shipping lines were generally good fellows. Tony Plante was in charge of the OCAL team and he had Trevor Bryans, a jolly Irishman as his ship planner. His opposite number in TOC was Denis Gallagher, a Scot. With OCL and ACT running a joint service, these two worked as a team and when it became clear that the massive computer printouts of bookings, on continuous stationery, were unwieldy and hard to use, they devised an excellent one page, pencil written summary which they updated all the time. They called it the Integrated Northbound Container Export Summary TOCAL - or INCEST for short! Later, another Scot took over from Denis. He was John Mackinnon, known as J McK, another good fellow.

Late one memorable evening, Trevor and Denis came to me with a problem. A strong styrene taint had affected many insulated containers and one remedy tried was to heat them in the refrigeration stack for a few days. This evening it was feared that a container of apples had been placed in the heating stack but we weren’t quite sure. So we got a ladder and each in turn climbed up to sniff around the portholes to try to tell if apples were inside. There certainly was an apple-like smell so we feared that they were being stewed. Nothing could be done until the morning and as it all seemed so awful that we had probably ruined 12 tonnes of apples, we all got the giggles. Next morning I told Bernie Packman, the Refrigeration Superintendent, what we thought. He said “I thought it was apples so we didn’t connect it.” Relief!

Gallagher’s boss was Mike Mahony, a former Blue Funnel officer and stevedore. He was tall and had a deep voice and had earned the nickname Lurch on the waterfront. Later he became *my* boss when I joined Trans-Ocean Terminals.

The TOC city office staff were a good bunch too. Phil Kelly, of course was the Manager and the Operations team consisted of John Newing, Doug Fletcher and Norm Maginness – all good men to work with.

OCAL’s transport officers were Don Bienvenu and Tom Kenny whilst TOC had Bill Hooper. These were the chaps who had the unenviable job of organising the delivery of imports from the 5 high stack that I mentioned before. They were terrific. There were representatives from the transport companies too. I remember Paddy McMahan from Mayne Nickless, Grahame Green from Green McCandlish and Robert

Strang from F G Strang. He went on to head up the Strang stevedoring and transport company.

When the European lines joined in with the British, their agents were Seabridge and the excellent people we dealt with there were Frank Macindoe, Dan Goodall and Alan Cordia.

German line Hapag Lloyd had two ships in the service, "Melbourne Express" and "Sydney Express", known as MEX and SEX. The French ship, belonging to Messageries Maritimes was "Kangourou", nicknamed "Skippy". The Italian line Lloyd Triestino had "Lloydiana" and the Dutch Nedlloyd's ship was "Abel Tasman".

The next additions to our shipping company clients were the Japanese lines Mitsui OSK, Nippon Yusen Kaisha and Yamashita Shinnihon . McIlwraith McEachern were agents for MOL and the terminal representative was Doug Macmillan. His counterpart at the depot was John Mullens. After some time and some incidents, their boss, an excellent chap called Graeme Prior, arranged for Doug to be replaced. NYK's rep, from Dalgety, was Rod Bendix, a nice cooperative chap and YS had Martyn Smith of Shiptraco, another good man. The Japanese lines also sent Port Captains when their ships were in port.

NYK's first ship was "Hakozaki Maru". MOL had "Australia Maru" and YS Tohgo Maru".

Other key people included those in Victorian Railways, notably Jim Kennedy and his off-sider Peter Elliott. A lot of the export cargo came in by rail - canned fruit from Shepparton, Mooroopna and Kyabram, dried fruit from Mildura and feeder containers from Adelaide. We would get notification of container and wagon numbers that were due and occasionally some would not arrive as expected. Then we would ring Jim, sometimes in the middle of a weekend, and he almost always was able to find out where they were and get them hurried in on the next shunt.

Wool was an important cargo and most of the dumping and packing of bales into containers was done at Wooldumpers' facility on Coode Road, close to the terminal. Leon Lefebvre was the manager, another really nice man with a difficult job given that the Storemen and packers Union were a militant lot and there were many stoppages which disrupted the flow of wool containers for loading.

At STL's Head Office, the key people initially were managing Director Brian Oswald-Jacobs, Secretary John Van Arkel, Materials Handling Manager Bob Merry and Arnold Reuter, whose title I've forgotten. There was also an engineer and I can't think of his name either but his main concerns were the Portainer and OHT cranes and the

refrigeration stack. Brian Oswald-Jacobs, BOJ, was tragically killed in a car accident when he hit a stray horse on the way to his weekend property at Flinders.

Others came and went. Alex Carmichael was MD for some time. John Bolton and Steve Alty, transferred from the Depot, were in over all charge of Terminals. And when it became clear that the systems based on the 5-high stack were not working a firm of management consultants was engaged, Beckinsale and Partners. Chris Spence was the leader of the team and they devised "PCC" which stood for Planning, Communications and Control. Miles of computer model printouts were generated and new ideas were proposed. Spence always had an answer for our "What if" questions about perceived difficulties in implementing some ideas. For instance, everything seemed to rely on nothing going wrong so, when we asked "What happens if the clerks won't accept this change to procedure?" he said "Get fresh ones"! "What if the train of dried fruit containers from Mildura is delayed?" "Make it".

Some of this worked. Some didn't. At one point, I remember John Bolton announcing to our clients that in future, all trucks must "exchange" containers. That is a truck bringing in an export must take out an import or an empty. One returning an empty must take out an import or another empty. A few months later, the "rule" was that *no* truck was to exchange. One bringing in a container must leave empty and vice versa. It was all quite confusing and by then, I was exhausted and pessimistic about the place ever functioning properly so I thought about leaving.

I approached Phil Kelly again and, as luck would have it, I found out that ACTA was to build a terminal on the East side of Swanson Dock. After some clandestine meetings with Phil and Mike Mahony, Terminal Manager designate, I resigned from STL and joined the ACTA group as Assistant Manager of the terminal that was then named Trans Ocean Terminal – TOT.

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