



# Weapons of Destruction

The first forklift was completed at an Ipswich factory in 1917. The fact that the modern tank was developed at much the same time should be seen as mere coincidence, and nothing more.

However, recent conversations with members of the materials handling industry suggest that the forklift has indeed become a weapon of mass destruction with the deterioration really starting after the government made use of a SETA to regulate forklift training," says James Cunningham of Barpro Storage.

"As one racking supplier said to me recently, every night I used to kneel by my bed and give thanks for bad forklift drivers. My prayers were answered to such an extent that I am now pleading for some good ones instead."

The current situation however does not mean that the "registered" training companies are not train-



James Cunningham

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ing the drivers properly. While training standards will vary from company to company most training outfits have adopted a professional approach and are becoming frustrated by what is happening.

### Views on training

James asks Des Fell, MD of Accredited Training and one of the country's most experienced trainers, for his views. "Most warehouse supervisors", he begins, "do not know the rules of forklift driving. For example, we train drivers to apply the handbrake before putting away or retrieving a pallet from pallet



racking. Supervisors don't know this rule and do not reprimand drivers when it's not done. Result? Forklift drivers quickly stop doing it."

Des estimates that up to 60% of forklift drivers do not look behind them before they start reversing. "It has become almost normal", he says, "for the driver to reverse until he hears a bang. Then he knows it is time to go forward." Des knows all about this as he was crushed by a forklift two years ago when the driver reversed without looking. When Des screamed, the driver panicked and his foot went on the accelerator rather than the brake.

"A simple test to see if a driver is competent is to look at the counterweight on the back of his counterbalanced forklift. Paint marks are the tell-tale sign which will probably match the colour of your racking frames."

**Level the pallet**

Drivers should "level" a pallet on the forks before putting it into the racks. This must be done at low level where the driver has a good view. Trying to level a pallet at 8 metres is almost impossible and results in the unlevelled pallet hitting the back load beam above the slot. This is one reason why load beams mysteriously collapse even when a forklift is nowhere close.

The beams have been partially dislodged and sooner or later they give way. Incidentally, this is why the beam locking pins should be regularly checked. If one is missing, it means that the beam was hit, probably by an unlevelled pallet.

**Supervisors has to be up to date**

On another occasion, a racking specialist was inspecting racking damage in a cold store with a supervisor who felt that the problem lay with the rack design. At that moment, a reach truck passed them in the aisle with a pallet on the forks at least 7 metres up.

The specialist, who has a forklift driving licence, pointed out this basic infringement to the supervisor who had no idea what the driver had done wrong. Supervisors do not spend enough time in the actual warehouse watching what is happening. They are neither trained or attuned to see dangerous forklift driving or damaged racking.

In the UK, warehouse managers or their trained subordinates check the pallet racking at least on a weekly basis, with an independent check once a year. This is essential if a dangerous driver is to be identified quickly and is very simple to do.

In South Africa, in house racking checks simply don't happen. Such inspections would allow supervisors to see at first hand any damage that had occurred in



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the previous week. They would also be attuned to look for it. "I walked through a warehouse

last year with the manager. On our way down an aisle we passed a racking frame which was bent at a crazy angle. The manager walked straight past and only noticed when I drew his attention to it. If the managers don't care, why should the drivers?" ask James.

**It is not the level of education**

While not everyone can be a good forklift driver, the abilities required are not in any way reflected in a candidate's level of education. One prevailing myth is that a pass at standard 4 is required, but in Des Fell's opinion some of the best drivers he has ever trained were illiterate. "Good eyesight, together with depth perception is important. I can always remember when, as a warehouse manager



Des Fell

I saw one of my forklift drivers getting into his car to drive home.

“He opened the glove compartment, took out a spectacle case and then put on a pair of glasses. On being asked why he didn’t wear them when he was driving a forklift, he replied that the other drivers would make fun of him.

“Co-ordination and quick reactions are important as the driver must be able to move a number of levers quickly. This does not mean that he must have the reac-

bottom line. There is also the damage done to the forklifts themselves. This can be major, not just in terms of spares, but also in forklift downtime.

“The best way to alleviate this, apart from careful driving practices, is by getting each forklift driver to check his machine on a daily basis. To do this he must have a check list to complete carefully which must not be treated as another piece of useless paperwork.

“Identifying low oil or water levels, frayed fan belts and worn mast rollers can allow maintenance to be done on a preventative basis and reduce unplanned downtime. However the supervisor must use the check sheets to take the appropriate action. If they are seen lying on his desk for weeks or deposited in the bin, then the forklift checks, if done at all, will become a pointless exercise,” Des points out.

tions of a fighter pilot, but he must be reasonably fast. Simple tests are available to assess these requirements.”

On the subject of the relative merits and demerits of female forklift drivers, Des’s opinion is that although women take slightly longer to train, they tend to be more careful and less reckless than men, and look after their machines better too.

**Warehouse design**

“Mind you, warehouse design can conspire to make forklift drivers look bad. If a warehouse

was built to handle a daily throughput of 1 000 pallets and has a design capacity of 7 000 pallets, increasing throughput to 3 000 pallets and cramming 9 000 pallets into the same volume will result in higher levels of damage. Indeed, rack damage will be phenomenal if counterbalanced machines are allowed to work in racking where the access aisles were designed for reach trucks.

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“In my view, counterbalanced forklifts should be kept out of racking as far as possible. Their job should be on the loading dock running pallets into and out of road trucks.

**Damage to the machine**

“It is not just the damage that a forklift can inflict on people, racking and product that hits a company’s



**Police the licences**

“The greatest problem in warehouses today is the lack of policing. Let me explain. We can pass our driving licence test with a perfect score. However when we start driving on the roads, unless we know that there could be a speed camera around the next corner, or that the police could pull us over for overtaking on a double white line, most of us will start to take chances on the road.

“It is this policing concept that is supposed to keep us in line. Incidentally, the relative lack of policing on South African roads compared

with those of the UK, for example, may explain the vast difference in annual road deaths between South Africa and the UK.

“In South African warehouses, the current level of policing is just about zero. In the days before the SETAs, companies recognised the need for refresher courses every 6 months, as this helped to prevent the acquisition of bad forklift driving habits.

“In today’s environment, when the licence comes up for renewal after two years, many drivers fail their evaluation and have to redo a full five-day course,” says Des. “Refresher courses are no longer popular and some companies complain about the two-year evaluations as they feel that a forklift licence, like the car licence, should be valid for life.”

**Forklift management**

Indeed, Des used to give a forklift management

seminar, which explained how forklift training worked and how supervisors could maintain their driver's levels of competence when they returned from training. Although this course is still offered, none have been given in the past year. There seems to be a perception that once a driver has a licence, no further training or supervision is required. It may also be that because this half-day course is not registered with a SETA, it does not qualify for a training refund.



**Increased confidence**

Being sent for training affects forklift drivers in another way. Assuming the test is completed successfully, the driver returns with increased confidence and feels valued. If what he has learnt is then reinforced by his supervisor, it becomes entrenched and his driving improvement is dramatic and long lasting.

**Found a forklift driver polishing his forklift behind a stack of pallets**

This is why the National Forklift Driver Competition was so important. It allowed competitors from all over South Africa to compete against each other to see how good they really were.

Supervisors could also get an objective view on how their forklift drivers rated in comparison with those of other companies. This competition has now been taken over by CILTSA, the Chartered Institute for Logistics and Transport, who hope to increase its prominence as a national event.

**Case in hand**

Says James, "Just in case you feel that your forklift drivers are incapable of improvement, I want to finish with one of Des Fell's stories." Des was asked to conduct training for a large company with depots in several Western Cape towns. On arriving at the Worcester branch, he spoke to one of the three mechanics to see what was happening to the forklifts.

The mechanic complained that the drivers were destroying the machines, that he and the other two mechanics couldn't cope, that the forklift downtime was phenomenal and that the drivers were simply untrainable.

Nevertheless Des trained the drivers and held a management seminar. He was called back the following year to re-evaluate the drivers. Arriving at the depot during lunch hour, he found a forklift driver polishing his forklift behind a stack of pallets.

Des was later approached by the mechanic he had spoken to the previous year who said that, since the original training, forklift damage had decreased to such an extent that he alone was able to keep the forklifts at all the depots in running order. Since the drivers checked their machines daily, he quickly got to know when replacement parts were required. They were ordered from Cape Town and fitted when he was next at the depot. In this way, downtime was kept to an absolute minimum.

"This may sound like a fairy story, but Des assures me it isn't. I am convinced that any South African forklift driver who can get a licence from a registered training company is no better or worse than a forklift driver in any other part of the world. What makes the difference is the standard of management in each warehouse," James concludes.

*James Cunningham, Barpro Storage, Tel: (021) 552 9190, Fax: (021) 552 9170, E-mail: james@barpro.co.za*

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