

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: John

Vincenti

Date

2 December 2020

Primary Maker

John Vincenti

null

Dimensions

1 hour 07 minutes

null

Extent

1 digital audio recording (WAV)

Object Type

Oral history

null

null

Collection

Malta Dockyard Oral History project

Museum

Malta Maritime Museum

Registration Number

MMM.AV0004

Description

This recorded interview was made as part of the Malta Dockyard Oral History project by the Digitisation Unit, Heritage Malta, under the direction of Joe Meli. John entered the yard in 1978 as a Shipwright apprentice. On completion of his apprenticeship, he was assigned to the New Building section and then moved on to the Shiprepair section. In 1998, he moved up the ranks and joined the Quality Control Department. In 2004, he was promoted to the position of QA/QC Manager up to 2010 when the yard closed down.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) He had applied to enter the dockyard three years prior to the stated date (1975), for the aptitude test-interview-medical test; even though he had passed all of them, he was called again for a second interview, which was similar to interview he had before, which is where they decided he had failed, Although he felt disappointed by this result, it did motivate him to continue frequenting school, studying and practicing the subjects related to engines, which was very close to his heart, so he applied for a course to become a motor vehicle mechanic. Then again, there was no place available hence he had to take one of a motor vehicle technician-which he was a bit sceptical about since, he was not sure he' d manage to keep up with what was expected from him throughout the course, yet he still did it for about two/three years and even got a distinction in two study units, within the course. Then, 1978 came along, and vacancies opened up again in the dockyard, he went through the whole process again and was then accepted in the dockyard. (04:30) He was abroad for the period when the apprentices had to choose their trade, hence they were asked to go in on their arrival but the trade he wanted to select that was related to the course he was currently doing, was not available anymore and

he had to choose from boilermakers, welder burners, shipwright and one or two other trades he could not recall. (05:45) Due to having a friend working as a shipwright, he decided to choose that one, since for the other ones, he had no idea what they were about. Later on, he came to understand that he made the right choice, as people who chose to become a shipwright had more chances to get a promotion, not just in that sector but also in other ones. (07:00) Their shipwright apprenticeship was supposed to be four years but was reduced to three years, which could be because their class was a bit keener. (07:15) Throughout their training, they still had to go to school to learn that particular trade, in the case of the shipwright, they were split into two levels depending on their academic level, some had to follow just a welding fabrication course, as a shipwright had to have that kind of knowledge before repairs took place and some on naval architecture, sciences, and more theory, according to their background-they were a good group that showed a lot of interest hence they had good marks overall. (08:30) After the three years of apprenticeship, for certain tasks they had a mentor/instructor with them to teach them and keep an eye on them at the same time. (09:30) He mentioned that apprentices were not allowed to carry out overtime. (09:45) He was the most mature one in the group, since he entered late, at the age of 21 while the youngest one was 17 years of age, hence the average was 18/19 years of age-most of the group looked up to him since he was older. (10:15) The chargemen/foremen, were sometimes hard up for manpower or to cover Saturdays and since he was the oldest, was good at his work, and knew what he was doing they told him to work Saturdays and overtime, which might have resulted in some resentment amongst the group. (11:15) He worked with the new building section, where they were not repairing ships but building barges, ships and buoys for tankers. They have also been involved in building the grandstand roof for the national stadium, and the Marsa power station-the structures of boilers 7 and 8 which had been demolished. The newbuilding section was in No.1 dock, which does not exist anymore. (13:15) As shipwrights, they used to delegate a lot with the welder burner on which parts of the ship to be worked on, but since there were a lot of instances where the welder burner would not be there (for health or union reasons), they picked up the skill themselves and welded and burned with the gas cutter. This initiative did not go unnoticed as it showed their initiative in the work. He then recalls, that at a young age, he acted as a 'primalista' out of his gang. He used to

carry the duty of the chargemen, when he was not there, even though he was fresh out of the apprenticeship. He stated that “... Some people shy away from responsibility and some look for trouble and I look for trouble all the time...” (14:30) After some time, an opening for a chargeman came along, and even though he had been replacing and acting as one all along, he was not promoted. This was a disappointment to him but did not stop him from working harder. (15:15) Ten years down the line, he applied for different positions along the way but was never accepted. He thinks that it could also have been due to his accent when speaking. Although, along the way, he came to like other different jobs. He mentions the work of the Quality Controller (QC), who used to come frequently to inspect the steel to be used for the construction of the ship or a barge, using optical instruments. He would sometimes be in charge of assisting in setting up, taking dimension readings. The practice was that each unit would have extra length on the edges, that was trimmed after the units are aligned and fitted. (18:00) The person in charge of carrying out the quality control got promoted to a ship manager, and since they did not have a replacement in the QC department, John was filling this gap. He was enthusiastic to apply for the position but in the meantime, an inspector from the QC department offered him the opportunity to join their department. Joining the QC department was always something on John’s mind. The inspectors’ manager, a known socialist (tar-Rokko from urrieq), wanted to speak with John, to know more about him because, with certain promotions, it’s not how much you know or who applied, but who you know or what they know about you. There were all sorts of people in the dockyard, those who, as he calls them, charlatans and those who were ringleaders, mainly political, who created problems and gave the rest of the yard, who were people trying to make a living, a bad name, where most of them just went with the flow not to ‘rock the boat’, but he was not like that because he spoke his mind, hence they saw him as someone working against them. (22:45) He met the QC manager for this short interview, adding that the manager was an apprentice with him as well but he still showed him respect being his superior throughout the apprenticeship, he had also taught him basic skills such as holding a hammer, as the other guy was more into the theoretical part of learning-as he had done diplomas that made him eligible to be selected as an officer (a trainee manager, then becoming a manager-where he did the rounds with other managers), due to his academic

background. (24:00) John was asked about his will to join their department, where he added that he was still green on what the quality inspector did on a daily basis, as he only had an idea of it (such as lining up and damage control), from what he had seen throughout his line of work. The response from the QC manager was that if John showed interest in his work and was willing to learn he will be able to do it as the others did, even faster. Although, the manager added that there was only one problem. Since he had people within his department, that were not chosen by him, now was his chance to start choosing people he thought were competent. He told John that he (John) had no backing, in comparison to the other people who applied for the position. (27:00) He mentioned the process of having to study for the exam to become a QC, by having to go to the library and also asking around to learn certain technicalities. Moreover, he added what he had observed during the exam, of people cheating by having their papers already written. After a few weeks after he had done the exam, no results were officially out yet but the QC manager came up to him to congratulate him for ranking first amongst everyone, adding that his promotion is on hold, as they are trying to find out how he cheated-hence, being the only one who had studied, he did the best out of everyone. In fact, when a promotion is given, it usually takes up to a month, while he took up to 4 /5 months and the probation period is supposed to be 6 months, while he took 12 months, to try to trick him into finding out how he cheated. His manager, then helped him get acquainted with the different departments that fell under QC, even though he was not going to be associated with all of them. When it came to inspect the work, it had to be done multiple times, till it is a finished product. The work was inspected for distortion, missing items, burner damage, grinding, alignment, missing welds (at first it was done by a welding inspector), finished works, if it's ready for paint or blasting, and so on. The checking is done more than once, depending on how meticulous the job is-using white chalk for the beginning stages of checking and the other time round, a yellow one, to show the updated inspection and using different colors along the way (except for red, which was used by the surveyor) to update [reason for mentioning the coloured chinks was because of the political colours]-and he did this job for 17 years. He deemed himself a pain in the neck because he was very precise when it came to certain jobs on the vessel which could be detrimental to the ship's structure. Hence, he did not close an eye. His conscience did not let him

let a defect pass as good, as some used to say that, once it was out of the port it's good to go because he knows there are human lives involved when the vessel is out at sea or sailing through high seas. Family and Social Life-Religion(38:15) He goes on to mention a few mishaps that occurred such as the blocking of the harbour, breaking things in the Church Chancery and blocking the streets. He specifically mentions when the Church Chancery premises were vandalized, at that time he had been at the Marsa Power station and remembers a few labourers that went there and he didn't follow them. They were proud of themselves for what they did and when they asked his opinion on what they did, his answer was that the act was nothing to be proud of, since they just fought with a number of statues, hurting other people's sentiments in the process and mentioning how most of the people who did what they did in the Church Chancery, are people that are actually on the front of most religious activities. (41:00) In 2003, by that time he had learned a lot of the managers' duties, especially since his manager had spent a long time doing a course overseas. He was prepared to take the position when his manager left. He was called in, and asked to fill in for his previous manager as he had already left, but not given him the actual position. He told them that he had been filling in for the manager's post for almost 15 years and received nothing back, such as monetary compensation, hence he would only do it if they recompensed him with the difference in salary, which was accepted. (53:00) In 2008, the Nationalist government came into place. Peter Moore-Design project (Fairmount Fjell), report to Castille on the progress of the project. They were losing money already, even before the preliminary designs. The dirty side of politics. Until 2010, skeleton staff, even though there was a lot of work left to be done but most of the people had left by 2008. Life after the Dockyard-Pension Schemes(57:30) There were four schemes before the dockyard was sold to Palumbo:- Scheme A: 56 and above, they were offered the early retirement pension. - Scheme B: Between 50-56, they are offered a lump sum until they become 56 and can retire early. - Scheme C: Below 50, given a lump sum according to how many years one has been working in the yard. - Scheme D: Remain working with the government-education office, social services, tax department or court messengers, so on. Life after the Dockyard-Pension Schemes(59:15) When they were told it was the last day, he took the lump sum scheme as he was 53 at the time. He had to go to register as the lump sum he took, accounted for an estimate of €43

a week. He could not get a job after he had left the dockyard, having to go to the ETC, standing behind queues, and seeing different faces each time, which did not have a good impact on his self-esteem. But, since the drydocks taught him a lot of practical things, he was open to many different jobs: cement, painting, plastering and so on. So, he found a job rebuilding rubble walls and other odd jobs, until eventually, he got a job as a foreman with a building company for three years, until he was able to get the early retirement pension.