

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Charles Azzopardi

Date

4 May 2021

Primary Maker

Charles Azzopardi

null

Dimensions

34 minutes 19 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.AV0031

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. Charles joined the dockyard in 1984 after finishing from the trade school. After finishing his apprenticeship at the dockyard, he was transferred to the Malta Shipbuilding, where he started working on the Russian ships. After about eight years, he was transferred back to the the repair yard and assigned with the boiler makers. 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) Went to school at Umberto Colosso and started in the dockyard right afterward. He trained and sat for examinations in the dockyard for around 6 months and was transferred to the Malta Shipbuilding. There they started working on fitting of plates on the dock, to position the side blocks (posti) to align the shipside. (02:30) Then they started the work on the Russian ships. The Malta shipbuilding company was growing and more people were employed; between the dockyard and the shipbuilding, at that time, they were around 7,000 people. (03:00) They spent around 7 years working on these ships. It was a great experience that they got on the newbuilding of these ships. He remembers his foreman that led them through the different work, involving alterations to drawings. He learned a lot of new things such as the structure of the vessel, which he considers a very interesting experience. After that project, they started working on a ship for a Norwegian client and about four supply ships for a Chinese company. (04:30) After about eight years, they were transferred to the repair yard, and allocated with the boiler makers. At the shipbuilding yard, they were referred to as steel workers as compared to the repair yard where steel work was done by the shipwrights. (06:00) During their

time with the boiler makers, they were involved in retubing of boilers, at the De la Rue factory, at the hospital, and also at the power station. They were also involved on the freeport, where they worked for a year where they renewed the crown (kuruna) of one of the cranes and did a lot of maintenance work around the freeport. They also worked on cracked propellers, where sometimes they had to remove a section and re-weld a new section, which involved special welding procedures. Entering the dockyard-Swan Hunter / Bailey / changeovers (07:15) He remembers when the conflict started to occur in the shipyard, when they had dismissed 900 employees and the boilermakers were merged with the shipwrights. They had to learn new skills and procedures, because repair work required different skills to what they had learned on new building. There they started working on the steel structure of the ships-involving cutting, moulding, and fabrication of the new plate at the plate shop. (10:30) New building-This actually started from scratch from the design process, the procurement of materials and the actual building of the vessel. They used to discuss a lot with the draughtsmen as sometimes from the drawing to the actual practice is not the same. New Building is a relatively clean process compared to repairs and one cannot just do the work without certain precautions. He brings the example of repairs on the hot coils, where one cannot just use a burner without certain precautions. With the new building, one gets to build the structure from start to finish, while with repair, the structure is already present, and one has to fix the problem within that particular structure. (13:45) As apprentices they spent about one and a half years at the dockyard before moving to the shipbuilding yard. He recounts the story of when they were still apprentices, they used to race with bicycles, for the packet of cigarettes. (15:00) When he was in the shipbuilding, he was mainly working afloat, however the erection work was advanced, they used to work also in the workshops. (16:00) The Barge 8 project was started from scratch, doing the double bottoms, where they build a barge, then they erected the top structure using steel sections and beams; This was enclosed with insulated panels. At the back, they installed the turbine power generators. There was a lot of fire-proofing and weather insulation cladding work, on the pipes and on the ceiling. A lot of ventilation trunking was also installed. (19:00) The project lasted for around a year and a half to 2 years-it was a very successful project, which brought with it a lot of profit. The clients were checking and testing of the welder and the welding procedures. This quality required on this

project was very high. (20:45) At the time he entered, shipbuilding was in its early stages so he and his various colleagues had to learn together. He was learning new skills. What he learned was for life and is never to forget.

Education-Projects(24:30) At the repair yard, he remembers the work on a turbine. The blades were covered with ceramic and they had to coat them with Belzona (which was very expensive material that had to be handled with care), He remembers that before closing the turbine, they used to do a procedure called vacuum air, to remove any debris. (26:15) He also remembers a boiler retubing from a Russian vessel. This required dismantling the boiler, removal of all the side cladding. The work was practically as if they were manufacturing a new boiler. Cleaning the tube plates with the necessary equipment, where they had to be careful not touch the water drum. Then they used to roll the tubes from underneath, which was a very tight space, just for one person, with another pipe inside of these tubes as to not make friction because it was a very dangerous operation. (28:00) When the dockyard was going to be closed down, at the time he was with the shipwrights. It left the majority of the workers confused, as they did not know what was going to happen to them. In the end, they were given two options. They could either take a lump sum and leave the yard. Or else stay in an uncertain position without knowing what will happen to them.

Life after the Dockyard-Pension Schemes (29:00) In his case, in 2008 he had to leave and go urgently to England due to health issues with his son where he spent a year and a half there and when he came back, he started working with an aviation company where he spent 10 years. Recently, due to the pandemic, he left the company started working with Enemalta.