

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: John

Zammit

Date

4 December 2020

Primary Maker

John Zammit

null

Dimensions

52 minutes 58 seconds

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.AV0006

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 joined the dockyard in 1955 as a Patternmaker apprentice. The patternmaker's workshop was situated underground and then transferred to the boathouse. Due to the decrease in the patternmakers' work, John moved to the boilershop as a sheet metal worker. He also worked with the joiners when required and mainly on passenger ships. In 1989, he was promoted to charginman up to his retirement in 2001.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) He entered first as a yard boy, but then he went back to De La Salle College and entered as an apprentice. He was good in mathematics, but he almost failed, because he was rushed through the examination paper. He chose the trade of patternmaking. He was the only one. The workshop was underground. (04:00) In the second term of his apprenticeship, he had to go to the foundry, because the training of a patternmaker required him to spend 2 weeks, 1 month and 1½ months. Family and Social Life-Religion(05:15) During the 1960s, there was the problem between the Malta Labour Party and the church. His instructor, who was religious, every first Friday of the month, used to put up a religious picture. There was another worker who was removing the picture and John got in a fight with this person. (08:15) The patternmakers shifted from underground to the boathouse, and there were workers who were patternmakers, joiners, shipwrights, fitters, and labourers. The boathouse was an open workshop, with slipways. It was a very cold place. As time went on, they were moved to another floor level, and once his supervisor came and told him to work on a certain machine, a

pattern milling machine that we used to identify as the 'Wadkin'. The manager wanted him because he was a hard worker compared to the other workers. (10:45) He and other co-workers made an application to go to the boilershop as sheet metal workers. They stayed at the boilershop for ten years. After three days he and his two colleagues got used to the work. He learned a new skill, and in fact he says that the first thing he learned was how to make a funnel, then a T-piece, and later on the Transition piece from Square to round (qalziet). In other words, he became familiar with the work and the system. However, when there was work on a passenger ship in yard, the three of them are employed with the joiners-for which he receives an allowance. Also, he was given a defect list with the requirements of the work and he as a chargeman added details of how many joiners are required and what they have to do. (15:00) Once he was working the Vistafjord and he thought that the work will not be finished on time. Then, one day, he remembers it was the 8th December. The forman sent him home, to prepare for 2 days, since they were going to Genoa. However, they went to Genoa, then to Gibraltar, to Las Palmas, then to the Bahamas and finally to Florida. When they were near Gibraltar, they worked until 3am to finish a cabin because British journalists had to come on board. Always slept at 4 am and by 7 am he was already working until 10 or 11pm. When he was at Orlando airport, he saw that the plane was a British Airways 747 Jumbo JET and from London they sent a new Air Malta plane. (22:45) In November 1989 he was appointed chargeman, He remembers that on that same day four people died when one of the dock-arms on No6 dock collapsed. Safety-Um El Faroud (22:30) He mentions the incident of the Um El Faroud, where he was supposed to work, but fortunately for him, he did not go. (23:00) He mentioned, when once they had to do a pattern for a diffuser for EneMalta. A few days later John dreamed of his former chargeman Guzeppi Martin (who was dead), who asked John if the diffuser would make it through the Foundry. The next day John goes to work, and when Lorry Grech entered, he asked him to give him the trammel, which was a compass to draw big diameters, to see if it would make it through, and it did not. (27:00) He recalls various episodes and accidents during his work. He recalls an accident once when Jerry Mintofo was working with him and cut his finger. In fact, John explained that to this day his hands bear witness to the cuts he sustained while working in the dockyard, some of them with the band saw (Sega), planer (Cana) and so on. Last time he injured

himself was when another worker asked him to remove the wood shaving (ana) and he cut his fingers, for which he was blamed. Family and Social Life-Religion(40:45) He remembers, that once Censu Camilleri, told him that here he could not blaspheme, because this workshop is called 'the saint's shop', because there was someone who keeps away the devil. When John asked him who was this person, Censu replied that it was Genju Borg, who was member of the MUSEUM. John, when he was a boy, was afraid of Genju Borg, who was a patternmaker. In fact, the work bench that Genju Borg used to work on was donated to the MUSEUM. Family and Social Life-Jokes and Humour (42:15) They also joked with each other and he mentions the event when Patri Rafel, who was a dockyard worker, prayed to Sant Andrija every morning, and once someone put a picture of the face of Stalin instead of that of Sant Andrija, whereupon he got angry and shouted "... I'll kill him ..." ('neqtlu' jigifieri noqtlu b' djalett ta' al-Luqa). (43:45) On 8th December when they went out on the Vistafjord and Jerry Mintoff, the chargeman, called him to go for a meeting. The Norwegian came and said they are expecting Force-8 winds. John called the workers on deck and asked them to take a fibreglass and place it between the mirrors and it worked. He says he never got seasick and was used to working in rough seas.