



The Society of Master Mariners
South Africa

CAPE TOWN BRANCH

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Dear fellow Members

At the Cape Town Branch AGM in May of this year I was elected as Master of the branch. Since joining the Society in 1982, my involvement and participation in Society matters has fluctuated along with my career through the maritime industry. With my business now 15 years old and somewhat settled, I feel ready to re-involve myself within the profession I started out with as a starry-eyed Deck Cadet in 1972.

Why you may ask - because I have become increasingly frustrated by things I see happening to a profession and industry close to my heart and I would like to do something about it!

Among my concerns are:

- The international acceptance of South African maritime professionals depends on our "White List" status, but retention of this status depends inter alia on the quality of our lecturers and examiners. Institutions are struggling to attract and retain suitably qualified and experienced personnel – something that could have an adverse impact into the future.
- Our Master's Unlimited Certificates of Competency have been downgraded within the National Qualifications Framework to Diploma level.
- The South African maritime industry's technical expertise has been massively eroded by the sale of our national fleets to foreigners.
- Our future generations of seafarers are desperate to get educated, trained and to get berths in order to complete their seetime – something proving near impossible.

Only the Society of Master Mariners South Africa is interested in doing anything about these issues because it directly affects our member's professional status and their employment.

It is also true to say that we can only act effectively through an organization like the Society. Individually we have no standing when dealing with government while the Society is recognized as a representative body whose collective opinions are taken into consideration.

We cannot rely on companies, politicians, government departments or their agencies to do anything about it – **It's up to us alone** – and its time for action!

In the preamble to the Society's constitution, its Mission is defined as:

"... to promote the professional interests of the maritime community in general and those of its members in particular in the context of service to the nation and all its citizens".

On the 9th of December 2010 the Society celebrates its 70th anniversary since being founded by two Durban pilots – Captains George Lindsay and Andrew Reid in 1940.

The seven decades of the Society's existence have seen massive ebbs and flows in the fortunes of the South African and international maritime environment as well as in that of the Society's. I would venture to suggest that we are currently near the bottom end of one of these ebbs!

Unfortunately, at our time of greatest need I believe we are at our weakest.

- Active membership participation is minimal,
- Some branches are dysfunctional,
- Our industry lacks the powerful "industry champions" of old with access to government
- The Society's marketing is poor.

There are good explanations as to how this state of affairs arrived.

Since the disposal of much of our national fleets to foreign interests over 10 years ago, the requirement to employ South African certificated personnel also disappeared. At the same time South Africa's new political dispensation open up international employment opportunities for South Africa's well qualified and experienced mariners who, together with their excellent work ethic, quickly found better (tax-free Dollar) employment abroad.

The same new political dispensation ushered in major changes to the way our ports were administered and manned. Affirmative action strategies within the ports significantly downscaled the qualifications and experience required for all professional maritime ranks – from Port Captain to tug mate. Traditionally the Port Captains, Pilots and Tug Masters were the mainstay of the Society's active membership. This core of our membership has now either retired or has scattered across the world to take up senior positions in the Persian Gulf, Canada, New Zealand and Australia – just to name a few.

I believe that we as a Society are presently at a crossroads in our evolution and that this should be considered an opportunity to reflect and re-direct our strategies to achieve our Mission as described above.

Those of us that have benefited from the career opportunities made available to us over the last 50 years owe it to the new generations of South African seafarers to ensure our experience; networks and friendship are offered to them through the Society as we take on the task of strengthening the maritime profession in South Africa.

Things have changed forever and we need to adjust course to take account of these changes. We need to look into our structures and modus operandi, using our collective experience to question the way we do things so that what evolves out of this process will

result in a Society that is modern, relevant and can offer the type of support useful to Government and our members.

Our annual Congress takes place in Cape Town during August this year and I hope members will use this opportunity to raise issues and, even more importantly, offer new ideas on ways forward for the Society so that we can end up with an organization that we can feel proud of and in which our valuable time and efforts produce real results.

I don't particularly care about how many members we have – I care rather about how many members want to join with me in re-inventing our Society by taking head-on the serious issues facing us.

The next few years can see the Society make a real difference to our maritime landscape if we use our resources wisely. If we don't and continue to let things drift, we face a gradual decline into irrelevance. I'm not interested in that route and I am sure there is a core of members who want to join me in ensuring we reverse our decline as a matter of urgency.

Thanks for your confidence in electing me as Master of the Cape Town Branch. I intend giving it everything I've got.

Please feel free to let me have your ideas and comments by emailing me at whitehead@worldonline.co.za

Yours fraternally

Rob Whitehead

Master – Cape Town Branch