



Southern Districts Towing Ltd runs a very busy towing, recovery and transport operation out of their Takanini base in South Auckland. With a staff of 25 and a fleet of 21 trucks, current owner and Managing Director Pam Watson and her team help ensure the ongoing success of the business in the highly competitive Auckland towing and salvage market. Simon Vincent travelled to Auckland to find out more about this professional tow operation.

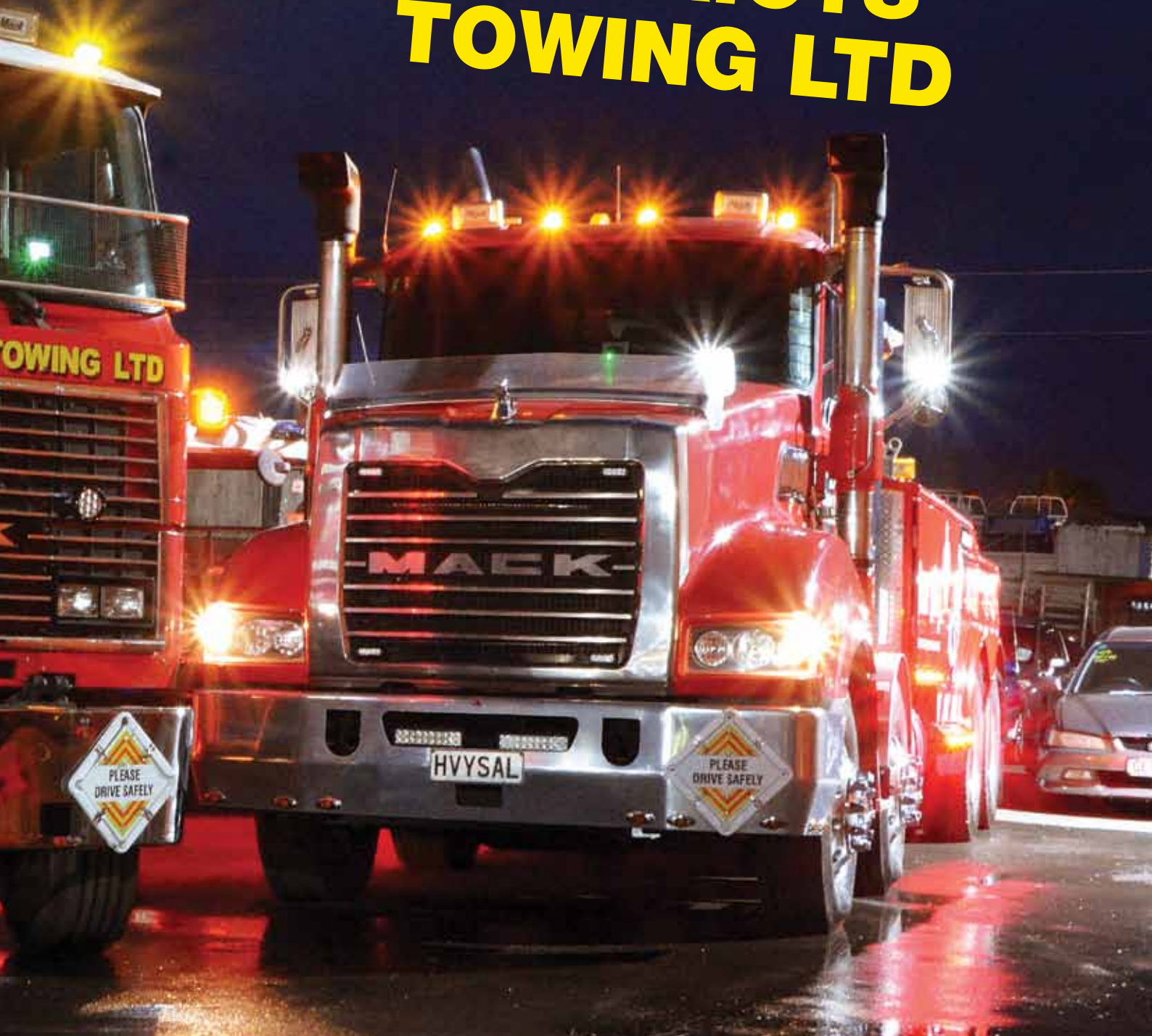
Southern Districts Towing Ltd (SDT) has been around for 37 years. During that time the business has grown from its roots in light towing to offer an across the board service from light towing to heavy vehicle recovery, accident management and clean up and, more recently, machinery relocation.

The business was established during the hard old days of towing when things were much less professional. Evan

Watson, former owner and manager, was instrumental in professionalising the industry. He was also well respected as a fair player and leader who would share his skill and expertise with the industry, his customers and associates.

He built a good business over the years, and after he passed away in 2009, his wife Pam took up the challenge of ensuring the ongoing success of the operation.

SOUTHERN DISTRICTS TOWING LTD



As owner and Managing Director of SDT, Pam Watson was quite literally thrown in at the deep end. She suddenly found herself right in the middle of the recession following the GFC, without her husband and business partner, and not helped by conjecture as to whether she would be able to hold the business together, let alone make a go of it.

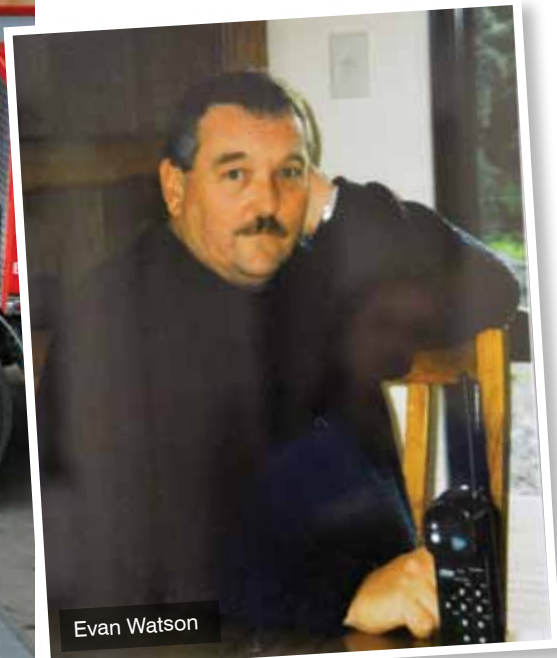
"There was a lot of speculation that I wouldn't, or couldn't, continue with the company," Pam admitted. It was a very tough time and she had to make some very tough decisions. Perhaps the most important requirement to ensuring the survival of the business was the need to restructure it. "We had a lot of staff and trucks as well as our own workshop. I had to scale things down to reflect the economic environment at the time," she says.

It was Pam's loyalty to her staff, all the people who had worked with Evan and her, which was the deciding factor in keeping going, she says. Six years later, Pam has not only held the business together, she has surrounded herself with an excellent team of professionals and together they have turned the business around and continue to grow and expand it to meet the ever increasing demands being placed on the operation.

"We've been able to build things up again and I'm now concentrating on promoting the heavy haulage side of the business," Pam points out. This is reflected in the fact that the operation runs a modern fleet of trucks which range in size from light tow trucks to some very well equipped heavy lifters. ►



Pam Watson flanked by Dave Iceton, Heavy Salvage team leader and Lionel Caines, Transport Manager



Evan Watson

Considerable investment has gone into the fleet which comprises of three heavy lift vehicles, one only recently completed, a transporter combination, a sizable number of roll backs (with three new ones due to come on stream soon), a heavy beaver tail transporter, a beaver tail transporter with a knuckle-boom crane and a couple of lighter boom trucks.

SDT Ltd was founded in 1978 and was taken over by Evan Watson in 1980. There have been plenty of ups and downs along the way Pam says.

In those early days, Evan fronted the operation whilst Pam took care of the administration and finances. Initially the business was based on the light towing market. The move to heavier recovery was spurred by the purchase of Papakura Heavy Towing and Salvage in around 1995. Papakura's operation included heavy recovery assets.

Evan was not only the primary driver of the business, he was closely involved in several sector and lobbying groups. He also had acted as a mentor for many people from throughout the industry. He was recognised as a fair man, not just someone out to feather his own nest.

Pam told me that Evan was closely involved in the creation of the previous towing roster system which saw different companies operate on a roster to clear accidents from around Auckland on a weekly basis.

Prior to that, the industry was pretty cut throat with stand over tactics, hard selling and speed all necessary ingredients of the towing game. Big V8s, large dogs and a large and imposing physique were common elements which are now, thankfully, relics of those bygone days.

SDT Transport Manager, Lionel Caines, said it was "unruly and disrespectful" in a lot of ways at the time. "It was embarrassing for a lot of people, including the industry, the Police, and the motorist, so they had to do something about it.

"Evan and two others (Lionel and Ken Cluff) went down to Wellington and helped set up the tow truck rules which stand today," Lionel said. This legislative change brought in the licencing regime and innovations such as the roster system mentioned above.

This created the far fairer and more professional industry that exists today and removed many of the undesirable elements from the game.

Lionel told us that he and Evan, as industry representatives, and bodies such as the Motor Trade Assn and other motoring bodies, sat through parliamentary committees assisting with the preparation of the new industry rules.

As SDT grew the firm moved along Kerrs Road, Wiri, to a larger warehouse. As this occurred in 2007, just prior to the recession hitting, Pam admitted "it wasn't a very good move". Add to this the decision to buy new trucks and the timing could certainly have been better.

When Evan got sick, things went a bit "pear shaped" Pam says. She took over in 2009 and inherited around 20 trucks which were mostly owner-drivers or sub-contracted drivers.

Back then, the firm operated its own workshop and fabrication facility to service their fleet in addition to building their own truck bodies.

Changes were immediately necessary and a period of restructuring followed. The first thing to go was the workshop, which Pam said "wasn't cost effective" at the time.

The declining workload brought about by the lower levels of economic activity meant that some of the sub contracted drivers' earnings diminished. Pam says some of these drivers chose to leave, others stayed and became waged drivers but she proudly said she never had to make anyone redundant. She accepts that some people left as they felt uncomfortable with change and the uncertainty that this can bring, but understands that is business.





Southern Districts Towing bought out Papakura Heavy Towing and Salvage which kicked off the heavy recovery work

The firm currently services in excess of 300 customers around the greater Auckland area. Their clients include major insurers, government departments including Auckland Transport. They also offer breakdown and recovery services for the AA, First Assistance and Youi and are currently the preferred provider to Counties Manukau Police, a longstanding arrangement with over 20 years of service involved.

The company head office is in Takanini where they relocated to in 2013. It covers over 8000 square metres, with covered and outside storage spaces available. 20 state of the art CCTV cameras monitor and record all movement, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is backed up by electric fencing, monitored alarms and after hour guard patrols.

The strong links to the Police sees SDT providing storage and other speciality services on their new site. They recover stolen vehicles, handle impounds and uplift vehicles which have been involved in crimes or serious crashes for the Police. Most of

these vehicles are returned to the Takanini base where they are securely warehoused for further analysis.

The Police use the facility to fingerprint vehicles, and scene of crime officers carry out any forensic work required on the vehicles. Police and other regulatory bodies use the warehouse for training purposes at various times. Impounded vehicles are also held the required time period at their yard.

The company was active in the development and implementation of the new National Recovery Alliance (see sidebar) in Auckland. This alliance is helping to forge a close working relationship with NZ Police, NZ Transport Association, Auckland Transport Operations Centre, Auckland Motorways Network and Waitemata Police District who have jurisdiction over the Auckland motorway network and have responsibility for all motorway movement and incidents.

The formation of the Alliance has produced an environment for closer working relationships, improved communications, ►





Recovering a vehicle with a hiab truck



The original dark blue livery is being updated



greater service levels, safer working environments, and quicker response times to clear disabled vehicles from the motorway network, according to Pam. "Our job is to clear the motorways as quickly as possible, to keep the traffic flowing," she says of the new arrangement.

The Alliance consortium won the tender for the motorway contract through a rigorous tender process. Lionel pointed out that several organisations tendered for the contract and everyone was assessed not only on price, but on many commercial realities such as service levels, competency, performance, call centre efficiency, and such like.

Pam pointed out that services such as the call centre need to be fully conversant with the types of calls they will receive. The advantage a tow company offers is the huge base of knowledge that ranges from accident scene requirements to heavy vehicle recovery knowledge. Call centres that might have previously only dealt with light vehicle break downs may not have the depth of knowledge or skill sets required to manage such events she says. That is why the consortium has chosen one of its member companies to operate the call centre while it establishes its own independent call centre.

Pam says that the Alliance has improved co-operation between the members. She has found that everyone is looking out for everyone else as they provide cover or assistance when other firms become tied up with jobs. This constant

communication and mutual support is certainly cementing the relationships and ensuring the highest service levels. "For the most part it works really, really well," she said.

The motorway contract is not new or unique either and is widely used in other jurisdictions overseas they say.

However, like the whole transport industry SDT faces the problem of recruiting suitably qualified tow operators which they say are becoming very hard to find. What is exacerbating the problem says Lionel is that unlike ordinary heavy vehicle drivers, tow truck operators require a V endorsement on their licence. The cost of obtaining a V endorsement can be anything up to \$1000, and includes a Police check which has been known to trip up a few applicants.

Pam reckons she would definitely be willing to assist the right people to gain a suitable licence if she could find them. "The problem seems to be getting people interested in joining the industry." Sifting potential prospects and checking that the licences they present are legitimate and legal is another challenge, they pointed out.

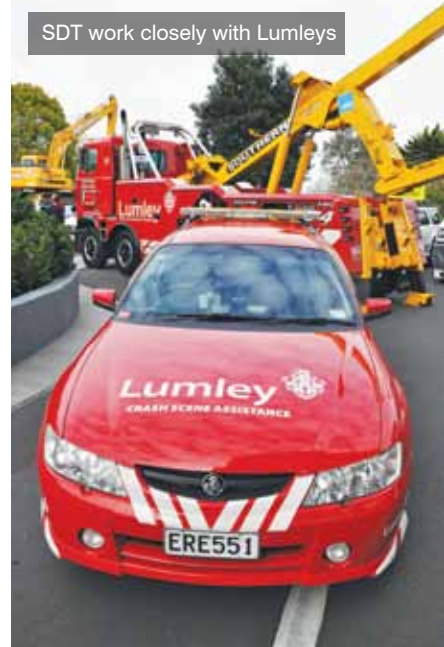
They have already progressed one staff member from yardman to class 5 capable and are currently looking at a second yardman who is wishing to step up.

What Southern District Towing is not really involved in is the policing and removal of illegally parked cars in private car parks. Whilst Lionel admits that it is a "necessity for people who pay for

One of the many unusual situations SDT deal with



SDT work closely with Lumleys



The National Recovery Alliance

Growing congestion on the motorway network and the need to better manage the recovery of vehicles causing any form of stoppage on the network has seen eight of Auckland's long standing recovery and transport specialists form the National Recovery Alliance. The members include: Warkworth & Whangaparaoa Towing, North Harbour Heavy Salvage & Towing Ltd, Alfa Westcity Towing & Storage Ltd, Avon Towing & Salvage Ltd, A1 Onehunga Towing Services Ltd, Southern Districts Towing Ltd, Auckland Waikato Cranes and Brian Roberts Towing (1998) Ltd.

By co-operating, these providers are offering a unified recovery solution to the growing traffic issues which plague Auckland. The group focuses solely on the prompt recovery and transport of distressed vehicles, ensuring motorists can rely on their support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, if the worst should occur. Everything from heavy vehicles

to motorcycles travelling in the greater Auckland district, Warkworth to Pukekohe, can be quickly removed, keeping the motorway network flowing.

Each of the members is strategically located and, between them, they offer an extensive range of vehicle recovery and transport services. This is backed up by some of the most experienced professional personnel in the industry.

Once removed, vehicles can be delivered to secure storage facilities with security services, complete with surveillance cameras, so owners can rest assured their property is secure and is being well and truly looked after.

Additionally, the member companies have the capabilities and experience to assist with transport and associated services. Anything from jump starting a car to relocating plant and machinery can be arranged. The group has over 100 vehicles of all sizes and types at their disposal.



Machinery relocation is becoming part of the day to day operation



Mechanical recovery is a regular job



Helping a heavy load get moving again



Recovering cars from down a bank



their parking areas” to have access to these parks, they are not chasing that work. He is equally adamant that they don’t “price gouge” tow away vehicle owners. He says it is their preference to charge a “fair rate” for the work they handle.

He also affirms, “This place has high integrity,” and is very conscious of the public perception of the business. “People have a tendency to sometimes blame the Tow company for their own bad decisions and don’t want to take responsibility for their actions.”

Pam says that one aspect of this job is that her staff has to attend some pretty horrific scenes at times, especially vehicle collisions or accidents. “It’s important to ensure that the staff is monitored and support provided if and when necessary,” she says.

Lionel chips in, pointing out that twice in his career he has been on the scene of accidents before emergency services and twice has been able to try and give assistance, if only to provide comfort to crash victims who have later passed away. He realises that that is part of the job and is proud of the fact he could step up and assist, even though it might not ultimately have brought about a successful result.

Changes to Health and Safety laws next year will mean that “we just have to be more proactive” according to Pam. She says that having robust paper trails will be essential under the new regime, which will likely penalise a lot of smaller companies.

Pam indicated that training and updating procedures and policies to cope with the constantly changing environment will become very important to all businesses in the future.

These days, heavy recovery specialists require far more training than ever before. BESS training and accreditation

for bridge crossing with heavy loads is a must. Training to successfully and safely operate the latest recovery equipment is often carried out overseas by the manufacturers and suppliers.

Permits have also become the norm for recovering heavy vehicles as they now have to handle 50MAX and HPMV’s. The operators sent out to recover the overweight and over dimension vehicles also need to be able to read and understand the intricacies of the permits under which heavy tow trucks are required to operate.

Issues such as ‘to a place of safety’, understanding what bridges or routes can or can’t be accessed by these heavy weight combinations are now just part of the day to day operation. These are only some of the vast number of factors which need to be taken into account to ensure the safe recovery and clean-up of stranded or damaged vehicles.

Traffic management and roadside safety will also feature more prominently in the future as live traffic lanes present considerable health and safety risks to staff out on the job.

Having said that, Pam acknowledges that the heavy end of the business has always required very skilled operators to complete what are often very demanding tasks competently and safely.

Even at the light end changes to the way cars are powered is introducing additional roadside hazards. Lionel advised that many hybrid cars have sufficient power to electrocute anyone (first responders, the public or tow truck drivers) that touches them if the wiring from the battery to the engine is compromised. We are often kept up to date by our Breakdown Service Suppliers, when any new technical information is available especially when there are new models released.



Pam also makes considerable effort to help educate the public about the tragic consequences of poor decision making on our roads. SDT willingly contributes time and resources to community training programmes such as Educate Right Track and Emergency Service open days..

As part of this programme a vehicle has been fitted to a car trailer as a permanent exhibit. This is used to demonstrate how illegal, uncertified modifications can result in failures of a vehicle's basic safety systems (brakes, steering, etc) and how this can lead to accidents. It's all about teaching the public, especially young people, about motor vehicle safety she says.

Wrecks or dumped cars are provided for emergency services to demonstrate how they can access the occupants of crashed vehicles. They are used to illustrate how families and community are affected when drivers are impaired by alcohol and drugs, speed, don't wearing seat belts, are unlicensed, distracted by phones or radios and many other factors.

Pam says, "We are on the frontline with the Police and emergency services, so we see the results of this. It's our contribution back to the community."

With a staff of 25, including four dispatchers and three drivers dedicated to night shifts, a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week service can be maintained. Today there are still a couple of sub-contractors on the payroll with most of the staff now employees, which Pam indicated was a "positive" change.

Work has expanded in recent years to not only include the motorway work, but there has been growth in the heavy towing fleet and the addition of transporters extensively involved in machinery relocation as well as recovery work.

The transition from working in the background to fronting the business hasn't been easy, as Pam explained above, however the results are clear to see, Southern Districts Towing is going from strength to strength. Pam concludes, "My priority has always been to provide the best, most professional service we can. That is what sustains us." We can't argue with that, it has certainly put the business on the right track. **TD**



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Mack Trident wrecker

Southern Districts Towing Ltd purchased a 2010 Mack Trident, ex McCarthy Transport Ltd, to form the basis of their newest heavy recovery unit. The Mack was shipped to Australia where Kent Collision and Custom in Ingleburn, Sydney, fitted an American built Jerr-Dan HLD 700/550 heavy under lift/salvage unit before being returned to New Zealand painted and ready for sign writing.

The 50 tonne rated recovery unit has a two-stage main wrecker boom rated at 32,000kg. It also has a three-stage 'coach' under lift unit which extends to provide a reach of 3.71m. Dual 15,900kg rated DP winches have been fitted and space for a counter weight has been included.

The unit is operated from a centralized touchpad station that controls all of its functions. Whilst the main control is in the driver's cab, controls are replicated in both sides of the wrecker body and complemented by a wireless remote control system. Closed circuit cameras and in cab and body mounted screens can be used to monitor the winching action. All these features have been designed to increase safety during recovery operations.



Dave hooks up a minor damage job



The Jerr-Dan underlift offers plenty of capacity



The tool box contains full controls and a camera monitor