

Stories from the Shed: *Memories of ships*

Andrew Wilson (2020)

- **Story-teller's** cultural background: **Australian**
- **Categories:** Urban, Maritime, Work, Travel
- Andrew's story reveals an insider view of working in the shipping industry in days gone by. It includes some dangers which are now on the public record, and one not so publicised regarding a potential harbour explosion.

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Memories of ships

Andrew Wilson

My first memory of visiting a ship in Brisbane's *Hamilton Wharf* was with my father as a small boy of four or five. My father was manager for *H.C. Sleigh* in Brisbane who were shipping agents amongst other things. I was led by my father into the Captain's cabin and told I could sit and wait for him in the Captains leather chair as they sat and chatted. I was roused from slumber sometime later and carried down the gangplank then waving as the ship moved down the river slowly until it disappeared in the darkness.

As a child I sailed a number of times with my family on voyages around Australia and New Zealand always thrilled and excited by the events around me. Always took tours of the ships when offered. The hustle and bustle of port visits on the ship and the wharves. My father had become a travel agent and taking the growing family on holidays was I guess a perk. Vessels the family travelled on were P&O's '*Arcadia*' and Nederland Shipping Line '*Johan van Oldenbarnevelt*'.

As a teenager of fourteen I travelled unaccompanied between Australia and New Zealand on holidays to family by ship, *Shaw Savill & Albion Line* '*Northern Star*' and '*Southern Cross*'. Whether it was travelling by ship or plane, I enjoyed sailing or flying but not waiting at terminals. Wharves and terminals, I was to become very familiar with later.

When my family moved from Brisbane to Sydney, fate waited to present me with a new job working for *P&O Australia Pty Ltd* in their Sydney headquarters at 55 Hunter Street. It was many, many years later that I realised I had followed in my father's career foot steps into the merchant navy.

I started in the ground floor booking hall selling holidays on cruises and passages to England on line voyages. This was before the introduction of the jumbo jet when air travel was still expensive. I spent some time in the advertising and passenger administration areas before moving to sea staff and ship's chandelling.

P&O placed cruise ships in Australian waters for extended periods and hence would have change over crews fly into Australia to replace crews at the end of their engagements. Chartered jets would fly in a crew and fly the crew home at the end of their engagement. The captain and officers were English or Dutch and the crew were Indian with Goanese stewards for the passengers. I was offered the opportunity to complete a Qantas ticketing course to add to my skills. I learnt how to take officers from *Commodore of the Fleet* to

deckhand to the *Maritime Officer* for their papers to be signed on or off the vessel, check their travel documents and deliver them to the ship or airport.

Ships manifests for passengers or cargo needed to be lodged with quarantine and customs to receive clearance for the vessel to arrive or depart the port. I earned a licence as a customs agent. I learnt to book pilots, tugs, waterside workers and security personnel and the penalties when it all turned turkey. I remember throwing slabs of beer from a pallet on the wharf into the open companionway of the '*Canberra*' as it eased its way from the wharf, one landed into the drink before we quit.

P&O usually docked at Circular Quay, Pyrmont and very occasional at Woolloomooloo, I don't remember them docking at Walsh Bay or Darling Harbour. British India cargo ships, *P&O* owned always docked at Pyrmont wharves. *Union Steamship Company* was another *P&O* owned shipping line. We received A4 sheets each week of the acquisitions to *P&O Group* as the company grew from divestments into other industries.

I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to sail on most *P&O* cruise ships. To achieve this staff were required to have up to date inoculation certificates and a valid Australian passport plus be trained in merchant navy procedures on board. We would be told from a week in advance down to two hours if there was a requirement for us to sail on an outgoing cruise liner. I sailed on the '*Himalaya*' as reservations had stuffed up the berths allocated to passengers and two of us were sent from Sydney to fix it as the ship sailed to Fiji.

While I was very young and naïve coming from Brisbane my supervisors and managers were wise women and men so when my nativity endangered my life, such as planning to go into a Pyrmont waterfront pub for a pee on the way back to work, I was told the dangers. For \$20 dollars a drinker (seaman) would rob you and kill you before you could open your mouth. He would slip out of the country that day before an alarm was raised. You never went to a wharf when there were elections on for *Waterside Workers* or disputes as it could be very dangerous. *Painters and Dockers* didn't get a job on the waterfront unless they had a criminal record, I was told. Security was only for show for office staff, as anything could be bought at pubs down the road from the wharves.

Most supervisors and managers were named by the subsequent *Royal Commission into the Waterfront* for paying ghost workers. If you wanted to get a ship loaded and out of port you had to pay the price asked by the *Waterside Workers Union*. It added to the cost borne by the customer for freight or the passenger.

Organising a vessels arrival and departure was the responsibility of an agent. The agent would ensure manifests were lodged with *Customs and Quarantine* for entry and exit, pilots, tugs and waterside workers to secure the vessel plus unload and load the vessel. They were first up and the last ones down the gangplank as it was lowered or raised from the wharf. Delays or changes involved significant penalties and costs. Being an agent on behalf of another shipping company also involved the transfer of the collected income for freight. This meant the transfer of millions of dollars of freight income to overseas owners.

Very few ships I visited or travelled on were dry ships. Learning to drink and hold your liquor was a mandatory requirement. Sydney had early openers (pubs) 6 am to 6 pm or 10 am to 10 pm then, having a drink after work on the Friday night was normal behaviour with fellow staff. Fridays after lunch was often liquid. While alcoholic drinks were served in the bars and officers lounges on ships, I never saw a duty officer or master drink prior to departure.

My twentieth birthday came and went just as the last year of conscription. My birthday number was selected and I submitted my paperwork. I had witnessed Bob Hawke and Gough Whitlam lead the marches up Hunter Street into the old Chifley Square opposite the *QANTAS* building to address the crowd of protestors against the Vietnam War. I remained unaffected by their speeches. I duly later received my confirmation that conscription was cancelled and I would not be called up to serve my country before the Federal election in December 1972 that saw Gough Whitlam become Prime Minister.

At *P&O* in Sydney I saw the passing into history of old tramp steamers unload and load at Pyrmont wharves. The wharf gangs manually unloading and loading cargo, the wharf superintendents responsible for where cargo was unloaded or loaded together with the deck officers and the trucks and transport workers union officials. The *Customs (Border Force)* and quarantine officers all coming and going to inspect cargo entering the country. It was organised chaos. Cargo was regularly dropped or stolen with those goods being hawked by street traders in the local hotels through Sydney.

I also witnessed the introduction of container ships, the transformation of wharves as a result of containerisation and the rapid increase in the size of container ships and their transformation into the shape they are today. Gone were the unloading and loading of cargo on the wharfs directly from ships. Instead containers were unloaded or loaded from bulk stores of containers. The wharves went from hundreds of busy people to just a handful. Giant gantries with cranes on top moved over the ships lifting off or lowering down sealed containers either twenty or forty tonnes of goods at a time.

These containers were moved onto storage yards behind the wharves or in the outer suburbs where trucks and trains loaded or unloaded the containers upon presentation of clearance paperwork, quite separate from the actual wharf activity. Everything became computerised and sanitised. It all became clean and white on the wharves, gone was the noise, chaos, grime and sweat of the wharf labours.

When I returned to the wharves seven years later in Newcastle it was a different yet familiar environment for me. Newcastle was a cargo port, a working port unlike Sydney which was now passengers only. Coal was king and full coal ships departing had priority due to their draft and the rock bar at the entrance to the harbour. As a coal ship completed loading as the tide peaked the tugs and pilot would be there to complete the trip down the channel and out through the heads before the tide turned and began to go out.

There were traditional tramp steamers loading frozen meat, wheat ships and roll on roll off vessels in the port of Newcastle to service the steel works products being exported. Coastal tankers would bring fuel supplies. There were often up to fifty vessels off the port at anchor waiting to enter and load their cargo. All shipping companies attended meetings with the port authority to assist with the organisation of berths and duration of vessels stays.

Once on one of those occasions as we sat down with the Harbour Master, I was sitting looking up the channel when he announced some startling news, the port was closed until further notice. A coastal tanker in the dry dock just up the channel had caught fire. The channel runs up the commercial town side of Newcastle and can see the huge ships making their way from the heads and the bar up or down the channel. They dwarf the city buildings as they glide up or down the channel.

The Deputy Harbour Master outlined the situation, as it dawned on us, we could be blown to bits at any moment. At that moment port authorities were reviewing their options. The floating dock could be lowered and the tanker pulled from the dry dock and taken to sea but it would take hours for the floating dock to lower. If the tanker remained in the drydock, they hoped that the walls of the floating dock may hold the force if the tanker exploded long enough for the blast to be forced upwards.

Another coastal tanker had entered the berth on the other side of that channel to the floating dock containing the now burning empty tanker that morning and begun to empty its cargo into the adjacent petrol storage tanks. Should the empty tanker in the dry dock explode, it would ignite the full tanker and the storage tanks behind taking half of Newcastle with it. Fortunately, the fire was contained and put out without an explosion.

Being a shipping agent was challenging and enjoyable as you were dealing with people all day every day. Whether it was owners of ships, port authorities, wharf or transport, you needed to be able to get on with people and organise effectively. You were being paid to get vessels into port, unloaded and loaded quickly so they reach their next destination.

Although I possessed no linguistic skills so spoke no language other than English, I never had any issues with foreign registered vessels or their crews with communication. One exception much later my wife points out was on a SAS flight from Bangkok to Copenhagen when the flight hostess was Danish and she could not speak English so had to swap with another hostess who did speak English for the remainder of our flight, we thought we were special.

My return to shipping in Sydney several years later resulted in no further dramatic events as my study took me on a journey away from shipping, although I did spend some time in the transport and food industries before settling into the *Queensland Public Service*.

Many years later my wife and I stayed in a Scottish Bed and Breakfast in Inverness and were served by a gentleman who owned the premises with his wife. We chatted and discovered our shipping interests. He was a Captain of a petrol tanker currently on leave at home. He was surprised when I mentioned he had to have a double-certificate as he was self-piloting his vessel into and out of port.

One never leaves the sea behind.

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