

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Joe

Mifsud (id-Dillinger)

Date

14 July 2021

Primary Maker

Joe Mifsud (id-Dillinger)

null

Dimensions

49 minutes 20 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.AV0059

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 Mifsud (aka Dilinger) entered the Royal Naval dockyard as an apprentice in 1949 experiencing the post war yard history which resulted in the changeover from Admiralty to commercial yard under various forms of management, first as a shipwright but gaining promotion to Department manager and retiring in 1991 as the Dock Master.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) Family and Social Life-Home life (00:30) At the time when he entered the dockyard as an apprentice, it was like a 'tradition' for the family to make a small party congratulating them for becoming an apprentice. Reason being, that at the time, working at the dockyard was a huge success because of the good pay in our country. He also remembers the time that some apprentices use to wear suits and bowler hats when they start attending the dockyard, while he and other apprentices use to make fun of them. Trade Union-Strikes (02:30) They had six years apprenticeship, while in England the apprenticeship was four years. Another discrepancy with the English dockyards was that in Malta they worked 48 hours 6-day week, while the English worked 40 hours 5-day week. This was one of the main reasons for the strike which occurred in 1947, where they the dockyard workers fought for a 4-hour working week. The Union was at its early stages at that time, but its work was done in secrecy. During the Admiralty, there were around 14,000 people working, and they had a system where every year a report is done on each worker by his charginman. This system was known as the 'shoal system' and the system was that the charginman and his gang are dismantled at the end of the year. Then

all chargemen would meet and they would choose the workers that he wanted to be part of his gang. These reports are passed to the Admiralty management, who would then assess all the workers based on the selections made by the chargemen. At that time all the workers were yearning to become established, because this meant better conditions for them. Joe remembers the time when workers reaching 60 years of age, were dismissed from the dockyard, receiving a letter that their service was no longer required, and how most of these workers end up begging at the dockyard gates. The workers were against this system, and the Union started to protest and striking. He remembers Karmenu Zammit and Gerald Azzopardi who organised these demonstrations and who showed the apprentices the methods of organising these demonstrations. Entering the dockyard-Swan Hunter / Bailey / changeovers (11:30) Another thing he mentions how when the British were managing the dockyard. They had a lot of privileges such as their own luxury bathrooms with attendants. On the other hand, the workers used to modify a paint drum to use as a washing bucket. Even when it came to the toilets, the ones used by the British were clean with a Maltese attendant. Whereas for the Maltese workers, the toilets were made out of corrugated sheeting with a gap from the floor so that the security guard could control any worker who stayed there for a longer time. This system was present until the dockyard was transferred to a Bailey to be commercialised. Bailey changed the attitude and more Maltese workers were being trained to be able to get promotions for better and higher jobs within the dockyard. (13:00) He was eventually promoted to manager. Education-Projects (13:30) The first commercial vessel that came in dockyard was the Sirius, which had a large amount of damage. At first the dockyard was going to refuse the work, they said that they were not capable to do the repairs. However, the manager, Karmenu Giuliano, gave the owners a guarantee that they were capable of repairing such damages. The vessel was docked in the floating dock, where they removed the damaged areas and repaired it successfully. It was hard work to do, because commercial vessels were built different from the naval vessels. Education-Projects (15:00) Various other vessels he remembers were Agip Genova which was completed in three months, He was the hull and project manager at the time so he managed most of the works-there was also the Atrotos. There were times they had 21 vessels at the same time in the yard, with three vessels berthed alongside each other. (15:45) The involvement of politics that ended up

making most people that were very knowledgeable of the trade were lost. At the end, most of the people that worked there were outsourced. The incentives and the involvement of people was not given importance and many people did not feel appreciated for the work they are doing. People were just employed for the sake of having someone doing the job and were not too knowledgeable and capable of doing the work properly, bringing the dockyard to not having any other way of progressing but to close it down. Looking back-Reflections (19:00) He feels that it was a pity that the dockyard was passed on to a private company, considering the work it did for our country and the equipment and machinery it had. Selling it to a private company, was a theft from the Maltese island. He feels that there was a way of keeping it as a Maltese industry because there are people who are capable locally. In addition, he says that for the amount of money it was sold for, this was short in terms of the value of its machinery, equipment and materials, apart from the value of the land it occupied. (24:15) Before he became a manager, he was an assistant manager, he used to go around the yard on the vessels. He had to make three plans / programs for the overtime, night shift and the work for the next day. The plans involved the number of men required on each vessel depending on the work involved and the completion date. His work day was that of 12 hours a day. Safety-Accidents (25:15) When accidents happened, he had to be there because most of the people were scared to go. When the doctors or the surgery personnel needed to go, he would help them to reach the area and assist them. He also added that most of the accidents happened out of carelessness and neglect by someone. Safety-Accidents (26:45) He mentions the Um El Faroud accident, even though he was not in the yard at that time. From the information he gained, he thinks that this happened for the same mentioned reasons, carelessness. The area they were working on was called a manifold, which distributed the connections to the oil tanks, with valves to control each different compartment. From his experience, he thinks that there might have been a leakage in a valve and caused the explosion. When they worked on similar work, they would remove the manifold and land it ashore, which ensured better safety control. Safety-Accidents (29:45) The system of how they reported the accident was on a verbal basis, where he used to report to the general manager. He also feels that there was a lack of discipline when it came to such accident, since he strongly feels that most of the accidents were caused by human errors. As far as he knows,

the court and justice system were not involved in such cases and he feels that that there could have been a better way of handling such situations. There was nothing done afterwards which could be because of insurance reasons. (33:45) Every year there were around 200 people who entered the dockyard, the afloat sections of the hull and engine divisions were the most dangerous jobs. Eventually, about 70 to 80 people leave the job or find a better job elsewhere within the dockyard. (36:00) He was given the position of a dock master, as no one wanted to take the job due to the huge responsibility it carried. (36:30) He strongly wishes to know what the government took out from selling the dockyard to the company Palumbo as he believes that it was just sold and the government has no profit from its operation. He looks back at all the time and work he gave to the dockyard, to the extent that he did not even see his children grow up. That was not a way to thank the workers for what they did. (37:45) He had been working there for 45 years in the dockyard when the early retirement scheme came in place but they still didn't offer it to him but was offered to people who worked half the number of years he spent there. (38:15) When he was a dock master-the system for opening the dock gate (kexxun), required around 12 people to do the work, which from his point of view was not the right way. He changed the system and reduced the man-power required. He also docked vessels on sacks of sand. An American Navy ship, had extensive bottom damage, and practically the complete vessel's bottom had to be renewed. Once he was abroad and he saw a docking of a vessel on sand bags, and being balanced by adjusting using the amount of sand with valves. He and his colleague, decided to give this method a try- he tested it in the plate shop and saw that it worked, even though many people discouraged him. (44:00) He recalls a case when a person called George was asked whether they have removed this angle from the tank. The superior told him that it had to be removed. In the meantime, there were the pipe workers working in the tank, and they had a temporary blank fitted on a pipe end which they removed as the work was now completed from their side, and the fitters had to fit the valve to complete the full work. George, who was not aware of the works done, went in the tank to remove the angle, but unfortunately there was a gas leak that exploded when he ignited the cutter, which cost him his life.