

Peter Starke with son Josh.



TO THE

# RESCUE

Since introducing its first Scania in 2013, Wightman Transport in South Australia hasn't looked back.

If the quiet of a truck cabin can be measured by the clarity of an interview conducted in a remote location by phone (hand's free) than the new R 620 V8 from Scania passes with flying colours. Peter Starke, Wightman Transport Director, might as well have been sitting in an office such as the clarity of sound achieved by his moving environment. En route to a Coles store in Berri, in eastern South Australia, where he is going to deliver a single trailer of groceries, Peter will then proceed to Renmark where he will take on a full load of berries. A shortage of personnel during the peak period for the company has meant it's all hands-on

deck for those with a HC licence. Wightman Transport, like many other fleets, is feeling the driver shortage. Normally at this time of year drivers are rostered to take their annual leave as the peak period ends. Seven drivers, without notice, pulled up stumps recently to return to India, leaving the team, despite their protestations, high and dry. It was left to Peter to get on the phone. "We rang a few of the other drivers who left us 18 months ago who we were still on good terms," he recalls. "They thought the grass was greener out there and it wasn't, but they didn't feel like they deserved to come back and so never called us up."

Three will start next week with another five drivers returning the following week. By Christmas, Peter anticipates, they'll have a driver pool of up to 65 or 70 drivers. "I don't want to work the drivers too hard especially the regional boys any more than four days a week because they do their hours," he says. "We want to make sure we don't burn them out. Unfortunately, some of them are doing five days a week. Obviously, we've got to closely watch their hours for the regulations. But it has been a bit tough." At present, the regional drivers are asked to do five regional jobs while incorporating one local trip. These jobs

will be made in the comfort of a Scania, the truck of choice for the company since 2013. "We've had a few boys come here, the sort who have got American trucks tattooed on their bodies, and when they learn what we've got they go, 'oh, no it's not for me, mate,' but they have had a change of heart once they get to driving these things," says Peter. "I'm going up through the mid-north towards the Riverlands and it's a little bit hilly and I can throw her into power mode and get it up to a dollar. And once I get it onto the cruise control, I can back it off to economy mode and let it idle along at 1450 rpm. The fuel economy is great. It's not revving its lungs out like a bonneted truck which would be at 1700rpm. It's got the torque there." Since 2019 Wightman Transport have, as subcontractors, worked in South Australia for Toll, who have a national contract with Coles. The fleet operates 27 prime movers servicing the regional end. This includes regular trips to Mt Gambier, Broken Hill, and the Iron

Triangle of Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Whyalla. Wightman Transport also handles overflow for Lindsay Australia and Leslie Refrigerated Transport out of Mildura. These trips invariably end up in Port Augusta where Sundrop Farms operates four massive greenhouses on a

20-hectare site. Even as the season starts to slow it equates to an estimated 40- to 60-pallets a day shipped out by road. The region had a late start to summer when volume escalates to as high as 180-pallets of tomatoes each day. The fleet just added seven new Scania R 620 V8s with another two on order for the second half of 2023. These new trucks are rated to 96-tonnes. Later in the year it will receive what is referred to as a 'WA Spec' for units rated up to 130 tonnes (GCM) for the A-B- and B-triples it operates. Having the flexibility to run triple combinations and B-doubles is advantageous given they can mix and match to suit their needs. This takes some co-ordinating depending on the location. Up to five Wightman trucks a day frequent the Iron Triangle where it operates A-B-triples, however, under current laws, they are prohibited from taking these into Mildura, a destination the business prefers to send B-doubles and single trailers nominally four times daily. Roadtrains regularly run up to Broken Hill. The Scania's all have sleepers but only on the off chance there's a breakdown so the driver has somewhere to lay down while awaiting a tow truck. "Our boys don't sleep in their trucks," says Peter. "They sleep at home



The latest Scania R 620 on the wharf at Port Adelaide.

every night.”  
Two B-double-rated Scania G 500s were added to the fleet 18 months ago. The “little bangers” are now running non-stop to Melbourne and are delivering excellent fuel economy according to Peter.

“On the Melbourne run the G 500s are getting 2.2 to 2.3 km/litre,” he says. “That’s just incredible. You’re not getting anywhere near that with the

American drivelines. That’s what I love about them.”

The cabover design also remains inside the 26-metre-long requirement for a refrigerated vehicle with a sleeper cab. For local deliveries Wightman Transport operates some smaller Scania G 440s that are fast approaching the threshold of 700,000 kilometres. Peter will look at replacing these “bulletproof little trucks” in around four months. For the rigid

fleet he opts for the twin-steer Scania P 320.

The first Scania in the fleet was an R 560. It travelled close to a million kilometres and the only thing that needed replacing in that time was the clutch. Five years later it was upgraded with a newer version and that has performed equally well, only requiring a new water pump. It’s just been put out to pasture as a local unit running around Adelaide.

“I want the horsepower,” says Peter. “I want something the boys can sit on and do it easy.”

Peter checks the instrument cluster. At 100 km/h the R 620 V8 is unwavering at 1450 rpm. The trucks are equipped, in compliance with stipulations made by Coles, with reversing cameras and hook-up lights for the JOST greaseless turntables that are appreciated by drivers who, during early morning starts, have

to connect trailers in the dark. When the rail network went down in Western Australia in November 2021, Coles came to Wightman Transport for help. At that point in time, the business hadn’t previously serviced Perth. After he spoke to his drivers, confirming they were happy to take on the new leg, Peter bought them new trucks. The process involved Centurion ferrying freight from Western Australia to Perth and

Wightman moved it onto Melbourne. It was intensive.

“I’m pleased to say we never let them down,” says Peter. “We were on time every time and the Scania’s performed beautifully.”


The Western Australian spec for the business evolved from this experience. As the exhaust stack requires a smaller muffler it enables extra fuel capacity, a major consideration for travel across the Nullarbor Plain where fuel stations are scarce and pricey.

A Teletrac Navman system monitors every prime mover and trailer — these are made by Haulmark. It gives Operations and Maintenance Manager Josh Starke, Peter’s son, adequate notice of 10,000kms prior to service, an event adhered to with the reverence of a religious rite.

“They’re all booked in, so nothing runs overdue,” says Peter. We don’t skimp on that sort of gear.”

Peter’s wife Meredith, who he met in high school, and daughter Jessica, also work for the company managing payroll. Wightman Transport, which was founded by Doug Wightman and Peter’s father in 1964, now employs around 90 staff.

Despite its immense linehaul itinerary, the fleet was left largely unscathed by recent floods that affected many remote areas of South Australia. Rail lines and other services over the border in Victoria, however, were damaged and shut down by rising flood waters. Again, its customer reached out to Wightman for help. For over a month, they redeployed a B-double daily to Swan Hill braving all kinds of conditions to bring the town desperately needed food supplies.

“The town would have been cut off with no groceries otherwise,” says Peter. “We are proud of the work we were able to do there. In the Scania it was made easy. You can do a 14-hour day and get out as fresh as when you climbed into it. That’s the beautiful part about it. The cab is comfortable and quiet — as you can tell on this call.” 



Wightman Transport AB-triple.