

are able to offer our customers warehouse and trans-loading options that are not being offered by our competitors at a price that cannot be matched". "We are proud to be the first company in Canada to purchase this new product and are sincerely grateful to Meclift for making a product that will allow us to continue being the industry leader in cargo handling."

Janne Kalliomäki noted that the company's next innovation will be to enable the Meclifts with remote diagnostic capability to make servicing the fleet more efficient. Next will be an e-Meclift, an electrically powered variable reach truck. "While we are still a small producer, we can more easily adapt production to new



ideas", said Mr. Kalliomäki. For more information: Janne Kalliomäki, CEO, Meclift (janne.kalliomaki@meclift.fi), Danny Terrigno, President, GT Group, (DannyT@gtgroupinc.com). Web site

<https://meclift.fi/media>. See videos on <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMxV797PE3C2DjnkHq5AJvw> and <https://meclift.fi/www.gtgroupinc.com>

Lessons learnt over 100 years

BY GUY M. TOMBS



Heavy-lift vessel carrying the HMCS Chicoutimi arriving in Halifax from Scotland: charter award to Ridgeway International

Guy Tombs Limited's first day of business was December 1, 1921. We were from our inception international freight forwarders. The company was founded by my grandfather, Guy Tombs (1877-1974), who was then 44. I will recount several formative experiences from the company's early years, as I can see important lessons learnt in their telling.

After I joined Guy Tombs Limited in 1978, I was invited to lunch by James Thom, then President of Montreal Shipping. He was a respected leader in the industry and a highly intelligent and cultured man. I was new to international freight forwarding, having returned from overseas after several years teaching in Nigeria and then studying in England. He

must have heard there was a new 'Guy Tombs' at the company. Perhaps Mr Thom wanted to size me up. During that enjoyable lunch, he told me that he, as a young man, had been the person at Montreal Shipping who made the phone calls to Guy Tombs Limited in the summer of 1945, enabling us to become the Canadian shipping agents for UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, managed from Washington. Montship had a strong connection with UNRRA in Washington, and they were, and are, agents for many important vessel owners. UNRRA was effectively seeking a well-placed Canadian freight forwarder. I had not known of this background prior to our lunch, and

expressed my gratitude to James Thom.

Guy Tombs Limited accepted this huge unsolicited mandate in 1945 and went on to coordinate over 250 vessels chartered by UNRRA with relief cargoes from Canada to devastated countries all over the world: to China, Greece, Ukraine, Poland and many others. At the time it was the largest peacetime shipping operation in history. The company engaged new staff and opened a special department that ran until 1948. We managed the movement to seaboard, generally by rail, the reception of cargoes at both east and west coast ports, and oversaw the loading of vessels and shipping documentation. We liaised with suppliers in Canada, the Government in Ottawa, Canadian Commercial Corporation, UNRRA in Washington and overseas receivers, as well as the ocean carriers, ports, rail carriers, and stevedores. It was a massive undertaking. Large consignments of horses, heifers, bulls, horsemeat, grain, flour, Canadian army trucks, diesel generators, agricultural implements, railway ties, ammonium nitrate in bags, fishing boats and fish nets, in large volumes, were some of the many relief cargoes shipped. The Marshall Plan took over after UNRRA shipments ended and our International Relief Division then closed. This helps explain the history behind the memorable lunch with Mr Thom of many years ago.

Lesson one: It is important to have trusted friends in the industry and you never know what might happen.

Not long after that, I was at a Mariners' House of Montreal event at the Port and was told that, many years previously, my grandfather had raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Montreal Sailors' Institute, a predecessor organiza-

tion. I also learnt he had been President of the Montreal Traffic Club and later headed the Canadian Industrial Traffic League. He was on the Board of Directors of the Montreal YMCA which in 1926 set up Sir George Williams College. It later expanded, merging with Loyola College, and is now Concordia University. He is named in the preamble to the University's Charter, viewable on Concordia's website. As a young man he had greatly benefited from evening courses in shorthand and other subjects given by the YMCA.

Lesson two: Serve your community.

Guy Tombs was 75 years older than me. When he died, I was 22. I was his 'namesake', as he often repeated in my childhood. Naturally I wished to understand his life. When I first joined the company, a company that also bore my name, the challenge of understanding myself was evidently linked with who he was, and how he saw himself.

In a speech he gave in 1948 in Kitchener before the Canadian Exporters' Association, he said that when the company began as a freight forwarder, "there was only one other forwarder in Montreal. He and his brother specialized in apples from Ontario and Virginia, also cheese from central Ontario."

Lesson three: Understand your roots and who you are.

Guy Tombs was born near Lachute, fifty miles northwest of Montreal. His family sailed to Montreal when he was three and they moved into a basement flat on Richmond Square. As he grew older, his proud mother walked him up to Erskine Presbyterian Church on what was then Dominion Square each Sunday, wanting to give him the advantages of belonging to that parish.

In 1892, when the young man was 14, his father pulled him out of Montreal High School, then on Peel Street, and (after a last summer working on relatives' farms in Lachute) sent him to work as a messenger at the Canadian Pacific Railway's Foreign Freight Office in Old Montreal, to help support the family. The young man brought home \$8.00 each month, and soon rose to Junior Import Clerk. He was so dynamic that his colleagues at the CPR nicknamed him 'the Young Van Horne' after William Van Horne, who had become President in 1888.

How did he work his way up from a childhood in modest circumstances – to having such wide and powerful contacts in Industry and Government, in Canada, the USA, and overseas by his 30s? From 1895 to 1919 he progressed from CPR through various service and sales positions



The staff of Guy Tombs Limited in 1921 with Guy Tombs on the right

with other railways, in St Hyacinthe, Montréal and Québec City. He worked for the United Counties, Central Vermont, Great Northern, and 'Canadian Northern, Quebec and Lake St John', the last two of which in 1919 formed part of Canadian National Railways. He also gained maritime experience with Canadian Northern Steamships / Royal Line during this time. Over twenty-five years he developed close relationships with many Canadian pulp and paper mills and Hydro-electric plants, then opening, rapidly expanding and very reliant on rail and inland water transport and ocean vessels to meet their shipping needs. By 1919 he was at Canadian National Railways, as Assistant Freight Traffic Manager. The CNR was formed by the Canadian Government January 1 of that year, amalgamating many railways in financial difficulty.

Lesson four: Build broad business contacts and remember them.

Guy Tombs was enticed away from Canadian National in July 1919 by the head of the Canadian Export Paper Company, to form its Traffic Department and be its General Traffic Manager. This was a trading company which had been set up by the major pulp and paper mills in Québec and Ontario to increase their collective export sales. Their members saw strong rail and water transport, negotiating and operational skills as essential to their export success. He built up a staff of fourteen and the Traffic Department managed the export shipping needs of all the mills, in diverse ways. However, in 1921 several mills pulled out of the Canadian Export Paper Company and it was decided to close the Traffic Department, and transfer

all this shipping activity to a separate new firm, to be called Guy Tombs Limited. The formulae for charging fees for traffic services rendered by the company would be negotiated with each mill separately based on annual contracts with Guy Tombs Limited. These were initially personal contracts guaranteed by Guy Tombs himself, and in fact the first shareholders of the company were Guy Tombs and the paper mills. The company was designed from its inception as a pulp and paper organization.

Lesson five: We make our own luck.

The company began in a strong position, with a full order book and excellent client list, and confidently broadened into some other markets, such as coal, clay, and what we now call general freight. The base revenue was an annual fixed fee with each mill, not determined by tonnage shipped, for a package of services, such as overseeing loading and unloading cargoes, shipping documentation, car tracing, freight bill auditing, even accompanying special newsprint trains and purchasing fuel in the United Kingdom. With some clients a commission of 5¢ per ton on cargo booked was also part of the compensation.

Lesson six: Pricing is key to retaining good clients but it needs to be remunerative.

By 1923 he was off to London to build the company's connections with diverse shipping firms. There is a big file of early correspondence between owners of paper mills and my grandfather which becomes increasingly dramatic and, yes, desperate. As the 1920s progressed some mill owners cancelled their annual con-

tracts and others insisted on large fee reductions. As the thirties began, and the Depression hit, a number of Québec mills went bankrupt, and unforeseen losses were experienced. Company salaries were reduced, and cash flow was strained. At the same time, US railroads were trying to substantially increase their freight rates, hitting Canadian mills shipping to the US very hard. Guy Tombs then spearheaded a major initiative on behalf of all the Eastern Canadian mills, at its heart as a mission to save them, to protect their rail tariffs, which he had personally negotiated many years previously. In 1928-1932 he spent many months testifying before the Interstate Commerce Commission in Watertown, NY, and Washington, and before the Board of Railway Commissioners for Canada in Ottawa. He was the acknowledged master of rail tariffs for the paper industry. In 1932 a partly successful settlement was reached.

Lesson seven: Fight hard for your clients and some will remember you.

The company has always worked with the same chartered bank. This has been an invaluable relationship. Our darkest days were during the Great Depression. During this time, Guy Tombs wrote, "The Company actually continued to service some large industries for little or no remuneration."

Lesson eight: Know your bank and let your bank know you.

My grandfather wrote well and could be very funny. He gave a delightful talk to the St James Literary Society in 1932 entitled *The Harbour of Montreal*, recounting its history and also promoting 'the St Lawrence Waterway' of the future, later named the St Lawrence Seaway, which opened in 1959.

He wrote a book in 1943 in French and English celebrating the centenary of the Chambly Canal, which the company employed from 1938 with its seven motor-vessels, constructed by Davie Shipbuilding at Lauzon, Québec, to transport newsprint principally from Donnacona, Québec to New York City – and to move general freight northbound. He called this the "all-water link between New York and Montreal", and the Lake Champlain Waterway. I well remember when Hal Banks, an American with unsavoury connections, brought in the Seafarers International Union during the early sixties, and the motor-vessels were no longer viable, and the Québec to New York service shut down. In pondering his words, I have been staggered by his early ingenuity in thinking through and investing in alternate modes of transport, all-water or rail or a combination, all to serve the client, and at risk to the company. Imagine shipping newsprint via 'old wooden tow barges' from Québec to New York City in the 20's and 30's.

He read *Scruton on Charter Parties*, a foundational text on vessel chartering. He wrote and spoke widely on 'the Freight Forwarder' and 'the Industrial Traffic Manager'.

Lesson nine: Keep re-thinking the best mode of transport and best routing.

I have since I was 20 worn a ring with his unique initials-signature embossed on its face. This signature is a distinctive, florid G over T. He signed many documents in this way – it was unique, confident and caught the eye. On the inside band of the ring, hidden from view, there are the words: *From the C.N.R. Ladies*. The ring was evidently given to him by a group of admirers at Canadian National. I know no more.

The company has in 100 years taken its share of hits. We have also had stellar years. The hits, if you learn from them, strengthen you. Tough times can expand your vision of the possibilities. International freight forwarding is now much more of a niche business than it was when we began. It is not a virtue to say you are a generalist: specialized knowledge and experience are key to commercial success in today's market. How then do we get the

ideas for where we must lead our companies in the future? Copying others is not a good plan. It comes down to regularly re-thinking and re-discussing strategic options in detail, and, once decided upon, executing them well.

Lesson ten: Think big. Sweat the small stuff.

Over this century we have worked with innumerable interesting and talented people, as colleagues, clients, agents, and vendors. Talented staff have left us. I think of D.B. Gillespie, Manager of the Overseas Department until 1947, and others. While we have been commercially driven, the company has the ethos of finding a 'middle ground', between people, between firms, as we are after all intermediaries. Leadership, intuition and vision help us understand what that middle ground can be. How to best engage with and disengage from people commercially is part of the art of navigating a business, learnt over time. It can take years to read the signs, both good and bad. Thanking people is very important. Never assume entitlement is fundamental. We must earn our keep and what this means is ever-changing. Calling people out when there is a problem can take courage and can require deep thought. Timing is key. Looking people in the eye. My grandfather teaches me that the qualities of the person, even more than their professional knowledge and skill, are the basis of the person's identity each working day. The intangible often supersedes the contractual. Pursue your dream.

Since the forties we have had countless adventures: securing multiple CIDA vessel charters and dominating the scrap metal market in the 60's and 70's, coping with a generational change in the 80's. We pivoted into the defence sector in the 90's, opening a Canadian subsidiary as part of the Ridgeway International Group. Ridgeway International USA began operations in 2005 in Plattsburgh, NY. We have undertaken project and over-sized cargo movements of dazzling complexity. To face strong competition especially from multinational forwarders, we joined globally linked networks. We continually strive to benefit from the latest ideas and training. Our talented team works closely with so many remarkable clients and partners in Canada, the US and around the world, with the benefit of great experience and balanced judgement.

The company meets its centenary with our identity at its core, fundamentally just as we began, as our founder said: "The ability to knuckle down and to persevere is an absolute necessity through life." Yes, it is: have long-term goals, be relentless, work hard, and speak to people with grace and good humour.

(Guy M. Tombs, is President of Guy Tombs Limited, a Montréal international freight forwarder and shipbroker, founded in 1921)



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