

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Alfred

Cauchi

Date

9 February 2021

Primary Maker

Alfred Cauchi

null

Dimensions

31 minutes 06 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.AV0016

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. Alfred joined the dockyard in 1971, as a shipwright apprentice. After completing his apprenticeship, he was assigned to the shipwrights-afloat section. He passed through the ranks to foreman level. He left the yard in 2008 during the closing down process.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) He starts off with his apprenticeship-in their first year, they started in the training centre where they got an idea of different skills and trades within the dockyard such as welding, gas cutting, blacksmith, electrical, lathe work, bench fitting and so on. Although, due to the fact that his father worked as an electrician and plumber he considered himself lucky as he already had an idea of these trades since he used to help his father. Safety-Accidents (01:45) After their first year, being 17-year-olds, they experienced their first fatal accident at the dockyard, which was a shock for them. (02:45) He did some training in the drawing office and continued their training outside the training centre, in places such as onboard ships, where they started getting acquainted with other workers and see the different characters that worked in the dockyard. (03:30) After they are assigned to a 'guy' (gang / a group of workers) but since the yard had a shift system, and apprentices worked only on the first shift, this 'gang' would change depending of the shift during which they were working. Education-Apprenticeship process (04:15) Throughout the apprenticeship, they used to go to school for a day and a half and three days and a half, working in the dockyard. They also did some exams, including a craft course, which, if they passed, reduced the apprenticeship period by one year. (04:45) In September 1975-he had his

first pay as a journey man. Education-Apprenticeship process (06:15) The chief recorder wanted to speak to him for going in to work on a Saturday when he was not supposed to because he was still an apprentice. Even though Alfred spoke to his chargeman and manager, who assured him that he will get paid but when he received his pay he was not paid for that day, but eventually he got paid with the rate of a tradesman. (07:30) At one stage he received a letter to go work in the workshop as a tradesman. He was not happy to go there, because he wanted to work with the afloat section. He spoke with a friend of his, that worked within the same gang, and after four days he managed to go back working afloat. (08:15) He is the kind of person that likes to keep himself busy and learn from his environment. He considers himself as an adventurous person and working onboard gave him this opportunity, in contrast with working in the shop. Even though working on board was more dangerous, he still preferred it to working in the shop. (09:20) His superior asked him whether he would be interested in being the 'primalista' of his chargeman (l-imghallem). So in 1988, he became a 'primalista' (someone who is next in line of the chargeman). (10:00) In 1989, one of the chargemen retired and he took over his position. Although at first the gang he took over were a bit reluctant to accept him, they worked together very well on projects such as the Vistafjord and the Cunard Princess (where they changed the wood decking using new equipment). Safety-Accidents(11:45) With reference to accidents, he witnessed one when he was still an apprentice, after they completed their shift and when the back-force and the night shift group came in, a tank exploded. Also, in 1976, the explosion of the buoy in No.1 dock, where he was working. At one moment started smelling drainage. Their chargeman told them that it was gas that they are smelling, then all of a sudden there was an explosion and found themselves in the middle of a fire. They managed to get out and tried to put it out but he can still recall seeing some of his colleagues in the middle of the fire, where one of them died in the fire in front of his eyes and one of them had managed to get out with barely anything on him. Talking about this experience made him very emotional. He remembers the Compass 1, which was a tanker in No.6 dock. He was informed, that there was a man who fell in the tank. He went down and found a man, called Chris, who was in the mud at the bottom of the tank. Luckily, Chris survived the accident. (18:00) Projects: A vessel who had a Chinese-American superintendent who treated him as if he was his son, he even let him alone to

do the surveys with the surveyor and then report back to him. The ship had a lot of work in the tanks but the problem was that since the vessel was berthed at the Bwejba, he had to limit the work such as chipping or knobbling during the night since it is situated near Senglea. They finished the vessel successfully and the agent of the vessel was so happy with the work, that he brought another vessel in for repairs. He wanted Mr. Cauchi to take care of it but at the time he had another project so he was not able to do so. (20:00) Latest projects were the Kingston Trader in No.4 dock. He was a foreman. At the same time there was another ship in No.6 dock, the Kronviken, which had priority, where Joe Demicoli was the foreman. The Kingston Trader, had around 250 tons of damage, and it was completed in 14 days. They had to manufacture some of the structures in the dock, instead of in the work shop. The superintendent of the vessel was Japanese, he was so happy with the work, that he even signed the bills before the work was finalized and even brought them beers and whiskey to thank them. Looking back-Skills gained(23:15) After the closure of the dockyard, he worked in other companies but the experiences and dangers found in the dockyard cannot be compared. (23:30) Celebrations-The Immaculate Conception feast, Agatha Barbara and Muammar Gaddafi visit. Various ministers, etc. Education-Projects (24:30) The opening of No.6 dock-for him this event is still imprinted due to the experiences and the amount of work they put into it, especially when there would be strong-cold north-eastern storm and them being on high scaffoldings, but they knew it was something very important for the dockyard due to the increase in the size of ships coming in. (25:00) He remembers two vessels in the dock, from Shell-the tanks used to have big manholes which were connected, hence when doing supervision, it was easier to do, as they could go from tank to tanks at the bottom, without going on the deck. (25:30) These large vessels, had large brackets that required repairs or replacement. This required very difficult handling for transportation and fitting. He highlights and mentions people working and how through such jobs, one can see how capable these people who worked there are at manoeuvring such operations. Looking back-Reflections(27:45) As he starts concluding, he started to get emotional because the dockyard was a job he loved since he liked working in the trade sector and loved to learn. Went to the machine shop, the foundry, plate shop, and boilershop, to see how they fabricate; even though he was there for work reasons, he still would see and interest himself in how they would go

about the job. Looking back-Reflections (28:30) His hobby of building religious models, Working in the dockyard has given him the ability to fabricate, build and use special techniques, which made the results more refined. He made it into a sort of side business, which keeps him busy, sometimes even more than his work at the dockyard. He adds, how much he wishes to teach others his techniques, which he learned in the dockyard, to keep this legacy going but due to how the circumstances have changed, many young adults are not willing to do so.