

2006: W. SIDNEY KNOX

The legendary Sidney Knox has been the face of Neal and Massy for more than thirty years and its undisputed driving force, Sidney Knox is a stalwart of private enterprise.

This larger-than-life gentleman has lived a life, the stuff of which great movies are made. This daredevil, swashbuckling, air force pilot, nicknamed “Bullmoose” moved from dodging German anti-aircraft fire over the Rhine in World War II, to fighting off equally dangerous opponents in the turbulent environment of Trinidad and Tobago business from his cockpit at Neal and Massy Holdings.

Sidney Knox is a very private man, but a courageous, brilliant one with a love of adventure and excitement and a passion for fast cars, fast boats and yachting, competing in both local and international races.

At the age of 17, Sidney signed up with the Royal Air Force, going off to Canada for his pilot training. Later on, in early 1945, he was part of the Sixth Airborne Division in the famous crossing of the Rhine. He was one of the pilots flying those wooden gliders loaded with jeeps, guns and troops. Of the 100 gliders that crossed the Rhine under a barrage of gunfire, 44 glider pilots were killed.

Sidney lost a lot of friends in battle but his destiny was already written and linked to the destiny of Trinidad and Tobago. No doubt, his wartime experiences (which he is not keen on discussing) provided good skills in fighting many corporate battles.

After the war, the man who returned was more mature than most men twice his age. British West Indies Airways was small, and he couldn't wait for work as a pilot, so he found work with Joe Fernandes, starting from the bottom up, "from scratch" as he says.

In 1953, he met Charles Massy and joined the ranks of Neal and Massy as a sales representative. Fourteen years later he was joint managing director. While self-taught in the principles of business, Sidney attributes his acumen to his ability to listen and ask questions, learning fast in the school of 'hard knocks.' However, recognising that all of us might not possess such natural brilliance and instincts, Sidney devoted his energy and time to the successful establishment and operations of the then named UWI Institute of Business (now the Arthur Lok Jack School of Business). Sidney served the Institute of Business as Deputy Chairman in its formative years bringing his considerable depth of experience to that institution, the success of which is a credit to his work and vision.

As an executive, Sidney developed a reputation as a tough, shrewd strategist who always played fair.

Under Sidney Knox, Neal and Massy moved to the heights of business success with Sidney, rising to many challenges including being forced to stand up and take a bunch of licks over two restructurings, in 1984 and 1994. In the 1980s, when the liquidity crunch was toppling giants such as Stephens and Johnsons, Kirpalani's and Woolworth, Sidney was able to keep Neal and Massy afloat. When trade liberalisation came, Neal and Massy was hard hit but thanks to

Sidney, it remained a player in the game. As he says “You just take your losses and move on.” Neal and Massy’s prized motor assembly plant was lost so he simply reverted to the dealership side of the business. For him, failure was just never an option.

Not only was Sidney Knox responsible for the expansion of Neal and Massy, but he encouraged his Board to invest heavily into regional markets. In the days before globalisation, when Trinidad and Tobago’s market was restricted, Sidney worked hard to make the Caribbean Common Market (CARICOM) a reality.

When it was difficult to travel in the Caribbean, it made economic sense for him to acquire an airplane and fly people to meetings in the Caribbean and bring them back on evenings.`

It was out of this ease of bringing people together from across the Caribbean that Neal and Massy expanded into markets across the region. In Sidney’s own words: “If the rest of the Caribbean islands do well, we’ll do well. You can’t have a narrow perspective.”

According to Bernard Dulal-Whiteway who started with Neal and Massy in 1972, Sidney’s goals were two-fold. He says:

“I think Sidney had two major visions. One was to grow horizontally – if you were selling vehicles, you’d get into insurance or associated businesses...The other was regional growth, so that we would have mini Neal and Massys all

over the region...I think that Sidney really felt that if you wanted to be part of the Caribbean, you had to make your presence known everywhere.”

There were times when it appeared he had lost but he would eventually win. Many years ago, after reaching an agreement on the purchase price of George F. Huggins, its Chairman called Sidney telling him they got a better price from Geddes Grant Limited. Sidney reminded the Chairman that they had an agreement. The Chairman, responded that “he couldn’t remember.” As Sidney let the deal go, he also told the Chairman “Well, maybe one day we’ll buy Geddes Grant – and that’s how we’ll get you.” The rest, of course, is history.

Yet another testament to Sidney’s visionary capacity is the establishment of the Point Lisas Industrial Estate. In the 1970s, Knox’s persistence in the development of Point Lisas was visionary because by the late 1990s, Trinidad was ranked number two among world methanol exporters, and Point Lisas became a hub for the valuable commodity. Knox said:

“When we put up that proposal to acquire a few thousand acres of Carnoi to create the Point Lisas estate, a lot of my friends in Port of Spain said “What are you going to do with 3,000 acres, you’re making joke!”. I said, if you combine natural gas with a deep water harbour, you’ll need even more than 3,000 acres!” Which is exactly what has happened.”

Sidney, because he exemplified big business, was on occasion the subject of political attacks which failed to deter him from his course. When Dr. Williams

spoke about the game of sharks and sardines, it is Sidney Knox who appeared to have been his inspiration. But every administration recognised his contribution and the great value he brought to this country. Dr. Williams himself, asked Sidney to sit on the board of the National Commercial Bank when he was going to set up that institution.

At the end of the day, Sidney's is a simple philosophy. In his own words in a 1997 interview, he said "The private sector must work with the government of the day to build a better country. Our philosophy has always been to cooperate with the government of the day. Whoever individual employees vote for is their business. Elections come and elections go, and between that you have a country to run." Without a doubt, Sidney Knox remains a charming daredevil, a tell-it-like-it-is, courageous and visionary patriot.

We salute him, his family and the Neal and Massy Group for the fine example they have been able to shape and mould for the business community. He has been a man for all seasons and always resolutely stood his ground in defence of private enterprise. Many are the challenges which continue to confront the private sector in terms of taxation, the continual intrusion of Government into business, barriers to free trade, impediments to the operation of free market, the artificial costs of doing business and cross-border relationships. Sidney and the Neal and Massy Group have been a tower of strength to the Chamber in repeatedly overcoming these challenges to maintain the beacon of entrepreneurship, growth and development demonstrating that when the private sector does well, so does the country.

May the torch which he and his group carry never dim nor be dropped.

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Mr. Sidney Knox into the Business Hall of Fame on this 10th October, 2006.