

■ Use of the remote control allows the operator to visually verify just how close the load is to any obstacle.



Going Remote with Versa-Lift

■ Convenient configuration eliminates tag-team operations.

By Guy Ramsey

WHEN ASKED TO consider all the equipment owned and utilized by Intermountain Rigging and Heavy-Haul (IRH), the one piece that gets President Mike McKnight's face beaming is its Versa-Lift Model 40/60, or more specifically the machine that features the wireless remote operating system. McKnight said it's simple why the remote is so effective. "Not only can one man do the job of two, or even three, he can do it more effectively" with the convenient remote configuration, he said.

The Versa-Lift, manufactured by Custom Mobile Equipment Inc., Baldwin City, Kan., is a unique forklift that's frame extends in order to achieve greater lifting capacities. Not only can it work as a rigger's forklift, but it is also equipped with a removable hydraulic boom. Accordingly, Versa-Lift products are rated two ways: With its wheelbase in its shortest configuration, the Model 40/60 can pick and carry 40,000 pounds (36 inches at the load center). With its chassis and associated counterweight fully extended 48 inches, the capacity shoots up to a full 60,000 pounds.

IRH is one of the leading rigging and heavy haul organizations in the western states, and one of the oldest and largest in the intermountain region. The company is the result of a merger between the former Intermountain Rigging and Transfer and Savage Industries' Heavy Haul division in 1997. IRH currently operates from a 10-acre facility in Salt Lake City, Utah, and offers rigging, millwright, heavy transportation, warehousing, packaging, and shipping services to a variety of customers in the intermountain region and throughout the United States.

IRH had used its first 40/60 for nearly 11 years when one day McKnight, who describes the machine as "the best rigger's forklift ever made," had a revelation. "We were on this job removing the head off a blow molder, which weighed about 23,000 pounds," he explained. "This is when it dawned on me that it would be really great if the unit could be controlled remotely." He soon called Custom Mobile owner and founder Gary Dick and advanced the idea.

McKnight smiled as he reflected on the call. "I told him that we wanted to order a new unit

but with one catch: It had to have remote controls," he said. At first, Dick wasn't sure if the company wanted to pursue this option but was soon persuaded to give it a go. Although it took a couple of tries to find the right system, in the end the lead time to deliver the new unit was only extended by about six months.

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■ Intermountain Rigging and Hauling President Mike McKnight pilots the Versa-Lift Model 40/60 remotely.



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“When that machine showed up I got myself a lawn chair and went out back and practiced loading and unloading it off one of our transports using nothing but the remote,” said McKnight, as he recalled how excited he was with the new unit. “It was amazing how well it worked from the moment it arrived.” Noting that they now use this unit regularly, he still marvels at its capabilities, as do IRH’s customers. “They are just amazed at how well it operates and the things it can accomplish,” he said.

“If I had to move something through an opening with, say, a 1/4-inch clearance, I would not be comfortable taking on that job if I had to use a signalman or spotter,” said McKnight, adding, “the remote allows the operator to stand next to the load allowing them to make the correct steering adjustment without the delay that comes through verbal input.” In other words, the driver is not operating blindly, something that is very common when spotting something as large as blower head or a press brake.

■ All cab controls can be found on the well-laid out wireless remote control console.

The heart of the system

Visually, there is nothing that distinguishes the remote control-equipped unit from other 40/60s. At the heart of the system is the radio control, supplied by Miratron Inc., Portland, Ore. Miratron has been producing these type of systems for more than five years. The T-1 belly-pack transmitter features a 915 Mhz direct FM frequency hopping spread spectrum, and has a operating range of up to 1,500 feet (line of sight) and operates on three D-cell standard or rechargeable batteries.

The R-4 receiver offers 16 factory-installed outputs that can be any combination of digital (bang/bang), proportional current, ratio-metric, or unamplified. It can directly drive a wide range of coils and other DC loads. For safety, it automatically detects when the transmitter is out of range and returns outputs to the prescribed safe condition.

The system only required a few modifications to satisfy Custom’s requirements, which helped in reducing development time. The remote’s interface is fairly straightforward. Custom Mobile made sure that every function could be commanded from this remote console, including mast and boom operation. According to McKnight, the system not only allows full remote control, but some of the functions are more precise on the remote than the standard controls in the cab.

A useful option and retrofit

The wireless remote is now an \$8,500 option on all four sizes of Versa-Lifts. TDS Erectors, Ashdown, Ark., recently received a Model 25/35 model with the remote. With a Model 40/60 in its crane and rigging fleet, the company was already sold on the Versa-Lift product’s quality. Steve Day, TDS’s president, said that the new remote-control machine, delivered just this spring, allows the operator to get down and survey every angle and obstruction to make sure that everything clears before inching forward.

“We use it in mold and die change-outs,” Day said, whose company performs industrial rigging and equipment moving with a fleet that includes a 100,000-pound rigging fork; as well as 30,000- and 15,000-pound forklifts. “It has eliminated the need for having two people on the job.” The operator can now see everything going on around the machine, which makes for a more efficient work environment. “The guy can stand out front [of the machine], and he doesn’t have to constantly flag someone while he’s working in a tight space,” he said.

Since the introduction about a year ago, Custom has put more than 30 additional units equipped with these remotes into service. And if you already own a Versa-Lift, there is good news: It is possible to have your unit retrofitted with the system. ♦

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