

LEN PHILLIPS, general manager, Hyundai Merchant Marine (Australia)

# Dinosaurs, cavemen, trucks, ships and spacecraft – the broad life of Len Phillips

By JIM WILSON

Len Phillips is the general manager at Hyundai Merchant Marine (Australia), which is one of Shipping Australia's newer members.

Len explains that HMM is in the process of establishing itself in the marketplace in terms of customers, suppliers and within the industry itself. "We've been working on that for the last couple of years. Ultimately, we're running ships profitably," Len says. He adds that HMM is taking on 20 new large vessels and is joining The Alliance. The company is looking for growth in the Australian market. "What we want to be is a 'full operator' – at the moment we do North East Asia, Korea and the Chinese ports. Our ambition is to cover southeast Asia, New Zealand, the USA, everywhere. That's the ambition," he says.

Len took over HMM (Australia) in June 2018. He says that when he took over the job, he was "happy, excited! It was a brand-new blank slate, and they were ready to go out and make a statement in the industry. There are some really great people here who will have a great future in the industry. They will have opportunities to expand their horizons".

## Going back a real... long... way

Len started off his career being fascinated, not with ships, but with dinosaurs and cavemen. He explains that he was always interested in pre-history and history. There's an old saying that we are "standing on the shoulders of giants," Len says, adding that we are, all of us, a product of what has come before. "I've always felt a connection to history – everything that we have done as a species and as a society is built on everything that has been done before, it's a continuum," he explains.

So he went to university and studied Pre-History and Anthropology, where he met Yvonne, now his wife of 35 years.

Unfortunately, when he left university, there

was a massive recession underway and world economies were suffering rampant inflation. Here, in Australia, then Prime Minister Bob Hawke had either just, or was about to, introduce the Prices and Incomes Accord. There weren't a lot of jobs, so Len took a job driving a truck with TG Manning. "Truck driving was a very different world," Len laughs, adding, "that's exactly the point my boss made during my job interview. He didn't want to employ me because of my education".

Luckily, Len comes from a long line of truck drivers. "Everyone plays a part. Everyone has their role. So I went out and did the job. I was like a sponge and I soaked up information about customs clearance and freight," he says. His manager at the time thought Len was too highly educated though and encouraged him to apply for the graduate programme at Australian National Line. It was a two-year programme that started their grads in the mail room.

## Ignorant... and stunned

"I didn't know very much about shipping at all. I was a little bit stunned. I thought, 'how hard can it be?' But going through the various departments, I realised there was a lot more to it than I thought".

Len was taken under the wing of Shipping Australia's very own Frank Needs. "He really helped me out. I was in sales and I was struggling. Frank really helped me out. I have very fond memories of my time at ANL," he says.

With great struggling sometimes comes great mistakes. Len had some... character-building learning experiences ... and he recalls one particular stuff-up with a groan.

"Goodness! My biggest mistakes involved not understanding the power of politics in a large company. I made some errors by not understanding how facts, which could be correct, might make me look bad. I also once gave a quote for a very large company. I was told that it was correct. But everyone quickly knew that we'd undercut. For me personally, I got a rap across the knuckles. A gentleman by the name of Mike went and fixed it with the conference partners. I appreciated the management support though, and it made me more diligent," Len explains.

Later he took his first line management role and it wasn't the easiest experience. Some of the other staff thought they should have had the role and did not behave as professionally as they might. They engaged in tactics such as reporting to Len's boss rather than him, not filling in or filing paperwork, not attending meetings and so on.

"So I had to grow. I did some management courses. As a very green person, I didn't manage it optimally. As an older, more experienced person, I have developed more strategies that I can use. I also learned that you can't please everyone all the time. I also learned to research decisions and to stick to them," Len reflects. It's sound advice for any-first time manager.

## Persistence wins the day

There were big wins too. Len recalls a supermarket, Franklins, which was a heavy discounter, that was owned by the shipping agency, Jardine, via an intermediary company. For about a decade, the company refused to ship with ANL.

Len formulated a plan and set out to deliver. It took 18 months just to get the



The HMM logo is displayed in a bold, white, sans-serif font in the upper left corner of the advertisement. The background of the entire advertisement is a composite image showing a satellite in space, the Earth's horizon, and a large container ship sailing on the ocean.

[www.hmm21.com](http://www.hmm21.com)

“At 22°S, 43°W, 15km from Copacabana Coast,  
your freight is being transported safely”

## HMM will lead you to the Silk Road of the Sea

A Global network that will connect directly  
with more than 150 countries across the globe.  
To HMM, the ocean is not merely a pathway  
but a new economic territory  
that will connect you to the world.



# Len Phillips: a life

## Hobbies

Len likes to play and write music, particularly 70s and 80s music - guitar and bass. He's also played a bit of sax, along with keyboard and drums. His musical influences are "hair bands," he laughs, like Bruce Springsteen, Van Halen, Neil Young and Bob Dylan. "Not so much The Beatles, although I know a lot of people think that's sacrilege!"

## Family

Len has been married to Yvonne for 35 years and they met at university, "believe it or not in Pre-History and Anthropology". He has two adult children. Isabelle (30), who works in mining as a lead geologist for Rio Tinto and son Edward (27), who works for software company Atlassian. "He explains to me what he does, but I have no idea! He's basically a computer programmer," Len says.

first appointment.

"The Franklins guy told me, 'My God, you're the most persistent representative I've ever seen! Normally, I tell them to bugger off and they're gone! But you're back every fortnight!' I remember when we got the first cargo for Franklins. I sent a telex to the HK office and I copied in Frank Needs. He came storming into my office and said, 'we've been trying for years. Are you sure?'. I showed him the telexes and he was very happy," Len says.

He had many more good years with ANL. By the early 1990s, the Government was keen to sell ANL and there were multiple rounds of restructuring. Then an intriguing offer was made by Cho Yang, a Korean shipping company.

They set up a job inside Barwil/Wilhelmsens, and it was a fun period in Len's career, working with good people. "I really enjoyed the whole set-up of the thing". He later became the New South Wales manager for Wilhelmsen, with a stint as the non-containerised cargo manager. That's anything that didn't include wheels, such as forestry products and heavy break bulk cargo.

And one Soviet-era Russian space shuttle, the "Buran". It was 20 per cent heavier than the US space shuttle, so heavy, in fact, it couldn't be flown with a crew. Although it did a few orbits unmanned.

Len's crew had to get it up the Moscow River before it froze, then they disassembled it on the main deck, brought it through Panama. When it got to Sydney, the Waterside Workers' Federation didn't

like the lifting gear, so they had to re-engineer the cranes. They even barged the shuttle some of the way. It ended up in Pyrmont, Sydney, where it was an exhibit for the Powerhouse Museum. "I got a much deeper understanding of supply chains. If it could go wrong, it did. It really told me what a supply chain really is," he says.

## From space shuttles to grocery trades

Later in his career, Len found himself working as the Oceania Reefer and Pacific Islands Trade Manager for Maersk. It was a very different trade. A fifty-TEU contract was a good contract. It was a small trade, with lots of family involvement. "You had to understand that to be successful. The guy who imports rice will be the brother of the stevedore, that kind of thing. You have to understand that shipping is their lifeblood. They really need it to survive," Len explains.

The Pacific trades have changed now and are more internationalised, but Len is quick to point out that it is still a grocery trade, with continuing demands to move equipment around, and lots of seasonal cargoes such as fish.

"I really enjoyed the camaraderie that the Pacific Islands agents have. They are hugely passionate about their industry and delivering what they say they are going to deliver. It is a joy to manage. They are out fighting the good fight and they are extremely loyal," Len enthuses.

After Pacific Islands there was a short stint with a little-known Australian stevedore. It went by the name of Patrick.

## Automation and a massive takeover

Patrick was very much "corporate Australia". Len thought it was a kin-industry to shipping but he quickly realised there wasn't as much in common between stevedores and shipping in workforce management, key performance indicators and driving forces. "I can tell you I was not bored!", he says.

Automation was already well underway, and it had already been done at Brisbane. Port Botany was next. There were many issues and discussions – union, legal, workplace safety among the forefront. Len's role was to make sure all the sub-contracts were in place for when they shut down the terminal. "It was an all-or-nothing move. We crossed our fingers. We threw the switch. And it all came online. Thank God," Len laughs.

Then Brookfield, an asset management consortium, threw down a huge bid to buy Patrick. Ports and logistics giant Qube chucked in a huge counter-bid. The bidding war was on. Bids were changed, offers were put together and, finally, months later, a deal was done. Patrick, or, rather, the parent company, Asciano, accepted a very complex \$9 billion takeover deal in a joint Brookfield-Qube bid.

"My job had slowed down because of the takeover; everything had to be run through layers of management committees and the bidders had to be kept informed. Toward the end, virtually all the other managers had gone. And I decided to move on. That's corporate life," Len says.

Looking for a new role, a friend advised Len that there was a shipping line looking for a general manager. That line was, of course, HMM.

Len's had a long and varied career in the shipping industry. He takes a moment to reflect on his experiences. "I really appreciate the shipping industry. The life I live is because of shipping. It has given me a great life, broad exposure to different cultures and to raise my family. You can make a very good career in shipping if you stick with it. It's not a monetary thing. It's not about extra pay. It's about quality of life. It's the people I've met. The memories. And understanding how other people view the world. The shipping industry offers so much." ▲



# The best fit is the one tailored for you

## Bespoke services to help you stand out

With 14 strategically located offices, GAC Australia has what it takes to serve your shipping needs for all types of cargoes and vessels, at all ports and offshore terminals throughout the country. From traditional ship agency to specialised services for bunkers, husbandry and crews, we measure and match our services to create the best fit for your business strategy. Our continuous investment in new services and technologies keeps you buttoned up to stay ahead of competitors.

[gac.com/australia](http://gac.com/australia)



### Gulf Agency Company (Australia) Pty Ltd

T: +61 02 8028 2400

F: +61 02 9279 0457

E: [shipping.australia@gac.com](mailto:shipping.australia@gac.com)

### Our offices:

Sydney (Main Office) | Port Kembla | Melbourne | Adelaide | Fremantle | Dampier | Port Hedland | Darwin | Townsville | Mackay | Gladstone | Brisbane | Newcastle | Geelong

[fb.com/GACgroup](https://www.facebook.com/GACgroup) [linkedin.com/company/gac-group](https://www.linkedin.com/company/gac-group)



Delivering your strategy.





Port by Port and Ship by Ship, we provide full port agency services through our unique network. Our geographical coverage spans over 1500 different port locations, supporting over 2500 diverse clients. Our local knowledge enables us to deliver quality services where they are needed most, enabling our customers to ship smoothly and trade successfully.

**Our services include:**

- Port Agency
- Liner Agency
- Husbandry Services
- Marine Survey and Inspection
- Bio-Fouling and Underwater Inspection
- Offshore Support Services
- Bunker Coordination
- Ship Maintenance
- Spares and Supplies
- Provisions and Stores
- Cash to Master
- Marine Survey and Inspection
- Medical Assistance
- Crew Movements and Logistics
- Disbursement Accounting
- Bunker Duty and Freight Tax
- Coastal License



**Australia**

Inchcape Shipping Services  
Ground Floor, 120 Christie Street,  
St Leonards,  
NSW 2065  
Tel : +61 2 9410 8888  
Email : australia@iss-shipping.com

**New Zealand**

ISS-Mackay Ltd  
The Shipping Exchange  
2 Akaroa Street, Parnell,  
Auckland 1052  
Tel : +64 9 3094 266  
Email : auckland@iss-mckay.co.nz

**Papua New Guinea**

Inchcape Shipping Services  
The Shipping Exchange  
Level 5, Mogoru Moto Building  
Champion Parade, Port Moresby 121  
Tel : + 675 321 2599  
Email : port.moresby@iss-shipping.com

**CONNECT TO A SMOOTHER, SMARTER OCEAN**

[www.iss-shipping.com](http://www.iss-shipping.com)