

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Frans

Mifsud

Date

8 June 2021

Primary Maker

Frans Mifsud

null

Dimensions

43 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.AV0047

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. Frans entered the shipyard as a mechanical fitter in 1965. On completion of his apprenticeship, he was stationed at the machine shop to work on the boring machines. He moved through the ranks up to the position of departmental manager of the machine shop, where he spent 14 years in this position up to his retirement from the dockyard in 2006.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) He did not have any previous knowledge when it came to trades since at the Lyceum, they only did the basic subjects such as languages. It was when he entered the dockyard where he went to the MCAST, where presently, there is the Junior College. (01:15) During the start of the apprenticeship, they were giving induction courses to give them a general idea of the shipyard. For the first year, they stayed at the training centre where they were given practical training in different trades such as, smiths, fitters, electrical, woodworking, lathe work and bench fitting work. After the first year they were allocated in various departments related to the engine fitter's trade, such as the machine shop, maintenance departments, afloat work onboard ships and so on. The apprenticeship period was reduced from 5 to 4 years, since they had good results from school. He was stationed at the machine shop to work on the boring machines. (02:15) After 17 years working as a fitter, he was promoted to a chargeman for three years, after which he then became a foreman. After four years as a foreman, he was promoted to a departmental manager of the machine shop for 14 years up to his retirement from the dockyard. (02:45) Working in the dockyard was a great experience for him because he learned a lot, however,

speaking from a departmental manager's point of view, they lacked the flexibility and incentives in their line of work. When it came to incentives, no matter what performance one gives, they were given the same wage and same amount of overtime. This created a lot of problems especially when it came to allocating overtime equally between workers. His opinion is that when a worker is allocated work and there is overtime involved, the same worker had to continue the allocated work even during the overtime. One cannot change hands because of the distribution/roster of overtime. On the other hand, when he refers to flexibility, he describes the fitter's waiting time for a specific trade to carry out some minor work that the fitter can do himself and was a very inefficient way to carry out the work. The quality of most workers was very high. Some were not simply fitters, they were actually fault finders, which meant that they could directly go to the specific problem rather than doing the work by trial. (06:45) One of the works he remembers, while working in the machine shop, was a rudder weighting more than 60 tons, of an Indian vessel. Even the crane did not have the capacity to lift it on to the floor type boring machine floor situated just outside the machine shop. They had to make use of two cranes, which was a difficult operation. On the other hand, it made it more difficult, due to the high level of work that was required by the vessel's superintendent. (08:30) Another big work he remembers was the work they did on the turbines of the power station that was brought from Palermo to be used in Malta. The specialist engineer Mr. Phillips (?), was looking at very high precision and detail. They also machined the turbine cover also to a very high precision. The feed-back he had after the assembly of the turbine was very positive, and it was said that the quality of the work was even better than that of a new one. In fact, the power station worked smoothly for a long time without any problems. (09:15) He also recalls a Shell vessel, anchored at the Hurd's bank, which had problems on the bearings that damaged the shaft. The bearings had pad-pieces with cast white metal. After machining of the shaft at another yard, they realised that the white metal on the pad-pieces was going to be thicker than the Class allowance. This required to fabricate new pad-pieces. These were first made out of cast iron at the foundry and then the white metal was put on to the cast iron supports. The bonding between the cast iron and the white metal was very important and it was continually being checked by the ship's superintendent. These had to be machined to the size of the shaft, which was actually a difficult

operation as the shaft was not in the shipyard. The result was a very good job which gave them satisfaction as they did not have the necessary resources to do the work as proposed, yet it was done to perfection. (09:15) Another operation, which was relatively small but left a good review on the dockyard, was a short shaft with cam-lobe, which needed to be machined off. The vessel was a cargo ship, berthed at the freeport, which required a fast turnaround as for the vessel had to continue with its voyage. They had information that the vessel would be in Malta during the night, so he organised a night shift. The shaft was eventually at the workshop at about 6:30/7:00. He had to re-organise the people to come early in the morning and the work was finished at 9:30. The service engineer, accompanying the vessel, was very surprised with the work as, the procedure usually took two days to finish. Frans also describes some other work at the machine shop. (19:30) The machine shop used to organise a mass every first Friday of the month. However, he was mostly impressed when they organised the mass on the feast of “Our Lady of Sorrows” . Practically everybody from the shipyard attended. Workers that one could think of them as non-believers and they would still attend to the mass with a lot of devotion. (20:00) He regrets that when the shipyard closed down, there remained a lot of machinery, tools and instruments, which were probably lost. The amount of work involved in keeping the equipment up to standard and certified was impressive. (23:30) Some disadvantages they faced was that when certain local industries, when they had maintenance on certain machinery, they would first pursue to get it done at private lower priced companies. This position the shipyard as a last resort for the difficult work only. Example for the freeport, they made some very difficult work, such as on a large gear wheel of a crane that worked with one shaft key, and the yard modified it to a three-key shaft. Entering the dockyard-Dockyard layout(26:30) In the machine shop, they had three bays along the length of the workshop: the light machinery bay where there were the small and medium lathes. In the middle bay, apart from large shaping machine, there were the bench fitters and the last bay there were the heavy lathes and boring machines. On the upper side, they had a huge heavy lathe, a huge boring machine and a vertical boring machine. Then at one end of the workshop they had a floor type boring machine on the outside, due to its size and required the handling of the work piece by the dockside crane. They also had a section for gear-cutting machines, where they trained a number of people in England to

become proficient on this machine. (29:30) In addition, they did the refurbishing on their own machinery by dismantling the machinery and use certain procedures to make it as if new. This refurbishment work was necessary since most of the machinery they had in the workshop was very old. They even did this type of work on a lathe from a local manufacturing company. They even had a section, the tool room, where they were responsible for various tools from different trades as well. (33:30) Re-wooding was the work they did together with the patternmakers, where they would make a dummy housing, fabricate keys as were existing in the bearing housing onboard. Then the patternmakers would fabricate and mark the wood according to the measurements provided and install them onboard. (35:15) They used to fabricate sluice valves. The valves were made from cast iron at the foundry. The castings are then machined at the machine shop using jigs made purposely for this work. Valves are important accessories of the ship, that required testing and special attention due to the fact that if they did not work properly, they could cause serious repercussions to the vessel. (38:00) In the machine shop it was quite a common practice to do shrinkage of items using dry ice, liquid oxygen and liquid nitrogen (the liquid nitrogen was not used anymore because they found out that it was very dangerous if made in contact with oil). When it came to shrinking a bearing, it could be done on the shaft hence they used to put the shaft in the liquid nitrogen, or any of the above-mentioned chemicals, to shrink it. (40:00) They also worked on deep-well cargo pumps, which they assembled, with the supervision of a service engineer, to perfection. (40:30) Other work involved the shrinkage of brass bushes on the shafts. These were big bushes manufactured at the foundry, under the supervision of the Classification surveyor, who checked for possible defects such as air holes in the casting. Due to the size of the shaft, the work was carried in the plate shop, where they had the necessary lifting capacity. The procedure was to heat up the brass using gas heating equipment. Once the bush has expanded, they would lower the shaft in position with a crane and leave the bush to cool down slowly over the shaft. The shaft with the fitted bush is then returned to the machine shop for the final machining.