



**A SHORT HISTORY...**  
**and some thoughts**  
**for the future**

# A DECADE OF DEVELOPMENT

2018 marks 10 years of Alistair Group; a significant milestone for a company that began with one truck and a desire to solve problems.

“Did we expect to still be here; to have grown this much?” says Founder and CEO, Alistair James, glancing up. “Honestly? No. I suppose we always had our heads down focused on the job back then. So, this a good moment to look around and see all that has been accomplished by everyone involved. It also feels like the right time to share our story, because we don’t want to lose where we have come from. It’s important that the team knows our roots and understand why we believe our company values are so critical to both our past and our future.”

As Alistair explains: “This isn’t about pausing to self-congratulate, though. This is almost the opposite. It’s about looking ahead. That’s what keeps it exciting. Our past is our foundation, and that’s vital. It is in future where all of the opportunity lies.”

And as for the present? Alistair Group is going from strength to strength and it’s hard not to notice the buzz in the air as the company expands into more countries, gains new assets, embraces new technology and continues to evolve. It’s a new era for the Alistair Group and the company is poised for further success.









# WHAT WE DO

“Sometimes, when people ask me what I do I just say ‘I’m a trucker’,” says Alistair with a flippant twinkle in his eye, “but it’s no longer really true,” he continues. “We have grown into the company we are today because we make stuff work better. That’s it. That’s the simplest way I can explain our range of services. If we’re doing that, everything else can be handled.”

Alistair’s words may sound offhand, but in fact this approach sets a standard of constant improvement; a bar that can always be raised – and this is at the heart of the Alistair Group. The company begins by listening to the problem. From here experienced staff can assess whether the firm is in a position to improve things; whether they have access to the assets required; or whether new technology or a new approach might make a difference. “By exposing the customer to smart people with answers, Alistair Group becomes the trusted advisor, building long-term relationships,” says Alistair. “That’s the ideal. It’s not about pushing sales of our services, but instead constantly reinventing them to help everyone, including ourselves, work better.”

The company may be asset-based but it’s this culture of efficient execution and best practice that has really set it apart in the world of logistics solutions.

# HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The company took its current form from a problem solving basis. Alistair was originally based in the bush when he began work in Tanzania back in 2002. His remote location (at the time, more than three days' drive to Arusha) meant that he had to learn to speak Kiswahili quickly and fluently, and that he had to overcome many logistical issues in terms of accessing food, spare parts and basic requirements. But also, since it was impossible to reach the nearest village and return to camp within a day, it meant that he frequently stayed with local business people who soon became good friends and who enjoyed discussing the concerns of the local area long into the night. It quickly became clear that there were many commercial opportunities in solving people's issues, and the traders encouraged Alistair to try to do exactly that.

His initial investment was in grain trading. He had witnessed the frustrating fluctuations in price and became good at predicting them. With a rented warehouse and a single small truck he began trading, but he struggled to make the financials add up on such a small scale. "It was time for a bigger truck!" Alistair smiles.

But Alistair made no claim to be an expert in vehicles, he was learning on the job and it was at this point Angelo Caruso joined forces with Alistair to provide advice on the next investments, as well as plenty of hands on maintenance. His professional background in mining and road maintenance and personal fascination with all things vehicle related made him an ideal fit and he has remained a key component in the Group's team ever since. Angelo, now one of the three Directors of the Group, is: "a well-oiled German machine; a petrol-head with a real heart for what we do," Alistair says affectionately.

"I remember we shared an old pikipiki [the word for motorbike in Tanzania]. It had us arriving at meetings with numb butts!" Alistair is looking back with nostalgic fondness, but in fact he arrived to our meeting today on a motorbike.





Next, with Angelo's input, came two fuel tankers and a little more success. Until, that is, just a few months later one of them caught fire! "I'll never forget that pre-Christmas phone call explaining what had happened. It was a big shock. We could have given up there and then."

But, instead, Alistair sold the remaining fuel tanker and his personal car in order to cover the cost of the lost fuel and finance two flat-bed trucks and a stroke of luck turned things around in the form of a rental contract on Mafia island for the oil and gas industry.

As business improved, the focus never wavered. "Two years in, my sister, Clementine, joined the company with a remit to find the resources to grow the business. At this point we had around ten trucks. We stayed in a shared house with one room as our office and the balcony as our meeting room." Clementine is now the third Director.

Over the following eight years, with financing from the US Government's Development Bank, the company expanded into its current form. With almost 500 staff across 14 countries the Group moved 650,000 tons of cargo in the last year, not to mention all that is stored in Alistair Group warehouses. However, even with all this rapid growth and expansion, extended services and ever improving standards "I feel strongly that we should never move too far from the key values that made it all work from the start."

Without explanation, these five values may initially seem unremarkable. Aside from 'humility' perhaps, many of these feature in other company's bullet pointed ideals too, but for Alistair they each come with a carefully thought out reasoning, often a story that illustrates their worth; he can list them effortlessly from memory and he and his team revisit them on a daily basis. This is required reading for anyone keen to be a part of Alistair Group.









The background of the entire page is a photograph of a large black ship hull. On the hull, there is white text that reads "Alistair" and "Group". In the bottom left corner, a worker in a black uniform and a green hard hat is walking. The worker's uniform has orange reflective stripes. The ship's hull has several white lights and cables visible.

## 1. Continual Improvement

“For us this is massive” Alistair enthuses. “It is the underlying current of our entire business. It’s about attitude. We maintain a healthy level of frustration and dissatisfaction...” These are not words often used to explain a company philosophy and he smiles as he pauses to let this sink in. “The point is we could always be doing things a lot better.” And that’s what’s exciting, both for the staff and the clients, about working with this dynamic and hungry company. There is no resting on laurels or stagnation, the world is turning too fast. We know we can always be leveraging new technology or developing new approaches.”

## 2. Customer Focus

This aspect of the company values may seem obvious for any company. It was established early on and its importance is reiterated in every new project won. But it’s more than that, Alistair explains: “We are not selling what we do, we are finding the answers for what the customer needs to do. We assess our position; can we practically help? We ensure we are conversant on the ground; that we can mobilize in the most efficient and most advantageous way. And then we deliver. Our goal is to become the path of least resistance for the customer, the easy button.”

Relationships are key and the Group always aspires to ask questions, drive conversation and actively listen to what’s required. “That way we are the ones providing real solutions,” says Alistair. “Moreover, given the chance to do the job again, we’re going to try to do it even better.”



### 3. Safety

This is a critical aspect of what the Alistair Group does. “Naturally because it keeps people and assets safe, this much is obvious,” says Alistair, raising his eyes to the ceiling, “but, perhaps just as importantly, it’s professional; it shows discipline and makes everyone feel that the job – in its entirety – is being taken absolutely seriously. We’ve won projects because of this careful attention to safety requirements, no matter what country we are operating in.”

### 4. Honesty

At face value this makes sense in terms of being able to show that prices are fair, employees are trustworthy, promises are honored. The Group also prides itself on supporting governments in anti-corruption efforts and has a fixed policy of paying no bribes or inducements. In many of the countries where Alistair Group operates this kind of culture incorporates many layers of complexity. “Taking what appears to be the ‘easy route’ is short sighted,” says Alistair. “Corruption must be cut, even at the smallest level. With a true resolve to keep everything above board our staff have earned respect from authorities and maintain a clear and direct path to project completion in every case.”

Further, operating in multiple countries where the cultural preference is to avoid saying anything that might seem negative, honesty is also vital in terms of having the integrity to be straightforward about what the hurdles are. “Nobody likes to give the bad news,” says Alistair. “But customers need a realistic assessment of each situation in order to achieve their end-game. A candid approach will almost always mean we find the optimal solution and avoid unrealistic expectations and disappointment,” Alistair concludes.

## 5. Humility

The company operates as a very flat organization, without the deep hierarchy that alienates top management from what is actually happening on the ground. The Directors have each learned their craft by rolling up their sleeves and actually doing the 'dirty work', and they expect the same from everyone else. To this day Alistair doesn't drive a fancy car or live ostentatiously, none of the Directors do. The company's modest beginnings are not forgotten.

"It's also key that people realize they are part of a team," says Alistair. "They don't just need to tolerate each other, they need to get along. It's a network and everyone is important. If one person feels they are somehow more important and needn't take time to build relationships with colleagues, then they probably won't work within this company, it's really as simple as that." And that goes for clients, customers, suppliers too: "Nobody likes doing business with a jerk," he grins.





# JOINING THE TEAM

As an employer the Alistair Group exposes its team to global best practice whenever possible. This may range from being taught to implement the highest standards of UK health and safety to traveling to France to receive further training as a mechanic or working alongside the technical development team based in California. Alistair enthuses: "From the employee's perspective: Get your hands dirty. Get your hands dirty aggressively. There are no aloof, suit wearing managers here. We need to know what is happening on the ground, to deal in details and remain connected to the goals at hand. The goal may boil down to getting something from A to B, but what goes into making that happen (particularly in complex countries where culture, infrastructure, weather, and ever changing regulations are just some of the issues we continually face) is what makes us special.





"Your drive and enthusiasm creates your role here and how far your reach goes is entirely up to you," says Alistair. "We want everyone to be asking themselves 'what have you changed today to make the company and/or the client work better?' If everyone does this every day we know we will grow in the right direction."

This is an exciting time for the Alistair Group and everyone involved is committed to making the next part of the journey as smooth for the company as it is for its customers.





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