

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Charles

Scicluna

Date

3 June 2021

Primary Maker

Charles Scicluna

null

Dimensions

27 minutes 12 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.AV0045

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 entered the dockyard in 1979. He initially worked as a welder with the Works department and then to Marsa erecting the Shipbuilding workshops. He then moved with the blasters for about 10 years and to chargeman of crane drivers up to 2010, when he left the yard during the closing down process.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) Starting from the young age of 12 he had started working in various private companies around the island, during which he also started frequenting trade school studying welding. At the age of 16 he worked in a factory for metal flanges, as a welder being that was the trade he was studying. After some time, the factory went out of business due to the high electricity usage and the people who worked there, with the help of the union, were given another opportunity. Workers who were under the age of 25 were sent to the dockyard, while the others were sent to the Malta Shipbuilding. Since he was still under 25 years of age, he was transferred to work at the dockyard. (03:00) He was sent with the Works Department doing welding department. This department was doing structural works, mainly connected with civil work. Then after a few months working in the dockyard, they had work at the shipbuilding to build the workshops, mainly involved in the assembly of the roofs which were made of steel beams. (04:15) After about a year, there was an issue where it was decided that people who worked in the shipbuilding as casuals were not allowed to perform any trade work and, he and other casuals were sent back to the dockyard. (05:00) He had spent some time working with the welders

in the dockyard. After a while was then transferred with the blasters. The blasting section at that time was run by a German company, that was being replaced by a British company as managers. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (05:45) With the blasters he spent around 10 years, where they worked non-stop because of the big projects that there were in the dockyard. At that time, he recalls that a lot of Turkish vessels were being converted from carrying oil to the carriage of wheat. These conversions required a lot of continuous blasting work, so the blasters worked long hours both during the day and the night. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (07:45) He also recalls working on the Russian vessels that were being built at Marsa. They blasted all the holds and tanks, they would start during the back-force at 14:30, continue throughout the night and the only break they had was of 30 minutes to fill up this 'pot' which contains the grit (sand-like rough material used to clean finish the steel plates) and it could take up till 9 am of the following day. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (08:45) The worst part of the job is having to work in small spaces and due to the nature of the work, the dirt and smoke resulting from the blasting the space would end up feeling smaller, little visibility, breathing through a mask connected to a compressor which sometimes leaks water ending up in the mask. In fact, they look at this work as the worst job they could do. However, they did it for the overtime and the pay. (10:30) During the 10 years in the blasting section, he was promoted to the post of Chargeman of the blasters. (10:45) The spraying they did was the first coat of paint, then the next coats were done by the painters. Safety-Health and Safety procedures (11:20) He spoke about the hazardous environment that they worked in and the amount of smoke and dirt they inhaled during their work. He remembers having a new sealed cigarette packet in his boiler suit pocket while blasting, and dirt even got in the inside of the cigarette packet. (12:30) After the 10 years, he left his position of a Chargeman with the blasting section and went to work with the shipwrights, erecting scaffoldings, where after two months he took the position of a leading Chargeman. (13:15) He had a motorcycle accident while going to work where he injured his leg, especially his knee, which made him unable to work on board vessels but he still wanted to go back to work. Hence, he was transferred to the boilershop, as a turner. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (14:30)

After about a year, there was a vacancy for a crane driver and he took that position. He operated all the cranes in the dockyard, with the roster system. The No.6 dock crane had a roster system of its own where when it was someone's turn, they had to work there for a whole week. One of the experiences he had, as crane operator, was that of hoisting the catamaran, San Frangisk, back in the sea, which was the one the pope used while visiting Malta. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (15:45) After two/three years, he became a chargeman of the crane operation section, after the chargeman at the time had to leave due to health issues. Charlie remained there for around 20 years working in the same position. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel) (17:15) The position required a lot of coordination within the different departments as the crane was required by various trades for their work. He had a lot of responsibility of 27 dock side cranes, with 42 operators under his authority. Apart from that he had to be aware of the working condition of each crane, and he used to attach a note to the crane keys, so that the operators are aware of these conditions. He also had to assess the ideal operator for the job and try to explain his decision to the operator in the best way possible. Life after the Dockyard-Memories of last day (21:30) The department consisted of three sections: the cranes, the transport drivers and the mobile cranes. When the dockyard was reducing personnel, some of them were dismissed with the 900 workers and as time went by, they started decreasing personnel gradually. Eventually he ended up on his own in charge of the three teams with around 20 workers in total. This lasted 2 years before the closing of the dockyard in 2010. Safety-Accidents (23:45) He once got his hand injured with the blasting pipe. A serious accident that he remembers, even though he had already left the blasting, was when an ex-colleague, was working in a tank and his equipment started unexpectedly, and the blasting jet hit the worker who lost his leg. A similar accident happened to him as well, while he was in a tank, which is a tight space. Luckily, he managed to escape the situation from the tank by jumping off the staging which was about four stories high but thankfully he had a soft landing on the same blasting pipes and grit that was at the bottom.