

## ACL looks to revolutionary design for new con-ros

*Newbuildings will have different configuration that dispenses with need for ballast*

SHIPYARDS have plenty of basic blueprints for owners to choose from when ordering new boxships or bulkers. But deepsea ro-ro vessels are a very different matter, especially ones that are able carry a really wide range of non-standard cargoes ranging from helicopters and yachts to motorhomes, construction equipment and farm machinery, as well as cars, trucks and containers.

That was the challenge for Atlantic Container Line when it started to consider replacements for its five G3 multipurpose ships that are more than 25 years old.

But ACL president and chief executive Andrew Abbott knew he was in no great rush when he first approached shipyards several years ago about a fourth generation of con-ro ships for the North Atlantic trades. That is because none of the current quintet, despite their vintage, has ever broken down.

But neither was that the only reason for the pedestrian pace of negotiations, with Mr Abbott fully aware that the longer he took to make a decision, the cheaper the price was likely to be.

He and his team, along with parent company Grimaldi, took their time considering what ACL would require before inviting tenders from 17 shipyards in both South Korea and China. A shortlist of five was drawn up, with a firm order finally placed with Shanghai's state-owned Hudong-Zhonghua Shipbuilding a few weeks ago.

The price has not been disclosed, but Mr Abbott readily admits that he obtained a very good deal in today's depressed newbuilding market.

The ships will be unlike any other con-ro ships, according to Mr Abbott, with a very different configuration that will dispense with the need for ballast.

International Maritime Advisors of Denmark came up with the innovative layout that is radically different from more conventional designs.

Virtually all con-ro vessels today stow containers on deck and lighter ro-ro cargo underdeck. Because of the significant air space on ro-ro decks compared with the denser stowage of containers, most of the weight rides high on a standard con-ro vessel, ACL said when unveiling its order, requiring a great deal of ballast for stability.

So IMA developed the concept of putting all the ro-ro cargo midship, and stowing the containers in cells fore and aft of the ro-ro space.

ACL, which was acquired by the Italian ro-ro specialist Grimaldi in 2007, already operates the world's largest ships of their kind, serving four ports in northern Europe and another four in North America. The new ships, scheduled for delivery in 2015, will have considerably more ro-ro, container and car capacity than their predecessors.

Ro-ro space is being expanded to 28,900 sq m on the new ships against 18,500 sq m on the G3 class, while container slots will increase from 1,850 teu to 3,800 teu. The G4 vessels will be able to stack containers 14 high rather than 11 tiers on the G3 ships. The car deck height will be raised from 1.65 m to 2.2 m to allow for SUVs, with room for more than 1,300 cars compared with 1,000 on the G3 ships. There will also be more space for oversized cargoes.

At 296 m, the 45,000 dwt newbuildings will be just 4 m longer than Atlantic Conveyor and its four sisterships, while the beam has been widened from 32.3 m to 37.6 m, but ramp capacity remains the same at 420 tonnes.

In terms of earning power, the G4 vessels will be the equivalent of a 6,500 teu containership, but with far lower costs, according to Mr Abbott.

## Press review

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ACL's ability to place the order at such a challenging time in the ship finance markets has undoubtedly been helped by the strength of its parent company, which has also been able to provide technical support.

Grimaldi has pioneered deepsea ro-ro services, with an extensive network stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to northern Europe, West Africa and South America. The family-owned company has grown both organically and through acquisition, including the takeovers of Finnlines and Minoan Lines as well as ACL in recent years. In total, Grimaldi operates a fleet of 94 owned and 120 managed ships.

As a private company, Grimaldi does not publish its financial results, but annual turnover is now around €2.3bn (\$2.9bn) and the company makes money.

That includes ACL, with Mr Abbott predicting that 2012 "will be a very good year for us", helped by "extremely strong" ro-ro cargo volumes.

For New Jersey-headquartered ACL, which dates back to 1965 when a group of European lines formed a consortium to operate transatlantic services, access to Grimaldi services through transshipment has greatly broadened its customer base.

Once the new ships are delivered, ACL also plans to extend its own direct calls to a port in the southern US, where Mr Abbott sees plenty of potential for additional ro-ro traffic such as cars, yachts and forest products.

With five ships and the need to maintain punctual weekly services, ACL will almost certainly drop one of its other ports from the schedule, Mr Abbott has warned, although he has yet to decide which will go.

ACL claims its G4 ships break the mould for ro-ro designs, and will also be far cheaper to run than the elderly G3s. With smaller crews and far lower fuel consumption, the new ships typically will burn 70 tonnes a day, against 75 tonnes, despite much larger cargo capacity.

Although the ships are to be built in China, European manufacturers will be supplying the engines and other machinery. Since the G4 vessels are to be deployed solely in the Atlantic trades, Mr Abbott says he wants to make sure any repairs and maintenance can be carried out locally, and not on the other side of the world.