

C.M.B., HOW IT RESPONDED TO THE CHALLENGES OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE PERIOD AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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1. Starting anew (1945-1953)

What did C.M.B.'s fleet look like in 1945? The proud armada of 29 vessels in 1939 was reduced to a mere seven. Two "Ville"-boats had survived and done a splendid job in the war effort as troop carriers but were both 23 years old. Amongst the cargo vessels which also survived the hostilities were the fast liners of 1938, "Copacabana" and "Mar del Plata", specially designed for the South American trade. They were equipped with reefer holds and able to maintain a relatively high speed of 15 knots.

At the end of World War II practically every industrialized country had to face the problem of starting anew. This meant in the first place a renewal of their maritime transport capability. Only the U.S.A. were able to lend a helping hand. The "Ship Sale Bill" made the release of the working horses of the Atlantic War possible. Standard wartime vessels were sold at 50% of their construction cost, with extensive facilities for payment by means of the lend/lease formula. In this way, vessels with a total tonnage of more than 10 million tons were transferred to maritime nations.

More particularly regarding the C.M.B. fleet, four "Liberty"'s were added, to be followed by another four "Victory"-class vessels, a more recent generation of standard-built tonnage. Together with three elderly "Empire"'s and two "Ocean"'s, which were bought from the British, the new acquisitions constituted the backbone of our liner activities such as they were in 1939. These consisted of regular departures to North America, Brazil/Plata and, especially, two lines to the African continent calling at ports in Congo (today's Zaïre) and Angola on the one hand, and the African ports on the Indian Ocean (Kenya, Tanganyika and Mozambique) on the other.

The postwar rebuilding programme included three cargo and passenger vessels for the Congo run, which were commissioned in 1948 and 1949. Their plans had already been conceived in London during the war by a future-conscious management. They were to be followed in 1950 and 1951 by two near sisterships with increased passenger accommodation.

Three cargo vessels, ordered before the war at Cockerill Yards and construction of which had proceeded reluctantly, on the verge of sabotage, were finally delivered.

Further, as an indemnity for tonnage lost owing to hostilities, three German vessels, the so-called "Ardennais", were allotted to the Company. They were high performance vessels which were deployed on the North Atlantic ; however, their powerful machinery of 12,000 IHP entailed an excessive oil consumption.

Operating ships is one thing, but handling goods in an adequate and speedy manner is quite as important. C.M.B.'s former berths along the River Scheldt became cramped. As the port extended further north, the subsidiary A.M.I. was granted a concession by the Antwerp City Council in 1947. It comprised nearly one mile of quaylength at Leopold Dock. In due time a terminal for break bulk was erected on the site, including specialised storing and handling facilities for iron and steel products as well as for African logs. The complex was inaugurated in May 1951.

2. Building a fleet (1954-1962)

As a side effect of the war, a new trade had ensued between the U.S.A. and Congo. Therefore the company introduced a new regular line between Europe/North America/West Africa and vice versa. In order to cut transit time to a minimum, fast liners were needed.

This resulted in the fine series of "LU-boats" which were fully designed by the company's technical department in close co-operation with Cockerill Yards in Hoboken. They were tailor-made to the needs of the trade. Between 1953 and 1956, seven vessels of this class were commissioned, of which the first new ships were to replace the expensive "Ardennais"-class vessels. They were able to sustain a speed of 15 knots, and the last deliveries could attain even 16 knots. Ship's loading gear included one derrick with a 100-ton lifting capacity serving hold no. 2, one derrick of 40 tons serving hold no. 5 and 16 derricks of 10 tons to be used in pairs according to the "union purchase" system.

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In 1956, an international incident in Egypt deeply shocked the international maritime community. This eventually led to the closing of the Suez Canal, when the British and French intervention forces were called back by the U.S.

This revealed the vulnerability of the canal as a means of providing Europe with oil from the Middle East. A blocked canal would have an enormous effect indeed on availability and hence the price of bunkers. Sadly enough, this was the case a decade later when the Egyptian-Israel war broke out.

As a result, C.M.B. began looking for a way to adapt engines and so use the cheaper heavy fuel for bunkers instead of the high-grade diesel oil.

The five "Ville"-boats then in service were also equipped with turbo-flowers, in order to make them compatible in speed with the two new turbine ships, "Jadotville" and "Baudouinville", commissioned in 1956 and 1957 respectively.

But then, the heyday of passenger transport by sea was already over, as more and more people turned to air travel.

Consequently, no more "Ville"-boats were designed by the company's technical department.

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In 1957 C.M.B. inaugurated a new line to the Persian Gulf, while the line to India/Pakistan, which the company had operated for a brief span, was abandoned.

The next stage was the gradual replacement of the obsolete war-built "Capitaine"-vessels named after the master lost at sea during the hostilities.

The "Mo"-class vessels, 10 of which were delivered between 1957 and 1962, were designed for heavy duty on the African trades. Their speed was 13 or 14 knots, depending on the year of construction, and their cargo-handling gear consisted of one derrick serving hold no. 2 with a lifting capacity of 110 tons, another serving hold no. 5 with a lifting capacity of 60 tons and 16 derricks of 10 tons to be used in pairs.

Incidentally, two "Mo"-boats were equipped with additional accommodation for a complement of 29 students and instructors of the Maritime College in order to make future officers acquainted with real life-on-board conditions.

3. Diversification into the bulk sector (1965-today)

The events in Congo in 1960 came as no surprise since they were in line with similar developments in West and Central Africa.

Of course, they deeply affected the company's policy. The then existing passenger transport to and from Congo collapsed overnight and the four latest "Ville"-boats were sold abroad.

On the other hand, the liner network was broadened by the take-over of Armement Deppe, operating lines to the Gulf of Mexico and South America.

In years to come C.M.B. would embark on a diversification programme, especially in the maritime transport of bulk goods.

As heavy industry was moving from inland sites to coastal locations, new types of vessels – bulk and ore carriers – were developed. This reflected the trend towards specialised ships designed to carry a single commodity, and the increasing importance on a global scale of the tramp market as opposed to the liner sector.

An ore carrier, "Mineral Gent", which the maximum capacity of the Terneuzen lock fitted like a glove, was built for C.M.B. in 1967 in order to discharge Brazilian iron ore at the new Sidmar plant in Zelzate along the Ghent-Terneuzen canal.

From 1965 on, bulk carriers mainly of Panamax size were also commissioned to carry ore, coal and grain in order to meet market demand. The latest development in the eighties has been the "OBO" carrier, able to carry both liquid (oil) and solid (bulk, ore) cargoes. The C.M.B. fleet now numbers three such vessels, which are the ultimate way of combining sea legs that offer restricted scope for bulk commodities.

For C.M.B., which was formerly interested only in the maritime transport of general cargo, this meant an opening into the tramp market. It was only logical that

growing co-operation should emerge between C.M.B. and BOCIMAR, the Belgian shipowner which, ever since it was constituted in 1965, has specialised in this sector. Eventually, this resulted in the merger of the two companies in 1983. As for discharging and storing bulk cargoes, back in 1976 C.M.B. acquired a majority share in STOCATRA, the major bulk terminal operator in Antwerp.

Another bulker of a similar kind is the "LNG" carrier. When the 1973 oil crisis shook the industrialised world, alternative source of energy were desperately looked for, such as liquefied natural gas to be transported in temperature-controlled, high-technology tankers.

At Boelwerf, Temse, C.M.B.'s affiliated company Methania ordered an "LNG" carrier of very advanced design and able to carry 131,200 m³ of liquefied natural gas at a temperature of -163° C. from Arzew, Algeria, to be unloaded at a gas terminal to be constructed at Zeebrugge. On this I only want to say that the vessel was delivered on schedule in 1978, whereas the terminal was not operational until 1987.

4. Operational agreements among shipowners

In order to avoid cut-throat competition, which would only have an adverse effect on the quality of service provided, co-operation has been a long-standing practice among shipowners operating similar lines.

Joint ventures were set up, spreading departures evenly. A further step consisted of pooling agreements of different kinds, up to the closely-knit integrated consortia, the final stage being the fully-fledged autonomous shipping company in which founder members act simply as shareholders.

Initially these operational frameworks included only European owners, but as a growing number of young independent countries set up national shipping companies, the scope of such co-operation was broadened to treat them on an equal footing.

5. Containers on the North Atlantic and intermodalism (1963-1970)

Of course, containerisation brought about a major revolution in the maritime theatre, more particularly in the liner sector.

In a way, the cellular container vessel may be regarded as another specialised bulk carrier for one commodity exclusively, that is to say His Majesty "the Box".

For an expensive cargo vessel, every day spent loading and unloading in port is a day wasted representing a considerable loss of productivity. So, a solution had to be found to speed up cargo handling, especially since wages for longshoremen in industrialised countries also represented an increasingly heavy burden.

Accordingly, back in the fifties the unit load, preferably palletised, was encouraged among shippers in order to achieve faster, and therefore cheaper, cargo handling. Eventually, the unit load concept culminated in the container, though to

begin with their dimensions were not clearly defined. For instance, in 1961 a subsidy for new ships in America was granted by the U.S. Maritime Commission only on condition that the slots were standardised, which clearly shows that at that time they were not. It took four more years, until 1965, before the International Standard Organisation (I.S.O.) accepted the container dimensions in use in the U.S.A. at the international level.

Some owners had prematurely and inadvertently started to build vessels in various slot sizes and, as a result, have foundered since.

C.M.B., however, has moved cautiously, as is demonstrated by the several adaptations that the "Painter"-class vessels have undergone.

Commissioned in 1963-64, these four vessels were intended for the North Atlantic route to the U.S. East coast ports, precisely those ports where containerisation had its cradle. In a first rebuilding programme, tweendecks were removed and the hold fitted out with cell grids, while a heavy bottom plate of iron ore served as ballast to compensate for the high stacks of containers on deck.

When containerisation in keeping with I.S.O. standards proved to be a winner, these vessels were reconverted to their former shape and successfully deployed on other trades where containerisation was still unheard of.

Managing means planning and looking ahead. In 1962 C.M.B. had already invested in Stevedoring Company Gylsen, the growing operator in Antwerp, which was planning to set up a new terminal at the 6th Harbour Dock.

In 1969, C.M.B., together with one Canadian and one British owner, constituted "Dart Containerline" and committed themselves to investing in and each operating a fully cellular containership of the third generation.

These three advanced vessels were designed and built according to the state of the art, as proved by the fact that the C.M.B. vessel of 1,860 TEU capacity, today known as "Canmar Europe", has been crossing the North Atlantic for 19 years without a problem. These waters are recognised as being the most demanding in the world, from both the meteorological and commercial point of view.

Containerisation deeply affected the shipping environment. It made door-to-door delivery possible in which the sea leg is reduced to a mere link in the transport chain between shipper and ultimate consignee.

Container vessels load and unload at specialised berths : Stevedoring Company Gylsen inaugurated a brand-new container terminal at Churchill Dock with gantry cranes and a huge storage area of 206,000 m³.

Goods had to be picked up far inland ; C.M.B. set up a haulage company TRACTO whose trucks and trailers covered the roads of Europe.

By then the mainport concept had already arisen. Again C.M.B. responded by starting a feeder service IBESCA, calling at every port from the Iberian peninsula to Scandinavia and delivering boxes to and from the Dart vessels.

Railroads, able to shift dozens of boxes overnight, in one move and over long distances, constitute a magnificent tool in the container age. European railroad

companies were grouped in an overall organisation, and from the start C.M.B. worked in close co-operation with the Belgian division "Railtrans".

During the seventies, individual liner trades evolved differently depending on whether the ports called at belonged to an industrialised country or not.

Quite naturally, containerisation was implemented gradually, first on those routes where sufficient technology and know-how was available and the large initial investment in container equipment could be coped with. Only in 1977 was a second fully containerised service to be inaugurated by C.M.B., namely the line to the Far East.

6. Commissioning conventional vessels (1968-1976)

As already mentioned, containerisation was still far off on many trades.

Between 1968 and 1973 four "Mont"-class vessels, intended for the South African trade and able to develop a top speed of 19 knots, were commissioned.

Although basically conventional tonnage, they already featured certain elements inspired by the container age which was dawning on the South African trade. One of these was the three lateral hatches having dimensions compatible with the breadth of an I.S.O.-box.

Loading gear consisted of four "Velle"-derricks with a lifting capacity of 30 tons, as well as the usual 10-ton derricks for dual purchase use. Machinery and superstructure had moved towards the stern, reducing the length of the propeller shaft and grouping all cargo holds together in front.

Ms. "Fabiolaville", a passenger and cargo vessel, was introduced in 1972 and showed similar features, but with accommodation for 71 passengers and three deck-cranes with a 12-ton lifting capacity, leaving only one pair of "Velle"-derricks.

Two conventional cargo vessels carrying four deck-cranes and one 60-ton derrick were bought on the stocks from Russian yards.

Finally, in 1976 the last two non-cellular vessels were delivered from Japanese yards with 6 deck-cranes lifting 20 tons each and which could be worked in pairs to handle heavy loads.

New ventures were undertaken in 1975. One was Armement Deppe's entry to the trade to the Pacific coast of South America. Our involvement in EAST, which operated two three-decked barges with a capacity of 266 trailers to be towed from Marseilles to Yenbu in Saudi Arabia, allowed us to bypass the endemic congestion in Arab ports.

7. Containerisation takes over (1977-today)

As already mentioned, the second line to be containerised was that to the Far East. By joining forces with a second Belgian shipowner, C.M.B. was granted access to the Far East Freight Conference.

Together with French interests and under the trade name "Franco-Belgian Services", they were the only European partners in the A.C.E. consortium and operated three cellular container vessels with a 2,080 TEU capacity. One by one other lines of the C.M.B. network were to be containerised.

The following year a fully containerised service to South Africa was launched in which C.M.B., as founding member of the S.A.E.C.S. consortium, deployed one of the fleets of huge vessels calling at Zeebrugge with a capacity of nearly 3,000 TEU.

On this trade, the real impact of containerisation on the maritime industry can easily be measured. The fourteen S.A.E.C.S. vessels were able to replace the massed fleet of 132 conventional cargo ships formerly operated on this run.

In 1981 Ms. "Plantin", capacity 1,402 TEU, was intended for service within the E.M.E.C. consortium to the Middle East. However, political instability meanwhile had upset normal trade in this region and the vessel was chartered out.

Since 1980 C.M.B. has introduced the container solution to and from East African ports by chartering half of the slots on a regular service run by a British shipowner. As this proved successful, two C-class vessels of 1,316 TEU capacity were ordered in Kiel, German Federal Republic, and commissioned in 1983.

The following year, two more new ships with a capacity of 2,257 TEU each were delivered by Boelwerf Temse.

8. Conferences, a mixed blessing

Until only recently, C.M.B. has operated its liner sector within the framework of Conferences and Consortia belonging to one or another conference.

Since the introduction of containerisation, Conferences and Consortia have lost much of their importance in the liner trade sector.

In the light of fierce competition from increasingly modern and independent operators and the gradual development of liner shipping into a true industry, the market shares held by the Conferences have drastically decreased in the last decennium.

C.M.B. has therefore decided to leave those specific Conferences / Consortia which were not in a position to adapt themselves to market developments.

An example of this decision is the creation of C.M.B.'s "Indian Ocean Service" operating on an independent basis, and serving one service consisting of nine full container vessels, covering three areas previously handled by three Conferences, i.e. the Middle East, East Africa and the Indian Subcontinent.

Full support from the customers to this unique independent service offering weekly sailings on fixed dates, has been proof enough of its success.

Meanwhile in the liner section, C.M.B. has been concentrating its efforts in those areas where it has the most experience i.e. the North/South routes, and in particular the services between Europe and West and Central Africa, South Africa, South and Central America, and as previously mentioned upper East Africa, the Middle East and India/Pakistan.

In order to prepare itself for the new Europe after 1992, C.M.B. has reinforced its position within the common market with the acquisition of 2 Danish lines : EAC West Africa Services Limited and DAFRA Line A/S, 2 German lines : Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie GmbH and Woermann Linie GmbH and 1 Italian line : Merzario Marittima Genoa.

Moreover, C.M.B. is represented all over Europe through its Asec network, and offers within Europe multimodal services through its subsidiaries Tracto n.v. and Portlink n.v.

9. Where do we stand ?

The C.M.B. Group has built a strategy that consist of reinforcing its position through differentiation.

In this respect, the group operates through 3 different entities.

The C.M.B. affiliate Bocimar n.v., active in the bulk transport sector, has developed from a middle sizer operator into a large worldwide bulk operator.

Operating 80 vessels having a dead-weight of 4 or 5 million tons, Bocimar can be positioned with the top 5 of worldwide operators.

In the sector of cargo handling and associated activities, the C.M.B. Group has through its subsidiaries Hessenatie/Gylsen/Stocatra, become the leading stevedoring operator in the port of Antwerp as well as for containers, conventional cargoes and bulk cargoes.

The creation of C.M.B. Transport was the beginning of C.M.B. Group's new strategy for their liner service activities.

The main points of this strategy is to concentrate its efforts on the specific niche of North/South maritime transport, the development of the intermodal transport concept and a pan European approach.

Through these actions, C.M.B. Group has become a European transport group running worldwide operations, while strongly relying on Belgian maritime know-how.

Similar to other European shipping companies, C.M.B. has been confronted with excessive operating costs under the Belgian national register.

Owing to the lack of adequate structural measures by the Belgian government, C.M.B. has been compelled to operate an important number of its vessels under more economic registers in order to meet competitive challenges.

I sincerely hope that the Luxemburg register will offer the possibility for Belgian shipowners to keep maritime know-how where it belongs.