Object Summary

Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Vince Scerri

Date

25 November 2021

Primary Maker

Vince Scerri

null

Dimensions

1 hour 12 minutes 17 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.AV0096

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. Vince Scerri started work at the yard in 1965, as a shipwright apprentice but immediately transfered to laboratory work from where, after years experience and higher education, he managed the Tank Cleaning Facility up till his resignation in 2009 during the closing-down process.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) Education-Apprenticeship process (00:30) He joined the dockyard after finishing five years at the Lyceum in 1965. He was encouraged to join by his two brothers who were already working there. He joined as a shipwright. He started in the dockyard training centre which was situated underground. He was learning various trades, including woodwork and steel work. During his apprenticeship he was approached by the personnel department and was transferred to the Yard laboratory. This was because during his secondary studies at the Lyceum, he studied and had certificates in chemistry and other science subjects. Education-Interesting training and skills (04:15) During that time the laboratory manager was replaced by Mr Martin Plummer. This new manager was still young, and was only six years older that Vince.At the chemical analysis section of the laboratory, Vince organised a standard schedule for the analysis method, whereby everyone started using the same analysis process depending on the metals and other factors.At that time, in the late 60s, the dockyard laboratory was the only laboratory in Malta. In fact, even the public service and other local companies used the yard laboratory for their requirements.Vince also worked as a chemist and this required him to board tankers outside harbour for gas testing and approval for the ship to enter the harbour. (12:15) At one time he attended an IMCO conference in

London. The marine environment was important, and he was already getting aware that the subject of the Marine environment was going to become important, so he decided to take biology in addition to Chemistry for his BSE. When he returned back to the laboratory on completion of his degree, he was sent to the tank cleaning station, which was built in 1965 and was one of the first in the Mediterranean. After some time, he was asked to go for 'sea going experience' on tankers. Scerri agreed, and went to Augusta Sicily, and went on the tanker 'Esso Warwickshire', which was loaded with oil. He joined the tanker up to England and then went around the Cape up to Iraq to re-load oil. He describes it as an amazing experience. He then returned back to Ricasoli tank cleaning station. He then realised that the tank farm actually reflected a tanker cargo system, with the only disadvantage that Ricasoli had about a kilometre of pipes, going uphill from the discharge point to the tanks.The tanks of the tankers were cleaned by machines that uses sea water which was pressurised and heated. The water and oil were then transferred to a slop tank of the tanker, and then pumped into shore reception tanks at tank cleaning station. In the treatment tanks, oil is separated from the water through a gravity process. The water could then be removed from the tank to make space. The remaining oil mixture with less water was transferred to treatment tanks. These tanks had heating coils that heated the mixture up to boiling point, which again separated the water from the oil. This process created some fumes escaping from the tanks, which led to some pollution and consequential complaints from the local community. (26:45) He mentions some incidents that happened due to this pollution. (29: 45) The oil that they separated was sometimes even treated with chemicals, so they reduced the amount of water used. This was then sold, generally, to an Italian company and was considered as a good operation for the shipyard. By time they built another two tanks, which had a capacity of 3000 tons. (32:45) When they transferred the processed water into sea water, outside the port, sometimes bad weather affected this process. This was especially when the North East wind prevailed. Education-Projects (36:45) Agip Genova was one of the most difficult ships that Scerri remembers working on. It was still a rivetted construction ship. This ship suffered an explosion in one of its middle tanks, which practically uncovered the main deck leaving the tank exposed to the atmosphere. When the ship arrived in Malta for repairs, it was difficult to clean, as the cleaning process was generating gas, which was

coming in contact with the outside air resulting in a perfect explosion mixture. And if there is a source of ignition, another explosion would take place. He explained the explosion limits of the different mixtures. (41:30) The tank farm also operated an inert gas generator that produce carbon dioxide. This removed the oxygen from the tanks reducing the risk of explosions. Sometimes they had tankers with an amount of cargo oil in the tanks, but since the tanks are inerted, other work could be safely done in other parts of the ship. Safety-Um El Faroud (42:30) He mentions the tragedy of the Um El Faroud, where he describes that the ship was tanker for carrying petrol. And from the evidence that was collected, it seems that there was some petrol sludge in a pipe, which probably fell in one of the tanks and when the petrol evaporated and mixed with air produced a highly combustible mixture. (44:00) Unfortunately, once, they had an oil spill in the Kalkara Bay. This happened because they had a fuel tank for their boiler, and a valve from this tank was left open and about 1.5 tons of oil leaked into the bay. The effects on the sand lasted for a long. (49:15) The first tank cleaning stations in the Mediterranean were in Malta and Marseille. He spent a week working in Marseille tank cleaning station and he felt like home, because the layout was same as Malta’ s. By time more stations were established across Europe. When he finished from the dockyard in 2009, he was asked to go at Libya, because they were going to construct 6 tank cleaning stations, but the war in Libya disrupted all plans. Education-Employment pathways / local and foreign training opportunities (50:15) During his career, he studied for a doctorate on the environment related to a shipyard. The years of experience helped him complete the thesis successfully.Sometime later the chief executive of the dockyard Peter Moore, asked him to start an information unit on the nature and environment in the Dockyard. He started and led the ‘Environment, Waste, and Recycling Unit’. (56:00) There were a lot of important things they did for the environment. One of the issues that the dockyard had was grit blasting operations which affected a lot the residents of Cospicua. There was also the problem of the disposal of the wasted grit.Another issue was the storage of large quantities of chemicals, painting, solvent, etc. in the underground tunnels. They cleared all the tunnels, and he took samples of all the items for analysis. Eventually these were re-stored in proper containers and exported from Malta. Safety-Health issues (noise, risks) (58:00) Another problem that was encountered was when they became conscious of the amount of asbestos that was

present on-board ships especially in cabins of the passenger ships. He and Joe Saliba tried to locate a place in Malta to assist on identifying the quality of asbestos, through the University and police laboratories, however there was no place in Malta that could assist. Eventually, he and Joe Saliba attended a course on asbestos at the University of Edinburgh. When they returned, they purchased some specific equipment such as a microscope and thanks to this, they managed to reduce a huge percentage of asbestos from around the dockyard. The removal of this asbestos was done by a specialised foreign company. Subsequently, all gas testers were sent on the asbestos course. (1:03:30) In addition, especially after the Um El Faroud explosion, safety was improved, and Scerri states that the workers became much more cautious before entering tanks and working. After the accident there was an increase of the safety requirements from the authorities. (1:09:15) In 1971, one of his lecturers, gave him the opportunity, to become the director of Botanic Gardens. He did not accept, due to family reasons, but he still preferred the Dockyard.