



The wrong job!

■ By Ian M. Johnston

Preface

It is essential I preface this article by reminding my readers (all half dozen of them) that I am essentially a hands-on tractor guy. In other words, I revel in being immersed in grease up to my arm pits, I come alive when up in the seat of a potent, robust tractor, plus I welcome with enthusiasm when a neighbour seeks my advice re. the three point linkage on his ageing Massey Ferguson. Accordingly, I freely admit to not being enraptured with office work and indeed I have to be press-ganged by Margery into entering the office and being confronted with unopened emails, incoherent bank statements, and worse – unintelligible bills that require my disorientated attention.

Many (and I mean many) years ago, my blissful carefree existence of jackerooing, tractor driving, being a shearing shed roustabout, a windmill erector's assistant, and meandering around the outback on my 1948 Matchless 500, was exchanged for that of a sales rep for a German tractor company. So now I had joined the collar and tie brigade! Oh – and instead of having to rely on my weary dust enshrouded Matchless, I now luxuriated within the confines of a company car!



Meandering around the outback on my 1948 Matchless 500 – picking up station work here and there – 1953. (It was hosed down for the photo.)

From there things started to develop. It seemed that the local dealers and their farmer customers were pleased to deal with a died-in-the-wool country bloke who understood the problems of drought, locust plagues, unforgiving weather patterns, etc as opposed to the majority of factory reps who were actually city types, who wore polished black shoes and wouldn't know the difference between a scarifier and a set of disc harrows. Anyway, thanks to the quality of my local tractor dealers, and the relative prosperity of the farming community, the sales rolled in.

I am not sure why, but rapidly I was elevated into the more senior ranks of the tractor industry. That was okay I guess, except it meant I was obliged to spend a considerable amount of time behind a polished desk in a city office. Not my thing!

Without meaning to sound egotistical, I was eventually encouraged to accept the 'top' job – but it was the wrong job, for me at any rate! I was and am a tractor man – never really cut out to be a pretentious corporate executive.

Why it was the 'wrong job'

It was the late 1960s and I should have been fairly content with my lot. There I was, holding down a secure position as General Manager of Cumberland Tractors Pty Ltd, the largest Massey Ferguson dealership in the Southern Hemisphere and surrounded by an enthusiastic team of born again marketing service and spare parts men and women.

The entire organisation functioned like a well oiled clock. It was my job to see that it continued so to do. This necessitated that I apply occasional fine tuning and directional corrections



I am bedraggled, covered in dust and grease, a Fordson 27N (petrol/kero) that I loved – bliss! Somewhere in the Riverina –1954.



Immaculate executive attire – well pressed suit, cuff links, the works, taken in the Cumberland Tractors sales yard. Certainly not bliss.



Massey Ferguson Work Bull. Cumberland Tractors sold scores of these MF tractors to government departments and local councils. They were actually an industrial version of the top selling MF135.

in order that we remain one jump ahead of our opposition. Cumberland Tractors was market leader in its field, a position I was determined to perpetuate.

The most immediate problem on the landscape was the necessity to constantly pressure the folk at the MF warehouse at Concord West to keep up the supply of tractors. At that time, we were in the frustrating situation of being able to sell more tractors than we could obtain.

The other problem was – I was rapidly tiring of playing the game of company politics as, (and here I reiterate) I was cut out to be a ‘hands on’ tractorman.

I would gaze out of my office window and envy a salesman as he deployed his persuasive ability to convince a prospect that he should take the plunge and invest in a new MF 135. Or I would look longingly at our ERF low loader as it trundled its way out through the gate with an MF 450 hydraulic excavator on board, en-route to a demo. Or I would walk through our extensive workshop and wish I could roll up my sleeves and assist with the repairs of one of the many jobs underway.

My normal early morning routine consisted of having to wade through seemingly endless executive-level correspondence and other demanding paper work. This dictated I should make a real endeavour to be bright and alert each morning (always a problem) and have the ability to exercise my grey cells to their fullest capacity – whatever that might be!

On one particularly trying morning, I grabbed the teetering pile placed in my ‘in’ basket by my long suffering secretary, and simply transferred it to my ‘out’ basket. Then I buzzed her to come and fetch the ‘dealt with’ material and do whatever mysterious things she normally did with it.

I realised this was shamefully unprofessional of me, but remarkably, despite my errant act, the company administrative routine just soldiered on as per usual. I had just saved myself a morning’s wearisome chore. (But it was an irresponsible act which I never repeated).

Thankfully I had at my beck-and-call a dedicated Administration Manager. He was constantly up to his armpits with procedural paper work involving stock ordering, stock

control, the processing of hire purchase documents, ledger keeping and so forth. But he was a cheerful character and loved his work, bless him!

But as is the penury of any company general manager, the reason for my existence was to return a profit to the shareholders. Cumberland Tractors Pty Ltd, being a wholly owned subsidiary of Conquip Ltd, meant that I was therefore ultimately answerable through the Chairman to the Conquip Board.

Boards of directors have an insatiable appetite for budget forecasts, expenditure predictions and sales targets, the preparation of which is almost guaranteed to trigger worrying heart murmurs in general managers.

Then there were the obligatory industry social functions, which general managers were expected to attend. With few exceptions these usually turned out to be painfully tedious affairs. One was obliged to stand around for hours making polite conversation with a frozen smile upon one’s countenance, trying desperately not to spill the red wine, while being jostled by equally unhappy individuals. In fact it is questionable if there would be anyone present who would not have preferred to be elsewhere!

Plus there were the day long Economic Forecast conferences. All self-respecting senior executives regularly took themselves into the city in order to obtain crucial fiscal intelligence, without which they clearly could not hope to function. I actually quite looked forward to these affairs. They presented a good opportunity to escape from the telephone for a while and enjoy a wee snooze in the darkened MLC theatre. Anyway the lunches were always good!

I have to confess that in the midst of all this dedication expected from me (in order to justify my fancy salary and obscene expense account), there were moments of great joy! Let me explain.

Cumberland Tractors, with its head office and main facility at Auburn, which in the 1960s was considered as being an outer suburb of Sydney, also had three country branches, each under the control of a branch manager. It was obviously essential that I periodically visit these branches in order to determine they were being conducted with integrity and diligence.

What a beauty! Off with the suit and on with the casuals. The three branch managers were great fellows and tractormen through and through. In addition each were experienced marketing strategists and certainly did not require to be inspected



The Cumberland Tractor ERF low loader.

by me – and they knew it. But they also knew that I just loved an excuse to escape from my desk and get out into the country side.

So, accompanied by one of the branch managers I would drive out into the agricultural community and yarn to the farmers.

These were real people and had more savvy and common sense than some of the tractor company executives I could name, with whom I rubbed shoulders at the aforementioned social episodes.

Sometimes, if there was a tractor sale to a farmer that was subject to a satisfactory demonstration, one of the branch managers – Jack – would phone me and suggest I may wish to be present. I needed no encouragement! I would extricate myself from behind the desk, and call out to my secretary “I’ll be gone for the rest of the day” as I headed for my car.

I always kept a pair of white overalls in the boot for just such an occasion. Jack was aware of my youthful successes at ploughing competitions back in Scotland. Therefore I had earned his respect as a tractor operator and he was relaxed about me demonstrating a new Massey Ferguson to his prospective buyer and I was of course ecstatic to be back in a tractor seat.

Looking back from my present perspective, I realise I did not conform to the pattern and normal conduct of an exemplary corporate executive. In fact, come to think of it, I was a bit of a rebel and definitely in the wrong job!

In 1970 Conquip Ltd, the parent company, appointed a financial wizard to the newly created position of Conquip Group General Manager. All of a sudden I had a new boss, as he was the person to whom I now had to report, instead of as hitherto reporting directly to the Conquip Chairman.

This ‘new’ man was brilliant with figures, but had little knowledge of the tractor industry and none at all of tractors! I know I was a major irritation to him as I frequently opposed his theoretical doctrine. Particularly his views that loyalty to the company came ahead of family responsibilities. I mean – wow!

In the end he did me a great favour, as he was the catalyst for what came next.

As with any family situation, an assured income was a priority. But never-the-less, for a year or so I had been discussing with Margery the pros and cons of breaking out from the bonds of the financial security, which Cumberland Tractors provided, in

exchange for the challenges and perils of establishing our own business. So while I liked and had considerable respect for the ‘new’ man, I realised I could not work amicably with him, which was probably largely my fault – not his!

Margery shared my view that the time was ripe to bite the bullet and take control of our own destiny. We both felt relaxed and indeed excited about it. In December 1970 I tendered my resignation as General Manager of Cumberland Tractors Pty Ltd.

I was a free man once again, prepared to accept and explore the challenges our wonderful country had to offer. But I knew they would involve tractors and farming. In addition, for the rest of my life there would be no boss to appease, as I would remain permanently self-employed.

IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

Question: Can you identify this whopping old tractor, with Ian at the helm?

Degree of difficulty: If you get this one right – go and buy a lottery ticket!

Clue: It is NOT a market garden tractor!

Answer: See page 72.

