Europe-based short-sea shipping specialist Oldenburg-Portugiesische Dampfschiffs-Rhederei (OPDR) celebrates 130 years of operation this year, and it is doing so with a youthful outlook on the future.

In recent years, OPDR has evolved its business from a port-to-port shipping service to a door-to-door intermodal logistics provider, offering just-in-time/just-in-sequence delivery and pick-up. As part of its strategy, OPDR has also invested in fleet modernization.

Part of the Bernhard Schulte Group since 1996, OPDR’s fleet includes 11 owned and chartered vessels, none of which is more than 10 years old.

Within the past year, OPDR has boosted its container fleet by 20 percent to 8,500 containers, giving it one of the youngest container fleets in the European short-sea market. All of OPDR’s 1,000 refrigerated containers are leased and have been renewed over the last two years. Most are equipped with Carrier Transicold systems, and the 300 newest 40-foot high-cube containers are equipped with PrimeLINE® units. Carrier’s top-performing PrimeLINE model was selected, according to OPDR Managing Director Mark Wilkinson, for its reliability and efficiency, two attributes that are essential to the fleet’s ongoing success.

OPDR’s origins trace back to 1882, when it established regular service between Oldenburg, Germany and Portugal. Headquartered today in Hamburg, OPDR’s distinctive yellow vessels still serve customers in Germany, northern Europe and the Iberian Peninsula, but its routes now extend further north into the Baltic Sea and south to northern and western Africa, Madeira and the Canary Islands – more than 50 ports in all.

“Our customers’ requirements are at the root of all things we do. That is why we are moving from a classical shipping company to more of a logistics provider, offering services on the landside as well as the waterside,” said Wilkinson, adding that OPDR is also vigorously developing its refrigerated business. “We see potential in perishables, foodstuffs, vegetables, fruit and the like.”

“We have extremely demanding customers,” Wilkinson said, explaining that OPDR’s supermarket customers expect efficient refrigerated deliveries without quality loss. “We are an integral part of our customers’ supply chains, working with such precise delivery times and such thin margins of error that we simply need the most reliable fleet.”

OPDR has also developed a very specialized service supporting the cruise ship industry, another business that requires uncompromising precision. In these cases, OPDR’s containers arrive in port just ahead of the cruise liners, enabling rapid transfer of food from container to luxury liner, providing a fresh dining experience for the 3,000 to 4,000 passengers on board in a matter of hours.

“We get this business because of the reliability of our operations. An integral part of that is that the vessels arrive on time and the function of the reefer itself is also of great importance. There’s simply no room for error.”
“We prefer to stay with the latest technology because of the efficiency it brings,” said Wilkinson. “The cost of bunker fuel is a huge issue. Every cent counts – it’s as simple as that. The more modern the fleet, the more efficient we are. That includes the generation of electricity – onboard power, which can have a big impact on the operating cost of our vessels.”

Carrier Transicold PrimeLINE units provide exceptional energy efficiency, reducing on-board power generation requirements as well as related emissions, enabling shipping lines to reduce fuel usage and related costs while improving their environmental profile.

Although OPDR has fewer containers than its deep-sea counterparts, the short-sea routes its vessels traverse put OPDR’s containers through more rigorous service.

“Rather than shipping a box from Shanghai to Oakland, where it will be on a vessel for 25 days, our box may only be on the vessel for 25 hours,” said Naci Aktas, OPDR’s head of Container Logistics. “So obviously the turn-around time for the equipment is extremely intense.”

“We require more out of our assets, because the transit times are a lot shorter,” Aktas said, reinforcing the need for reliability.

Helping to assure reliable service of OPDR’s units are Carrier Transicold’s extensive service center network and ready parts availability. As Wilkinson said, “Carrier’s extensive support network is another one of the advantages of working with the market leader.”

As this graphic shows, within the first half of this year, Carrier Transicold surpassed the 900,000 mark for container refrigeration units produced since our very first unit rolled out of our factory back in 1968. More broadly, this is another illustration of the rapid growth of the container shipping industry in general, and refrigerated container shipping in particular, over a span less than half a century.

Today, 52 percent of world seaborne trade goes by container vessel, and refrigerated containers allow transport of fruits, vegetables, meat, seafood and more between virtually all points in the world. It’s a testament to the amazing practicality, efficiency and convenience of container shipping.