

# Object Summary

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## Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Vince

### Pulis

#### Date

3 February 2022

#### Primary Maker

Vince Pulis

null

#### Dimensions

1 hour 44 minutes 02 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.AV0102

## **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 joined the shipyard in 1972 as a shipwright apprentice at a time where the shipyard was passing through turbulent times. After completion of his apprenticeship and was assigned to the shipwrights-afloat section. He became chargeman in 1980s and eventually moved up the ranks up to Hull Divisional manager up to the closing down of the shipyard in 2010.

## **Transcript / Summary**

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) Vince Pulis was born on 27-01-1956. He entered the Yard on the 07-09-1972 as a shipwright apprentice. (01:15) He said that working for 40 years at Malta Drydocks, it came part of himself, developed and made him what he is today. (01:45) He never planned his career as a Dockyard worker. At school he learned commerce and accounts not technical subjects. (02:45) Probably, Vince was pushed by his father to take the exam, as hundreds will do. At the age of 16, he was at the crossroads – either to find a job or continue his studies. It never crossed his mind to continue studying. (03:30) He sat for the exam and passed. Usually, the first placed chose the trade of electrical fitters, then mechanical fitters. Next in line the preferred trade was the Shipwright. He placed 27th and had a school friend who placed at 28th. They decided that when they were going to be called to choose the trade, they will choose Shipwright, without any knowledge about the trade! Vince’ s father asked a draughtsman working at the Drydocks to brief them about the trade and finally that’ s what they chose. (05:30) The apprenticeship was different from the previous ones. Malta Drydocks was passing through a change, with strikes held few months before. There was a change in government in 1971, with him

entering the Yard in 1972. (07:15) During apprenticeship the basics of several trades were taught, by learned instructors, both in theory and in practice. It took 6 weeks training for each trade. (08:45) As some had second thoughts joining the apprenticeship, a vacancy for engine fitters were available. They were offered that option, but they choose to stick to Shipwrights. (09:45) As Malta Drydocks was on going through a tight budget at that time, the annual camping for the apprentices was not held for 1972 entry. (10:30) Theory classes on various trades were taught once or twice a week in a canteen building at Kordin – which at a later stage was pulled down. (11:45) After the time spent at the Training Centre, hands on training was given in several workshops and departments like the Drawing Offices. Unfortunately, Vince skipped this phase as he with others were assigned to work at the previously mentioned canteen, as this building was going to be transformed in a Trade School. (13:00) Due to the time spent working at the canteen, he lost ground of the new developments in various trades. As an example, the period spent at the Drawing Offices. The instructor he was assigned to was attending training himself on new drawing technology. (14:45) So alone at the Offices, he copied the theory notes of other trades being learned. He doesn't have a clear idea of his apprenticeship. Also, there were instructors who had great interest to teach the apprentices. (16:15) After his apprenticeship, Vince was sent to the Shipwrights Department. He was assigned to a particular chargeman. He went to find him onboard, not knowing his name but only his nickname. He was allocated with this chargeman gang, usually each gang had between 10 and 14 workers. He was assigned under the guidance of two workers known as Ta l-Arbli, which literally means Of the Masts, because they used to work at heights, like on masts, crane jibs etc. (18:45) Vince remembers that once he asked them to join them on a crane jib repair, right at the top. Half way he literally froze and turned back. (19:45) Hence going along, one will learn the trade as a Shipwright, which basically is all the steel work of the ship structure. (20:30) At this stage, one will start developing, apart from the trade itself, the relation to your fellow workers. This is of the utmost importance of which Vince still holds to this day. Although the work itself is important, he considers that the human resources is the backbone of the Drydocks. Once you lose the human resource knowledge, it's very hard to bring it back. He thinks, maybe being sentimental, that once the Drydocks was closed, there is a lack of skilled workers on the island. (22:15) As he said before, Vince

never planned his career beforehand, and things were happening without his planning. In 1980, he found himself as a chargeman. He thinks it came at an early stage, as although you start learning how to manage, you lack the practice of physically doing the job yourself. There are many workers who know their job well and don't bother how others manage the work. (24:00) In the mid to late 70s, the present chargemen and foremen were reaching their retirement age or transferred to other departments. (26:15) There were many vacancies for promotion. The young had these opportunities. (28:30) In 1980, Vince found himself as a chargeman and now had his own gang. There were about 10 gangs with 12 to 15 workers each. The Departmental Manager (DM) will assign the work to each gang, and there was a kind of rivalry between the gangs as sometimes they felt they were discriminated by the DM as how the work was being distributed. But obviously it was the discretion of the DM how to assign the work. (32:30) It was the practice to keep all the overtime worked for each individual on a notebook. The chargeman used to rely on it as this was the workers wish and everyone will know his turn for overtime. Vince wasn't used to this. For him if you are on the job and there is overtime, you will continue the work. You must be fair and distribute the work according to the workers different abilities. (34:00) Conflict arises on overtime. His first was when he ordered one worker to work overtime on Saturday as he was on the job. Another worker informed a GWU official that he was next in line to work overtime. It was Friday evening when Vince was advised by a GWU official that the worker next in line should work overtime. He had to go and find the worker at his home to tell him that he was ordered by the GWU to go by the overtime roster, so another worker was to take his place. But by time experience will be gained, and will resolve these issues accordingly. (36:00) In 1989, after 9 years as a chargeman Vince was promoted to a foreman, and had several gangs to manage. On every ship a Ship Manager is assigned to co-ordinate all the jobs. A defect list will be drawn and all departments were informed about their jobs on that ship. The Departmental Manager will assign a foreman to be responsible for the works to be done. The foreman will co-ordinate with other departments, thus gaining experience in management. A group of workers called Liners, did all the dirty work for the FM. They were highly skilled and do all work, from planning the work, including the material needed, and Class certifications. They also will make a high-quality work report. They were an asset for the Shipwrights department. (42:15) During this

time a scheme was introduced called Incentive. The idea was to give monetary incentive if a ship or project is completed before schedule and with a profit. But the scheme was scrapped because there was a disagreement of how the profit was distributed between the direct workers on the ship and the indirect workers. (44:30) In 1989 Vince was awarded the Worker of the Year. He had no idea what was it all about. They told him that for the day after he had to bring a jacket and tie. On that day he went as usually onboard. His DM came onboard and told him to go to the office and put the jacket and tie on. At the board room he was awarded the Worker of the Year. It was much appreciated and still value this award to this day. He remarked that honestly, he doesn't know why they chose him, as sure there were many others who deserved it. (48:30) We went through many jobs, big or small. Once the job is finished, one will feel satisfied and forget all the difficulties that had encountered throughout. (50:00) Once there was an American ship named Robert Lee with extensive damages. Vince was the foreman and had the bow section under his lead. It was a challenging job, the sections were pre-fabricated at the workshop, then transported and fitted on site. Good co-operation with all departments, Drawing Office, Steel Shops and Shipwrights was a must. (52:45) The fabrication sections had to be aligned in place. It is not an easy job as often the drawings of the sections don't match with the dimensions on site. (54:45) In 1995, the tragedy of Um El Faroud took place. Vince was working night shift that day. It was a busy week and all docks were occupied. He used to go early for work, so that he will go through the handover left by the day duty foreman. (57:30) Before the beginning of the night shift he goes through all the jobs, and allocate the workers accordingly. It was a busy week, and night shift had its particular challenges. He used to go on bicycle to each dock and see the progress and sort out any difficulties encountered. (1:00:00) On that day in the afternoon Vince had to sit for a written exam for the vacancy of a Hull Manager. Also, in the morning he went to check a shed that was being dismantled to see if there was something worth keeping. It was really a hectic day. (01:00:45) He knew all the workers and had spoken to some of them few minutes before. (01:01:15) As the No. 3 dock was the nearest to his office, it was his first visit that night. Then he went to No. 2 dock, at about 21.30 hrs., before proceeding to No. 4 dock. He was on the ship's deck when he heard a big explosion and saw huge fires. Immediately he called the Security as it was obvious that it was a big accident, and went on bicycle

to the dock. Many workers were climbing down the Jacobs ladder as the gangway was blown out of place. It was an instinct to try to help your fellow workers, so he went down to the dock floor which was engulfed in fire. Although one tries to help, there is nothing much to do in those circumstances. When the various emergency personnel came, counting the number of workers missing was the priority, as with the explosion many workers ran away far from the ship. (01:04:30) It was a tragic night. It was the biggest accident, although there were other accidents throughout the time Vince worked at the Malta Drydocks. He can still hear the voices of those workers who died on that night as he would have regularly spoken to them. (01:06:00) It was a shock. The tragedy will drag on with inquires and so on, and going back in memory on every year's anniversary of this tragic accident. (01:06:45) Due to the nature of its work Malta Drydocks has a dangerous environment. There was a 24-hour clinic complete with doctor and an ambulance, long before they were mandatory. Also, there was an active Safety Department. (01:08:00) After the accident safety took a stride forward, such as drawing of Risk Assessments. A foreign company was engaged to help to draw safety procedures. So, from a tragedy something good came out. (01:09:00) In 1995, Vince was promoted to Departmental Manager. Now he had to co-ordinate with other departments such as Steelworkers, welders, titulars, labourers and so on. Now it is more management then practical-hands-on work of a foreman. (01:10:15) Being promoted at a young age, Vince was always aware of Human Resource management and under his leadership he always gave importance to communication and information. (01:10:45) One of the workers in the shipwright's department was Sammy Meilaq, who believed strongly in communication. Shortly after Vince's promotion, Sammy told him that there were many ongoing issues and wanted him to call a meeting for all workers. He had to listen to all workers in a packed hall, to all their complaints and difficulties. That was the baptism of fire for Vince. (01:12:45) The departmental manager had to engage in discussion with the GWU, which had an important role in the company. They co-operated well, but obviously sometimes there was disagreement. Management and GWU have different perspective on certain issues. (01:15:30) Once he had a disagreement on the workforce to work overtime. It was on a Friday, and a cruise liner was scheduled to enter the Yard. Apart that it was going to be the weekend, public holidays also fell on these days. So, the workers involved will earn good money. The shop steward gave a directive that no

workers shall report to overtime during these four days. It was unacceptable, so a meeting was held, and for the sake of the work, Vince had to apologize and go their way. (01:17:45) At one point, it was decided that Malta Drydocks had to deduct its workforce. Among these workers were the shop steward and his assistant which Vince always got along well with them and also with other very good young workers. He was surprised and disappointed, not knowing how the selection was made. The Departmental Managers were asked to make assessments on each worker which was made fairly and in transparent way. (01:20:45) At one stage Vince was promoted to Hull Manager. The responsibilities increased because now he had to manage many Departments such as the welders and steel shops. Also, he had to give his input for estimation costs at the commercial department, and attend many meetings. (01:22:30) In 2006, a barge was berthed at Boiler Wharf. At the meetings held, it was always said not to take any considerations about that barge. It was the Fjord. Later a visit on the barge was organized. At that time estimates were being done by the yard and other shipyards. Around March Vince asked the Drawing Office if they have any information and drawings. They gave him a drawing of a section to be fabricated. This barge had to be lengthened. Around April, Chris Bell informed Vince that he will manage this project. An engineer, Joe Abela was to assist in the project. Joe explained what the project was all about. The vessel had to be modified from a barge to a ship. All systems had to be installed, including propulsion. Vince admits that he had no idea about some work such as engineering and other services including pipework, and didn't understand on what criteria he was chosen! (01:26:00) Two managers were allocated with Vince. His concern was about the steelwork. How to cut, move and fit a fabricated section to lengthen the ship. On the other jobs such as propulsion, generators, electrical, accommodation, services, he had no idea what the entity of the job consisted of. In his opinion what happened was, that just before there was a project – Ikdam – which was managed by a foreign company. This company gave the installation part to Malta Drydocks and it seems that the bulk of the profit was gained by this company, and Malta Drydocks had only a small share of it. The idea was that this project will be done totally by the Yard, on the Ikdam model. He doesn't think that the Yard was prepared for this. Another option was to outsource some parts of the project. Vince was more focused on the steelwork and had discussions with the American owner and the Dutch

company. When the management presented the plan how to cut, move and install the new section, they were not happy with the plan. They suggested that we engage a foreign company to do this job. Literally they will lift the section of the ship, put it on wheels and move the section. This company had the expertise to do it. (01:30:15) In June, all the systems, like ballasting, cooling, ventilation and others had to be prepared. Again, it was decided to engage a foreign company, this time it was a Scottish company. There were doubts about their ability. The ship's systems were to be designed from scratch. (01:32:30) Vince was not involved in finances, but was focused to finish this project. The project was finished in March 2008. In these two years he feels that his life took a setback, health wise, mentally and spiritually! But it was also enlightening, because he was surrounded by a good team. It was a challenging job, lots of surprises cropping up, like in a meeting when one of the engineers present asked that if in the eventually of a fire on board, what system is in place to shut off the fuel pumps and the ventilation. (01:34:45) Finally, the project was completed, and as a finished product it was very good, but faired very badly in finances. Additionally, there was also a sister ship to be converted as same but it was decided that this will be under the management of Malta Shipbuilding. (01:35:15) In 2008 privatization of the Yard was being planned for 2009. Back to the Yard, as a Hull Manager, Vince found himself in a new environment, as for the past two years he was completely focused on the project and was not aware what was going on in the Yard. (01:36:30) In 2008 retirement schemes were being issued and human relations became more difficult. Workers were uncertain about their future. Managing was challenging as workers were being let off by the schemes regularly. Work was still coming in, so work had to be done with a smaller number of workers, but still we managed to do so. (01:37:15) There were workers who were undecided if to take the scheme or not, and asked for advice and also for a reference letters. It was a hard period, as docks will stay but the workers and their skills will be lost forever. (01:38:00) Another thing Vince liked to mention is that at one stage the Chairman - Robert Aquilina, in view that the process of privatization was in progress, somebody has to identify what things are going to be removed from the Yard, to be given to a museum. In future it will be exhibited as the history of the Yard. (01:38:45) The process of privatization was being done by Malta Enterprise. Vince was helping them to draw an inventory of all that belongs to the Yard. So, at the same time there



was ongoing works, redundancy of workers every day, and uncertainty about what was going on. So, the situation was somehow complicated. (01:40:00) When the closure of the Yard was near, a very small number, about 100, of workers were kept. It was a period of unity. All workers apart of doing their job in their respective trade, had to assist in other trades. At that time, there was one ship, which had several works, which finally was done with the help of all workers. Miracles of work used to be done, and profits were made also. (01:41:30) The last day was a sad one. In the morning work was being done on a vessel, that had to go out of the dock. In the afternoon, all were preparing themselves as the last day at work. (01:42:15) Vince was ordered to continue working at the Yard with a very small number of workers, to cater for maintenance, and stayed there until the new owner took over. (01:42:45) Although not part of his experience at Malta Drydocks, Vince mentioned that he stayed for a short period with the new owners. (01:43:00) To conclude, Vince acknowledged that the Yard made him what he is today. Although maybe he didn' t learn several trades as hands on, but surely learned to appreciate the workers and their skills. Nothing would have happened without them.