

At the Helm of Boluda Towage Belgium **STEVEN DE NIJS**



It's not just the employees on board that matter, if you want to sail the right course as a maritime company. Steven De Nijs (46) has been at the helm of Boluda Towage Belgium for a year and a half, albeit mostly from the office. This is the Belgian branch of the world leader in maritime towing services. We had a pleasant conversation with him, during which he gave us an overview of his career and the company. He explains how he became General Manager Area Scheldt & Zeebrugge.

How large is the Belgian part compared to Boluda Towage as a total?

Boluda Towage was created in Valencia, Spain, in 1920. Throughout the years, the company realised a substantial expansion, at first mainly in the Spanish-speaking world, but the growth accelerated with the acquisition of Les Abeilles in 2007. We are present in 100 ports and 18 countries on the four continents of Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. With the announcement of the acquisition of Smit Lamnalco, our fleet will expand from 400 to 600 ships in the next year. In Belgium, we have 26 ships in the water, eight in Antwerp, eight in Zeebrugge, and ten at North Sea Port.

Your main activity is offering towage services?

Boluda Corporacion Maritima has a lot more to offer. The group consists of two strategic divisions: Boluda Lines and Boluda Towage. For the latter, the main activity is guiding ships when docking and when entering or leaving ports. Whether our services are called upon does not always depend on the size of the vessel. It's foremost a question of ship manoeuvrability, while certain external factors may also be important: weather conditions, currents, draught, and air draught of the ship... Most shipowners



have a fixed contract with us, so they call on us when necessary. In the end, it's the pilot that boards the ship who decides how many tugboats will be needed.

We also offer other services, such as docking gas transports, an activity that has almost doubled since the war in Ukraine. We also provide escort for special transports, such as platforms or special cargo, such as the lock gates of the new lock in Terneuzen recently, or the new container cranes for the terminal in Antwerp. Finally, we also conduct firefighting operations, and we are on call to provide emergency assistance or salvage missions in case of a calamity.

At Zeebrugge, one will only see tugboats from Boluda Towage? So, it's not a very competitive market?

Quite the contrary, the overall picture is quite different. Worldwide, there are about 20,000 tugboats. The competition is fierce and as a result, rates are under constant pressure. As for my region, things look different still. Antwerp and North Sea Port are 'open harbours', in other words, any company can start towing, although there are certain conditions to meet if you wish to obtain a licence in Antwerp. Furthermore, Antwerp has its own towing service, which operates behind the locks. The picture is completely different in the port of Zeebrugge, as there is a new public tender for towing services every five to eight years. We won the concession in 2020, so we're the only service provider for the coming years, and hopefully still after that period. So the competition in Zeebrugge only takes place every few years, but that doesn't make it any less fierce.

If you're the one controlling the market, do you still stay focused?

Sure! Contracts between shipping companies and Boluda Towage are signed at both global and regional levels. Our local connection and embedding have always been very important. Clients are looking for sustainability and demand the same from their providers. We are greening our fleet and carry customer satisfaction

as a top priority. Besides, we have hired an Innovation Manager who monitors global trends and how we can contribute to these in a sustainable way.

In Zeebrugge, for example, we developed together with ABC Engines a system that significantly reduced the nitrogen emissions from our ships. We also have a system now for monitoring fuel consumption live on the tugboat's bridge. This awareness of consumption in itself resulted in Zeebrugge managing to save 260,000 litres last year. Furthermore, this system provides us with a lot of valuable data that we can use in other company processes.

We haven't lost our entrepreneurial spirit, just because we're the only active towage company at Zeebrugge. In North Sea Port and especially in Antwerp, we're constantly fighting for our share of the market, but our main concern is ecology and sustainability.

So how does Boluda Towage stand out from the competition?

(laughs) Ha, that's something you should ask our customers! We offer market-based rates for high-quality and safe services. Furthermore, the skills of our employees are an invaluable key to our success. The fact that someone was a captain on a tanker, bulk carrier or cruise ship for years doesn't automatically make him suited to take command of a tug. This job requires experience and precision. You must realise that a tug has to position itself directly under the bow of cruise and container ships. You engage at a speed of six knots, so that's not without danger. It's only on the job that you can learn this, so if you have the necessary patience and time to invest, you can find the job of your life here. Thanks to an attractive work schedule, you can perfectly combine your work with a social life ashore. We offer two types of work schedule (daily or weekly relief), and one week aboard is followed by two weeks at home. For this reason, it's not so hard for us to find crew, with the exception perhaps of the captain's position, as they must first follow an internal training programme. You do notice that at



a certain age some sailors (m/f) on the long haul feel the need to work closer to home and spend less time at sea.

You're talking from experience?

Until I was 33, I sailed on a trailing suction hopper dredger at Jan De Nul. Then after a year at Cobelfret, working mainly on HSEQ and company processes, I started working for DEME. For ten years, I travelled a lot to Africa, where I was Area Manager, responsible for all activities, first in West Africa and later on in South and East Africa. I also had a seat at the board of directors of CTOW, the towing division of DEME. So, there was already a connection with towing services.

When a headhunter company approached me and proposed the function I currently hold, it didn't take me long to decide. I was ready for a new professional challenge and to take the next step in my career.

It may not be Africa any more, but I still have to travel a lot. I hold office at Antwerp, but I regularly visit our offices at Zandvliet, Zeebrugge, and Terneuzen. I also pay regular visits to the crews on board of the tugs, as it's important to feel the pulse. That is also the reason why I network with port communities and our chain partners. I want to know what's going on in our branch, so we can anticipate in a timely manner.

So, becoming General Manager at Boluda Towage was your last career switch?

I'm glad to be working with a young, passionate team. We face new challenges every day, ranging from thinking along on small problems to taking important decisions across a broad operational spectrum. In Belgium, we provide work for about 340 people, we're an existential link in access to our ports, and we're constantly on standby to provide assistance whenever a ship is in distress on our coast or on the Scheldt. That's a huge responsibility.

The pinnacle of our work was being awarded "Tug Owner of the Year 2022". Furthermore, our sustainable projects earned us a selection as one of four finalists for the "Sustainable Port Award".

With the team, we recently also obtained the ISO 9001 and 14001 certificates. We're very proud of this, and I consider this to be a real achievement, but I also realise that this sets a standard, and we will have to continue optimising and improving procedures. This, together with numerous other daily and future challenges, makes this job so exciting.

So, your career path is set for the future?

You see, one can never be certain of what the future holds. After high school, I wanted to go to the Maritime Academy. I took the entrance exam and passed. However, a former captain advised against it. He believed there was no future at sea for Europeans, as all the work would soon be done by crews from other continents. So, I decided to follow his advice and studied law. Once I had obtained my bachelor degree, I finally chose for my passion, and went to study nautical sciences in Antwerp, with success! And the prophecy of the good captain never came true. Twenty-five years later, we still need those European sailors.

This goes to show that a career is always unpredictable, and can take strange turns. But one thing is clear to me: it will always be a function in the maritime world. ■