



Master mariners steaming along

Report by Brian Ingpen

The Society of Master Mariners celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. *SA Shipping News* pays tribute to the Society which plays an important role in the lives of its past and present members, offering solutions about a range of issues including education and training, criminalisation of seafarers, and the future of the maritime industry.

Interesting names appear on a board in a committee room at the Survival Centre at Granger Bay. It shows that CAPTAIN J. MONTGOMERY, a Union-Castle superintendent, was the first master of the Cape Town Branch of the Society for Master Mariners, founded in 1941 amidst the awful horrors of the war at sea that had begun in earnest off South Africa in that year. Between January 1941 and December 1943, 137 merchant ships were lost to enemy action off the coast. The Society reached out to master mariners in those terrible times for when they sailed, their ships were in grave peril, and some who had called in local ports were not seen again, their ships simply labelled as "war losses", and their crews "missing, presumed dead".

Since its founding 70 years ago, the Society – like shipping in general – has undergone considerable change.

Until a few years ago, the ports were down by the head with master mariners, for the prerequisite qualification at entry level on the marine side – mate on an old steam tug – was a master (foreign-going) ticket. It is said that, with its hordes of tug mates, masters, pilots, and those further up the ladder, the South African Railways & Harbours was the largest single employer of master mariners in the world!

Membership

Those master mariners who were superintendents, surveyors, in ships' agencies, stevedoring, or in other maritime activities swelled the membership and boosted attendance at meetings. Cape Town membership included most of the senior staff of General Botha, all of whom held master's tickets. With such an array of seasoned gents, meetings abounded with fascinating tales of the days of conventional shipping, where voyages lasted months, or even years, and protracted port stays allowed decent runs ashore.

Holding the Society's purse strings very tightly for many years was REG JACKSON, the no-nonsense, highly respected Port Captain of Cape Town, and after whom the Society named a prize awarded annually at the Military Academy in Saldanha Bay.

One of a trio of intrepid Cape Town pilots in the 1960s and later Port Captain, BILL DAMERELL held several offices in the local branch and on the national executive. Apart from handling the Union-Castle mailships in all weathers to maintain the schedule, these pilots took calculated risks to ensure that wind delays were kept to a minimum. As long as the old steam pilot tugs *Eland* or *H Sawyer* could venture out in a westerly swell, they were willing to bring ships into port amidst heavy weather, and the pilot service developed a reputation for some remarkable feats of piloting in even the most fearsome wind or confined manoeuvring space.

Prominent among the membership was another stalwart of the harbour service, RAY SCHOOLING, who learnt the ways of the sea aboard Clan ships plying the trades from the UK to Australia, India or to South Africa. He later rose through the harbour service ranks to Port Captain of Cape Town.

Retired Port Captain JOHN DAVIES is also one who has contributed to the Port Elizabeth Branch over many years.

Liner companies were well represented among the Society's membership. TONY WEATHERLY whose discharge book would have looked like an Ellerman fleet list, featured prominently in the containerisation of the South African trade, and GORDON OXLEY, who has the distinction of merchant service with Harrison Line and service in Royal Naval submarines was well known in stevedoring in both Durban and Richards Bay.

Naval officers also formed part of the Society. The legendary JACK NETTERBERG DSO, GLEN SYNDERCOMBE (holder of a master's ticket after years in Shell tankers, besides a string of naval qualifications that led to his appointment as Chief of the Navy) and ANDRE BURGERS, one of the last officers commanding a President-class frigate feature prominently in the Society's annals. When Andre was in command of *SAS President Pretorius* on a courtesy visit to Britain, the frigate was making good speed in the English Channel when the officer of the watch called him to the bridge.

"No one seems to be on the bridge of that ship," the young officer told him, pointing to the lights of the silent ship that was not responding to radio calls as to her intentions.

Having turned the frigate to avoid immediate danger, and having given a prolonged blast on the foghorn that also elicited no response, Andre brought his vessel abeam of the mystery ship and ordered the searchlight to probe the darkened bridge that certainly appeared deserted.

"Load the saluting gun!" ordered Andre, "and fire!" The gunfire brought a figure leaping from a couch on the bridge, and, shielding his eyes from the searchlight, the startled officer hastily altered course to turn his old banger away from the frigate. Perhaps Andre's response that night saved the lives of umpteen seamen for surely that sleeping watch-keeper spelt danger for other ships.

Fewer master mariners

The shipping scene has changed remarkably in recent years. To manoeuvre a Voith-Schneider-propelled tug is not as complex an operation as was the case of those twin-screw, deep-draughted coal-burners of a previous era, and new entrants to the tugs now need only a second mate's ticket. Similarly, the local pilot service features fewer master's ticket holders as a second mate's ticket is now accepted as entry level qualification. These factors alone have reduced the number of master mariners employed in each port.

Containerisation brought the rationalisation of operations of several liner companies and a range of new procedures, many of which did not require the skills and experience of master mariners. Gone were the days of huge drawing boards in cargo superintendents' offices, as cargo planning became more centralised and progressively computerised, opening the way for relative greenhorns to be trained in ship planning. As systems changed, many positions formerly held by master mariners were culled, reducing the number of superintendents ashore, with the inevitable impact on the attendance at meetings of the Society.

The sale of Safmarine in 1999, the transfer of its head office to Antwerp, the more recent transfer of its technical and crewing departments to Singapore as well as the tendency to reduce the number of South Africans in fleets that formerly employed dozens of local master mariners have also

impacted the Society's membership.

With a sea-going career that stretches back to days when the 1922-vintage Runciman steamer *Dalemoor*, in which he was serving as an apprentice, hit a mine in the North Sea in January 1945, JACK CLARK, a highly respected figure from his days in the stevedoring sector, brings over 60 years of experience to discussions.

A number of active members are at sea, popping into branch meetings when on leave. Commanding the Panamax bulker *Bergen Max*, LOUIS CROLE reported from Port Hedland (Western Australia) that his vessel was the first to berth at the Utah Point Berth to load iron ore, and to use the Cavotec Moormaster Suction Mooring System at the port. Fresh from leave, RICK SULLIVAN continues to command *Rhapsody of the Seas*, currently cruising from Sydney to the Melanesian Islands with their beautiful beaches and interesting history, including the labyrinths of fortifications built during the wartime Japanese occupation.

CHARLES KINGON, master of Safmarine containerships, MIKE BARNES and GLYNN MORGAN who command ore carriers, and others who are at sea can give current perspectives on issues that affect all master mariners.

Important issues

With a wide range of experience available from members ashore in the stevedoring, liner, salvage, agency, surveying, legal, harbour, marine equipment and training sectors, expertise abounds, so that, apart from sharing pleasant tales from laughing fellow-rovers – important in promoting camaraderie among members – the Society currently is dealing with several important issues:

- the status of the master's ticket within the South African qualifications framework (it has been downgraded from its former degree-status);
- the criminalisation of seafarers, some of whom suffered arbitrary arrest after ac-

cidents that were totally beyond their control;

- the future of the South African maritime industry;
- maritime training, especially the quality of training and the bottleneck through which cadets must pass to gain their sea-time;
- the administration of the Society's benevolent fund that is available for those in difficult circumstances, and the bursary scheme that assists cadets with their training.

Conclusion

Much has happened in 70 years. Technological and sociological changes at sea have been both rapid and far-reaching, while the economic backdrop to modern shipping is far different from that of only a few years ago.

The Society can and does provide input wherever possible for the benefit of its members.

CAPTAIN GRAHAM MANNALL National President of Society of Master Mariners

An apprenticeship that began in *Hermiston*, a trampship of the Tyneside company Chapman & Willan, was the foundation for Graham Mannall's lifelong career that included eight years in British & Commonwealth, the parent company of Clan Line and Union-Castle.

After spells as third mate aboard several Clan ships, he moved to the cruiseliner *Reina del Mar* that was under a Union-Castle charter for a voyage to the New York World Fair in 1964. Back aboard the mailships, he moved up the ladder to second mate aboard *SA Vaal*, and, having obtained his master's ticket in 1965, he had a further promotion to chief officer on *King Malcolm*, one of the King Line trampships that were also part of the B&C Group. (The pecking order was such that officers moved to cargo ships to gain their first appointment as mate or master.)

After the Suez Canal had closed following the Six Day War in 1967, South African ports were severely congested, and news reached Graham Mannall that vacancies existed in the South African Railways and Harbours. In keeping with the usual entry level at that time, he was appointed mate on a harbour tug *T Ericksen* in 1968, serving in her for four years before his promotion to tugmaster on transfer to Durban. (There was no fast-tracking then, and officers gained considerable experience before taking on the next rank!)

"These were interesting times," Captain Mannall recalls, "as the old steam tugs were being replaced with the new breed, and I was the first master of *PG Joubert*, the first Schottel tug in South Africa." He was promoted to pilot in Durban in 1976.

One of his memorable experiences was bringing the super-tanker *Alki* into port from the Single Buoy Mooring after her rudder had been immobilised in heavy seas while discharging. With her beam of 48 metres and a 10-metre draught, he called on all his experience to ensure that the 324-metre tanker passed through the relatively narrow entrance at Durban. All the tugs available in the port shepherded her to Island View 7 & 8 where she lay for about six weeks while new hydraulic rams were made and fitted to her steering motor.

He retired from local piloting in 2002, and went on a temporary assignment to Jebel Ali, in the United Arab Emirates.



Current President, Captain Graham Mannall.

A former colleague suggested he become involved in assisting at the newly established Portnet Academy in Durban where pilot training had commenced, but shortly thereafter the Harbour Master persuaded him to return to piloting in Durban. It was fortunate that he did, for when the *Queen Mary 2* arrived in Durban on her maiden visit, he was the pilot who brought the impressive liner into port, symbolically inaugurating the wider entrance to the harbour.

"As I look back over 55 years at sea and in piloting," Captain Mannall reminisces, "I am staggered at the changes in shipping since I stood on the bridge of *Hermiston* in 1955 and *QM2*, the former with her four-bladed steam driven propeller and steam-driven single plate rudder, and the latter with her steerable pods. *Hermiston* had a solitary DF loop, and lead-line to navigate when poor visibility made stellar navigation impossible. It has been a wonderful experience for me to witness changes both at sea and ashore. Even now, we are introducing a more powerful tug fleet as larger containerships enter the South Africa trade."