

To The Victor, The Spoils – Post-War Years & Cannibals

THE SECOND WORLD WAR and its immediate aftermath were watersheds for New Zealand truck-trailer building.

Whilst it would be wrong and irreverent to ignore the contribution of pre-war builders such as Abingdons and Inglis Bros—and we have not sought to do that—the fact is that just about every aspect of the industry as it is today stems from the Second World War. New Zealand would be invaded by bigger and better trucks, which would lead to larger loads, and

consequently bigger and better trailers. That period would produce many of the major trailer-building companies still with us in one form or other today. It would also establish and entrench much of the technology still in use today, and instil much of the trailer-building industry's hallmark entrepreneurial spirit.

And much of what the industry is today, we owe to two men who saw, took and turned a climactic but opportune time in our history into a “new” industry. Those men were Jack Tidd and Ray Vincent.

Neither man was on active service during the war, but both saw the opportunities it afforded for the New Zealand road transport industry.

During the 1930s, and before his emergence as a trailer builder, **Jack Tidd** ran a petrol station in Te Kuiti. As well as serving the petrol needs (petrol was received in cans carried from Auckland) of the local and travelling population, Jack Tidd carried out general servicing. In his spare time, Jack cannibalised car and truck parts to build axles, some of which were fitted to Caltex tankers transporting petrol to Taumaranui and National Park.¹ Significantly, he also employed while in Te Kuiti a man called Ernie Binns who would later go on to design and build the first Tidd trailing axle.



(Above) Jack Tidd.

(Opposite) Mail Contractor Jack Clune, Masterton, N. Z. November 1914.

¹ Norm Todd, who would later become Jack Tidd's partner in Jack Tidd-Ross Todd, gives an insight in Jack Tidd's thinking: "You could only buy a four-wheel two-axle truck in those days. And they had axle-loading law even back then, so old Jack says 'well, if I throw another axle on the back, I can carry more'. He had a good guy there (at Te Kuiti) by the name of Ernie Binns who had some brains. Ernie designed it. It probably was the first six-wheeler in New Zealand."

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As the war drew to a close, Jack Tidd, sometime engineering hobbyist and ever the opportunist, was looking closely at what the Americans were doing in the Pacific Islands, or more accurately what they were littering those islands with. He surmised that the Americans after the war had only two options with regard to their surplus ordinance—trucks, tanks, bren-carriers and trailers: they could either ship them back to the States, which would cost money, or they could leave them where they were and try and sell them. Tidd reckoned the Americans would try for the latter.



The LST 283 loaded with ex-army vehicles destined for the TRT workshops in Hamilton

Armed with an entrepreneurial spirit and, somewhat more tangibly, finance from his Te Kuiti petrol station business, Jack and Ernie moved late in the war from Te Kuiti to Hamilton where Jack set up Jack Tidd and Co Ltd.

Immediately after the war, he sought and gained a government tender to procure the surplus U.S. military equipment. Some of that equipment was already in New Zealand—the Americans weren't taking it home with them— and was straight away put to use for truck and crane rebuilds, and cannibalised for trailers. But Jack didn't stop there. He was soon venturing overseas to meet the demand in New Zealand for the strong powerful American equipment.

He had no trouble finding it. An early order, for 140 ex-U.S. Army trucks, was found in Pearl Harbour and paid for without a problem. The problem was how to get those trucks back to a vehicle-starved road transport industry in New Zealand.

Ironically, the solution came in the form of a self-confessed critic of road transport, inland shipping magnate Caesar Roose. Roose's contacts in Honolulu had told him of a Landing Ship (Tank) for sale in Honolulu. LST 283 had served with distinction in both the Pacific and European theatres, but had been lying idle and for sale for two years. With a guaranteed cargo of 140 trucks on offer from Jack Tidd, Roose moved quickly to purchase the ship. The purchase and the refitting of LST 283 was completed within three months, and in January 1948 LST 283 (later registered by Caesar Roose as Rawhiti III) steamed out of Honolulu harbour with 140 big-brute trucks on board bound for New Zealand.

The road transport industry, and ultimately the configuration of New Zealand truck-trailers, would change forever the day LST

283 arrived and was moored to a tree at Port Waikato—13th February 1948, Black Friday.

We'll return to Jack Tidd later. But now it's time to move further north to another man who was busy after the war, carving out a niche for himself and a permanent place in the history of our industry. Ray Vincent's accomplishments and influence are as important as Jack Tidd's. Both men followed similar career paths and both came to prominence through buying and using military equipment.

Where they differed in that respect was Ray more often bought his vehicles and equipment in New Zealand at government auction (an early employee of Ray Vincent's, now managing director of Ray Vincent Limited, Les Findlay, describes Ray as an "auction junkie").

However, the industry's memories of Ray Vincent do not fully convey the scope of his influence, nor give the man the credit he deserves.

Ray Vincent is today remembered primarily as a transport equipment supplier. And in that capacity, he certainly had no peer, other than the equally redoubtable and entrepreneurial Jack Tidd. There are many still in the Waikato and Bay of Plenty today who recall Ray Vincent turning up at workshops, ever-present cigar to hand, driving a Morris Minor sagging at the springs with bits and pieces Ray filched from some truck back at his Newmarket workshop. Prices would be negotiated on the spot, and if the trailer builder couldn't pay then he could pay later—sometime—next time Ray was around—maybe.²

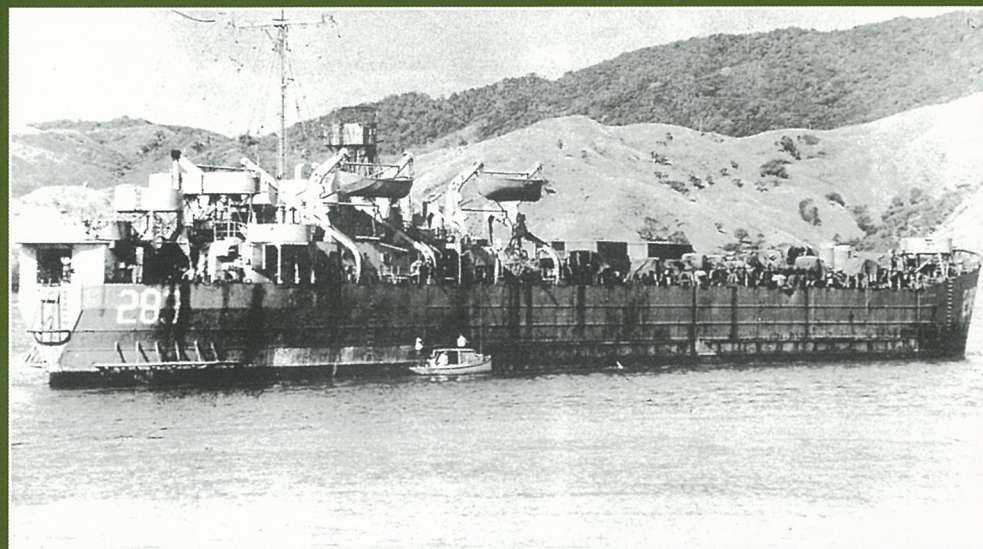
However, Vincent's accomplishments as a trailer builder are today largely forgotten, but deserving of recognition. They include the building of an early trailer for Dave Domett,

SUNKEN TREASURE

The first ship to transport a substantial shipment of surplus military trucks to New Zealand after the war was a LST (Landing Ship [Tank]) 283, purchased for the purpose from the American Navy by the Roose Shipping Company.

After delivering her shipment of 140 trucks for Jack Tidd (and one load of household furniture for a Miss Oliphant) LST 283, which was in 1948 registered as Rawhiti III, went on to serve from 1948 to 1951 as an inland water and open ocean trader in New Zealand, Australia and throughout the Pacific Islands. In 1951, Rawhiti III was sold to the Peruvian Navy, for whom she still serves in reserve.

However, LST 283/Rawhiti III's link with New Zealand remains. Motorists travelling through Meremere, just south of Auckland, will know of the old barge (another former Roose vessel) sun-bathing on the west bank of the Waikato River. Next to it, fully submerged but still to be seen at low water, is one of the original gun turrets of LST 283, complete with bullet holes received while serving at the D-Day landings.



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² Ray Vincent had a price policy that was, to say the least, fluid. He was known to adjust his prices frequently simply to suit each customer's need and ability to pay. However, in one respect he was rigid: the price for his equipment would always end in £7.10s. For example, Ray's price for a Ford Warner gearbox was £27.10s; other items would be £57.10s, £167.10s, etc. Nobody quite knows why this was—perhaps it was just eccentricity, or—as with the 99 cent merchants of today—simply sound retail psychology.

³ The Ray Vincent organisation and Vincent's organising ability would be instrumental in bringing to the fore other names who would go on to play major parts in the evolution of New Zealand heavy transport, among them: Ken Mahaffie, Ray Wilson, Frank Zwanenberg (Transpec); and Max Wylie, (Titan Plant Services) Bert Martin, Bob Burnett and of course Les Findlay.

Vincent's building of possibly the first motorised logging trailer in New Zealand and having the foresight to employ a young engineer called Russell Law straight out of university.³

Ray Vincent's death in August 1967 at the age of 56 of a heart attack was particularly poignant. Vincent's good friend and then general manager of his company, Les Findlay, remembers:

“(Ray) comes back from overseas, and he isn't well. So some friends of his decided that he needs a bit of a break, so they shoot off with him down to Rotorua. Didn't stop Ray working, though. First day down there he rings me up, all excited; he's in some trucking yard, and telling me that they want this and want that. Next day, he rings me again, still on business. Then,



Ray Vincent stand at Epson air show, 1952.

on the third day, there's nothing. No call. Nothing. His wife, who stayed in Auckland, gives me a call and tells me that she hasn't heard from Ray at all. So, I get worried and call the people I know he is staying with and I'm told Ray is 'pretty crook' and maybe his wife should come down. I think she just made it before he died in an ambulance on his way to hospital. But you know he was still working up to the end. Still doing the deals, still had the enthusiasm. That was Ray Vincent, all over."

Those post-war deals, those years of surplus military ordinance, the importing and the auctions, and particularly the suppliers such as Jack Tidd and Ray Vincent, would quickly open New Zealand to bigger, more powerful trucks. Those trucks would, in turn, open the door and power to weight ratios for bigger and better trailers.

That was something a young Christchurch trailer builder, fresh back from the war and not keen to return as a mechanic to his father's business, predicted and was already working on. It was also catching the interest, and a shift in focus, for another up and comer in the industry—a young general carrier in Feilding.

OPERATING IN THE BIG SMOKE

Ray Vincent loved his cigars. A self-confessed (and it was confessed to a doctor after Ray was diagnosed with appendicitis) 40-a-day man, he was rarely seen without a cigar in hand. But that was nothing compared to the spectacle that confronted visitors to Ray's office on Great South Road in Auckland. Les Findlay recalls that an entire wall, floor to ceiling, was covered with packets of cigars. However, that somewhat unusual and no doubt expensive wall covering was not to last.

One year, after making a New Year's resolution to quit smoking, Ray donated his entire collection to good mate and future director of Titan Plant Services, Max Wylie. Today, one of the first sights greeting a visitor to that same office is a "Thank you for not smoking" sign.

