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HEADLINE NEWS

Logistics Provider Is a Heavyweight in the Eyes of Its Client

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Much of the business of Levand Steel & Supply Corp. centers around getting counterweights to the world's largest mining-equipment makers. A recent delivery, by barge, posed some unusual challenges for the 3PL.



Talk about picking an order and fulfilling it to point of destination! It's not every day that you stroll into the warehouse, select a half million pounds of marble-sized bits of steel, crate them up and send them on to the customer who uses them to keep one of the largest pieces of earth-moving equipment in the world from tipping over. No, not every day, but it has occurred at least seven times this year for one logistics services provider.

Bridge Logistics is based in Mequon, Wisconsin, and like third-party logistics providers everywhere it is interested in working with most any customer in quite a few verticals. But for about 10 years now, one of its valued clients has been Levand Steel & Supply Corp.,

whose needs have centered around warehousing and transporting ballast used as counterweights in draglines and shovels. Several times this year, Levand has called on Bridge to pick and pack its ballast and get it to a customer pronto.

Dragline excavators are among the largest pieces of rolling or mobile machinery ever produced. There are a number of uses for them, but the biggest units are put to work removing the surface soil or overburden in mining operations. The largest ones can weigh in anywhere between 2,000 to 13,000 metric tons.

Mining shovels are hardly handheld implements. They are essentially a revolving deck that directs the shovel, or dipper, to scoop up massive amounts of material. The housing sits on tracks, and the operator inside shifts the dipper from position to position as material is first removed and then dumped.

The counterweight is an essential component of draglines and shovels, and Levand Steel & Supply is a major marketer of the ballast that steadies heavy equipment, says Joe Cordner, president of the Los Angeles-based company. Of course, Levand has a number of other businesses as well. It's involved in the scrap metal business. It imports hammers from China that are used by companies that specialize in shredding old cars. It even owns mines that it bought from Kaiser Steel years ago to produce the iron ore that goes into cement. But easily 40 percent or so of its business comes from ballast, Cordner says. And the essential ingredients there are steel punchings.

These are the tiny bits of material produced when holes are punched in some kind of metal. Depending on the size of the punchings, weights vary per cubic foot. Typically, punchings may be used in any number of areas, ranging from counterweights in marine vessels to resin-covered strengtheners in paving stones.

Levand, which also has offices in Birmingham, Ala., and Baltimore, purchases the scrap pieces and stores them in 55-gallon drums in a warehouse operated by Bridge Logistics. Each drum weighs about a ton, says Bill Klein, Bridge's warehouse manager. On average, about 800 drums are kept in inventory in the Mequon facility.

When an order comes in, Bridge is responsible for prepping the ballast and transporting it. Over the years, deliveries have been made all over the world, from diamond mines in South Africa to copper mines in South America. It's a far cry from Levand's beginnings in 1934 in Ohio, simply melting scrap metal. But things began to change when the founder moved the company to California in the 1950s. He found his niche in the ballast business because so much coal and other mining was taking place in Wyoming and throughout the West, Cordner says.

Recently, Levand took an order for a counterweight that had to be delivered to an oil-sands operation in eastern Canada. The country has become one of the most important sources of petroleum extracted from oil or tar sands, and heavy-equipment manufacturers are busy shipping units into various provinces.

The mode of transportation for the ballast is what posed the challenge for Bridge. For the first time, it was tasked with moving ballast by barge, and the operation required special handling to prevent the drums from rolling as the vessel moved through the Great Lakes and up the St. Lawrence Seaway to Montreal, where they were to be offloaded on flatbed trailers.

Bridge is used to crating the cargo, loading it on trucks and moving them down to, say, Houston or Mobile, where they are shipped across the Gulf of Mexico to Central or South America. This operation started out the same way, moving by flatbed from Mequon to Milwaukee. But the prep work was a bit more involved than usual.

"All the ballast was packaged very uniformly," Cordner says. "It's in the 55-gallon drums, sealed, then banded two to a pallet, so they could be picked up easily. It was a pretty tight and compact package. Then they went into the container box with protection around them so it was able to withstand the ups and downs of the trip."

In fact, the protection was dunnage bags, Klein says. "We did our research and found that if we could inflate them around the drums so there were no open pockets of air, that they're would be no chance of them rolling around. You just don't want those drums moving around or turning over in those containers."

Floor cleats were considered, but the expense was an issue, and it wasn't clear that they could do the job, Klein says. Ultimately, it was decided to put plywood between the pallets, place a "shower cap" over the load to keep it waterproof, then place the air bags around them to "really wedge everything in place."

Past orders have involved as much as 800,000 pounds. In this case, Bridge picked 520,000 pounds, then packed them into 12 twenty-foot containers for the trip. Since the load was leaving the United States heat-treated pallets were required.

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The trip could have been made overland. In fact, Cordner says in past many such trips were made on flatbed trailers. "We used to truck loads to Montreal, but trucking has gotten so expensive. Frankly, it's much more economical for our customers if we ship the product by vessel."

As for Bridge, Cordner says, "They do a lot more than just store and ship for us. They get pretty creative."

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