

# Object Summary

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## Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Frans

### Maniscalco

#### Date

9 August 2022

#### Primary Maker

Frans Maniscalco

null

#### Dimensions

50 minutes 43 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.AV0114

## 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 dockyard in 1954 as an engine fitter apprentice. He spent a good part of his apprenticeship working on lathes, and in due course he was assigned to the machine shop, where he passed through the ranks up to the position of departmental manager of the machine shop up to his retirement in 1990.

## Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) At the time, most young adults were interested in entering the dockyard as they were all thinking about working and he was one of them. He did three years at De La Salle college and afterwards did the dockyard exam amongst 1,200 others - reason for such a big number was because at the time there were not that many employment opportunities in the country - even though, only around 200 of these applicants were chosen. Unfortunately, he did not pass, so he did not enter the dockyard on the first attempt. Here he added to that, as the 'brother' from the De la Salle was very surprised as he considered Frans as a top student within this group of the six students that were qualified to sit for the dockyard exam. (05:30) He sat for the exam for the second time and he was accepted as an apprentice, where beforehand he had to make a medical exam and take an X-Ray at the hospital, which was situated in Bighi (where today one finds the Heritage Malta offices). (06:00) Entering the dockyard, he chose the trade of an engine fitter apprentice, where they were first sent to the training centre and also shown around the dockyard. They were about 60 engine fitter apprentices. (08:00) He had always wanted to work on engines but never got around to doing it. This was because,

as an apprentice he was working with the leading hand at the machine shop. Due to the duties the leading hand had, Mr Maniscalco had spent a lot of time without an instructor, which he compared it to a Maltese saying that goes “u tkun qiesek ghasfur bla bejta” (a bird without its nest), which means that he felt he did not know where he belonged. Furthermore, there was a worker who was a member of the MUSEUM community, who worked on the lathe and Frans used to go near him most of the time. This interest did not go unnoticed by his working superior, and from then onwards he started giving him work on one of the spare lathes. This was the start of his career in the machine shop. (11:00) When he first entered the dockyard, he was amazed by the magnitude of the dockyard as he never thought that it was such a huge work place. Then again when one considers how many training centres and different trades were present within the dockyard, it would all make sense. (12:15) He spent around 5 to 6 years working on the lathe and in 1966 he was promoted to charginan, within the department. (14:00) When the change in management from Admiralty to Bailey took place, he was in his 4th year of apprenticeship, and he recalls that one of the changes was the dockyard school, which was eventually closed. There was also a change from naval to commercial ships that were repaired. This changed the type and quantity of work which in turn resulted in increased overtime. (16:30) After working with Bailey, they were able to see the positivity it brought since before the change in management they were very afraid of its consequences. They had entered the dockyard, with the mentality that they had a secure place and were able to work, so when the change was rumoured, they were all feared for their jobs due to the uncertainty it brought. (19:30) The factory had 3 sections, where the heavy machinery was placed on the dock side section, the middle section housed the bench fitters and on the other side, there were the light machinery such as the lathes, milling machines and static machines; there was also a shutter, which separated the factory from the foundry. Furthermore, in the beginning, the machine shop employed around 300 employees (Manager - Mr Baldacchino), then when he became manager, this number fell to about 275, which decreased further to 220 people. The decrease was due to a policy of non-replacement of people who retired. (21:30) The work within the machine shop varied, there could be work on large diesel ship engines (with a 25 to 28 inches piston), large ship shafts and other items for machining. (22:30) Projects he particularly remembers when working on the small lathes

involved spindles, pump shafts, adapters and others which were small in size. As he moved up to higher positions, the work varied more, including specialised work on rudder-stocks. He particularly remembers the machining of the rudder stock of a Russian vessel, Bellary(?), where because of its size and shape it could not be machined on the available lathes, because it could not be turned. So, he and his assistant manager created an additional machine that was fitted on the lathe and with the rudder-stock sitting in a fixed position on the lathe, this machine with its cutting tool turned did slide along the rudder-stock. (28:45) Another job he remembers was in relation to the floor type boring machine, where they constructed a shed around it and they could machine rudder blades weighting up to 40 Tons. (29:15) He remembers when once one Owner wanted to know if the dockyard could fabricate a sleeve on the Ship' s propeller shaft. Frans travelled to a dockyard in Genova to inspect the work required. When he was there, he noticed how different their dockyard was in comparison to ours, from the number of docks to the workers and the machinery they used. In fact, the work they wanted our dockyard to do, was not possible to be done by them as their machinery could not handle the size. Another factor he noticed was how empty the place was, to which the client said was because they were all onboard so, there, the people that worked in the shop, were able to work onboard as well, unlike our dockyard. This experience impressed him since the Maltese dockyard had better facilities both in machinery and man-power, than the one in Genova. Yet, they were running it at a profit as compared to our dockyard that was not making any, something that for him, did not make any sense. (35:15) The machine shop was as large as a football ground and a half, with two overhead travellers (cranes running on beams along the workshop) in each bay, hence there were around 6 of them in total. (36:30) When he took the position of manager, one of his main functions alongside with his foremen was to allocated the work. They also used to estimate how long the job should take. (38:30) He remembers a number of strikes, especially the one that was around 7 months long. They still used to report for work but practically doing nothing as the crane operators were on strike, and there were not that many jobs that could be performed without the usage of cranes. This was in the beginning of the 1970s. (39:30) Thankfully he was not present during accidents, even though it happened frequently while he was working in the dockyard. He recalls losing a cousin of his, in the dockyard, when he became a

tradesman. His cousin worked afloat and the accident happened on a vessel on dock number 3 - at night the shipwrights were asked to do the necessary scaffolding to carry the work but then the work was cancelled. In the early morning the work was approved again. But it happened that due to the previous cancellation, the scaffolding was not fully completed. As a liner, his cousin and a welder used the scaffolding to inspect the work that was required and unfortunately, the scaffolding failed and gave in sending them both to the ground. His cousin lost his life on the way to the hospital. He added that the accident could have been avoided if there was a proper handover or communication but yet again no one knew exactly what happened. This occurred in December of 1961. (45:30) If he had to repeat the whole dockyard experience again, he would do it because he loved the work he did and even challenged himself to always do the work in less time. He loved the work so much that he considered it as a hobby instead of work and when the workshop manager used to see him working this way, he would tell him that there was no need for him to do so but he wanted to perform the work in less time for his own sake. (52:45) He recalls visiting the machine shop, around 1995, when he had already retired from the dockyard and seeing it then in comparison to how it was when he worked there, he felt very sorry and sad to see it in that state. Before, the machine shop was filled with machines, noise, people working, seeing the fabrication of things, extremely busy while now it was just empty and silence mainly filled the place. The machine shop was an indication of the amount of work that was within the dockyard at that moment in time, since they took work from the afloat personnel working on the berthed vessels. The machine shop was the heart of the dockyard.