

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Joe

Cassar

Date

25 May 2021

Primary Maker

Joe Cassar

null

Dimensions

28 minutes 03 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.AV0041

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. Joe entered the dockyard in 1966 as an Engine Fitter apprentice. During his apprenticeship he attended an HTD course at the MCAST. He then had the opportunity to do sea-going experience with an oil company for a period of about 4/5 years. In 1978, he became a shiprepair manager, where he stayed up to 2008 when he left the yard during the closing-down process.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) The Dockyard entrance requirement was to do an intelligence test, an engineering aptitude test, a medical examination and an interview. After the first Test, if successful, the applicant is asked to sit for the next test up to the last test of the selection process, that was the interview. This requirement process was listed in a letter sent by post to him in June, and he received the letter of acceptance in August. With his application, he also had to submit the police conduct, passport photo, and birth certificate, and other required items. (02:45) The entrances examination tests were held in No.1 dock held in the canteen area. There were a lot of applicants, out of which 100 were selected (8 having 16 years or under and 20 over 16 years of age). Entering the dockyard-Reasons for joining (03:45) The first time he entered the dockyard, he saw a frigate in No.1 dock from the Admiralty, which impressed him a lot. Entering the dockyard-Reasons for joining (04:00) Mr. Charles Montefort, who was a neighbour that worked in the yard, had encouraged him to enter the dockyard. As a young boy, seeing the engineering drawings that Mr. Montefort had from the drawing office, impressed him a lot. He also knew someone who worked with the Admiralty, who used to tell what they did in the dockyard, which

stayed impressed in his mind. He particularly remembers the part where he described to him the time it took to get work done. (05:15) When he saw the lathes in the machine shop, which was a sensation as if he saw a space shuttle. He had never seen such machinery. (05:30) Apprenticeship-where they learned most of the main trades. This was in the training centre, that was located on the left as you enter the dockyard, past the surgery. During his apprenticeship, he also was sent to MCAST to complete a 4-year course for an HTD qualification. They were then assigned to an instructor, (who happened to be the father of Pule` - the magician) working on a submarine, which requires one to work in tight spaces. His instructor happened to be a thin and tall man, making it easier for him to go around these tight places. (07:15) He had the opportunity to do sea-going experience which required them to work at sea. (07:45) Qualification for one to become a journeyman fitter. In his case, since he had the HTD and the full tech qualifications, he was not required to do certain tests. Although doing the HTD required him to work the summer months in the dockyard, hence they had both practice and theory but focused more on practice. (08:45) Another test he did was with a company called Texaco, to go on sea-going experience where he stayed around 4/5 years. He got various sea-going related certificates. (09:15) When he returned to the dockyard, he noticed big difference in management systems. It was not easy for him to readjust to these changes, which he did not necessarily agree with. (10:00) In 1978/9, he had the opportunity to be promoted to a shiprepair manager and based on his experience working at sea as well, it was easier for him to communicate with the ship' s crew. He stayed in this position until he left the dockyard. (11:00) He worked on various shiprepair such as maintenance, routine work and heavy steelwork repairs. He particularly remembers one of his first big steelwork repairs on a Venezuelan vessel. This ship has about 600 tons of bottom damage due to grounding every time it left the loading port. At that time, there was political problems in Venezuela, and this was reflected by the situation of the officers and crew on board the ship. (12:30) The first vessel he worked on as shiprepair manager was in 1978, on an American vessel named Monarch. This type of ship, required a totally different attitude as compared to other types of vessels. In the sense that top priority was to carry out the repairs in the shortest period of time. (13:30) In 1980s, he worked more than once on the passenger vessel Uganda. This ship had a huge amount of asbestos, which at the time, was not considered as a

hazardous material, and how dangerous it was. The Uganda was a school ship which was an old ship with rivets. (15:15) Joe speaks about the different nationalities that were encountered in the yard. For example, the ship Bazrah, an Iraqi vessel, in the time of Saddam Hussein. He points out how through these vessels, coming from all over the world and speaking to people from different countries, he was able to keep himself informed about what is happening in the country they are coming from. (15:45) The role of a shiprepair manager, he describes it as that of being a bit like a 'jack-of-all-trades' due to the fact that he had to be in contact with everyone on that vessel from the captain to the crew in order to get to the bottom of the problem. He also mentions how one needed to analyse the problems and give priority accordingly, which sometimes did not just depend on the type of work but the requirements of the individuals. (17:30) He was also very much present during the transition of the introduction automation systems on ships especially on the engineering side, which required a change in mentality of how procedures should be performed. This was especially important when it came to finding certain automation spare parts, which was not easy and caused some difficulties during the work. (18:45) The ship manager was also involved in the estimating part of the job which required working with the commercial, engineering and hull department. (19:30) As time progressed, the emphasis increased on safety. Originally, for some people it was seen as a waste of time and money, instead of a way of helping them perform their work better in a safer way. Here he recalls the time when he was still an apprentice working in a tank, where the workers used to enjoy lighting the gas coming out from the oil sediment. Eventually, even though it was a painful transition, safety improved considerably. The Um El Faroud accident affected the way of how one should approach certain works. (21:30) He also mentions incidents involving the political influence-not locally but from the vessel's country. He had one instance, when an officer from an Iraqi vessel asked him to make it possible for him to escape to the American embassy because he did not want to go back to Iraq. This put him in a difficult position, as he could not just say 'no' to the request, even if it was not part of his job, He took this to the top management. He did not know how it ended but he was aware that certain actions were taken. (22:45) Another example was on Russian vessels. They would communicate in a communist system, where during a meeting there was a committee, and Joe, as ship manager, had to identify the key man that was

responsible for the decisions on the work. (23:30) The Iranian vessels, were very alert on other vessels in the dockyard, especially vessels from the western world. For example, when they would notice a vessel from the west, they would put guards on their vessel and would not let anyone onboard without identification documents. (24:15) The continuous struggle of being careful on what and how to speak because sometimes the message one is trying to say could be misinterpreted. This was important especially since most of the people working in the dockyard were Maltese and they had to then convey their message in English to someone who did not necessarily fully understand the English language. (25:45) He stayed in the position of shiprepair manager, until his last day in the dockyard, which was from 1978 till 2008. (26:30) To conclude, up to this day, he still sees the work in the dockyard as something he liked a lot with all its good and bad parts, meeting people from all over the world and the variety of work they had. After leaving the yard he tried to do other work but he found it difficult to try and work somewhere else. The satisfaction he felt when he saw a vessel leaving the yard after repair was something, he treasured a lot, because with that vessel he was left with a lot of memories and met a lot of different people, which will live on with him.