

# Object Summary

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## Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Freddie

### Micallef (Mickey)

#### Date

16 February 2021

#### Primary Maker

Freddie Micallef (il-Mickey)

null

#### Dimensions

33 minutes 44 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.AV0020

## **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 entered the dockyard in 1955 as an intermediate trade-riveter and in 1956, as an Engine fitter apprentice. After completing his apprenticeship, he was assigned to the Fitters' afloat section, where at that time work was difficult and mostly done by physical force. He contested for a member of the Dockyard Council in 1981 and in 1993 he was chosen to be Deputy Chairman up to 1997, when the Workers' participation system came to an end. He retired in 2002 after 47 years working at the shipyard.

## **Transcript / Summary**

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) Entering the dockyard-Reasons for joining (00:30) In 1950, after attending primary school at Zabbar, he entered De la Salle. He decided to join De la Salle in preparation to join the Dockyard as an apprentice. Micallef mentions that during that time, employment was difficult to find, and therefore, having the dockyard offering several trades was an advantage. The De la Salle College organised Four classes for the dockyard students. These were, Dockyard A, B, C and D, and Micallef was in class Dockyard D. And in 1955, at the age of 14 years, he sat for the exam but did not pass, but at that time the Admiralty used to give them the chance to join in as a yard boy, which was an intermediate trade. (02:00) He states that at that time welding was still a new trade and riveting was the only method to join plates, and this was done by rivets. This job consisted of the rivets being put in the forge (forga) and with air and coal, they were heated to red hot. Then they used a machine to hammer in the rivets. He spent 6 months with the riveters, and then returned back to De la Salle, to take another chance to re sit for the dockyard examination. (03:00) He passed his exam and in October 1956. He started his

apprenticeship and joined the engine fitters. Micallef mentions that during that time around 400 apprentices were chosen. The Admiralty used to offer several trades, for example; patternmakers, electricians, engine fitters, shipwrights, boilermakers and pipe workers. The famous trades at that time were, patternmakers, electricians and engine fitters. Education-Apprenticeship process (03:45) He choose the trade of an engine fitter. The apprenticeship duration was six years, and after a trade test, the worker becomes a journey man, meaning that they take the same wage of a tradesman. During his first year of apprenticeship, they training centre was in an underground area, each apprentice had had his own bench-vice (morsa), and for their first they were given a steel round bar (bar tal-azzar) and with a file (lima) they had to make it square. The exercise was to make a square bar to fit in square hole. When the process was done, the instructor used to check the fitting, by looking at the fit against the light of a lamp.

Education-Apprenticeship process (05:15) During their second year, they used to leave the training centre and get organised in in 2 groups. One group goes underground on the lathes (tornijiet), and the other group goes to the loco-shop which was for learning bench fitting. During the year they used to do various test jobs, for example, cutting of left and right threads (kamini), learning also how to make their own tools, and much more. Education-Apprenticeship process (06:00) For the third year, they left the training centre and were allocated to various yard workshops, at the Manoel Island or onboard the ships, and this lasted up to the completion of the apprenticeship. Micallef states that his preference was as a fitter afloat and not in the workshop, and eventually he became a fitter working onboard ships. He mentions that for one to do that type of job had to be physically strong, because the job was difficult, especially when he joined as all work was done by hand. However, by time some tools were introduced that reduced the hard work. (06:30) He considers hard work when working on the main shafting, the removal of a rudder and main engine work, because these involved heavy items in terms of weight. He also mentions that when the Dockyard became commercial, the ships size increased, and as a result the engines were bigger too, and more difficult to work on. When he was still under the Admiralty, refit work on submarines and ships like destroyers, used to last for about 9 months. He states that usually it used to take this long because the work was specialised, for example when they had pipes, the flanges had to be fitted face to face using blue marking. Entering the dockyard-

Swan Hunter / Bailey / changeovers (07:45) In 30th March 1959, the Dockyard was handed over to Bailey and it was at that time that the Dockyard became commercial. Meaning that is started to repair ships, cargo and tankers. The work increased substantially, however the conditions were difficult and health and safety was practically non-existent. Entering the dockyard-Swan Hunter / Bailey / changeovers (08:30) In 1963 (Micallef in error says 1983) the dockyard was taken over by Swan Hunter. This company introduced 2 shifts, which required more managerial positions, and this was an opportunity for the Maltese to take posts in middle management. Swan Hunter stayed in the dockyard until 1971, when the government ruled by Mintoff removed Swan Hunter and started the process to pass the Dockyard to the workers. Entering the dockyard-Swan Hunter / Bailey / changeovers (09:00) In 1974, the Dockyard made a profit, and in 1975 Mintoff offered to workers to start managing the Dockyard on their own. In fact, in February, 1975, the first election of the Dockyard Council (Kunsill tat-Tarzna) took place. Micallef states that he was not sure about this decision but by time he convinced himself that it was a good management system for the Dockyard. (10:00) He contested for a council member until 1997 when the prime minister of that time, Dr Alfred Sant, changed the Dockyard Act where the Council had four elected workers instead of 8. This was a decision that he and Sammy Meilaq, the then Council Chairman, did not agree with. He notes that from when he was first elected until the last day, he was a council member, he still used to go onboard and do the work of a fitter. He spent half of the day onboard and the other half doing council work. Trade Union-Reasons for trade unions (10:15) He goes on by saying his experience of how he joined the Dockyard council. It was around 1980s when the fitters afloat were going through injustice in the allocation of allowances. This injustice had been happening for a long time and it irritated him. He spoke with his friends and they all agreed to put forward a claim to the Union. Micallef states that it was not an easy process, in fact it led them to do an unofficial ban on overtime. This issue escalated when all the fitters afloat decided to do a day and night sit-in in the box-rack. He also remembers when the chairman of the council came to talk to them in order to find a solution. They did a lot of meetings and were all held by Freddie Micallef himself, as delegate of the Union. Finally, an agreement was made (11:45) Sammy Meilaq approached Micallef, and encouraged him to contest for the council election, which took place in February 1981. At first, he was reluctant to accept, but

then the chairman Frans Spiteri encouraged him too, and Micallef accepted the request. (12:15) He was also aware that the engine side was not well represented in the Council. As he gained experience, in 1994 the Council made him the Coordinator of Co-ordinator of the works committees (Kordinatur tal-kumitati tax-xoghol). With this new position he spent time doing meetings with work-committees and heads of the department where they discussed the worker's requirements and ideas. (13:30) In 1993, there was a vacancy for a deputy chairman within the council, and he was chosen by the other council members. A role that he kept until 1997, when the Workers' participation system came to an end. (14:30) As a member of the Council he faced several problems, but as a Council they all did their best to improve the situation without any rundown of the workers. Micallef was assigned to lead the 'Joint Production Committee', which included the deputy general manager, divisional heads, commercial manager, personnel and representatives from the three sections of the General Worker Union. (15:15) As a deputy he always assisted Sammy in every meeting with Dr. Fenech Adami's Nationalist Party, as well as Dr. Alfred Sant's Labour Party. The meetings were always difficult, because when the Nationalists were in government, they were always insisting to have their representative in the council, something that The Yard council always refused. Then when, on the 26th October 1996, the Labour government went into power. The promise made before the election by Dr Alfred Sant to the Dockyard workers that the Council of the Dockyard was not going to change, was not kept, and he was adamant to change the Dockyard Act. (16:00) Two reports were made, one of them by John Cassar White, who concluded the financial situation was worsening, and recommended to establish a task force, between the Dockyard, the government and the General Workers Union. The main aim of this task force was to agree on certain reforms. Another report was that of Godfrey Baldacchino, where he said that the management of the dockyard was disorganised because of the Council. (17:45) Sammy and Micallef did not agree with the reports and proposed that the council should still be elected. This was not accepted by the task force. On 11th January 1997, the President of Malta Dr. Abela said that the report of Godfrey Baldacchino was not going to be amended, and said that it was going to be published within 2 days. With this meeting the side of the government and the side of the General Workers Union stated that they agreed with the change in rights, meaning that six will be elected and the other two will be

appointed by the government. The report was shared and this meant that the Council was coming to an end. (19:00)

On 23rd January, 1997, there was an agreement that the Council will be made up of four elected members and another four members appointed by the government. In the evening a meeting with the Prime Minister Dr Alfred Sant took place, where Micallef and Sammy were the only two against the changes, however they promised that for the sake of the workers, they will support the changes so as not to create any divisions between the workers. The day after, the chairman Sammy Meilaq met the Yard Council and stated that they did not agree with the Government's proposal. On 1st February, the Parliament approved the change in the Dockyard Act, and at the same time he appointed Noel Zarb as the new chairman. On 12th February, the Dockyard Council met for the last time and Sammy and Micallef gave their reasons why they did not like the new change and that they decided not to contest the next election. (20:45) After all this, Micallef went back to working as fitter afloat until his retirement on the 10th March 2002. Sammy Meilaq taught him a lot and Micallef states that one thing he will never forget is that while he was council member, he never lost contact with the other workers. Micallef says that he joined as a fitter afloat and 47 years later he finished as a fitter afloat. (22:45) He remembers working on warships, but as previously mentioned the dockyard then became more commercial and of course the work changed substantially and was more demanding. In fact, Dock No.4 was widened, in order to take bigger ships. He spoke about how work was carried out. Micallef also mentions that steam ships, which were turbine driven were also making their way to Malta. (27:15) Another job they used to do, was the boring of the tail shaft tube. The removal of heavy items was done practically with heavy hammer blows. Eventually hydraulic tools were introduced where the hard work was reduced. (29:15) He speaks about when once Salvu Attard and him were working, and they had to go up to the staging that was erected to reach the highest point of the tank, using the ship's ladders. He realised that the holding bolts of these ladders were all rusted and loose. They went down again thankfully avoiding an accident. Another time, he had work on a rudder and as he went up on the trestle, he felt dizzy, but luckily enough he made an effort to hold there in safety. (30:45)

Micallef remembers an explosion in No.1 dock, when a welder from Zabbar died. This welder was on the tank opening (bokka tat-tank), and as soon as a molten metal spark (xrara) fell in the tank, an explosion took place.