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# Rags — to — Riches

## TFL Industrial built on hard work and drive

By Heather Hudson

It's amazing what you can accomplish when you're young, earnest and ambitious.

Tanner Stewart was 20 years old when he made a one-way trip from his hometown in Miramichi, New Brunswick to Alberta for a chance at a more prosperous life.

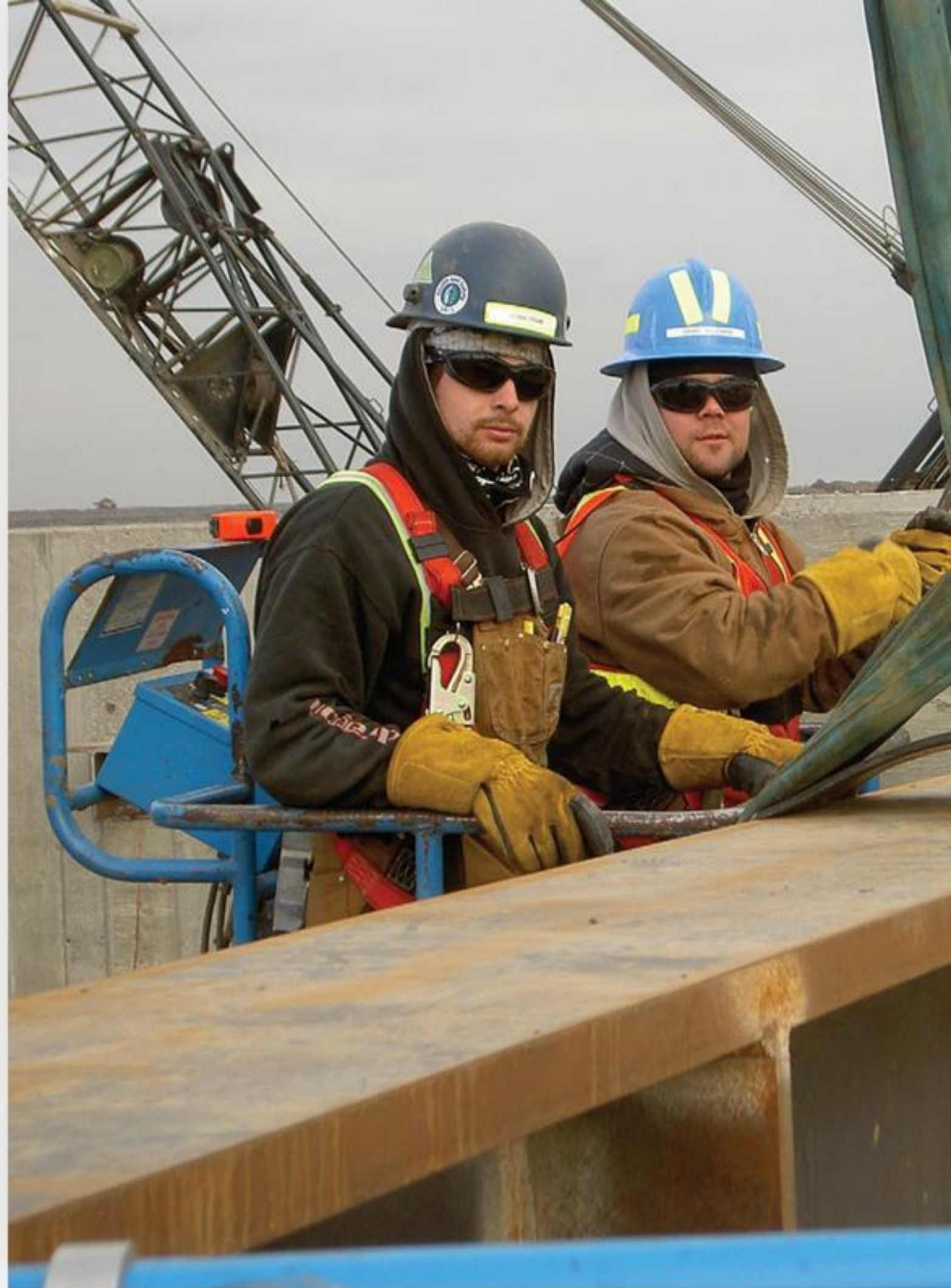
He had no idea that eight years later, he'd be CEO of TFL Industrial, a multi-million-dollar steel fabrication business he built from scratch with little more than fierce determination and trial and error.

"I guess you could say that I didn't know any better to not try [starting a business]," he joked.

Like most east coasters, Stewart's first stop in the west was Fort McMurray. A pipe fitter by trade, he quickly got a job doing civil dirt work with a North American construction group.

His first pay cheque sent him over the moon. "To go from an average of \$400 a week doing immensely hard labour planting trees to \$1,000 a week in this exciting atmosphere was energizing. The whole province felt vibrant. Opportunity was everywhere; you could smell it in the air. It was an exciting time for me."

It's no wonder that less than two years later he went the route of many of his construction comrades and bought a welding rig with a plan to begin his own mobile welding business starting with one truck and one employee.



Tanner Stewart, CEO,  
TFL Industrial

"It was 2007, and I didn't know what the word 'recession' meant. And I certainly wasn't familiar with what it did to an economy. Besides, we were at the height of the boom in Alberta," he recalled.

It took a little tinkering with some business plan software, a lot of meetings and four solid bank rejections before he was granted a \$60,000 government-guaranteed business loan, but persistence meant Stewart was in business.

Still working in construction, he began looking for jobs for his welder and rig. He got his start in the piling industry with a Suncor Voyager project, which proved lucrative.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TFL INDUSTRIAL



Members of the TFL team; the company has grown from two or three employees in its early days to around 110 employees today

“You could say that TFL was born in the piling industry as far as the welding service side of things goes. While we were on that piling project for most of 2008, I grew the company to a fleet of five welding rigs and five operators.”

Like all things too good to be true, the fingers of recession started to work their way into the industry and in the fall of 2008, Stewart got word that the Voyager project would shut down in January 2009.

In the months leading up to the shutdown, Stewart abruptly stopped investing in the company, bracing for the shortage of work to come.

“We were back to square one with no work,” he said.

The first six months of 2009 were lean, but a fortuitous meeting with someone in similar circumstances proved to send things back on the upswing.

“A gentleman I had happened to meet had a lot of rent to pay for shop space and I had trucks with no official TFL headquarters. I decided to share some rent and move into his facility in the west end of Edmonton.”

With a new home, Stewart pounded the pavement making cold calls to drum up fabrication business in the structural steel industry, though the real hope was to get his mobile welding fleet back out the door.

He managed to wrangle a meeting with Pacer Corporation and convince them that TFL was the shop that could provide

**“If it has to do with foundations and it’s steel, TFL has probably built it over the last six years because that’s where our fabrication shop roots originated.”**

– Tanner Stewart, CEO, TFL Industrial



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If it has to do with foundations and it's steel, TFL has probably built it

the service they needed for some miscellaneous steel fabrication for foundational work.

"A pipe fitter endeavouring into the structural steel fabrication world was a huge learning curve, to say the least," he explained.

Deciphering the structural steel drawings alone almost did him in, but Stewart stuck with it and figured it out. TFL's first fabrication supply jobs were embeds and trench grating jobs all within the foundational industry.

In 2009, TFL was also awarded a load tester job that led to building sheet piling, templates, bridge components and more in the shop.

"If it has to do with foundations and it's steel, TFL has probably built it over the last six years because that's where our fabrication shop roots originated."

In 2010 and 2011, Stewart says the shop "blew up" with jobs servicing the likes of Ledcor, Clearwater Group, the North American Construction Group, Belterra and more. The welding fleet was also back out the door on a number of jobs.

In 2010, TFL Industrial officially outgrew the rented shop and moved to their current facility in Winterburn, Alta. With

10,000 square feet and just under two acres, they've been running day and night shifts since October 2011.

This fall, TFL will add a second facility in Acheson, Alta. It will feature 20,000 square feet of shop space, five cranes, 8,000 square feet of office space and more than five acres of module fabrication yard.

"The company went from basically two to three people consistently throughout the first couple years and today we're sitting at about 110 employees," said Stewart.

Looking back on this flurry of early success, Stewart says he can credit the diligence of the people that supported him. Three in particular were "game changers" for his success in the early days.

Adrien Lombard had 25 years of fabrication experience when he took a chance and started working with the fledgling company.

"He originally had his career in the Halifax shipyards which really rounded his skill set out amazingly. I'm not a welder so I needed a guy like him who could build anything," said Stewart. "Without having him on board, I wouldn't have had the confidence to sell our shop



TFL offers on-demand, mobile welding services, including pile splicing and pile capping

fabrication service. He's still with us today as the day shift shop foreman."

Stephen Hoess, an apprentice who became a journeyman while with TFL, was also part of the early dream team.

"I can't count the number of all-nighters the three of us pulled," said Stewart of himself, Hoess and Lombard. "They really stuck with me."

And Stewart also credits TFL's success to Devin Alward, the current processing plant manager who's in charge of all steel processing. Alward helped get TFL into steel processing back when they first started renting the shop.

"The first piece of equipment TFL bought when we moved into the original fab shop was a 2-D plasma cutting machine which enabled us to provide processed plate in-house," Stewart explained. "Devin learned how to run that equipment and we've since bought five other CNC processing machines that allow us to process all of our structural steel. We can bend and form plate and do all of our own plasma cutting, which allows us to provide top-notch service. And we don't have to rely on other vendors to process steel for us."

**Secret to success**

It's only been about 18 months since Stewart and his loyal workers stopped pulling all-nighters to get orders out the door on time, but that doesn't mean he hasn't reflected on why his business made it when others have gone bust in tough economic times.



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The company offers bridge construction as one of their specialized services

“Our success is 100 per cent due to the die-hard dedication from my team in those early days and TFL’s even larger team today. Our commitment to customer service could not and cannot be beat.

“I probably worked eight years’ [of hours] in those four years. We were willing to ensure that, even though we were a small shop, we stopped at nothing to get the clients what they needed, when they needed it and stood by the quality of the work.”

Up until three years ago, Stewart was the only administrator. He’d spend his days working on estimates, HR, payroll and other office tasks and then put on his coveralls and join Lombard, Hoess and Alward on the shop floor and work all night to get deliveries to work sites on time.

They’ve come a long way. Last year, the business pulled in \$20 million and Stewart says they’re well on their way to doubling or even tripling that this year.

“It’s the same dedication to service that is the core of our business. We firmly believe that no matter what the size of job, we always have time to make it work for our clients. That’s why we operate 24 hours a day.

“TFL’s culture has evolved since the early days when there were just a few of us, but it comes from the same roots. It’s about having a workplace where people love to be and where they can be empowered and feel a sense of ownership.”

With help on all fronts, Stewart has been able to steer the business toward giving a leg up to tradespeople eager to get their start with apprenticeship and other training programs. They’re also creating partnerships within the community.

And when it comes to competing in a global marketplace, unlike his early days of scrambling to get by, Stewart has a solid plan.

“I’m aware that, as a company, our competition isn’t here in Canada anymore, it’s overseas. I’m always re-examining things and trying to figure out the best ways to deliver our services and pass savings along to our clients. That’s the key for local Alberta companies to maintain our market share going forward,” he said.

Today, TFL provides piping, structural steel and module fabrication in their Edmonton facilities that run 24 hours a day and they service the piling, tank, pipeline, maintenance and general steel construction industries in their field operations.

With almost a decade of steady growth and stiff challenges behind him, there’s no question that Stewart, his team and TFL Industrial is up to the job. ☺