

Object Summary



Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Michael

Camilleri

Date

21 February 2022

Primary Maker

Michael Camilleri

null

Dimensions

40 minutes 54 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.AV0104

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. Michael entered the dockyard in 1955 as a shipwright apprentice. During the last years of his apprenticeship, he was allocated to the yard development office at a time when the dockyard was transitioning from Admiralty to Bailey. On completion of his apprenticeship he was assigned to work at the boathouse as a shipwright working on yachts. He then moved to the drawing office and started training for a management post eventually, moving up as project manager with the Newbuilding section, involved in most of the new buildings done at the Malta Drydocks. In 1985 he was moved to Malta Shipbuilding, and worked there up to his retirement in 1993.

Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) Michael Camilleri, was born on the 3rd October 1939 and entered the Dockyard on the 3rd October 1955 as a shipwright apprentice. He was one of the successful candidates to enter the Dockyard after attending for 3 months at one of the many classes that prepare youngsters for the dockyard examination. As apprentices they attended at the Training Centre for 3 years learning several trades. Additionally, they also attended for 4 years the Dockyard Technical College at which at the 3rd year they were assigned for 6 months to the Drawing Office to have an idea of how this section works. (02:00) Finishing school on the 4th year, they were sent to work afloat. Unfortunately, Michael didn't spend much working afloat as he was selected to attend the Yard Development Office. This was recently passed from the Admiralty to Bailey Malta Ltd. The aim of the office was the development of the Dockyard. He was the only Maltese in the office and was to

liaise with foreign customers who had interest to use the service of the Dockyard. Amongst them were some Italians, representing the Ceretti crane manufacturers. As the English personnel in the office didn't speak the Italian language, he also took the role as an interpreter. (03:15) At the end of the 6th year finishing their apprenticeship, Michael and others were assigned as draughtsmen with the Hull Section. They were offered half a pound less than the established draughtsman, and the Union advised them not to accept the role. (03:45) Now as a journeyman, he was assigned to work at the Boathouse. Together with the departmental manager, he would discuss the works to be done to several yachts laying at the Boathouse and issue the drawings accordingly. (04:15) Meanwhile an application for a Civil Engineering Draughtsman was issued. As previously Michael had attended a 4-year course in civil engineering, he decided to apply. He spent two and a half years there, but as there were other draughtsmen which were already established there and also younger than him, he realized that he had entered a blind alley and cannot progress in his career. (05:00) Michael mentioned that during the 6th year of his apprenticeship, he was informed by the Education Manager that in view of his very good recommendation from the Head of the Development Office, he was selected as a Management Trainee. He was the only one that was ever selected for this role while still an apprentice. He made the Management Trainee Course, took the exams and got the relevant certificates. (05:30) In the meantime, while he was at the Civil Engineer Office, he decided to apply again for management, doing another year training going from one department to another. (06:15) After that year, Michael was assigned by the Education Department to manage one gang of shipwrights, with the same department putting pressure on the Departmental Manager to promote him as a Chargeman. After 3 months as a Chargeman, working afloat, he was being pressured again to become a foreman. (06:45) His promotion as a Foreman was somehow troublesome, as the Departmental Manager told him straight and plain, that it was not his decision that he was promoted to foreman but somebody's else. He was warned that if he commits any mistakes in this role, he would be dismissed! Obviously, Michael didn't agree, but moving forward he spent three and a half months as a foreman with the shiprepair afloat section. (07:30) After 4 months there was a vacancy for a foreman in the docking section and he was sent to fill that role. At first, he objected, as now he was doing well as a foreman afloat. But then he

realized that it was better for him to move from his previous position. He spent working for 2½ years as foreman of docks. (08:00) In 1970 the shift working system was introduced, so double management was needed, working mornings or afternoons. Hence, a vacancy for a Deputy Dockmaster was issued. He applied and got that position. He worked as a Deputy Dockmaster for 4 years, 2 years of them during the shift period. Once the shift was abolished, everything went back as it was before the shift was introduced. One Dockmaster and one Deputy Dockmaster were given other roles, while Michael stayed as a deputy dockmaster with the other remaining Dockmaster. After 2 years the dockmaster got ill and spent some time on sick leave. When he returned to work, he was given another position, as the dockmaster's, the job is quite demanding and required working day and night as necessary. This made him the only dockmaster and all the burden of the post was laid on him. (09:30) So, he decided to go to the management and told them that after 4 years as deputy dockmaster, he feels that he must move from this position. They told him to take one week off and get back to them. He was given a choice, either as a shiprepair manager or a project manager, he opted for the post of project manager. (10:00) In 1958 there was a changeover of the Dockyard, that meant that the workers either remained with the Admiralty or transferred to Baileys Malta Ltd. At that time, Michael and others were still apprentices, so they never expected that they will remain with the Admiralty. Only the established workers did, so they remained working in the same system, with no problems at all. (11:00) Michael remembers that in the 70s, Malta Drydocks was at a total stand still for 6 months. Also, there was a change in government. (11:30) At that time, the shipbuilding section was not well established, although there were some Project Managers who had to manage Industrial Works outside the Dockyard premises. Then a group of Project Managers were assigned to work on New Building, like the SBM buoys, which Michael was responsible for 10 to 12 of them. He had also other projects like the building of the vessels for the Chinese. (12:15) Once Michael as the Project Manager together with a mechanical fitter and a special mechanical fitter were sent to Nigeria to perform some regular maintenance work on a buoy. They stayed there for 5 weeks to finish the job. (13:00) Several other vessels were built, including hopper barges. Michael went to Algeria, together with a foreman of mechanical fitters, Joe Camilleri from Santa Lucia, to deliver 2 of these barges, instructing them how to operate the vessels. They stayed

there for 5 weeks for the handover of these vessels. (14:30) When there was the order to build 8 vessels for Russia, Michael and another project manager, Richard Zerafa were assigned the task for the preparation for the beginning of this project. They spent 1 year preparing and planning, such as drawings, sections to be fabricated and receiving all goods to the stores needed for the project. (15:00) In 1985 he was transferred to Malta Shipbuilding and spent 8 years there, until opting for early retirement in 1993 at the age of 53. He was responsible for the first vessel – Kapitan Goncharov. (16:15) One of the biggest challenges was the goods received from Russia and Poland for this project. They were stored in 2 large warehouses at the Malta Shipbuilding. The main engines – big as a block of flats each, had to be stored under cover, run and changing the oil regularly. (17:15) He took the early retirement scheme, thus ending his work experience at Malta Shipyards. (18:45) One of the jobs that Michael was responsible for was the No. 6 dock gate, from the fabrication at the steel shops to the installation on site. He was also responsible for the fabrication of a part of the dock gate for the Marsa dock. (21:15) Management of the shipbuilding section in the dockyard yard was at the early stages. There was Joe Abela together with Joseph Sant and later Philip Buhagiar. At first there were few project managers, but as the section grew stronger, the number increased. They were stationed at an office in the No.1 Dock area. (22:15) There were about 6 project managers, but some of them were not into shipbuilding but industrial works, doing jobs outside the dockyard. Amongst them Joe Deguara and Joe Saliba. (23:00) When the group that went to Spain came successfully back to Malta, most of them were back at the Malta Drydocks. They were assigned to various departments, with some of them getting training with Michael for 4/5 months and then move on to other departments. As he had experience in building of barges and other shipbuilding works, with him, they learned and gained experience. (24:00) When Michael was at the Malta Shipbuilding, a number of newly project managers were trained by him. In 1992/93, he was also the last project manager who came from the Malta Drydocks still at the Malta Shipbuilding. (24:45) As the time to go back at the Malta Drydocks was getting near, Michael was seeing that his role in shipbuilding was going to end, as at the Malta Drydocks there was no shipbuilding but only shiprepair. Considering his age, he was not keen to go back into shiprepair, so he took the opportunity of the early retirement scheme. (26:00) While the building of the vessels for China, a good number of

Chinese were sent to Malta – about 10 plus an interpreter. Michael had to take care of all their needs together with the progress and report of their work. He used to spend a lot of time with them during inspections on the vessels.

(26:45) One of the best experiences was during the fabrication of the No. 6 dock gate, where he met a Chinese engineer, who was a timid but very intelligent person, who made all the designs himself of the gate and he used to follow the project systematically. (28:15) The fabrication of the dock gate for Marsa Shipbuilding was not difficult, because it was fabricated in box sections assembled together with hydraulic and pneumatic piping systems running through as compared to the No. 6 dock gate which had a particular design, curved at the bottom. The procedure for the connection of the dock gate onsite was as follows: When the dock gate was finished from the fabrication side, it was floated and towed to site. With the dam still in place, water was pumped out, the dock gate positioned in place and with the assistance of both Chinese and Maltese divers the hinges were connected. With the dock gate installed in place, water was pumped in again. The dam was built so that the construction of the new dock can be done. A berthing quay was built and a 150-ton crane was brought from China and assembled by the Chinese on site. (31:00) The experience at work can be different. From jobs that run smoothly with others that can be challenging. Superintendents can be cooperative or difficult. The character of the management you are responsible to also differs. But the satisfaction is when the same management will send you a memo, congratulating you because the job was finished in time and with a profit. (33:00) Michael remembers one accident, him being the Project manager on a barge. This was docked at No. 1 dock together with another ship. While the pipeworkers were burning the bolts that hold one of the pipes installed on the barge, which were about 2 feet in diameter, the barge caught fire due to the oil inside these pipes which unfortunately no one knew about. He was in the dock. At that moment no one understood what happened. The barge was engulfed in flames. One of the chargin men on the job, had several burns, was taken to hospital but died later. The body of one worker, a labourer from Zabbar, was found charred under the barge. Another had burns on his face, and sent to England for treatment. (35:15) Projects included barges, ships and other works entrusted to by the Commercial Division. There were other Projects Managers on industrial work. One of them, Schembri was in charge of the Malta Shipbuilding shed. (36:15) At the time that Michael was a Project

Manager, it was a habit to send either a Ship Manager or a Project Manager to work at the Malta Drydocks London office. He was assigned there for 3 months. At that time Mr. Spiro Aquilina was the manager of that office, together with Mr. Cane – who previously worked at Malta Drydocks when he was in Malta - and another person from Rabat. Mainly his job was to assist Mr. S. Aquilina in looking for new works. (37:45) Among the Englishmen, Michael would like to mention Mr. Adams, the Educational Manager, which he had good contacts with him, and his predecessor Mr. Lions, who gave Michael a good certificate at the time of his apprenticeship.