

Heavy metal

The vanilla fleet tractor is a country mile from chassis required by the recovery sector. Indeed, to get the right result for the operators, it takes more than two to tango, says Ian Norwell

To survive in the heavy recovery business you need to be creative and think well outside your own locality. Why? Because the business generated from a small geographical orbit is increasingly hard to stack up against the sheer cost of acquiring and running specialised recovery chassis.

Mark Cowan, operations director of CMG, the Newport Pagnell-based commercial vehicle recovery and heavy plant transport specialist, knows this only too well. He has nationwide contracts with high profile hauliers such as Fowler Welch, Wreford's Transport, Great Bear Distribution and XPO Logistics (formerly Norbert Dentressangle).

For him, a key move has been setting up more than 300 subcontractors around the UK for distant lift and recovery work. For some customers, windscreens, tyres and cold chain trailer

equipment is also handled. Repatriation of broken down cars from Europe also keeps a modest fleet of transporters busy, as do contracts with BCA and Mannheim. That's diversity for you.

But heavy recovery operations remain at the centre of what CMG does, and getting a new chassis on the road is just about as far from taking a vanilla tractor off the shelf as it gets.

Naturally the detail of heavy recovery unit specifications depends on the application but, that said, three DAF XF 6x2 trucks recently delivered to CMG provide a useful illustration. All DAF/Boniface combinations with the XF 460 FAS Super Space Cabs, they're the first of their kind in the UK, plated at 90 tonnes gtw. Boniface Interstater Mark 6X under-lift recovery bodywork is doing the heavy lifting.

What about the running gear? Phil Moon, marketing manager at DAF UK, explains the choice of suspension. "For on-road work, where CMG will be using these units, the 6x2 chassis with a tag axle is ideal. A double-drive isn't necessary, but we do install a heavy-duty hub reduction axle." So, plainly, any assumption that a 6x4 would be de rigueur for this demanding sector is wrong. If the road surface is hard, a single drive is sufficient.

DAF's 6x2s also give a 25-tonne rear bogie capacity, and the ability to transfer extra weight to the drive axle when needed. Other beef is added with 310mm deep chassis rails, plus full-length flitching, and a 9-tonne front axle - effectively the first cousin to a heavy haulage specification. But, as in the heavy haulage arena - where the chassis spec is driven by the trailer - here, the applications drive bodywork decisions and they, in turn, point at the rigid chassis.

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Clearly, this is not a job for one person - and, as ever, franchised dealers have at least as big an influence on chassis decisions as the truck brand itself. For CMG, support provided by Brian Currie at DAF in Milton Keynes, was a vital part of the equation. The truck sales exec who managed these vehicles reckons it was a seven-week job liaising between DAF's sales engineering staff at Thame, and the constructors at Boniface Engineering, in Thetford.

But Currie's Richard Stevens needed to be more than a simple go-between. "After the initial brief from CMG, we set about the chassis building programme using DAF's bespoke software," he explains. "Even though many jobs are





one-offs, the calculations on axle weights, rear axle ratio, gearbox, gradeability, gearshift patterns and the like are all validated by the system at each stage." Apart from the lifting and winching equipment, the positioning of fuel tanks, side lockers and scene lighting towers all had to be designed into the jigsaw.

Lead times for heavy recovery trucks like this 6x2 run to well over four months, which leads to an interesting approach when it comes to calculating a unit's first-life duty. You may think that such a specialised and bespoke vehicle might stay on a fleet for many years to justify the effort and outlay (in the region of £200,000). But their rarity value can lead to a very different approach. CMG's three 90-tonne units went on the road in May, June and October last year, but Cowan insists they're already available.

It's not that he doesn't have plenty of work for them: he does. And he confirms that he's delighted with the chassis and bodywork - and that fuel economy is breaking records. However, Currie's Stevens explains that during the first two years of operation such vehicles see virtually no depreciation, if they are maintained within the franchise.

So, although Cowan has his own

workshops, all vehicles he's bought since 2008 have been on R&M contracts. These three are on five-year DAF MultiSupport contracts, managed through Brian Currie in Milton Keynes, and Cowan says he intends to market them actively after two years, with the bulk of the contracts still to run. There's many a fleet engineer out there who would sell his grandmother for such strong residuals.

Making this work is about keeping sufficient flexibility in the CMG fleet to give the firm the ability to react favourably to a keen buyer at short notice. If a recovery chassis operator with less leeway suffers a total vehicle loss through accident or fire, picking up a late model could be a life saver. And circumventing a four-month wait for body build means he'll need to be prepared to pay top dollar. **TE**

Body beautiful

UK recovery operators sourcing vehicles from the new market and casting around for suitable bodywork suppliers have a relatively easy task. They won't be trawling through thick directories. The landscape is dominated by two specialists, Boniface Engineering in Thetford, Norfolk, and Roger Dyson, in Droitwich, Worcestershire.

Boniface UK sales manager John Coldwell says the firm is able to take full advantage of parent company Miller Industries (USA), the world's largest towing and recovery vehicle builder. Although there's extensive design and fabrication in-house, much of the specialist equipment installed at Thetford originates from the USA and France, with familiar brand names like Century, Challenger and Holmes.

"We have access not only to a vast range of specialised equipment, but also to the software design packages that put it all together." At the heavy end, Boniface produces between 30 and 40 finished vehicles a year at Thetford, and its move, some years ago, from mild steel to stainless, has extended operating life significantly. It's not unknown for vehicles to come home to Thetford to have a new chassis slipped underneath, when the recovery bodywork and gear still has plenty of work left in it.

Coldwell recalls a trend that moved some operators up to four-axle chassis in days of yore, but says the tide seems to have turned back in favour of three. "Even two axles can achieve a 60-tonne train weight, and they're well-suited to city work," he adds.

Incidentally, Boniface also builds vehicles for stock, but only in very small numbers. It may be a niche market, but such is the demand, the firm rarely completes one before it's sold. Nice work if you can get it.