



Ken Newton,  
CEO, VASA

# Frank Allison, an industry legend

*Remembered by Ken Newton and Mark Mitchell, VASA*

**F**rank (William Franklin) Allison, the long-time executive director of IMACA, died on July 11th at age 80 in Fort Worth, Texas. A memorial service was held on July 20th. He was known throughout the world, and his early influence and effect on the international mobile A/C industry almost cannot be overstated. He served as president of IMACA for several years and received the "Legend" award from VASA in Australia.

He knew a lot about mobile air conditioning and refrigeration, but was never on the tools. His career began on the counter of a men's clothing store in Little Rock, Arkansas. He excelled as a salesman and became skilled in business management, negotiations and problem solving.

In the 1950s, vehicle air conditioning was usually installed as an aftermarket kit, and many companies got into that game. In 1958 Frank joined Climatic Air of Dallas, Texas, selling air conditioning systems and radio installation kits as a package to car dealers. He wrote good business because the radios he offered had AM and FM, when most cars offered only AM. The air conditioning systems were under dash and trunk-mounted models. Frank opened Climatic Air's office in Los Angeles in 1962.

A year later, a diminutive and savvy Japanese industrialist, Tetsuo Nobata walked into Frank's office and revealed his grand plan to air condition the entire Tokyo taxi fleet. Nobata knew little about car air conditioning but he had the contract from the owner of the largest taxi fleet on the planet. That meeting started a long friendship, and was probably the beginning of the air conditioning aftermarket industry in Japan.

Mr Nobata's orders were massive

by the standards of the day. One order alone was for 30,000 complete mobile systems. The level of shipments going through the port of Los Angeles was such that the city's mayor telegraphed Mr. Nobata to thank him for using the port. The framed telegram hung on Mr Nobata's boardroom wall for 40 years. But whenever he was asked about the success of his massive enterprise, Mr Nobata never hesitated: "Mr Allison was my teacher."

A consummate salesman, in the mid-1960s, Frank took a three-leg flight to Australia and cold-called likely customers from the phone book. It was an exhausting six weeks of flights, hotels and meetings and also a significant spark to ignite the mobile air conditioning industry in Australasia.

Frank left Climatic in 1974 to again pursue car radio opportunities with Los Angeles importer Astro Sonics. Frank was vice president of sales and marketing and summed up his time there in his trademark understated fashion, "We sold a lot of radios." Two years later, Frank was hired by NGK Georgia to expand that company's business into radios.

1978 saw Frank appointed as president of Frigette, a company beset by poor financial management and legal problems in the owner's family. Frank recalled that the then-operator of the company was less worried about being in jail than what was going wrong back at Frigette.

Frank managed to turn the company around in three or four years, moving heaven and earth to do so. "It was a big operation," he said, "with 100 staff on the main assembly line and ten warehouses around the country."

Frank also cultivated business for Frigette in Central and South America, taking his wife Josephine as Spanish translator. His reputation as

a businessman and his well rounded knowledge of the industry was attractive to the International Mobile Air Conditioning Association (IMACA) and he joined as its executive director in 1987. He had what was needed in the heady years of new licensing, refrigerant change, retrofitting and more.

His strength throughout his career was his ability not to jump to conclusions. His close friend, VASA's Mark Mitchell noted "Frank was good under pressure. While everyone else was dancing up and down about the problems the industry would face with the phase out of CFCs, Frank and his team quietly stood back, analysed it rationally and as a result, retrofitting was nowhere near the big bogey portrayed by those who could profit from chaos."

In the late '80s Australian Mark Mitchell rapped on IMACA's door to learn the structure of building an industry association. Mark found the industry varied little between Texas and Australia, and Mark returned to help found VASA using everything he had learned from his mentor Frank Allison.

"Frank was a guy with a lot to say – he didn't suffer fools all that gladly – but he was very modest about himself and his achievements," Mark says.

Every organization needs to recognize that their success and philosophies are influenced by a great mind, and Frank Allison had that effect everywhere. His business knowledge and influence affected the air conditioning industry and related groups on five continents. His advice will be sorely missed. \*



Frank Allison