

JOHN MORRISON:

THE LIGHTER SIDE OF A CAREER IN LINER SHIPPING SPANNING 3 COUNTRIES

NEW ZEALAND:

Born and educated in Dunedin I had the vague idea of seeking entry to University when I suddenly found myself applying for the position of Office Boy in the Dunedin Office of The New Zealand Shipping Co. Ltd.

Successfully appointed at age 16 years I was assured by the Branch Manager that I was indeed fortunate to be employed by such a blue ribbon Company and provided I worked hard and behaved myself I could look forward to a lifetime career! Fateful words indeed – which I will revisit later!!

In January 1953 I commenced work and still have my first pay slip – 3 pounds 2 shillings and sixpence per week. By 1954 I had secured an evening job in a radio orchestra which paid four pounds for a total of 4 hours a week so I recall feeling rather rich!!

One of the first lessons learned was how sacred the word “The” was in the Company name. It was considered a terrible mistake to either speak or write the name without emphasising “THE”.....!!

Daily duties included mail inward and outward twice daily, the despatch of telegrams and cables and attending to basic services at the counter. Maintaining an outward mail register to record addressee details and postage costs had to be balanced daily against the petty cash tin.

However, each day started with a long climb onto the roof (out windows and up ladders) to hoist The N.Z.S.Co. and Federal Line house flags. Each day finished by repeating the expedition to strike and fold the flags. Now... Dunedin was never renowned for good weather and even with a rain coat it was difficult to stay dry – let alone on my feet in the slippery conditions! Thus the duty was intensely disliked and became a major motivation for early promotion!!

An essential office item was the “Gestetner” – a machine to which you fitted a stencil, added ink and operated by turning a handle which in turn revolved the stencil and printed all manner of communications and information. It was messy, difficult to keep clean and temperamental – and considered a suitable task for the office boy!!

On one occasion the Fleet Commodore arrived in Port and the Manager escorted him to the office. I had been alerted that he was an important guest and deserving of great respect!!

My desk was near the main entry doors and as they approached I ensured I was busy!

As they passed I was astonished to be hit in the chest with what turned out to be a large bundle of letters! Pure reflex kicked in and I immediately hurled it back at the Commodore, hitting him at neck level and evoking considerable surprise!! The group continued into the inner sanctum whilst my misery was compounded by enthusiastic predictions from staff of the early end to a promising career!!

A few minutes later I was called in by the manager who introduced me to the Commodore who promptly apologised to me!!! I was speechless (briefly!) whilst he explained that he had intended to place the bundle on my desk – but lost his grip!! I accepted magnanimously and gratefully withdrew – but often wondered whether the Commodore had acted in conscience or perhaps (more likely) the manager had intervened?

After 6 months I was promoted to the Accounts Department where I was teamed with another boy to perform all manner of boring work – the weekly highlight being to prepare the wages for the crew who “cleaned out the holds after discharge” and the carpenters who “tommed” the spaces preparatory to loading. The wages had to be calculated on a large multi – column spreadsheet and had to balance to the penny!! No calculators in those days – just mental arithmetic! Additionally, the accountant just loved to stand over my shoulder adding the columns and informing me when my total was wrong – or worse – that I was too slow!!

Frustrating as that was, I am grateful for the resulting discipline which enables me still today to checkout at supermarkets knowing exactly how much I should be charged!!

An unexpected requirement was that I was instructed to join a typing class at the local Technical College – one night a week!! The purpose was to develop sufficient skill to assist in the typing of manifests and other documents which quite regularly occurred well into the night. I suspect that the ladies of the ‘pool’ were not asked because they were paid overtime and needed taxis whereas salaried staff were only paid overtime after 9pm!! Back to the typing class – which I approached with trepidation – having found myself the only boy amongst some 25 girls! There was nothing romantic about the atmosphere and many of the girls enjoyed themselves at my expense whilst the teacher continuously emphasised the need for... ‘rhythm’ using all fingers!!! After about 3 months I was able to disengage having acquired sufficient ability with 2 fingers on each hand – which I retain to this day!

One job I enjoyed was entering and clearing vessels and attending to all the provisioning and crew needs. On one sunny day I had been down at the wharf and was idly watching an Ellerman Line vessel as she prepared to

sail. The Port of Dunedin had a berthing “basin” (similar to Swanson dock in Melbourne) and the vessel was berthed bow in.

The lines were progressively let go as she swung the stern out into the basin and I heard the signal for what I imagined was “slow astern”. However what happened was more like “full astern” and this beautiful new vessel gathered speed toward the wharf opposite. This was proclaimed by a loud chorus of alarm from a number of Indian crew gathered at the stern. The inevitable happened and the vessel hit firstly a fishing boat and then the wharf!

By now a large audience of onlookers had gathered and watched with disbelief as the vessel teamed “full ahead” across the basin and ploughed into that wharf!! Beams and timbers flew everywhere as the bow reshaped the line of wharf. This all happened close to the Harbour Board office where an astonished Harbour Master was witness to the whole sorry affair.

Ohthe poor fishing boat sank like a stone when the ship made her last dash forward!

An embarrassing memory was, together with the Branch Manager, dutifully watching the “Hurunui” sail from Port Chalmers on a bleak winter day. As the last line was about to be released the manager decided to head for the car and back to Dunedin where he dropped me at the office to send the various cables confirming safe despatch.

I woke the following morning to radio news of a large cargo vessel stranded on a sand bank just off the wharf!! Shortly after, the manager rang to ensure I was on my way for a meeting to work out a common story!! He realised that he was in breach of Company guidelines that required witnessing full clearance from the wharf on departure!!

We decided honesty was the best form of defence supported by full weather reports about the ‘atrocious’ conditions!! As always happens on these occasions, the Managing Director in Wellington opened his copy of the “Dominion” over breakfast to find a report of the stranding on the front page!!

I felt very sorry for my Manager (for whom I had great admiration) but the experience taught me never to cut corners. The ship freed herself on the next high tide (without damage) and my favourite manager survived!

Revenge is sweet: During my Office Boy days we had a Passenger Manager of pompous and devious character who considered me as somebody he could persecute at will! I was not alone in this view, and longed for the opportunity to turn the tables!! It happened!!

We had a ship arriving early one Saturday morning who wanted a Doctor to administer to the crew a well known treatment as an antidote to sexually transmitted diseases.

For some reason it was agreed the crew would be brought to the office and it was my job to make the arrangements. I met the Doctor and suggested the most appropriate private room was – the Passenger Managers office!! The bus arrived and the guys had their treatment and went their way after which I made a vague effort to tidy the office.

On Monday morning the Passenger manager arrived late (as normal) and was watched by most staff as he entered his room - and reappeared demanding to know why the cleaners had not performed! I then told him what had happened on the Saturday – with graphic exaggeration! He was speechless with rage and stormed into the manager who was not impressed and despatched him with a flea in his ear!! Curiously he resigned some 3 months later – and I sometimes wondered why??

In 1964 after 11 happy years I was transferred to Timaru as the Travel Manager. This proved a rather quieter existence as I was newly married with plans for a family and the future seemed full of possibility. However, one event occurred which inspired me to explore a new line of activity.

One Sunday a Hain Line vessel Treneglos (under charter to The N.Z.S.Co) sailed from Timaru but sadly the vessel turned to starboard a little earlier than instructed by the pilot and stranded on a nearby beach!!

Fortunately, benign weather followed but all early attempts by the ship to withdraw failed and it was decided to bring down 2 heavy duty tugs from Auckland. Meantime the locals took this event to heart and in increasing numbers made daily visits to the beach to wave and shout to the crew! Bus loads of school children – even day trippers – arrived from all round the area and things took on a carnival atmosphere. This made me think I should capitalise on this public interest in free entertainment, by staging a transport exhibition (as a travel promotion) during the approaching Timaru festival. I floated the idea to my Branch Manager to occupy the whole ground floor of our 2 storey building and he enthused on one condition!! It was to be staged without informing our Head Office!! His independence from H/O was well known! So the great day arrived when all the models of ships, aircraft, buses and support services (including a wonderful model railway) was opened to the public with the full support from all staff (all aware of the H/O ban!!)

An astonishing response occurred from the public which lead to extensive coverage from print, radio and television media. The Festival management were delighted and of course the Branch Manager revelled in the publicity – until the storm of success hit Wellington!

Two senior managers were despatched to Timaru due on a Friday morning - I met them at the airport with the news that the Branch Manager had been stricken with illness and he sent his sincere apologies!! Furthermore he would ensure a full report would be forthcoming! It never did!!

In 1967 I moved to Wellington as National Travel Manager – and my first job was to wind up the 3 ship Passenger Service that had plied between N.Z. ports and Tilbury since around 1880.

With the last ship departed I confronted the task of sorting out the records stored in the basement. I spent 2 weeks in old clothes and only surfaced at tea breaks and lunch time and thus attracted numerous unkind nicknames from workmates!!

However, it was a fascinating discovery and eventually I advised the M.D. that the historic value was way beyond my ability to assess and it was agreed we offer it to the National History Museum.

I made the initial phone call at 4pm and the respondent met me at 4.30pm and when he surfaced from the tour I hosted, he declared they wanted everything and would send the first truck the following morning!

Two days later it had all gone and eventually became a major display about the history of the Line and the part it played in the development of New Zealand.

By this time the container revolution was gathering momentum and The New Zealand Shipping Co. Ltd (by now wholly owned by P and O) was scheduled to be replaced by container services operated by OCL which set up a development team in N.Z. called OCLNZ.

The Australian service started in 1969 and the first N.Z. service was to be to/from the East Coast North America (ECNA) in 1971 followed by the Europe service. Unfortunately the colossal cost involved in setting up so many services stretched the financial resources of OCL owners and it was decided the N.Z. introduction would be delayed for some years.

By this time I had worked with OCLNZ for some 18 months when to our dismay we suddenly found ourselves given two week's notice! So much for the assurance of lifelong employment given by my first manager in 1953!

Fate works in curious ways and I was fortunate to be invited by OCAL Melbourne to join their marketing team and so with one week to sell a house and pack up the Morrison family arrived in Melbourne in August 1971 to start a new chapter!

AUSTRALIA:

After World War 2 the Liner Trades spent some 10 years rebuilding fleets and adapting to evolving Trade needs. Another decade was spent refining services and coping with serious industrial disputes in the ports.

The impact of Trade changes such as the Common Market was offset by new services launched to Asia and North America.

By the early 1960's it was becoming clear that port performance was continuously disrupting schedules and escalating operating costs at an alarming rate. A solution needed to be found and with the decision to introduce Container Services the whole business was turned on its head!

Large and fast vessels transporting containers and using specially designed Terminals could revolutionise turn round at the large ports and enable smaller ports to be connected by rail (or Ferry –in the case of Tasmania). Some historians suggest that this was the biggest change since steam replaced sail. I suggest it had a greater impact because suddenly the model was no longer 'Port to Port'. "Through transport" became the catchcry and new terms came into usage such as "Door to Door; FCL; LCL; Transshipment; and Inland Depots & Container Bases" which opened up an endless opportunity to explain and talk to clients. And to promote the new image, 'the enormous potential benefit' for exporters/importers alike would be explained and guided by a "Marketing Representative". The "canvasser", who had faithfully served so well for so long - was no more!!

Insurance costs would drop as the new system would dramatically reduce cargo damage, pillage and even ullage. In fact this was to be such a transformation that the customer could look forward to a wondrous world of lower costs, improved performance and increased leisure time!!

Wrapping the whole change together was the new tool called computers and although we hardly knew what they looked like we assured the market that computers would handle all the boring data and documentation in future! The enthusiasm was palpable!!

Did it happen? Well.....not initially!

This period was undoubtedly the most exciting time to be working in the industry and my memories of this time reflect the fun we had. I know that was shared by colleagues and competitors alike. It also established a new approach to the business and it is from this that my happiest memories are sourced.

For example we had a visit from London based Directors and a 'Board Room' function was arranged one evening to introduce a range of clients. All went well until I noticed one guest showing signs of 'instability'! So, knowing he was driving I eventually got him to agree that he should leave his car in our garage and take a taxi. One was ordered and I waved him goodbye having given the driver his address and a Company voucher.

Feeling quite pleased with myself I returned to the party where I was asked by a colleague where the taxi was headed. I replied "Launching Place" and

immediately the local wits fell about laughing!! I was stunned to discover it was the last stop before Warburton!!

The final irony was that he rang me the following morning to thank us and to ask me to arrange transport to the city to pick up his car!! That was easier to arrange than when I had to explain a taxi charge of about \$140! (1975 values!)

One sunny afternoon I was engaged in a particularly “willing” telephone conversation with a senior colleague in Sydney. At such times it was my habit to swing round and gaze out the window to allow complete concentration – until I sensed someone was insisting on my attention! It was indeed the Building Safety Officer who bluntly told me to get out as a bomb was in the basement!! I looked into the outer office area where not a soul was to be seen! I abruptly finished my call and swiftly headed for street level.

Fortunately the ‘bomb’ turned out to be not so and we returned to our office where I demanded to know why I had not been warned?? Some claimed to have tried and one wit asked if it was ever possible to break up a call from the splendid Sydney representative!!

I suggested that in future a smack over the one exposed ear would fix such a problem!!

Probably my fondest memory from that period concerned a new business development. I was contacted by a visiting business man who claimed to be a Scot – without the accent! Following lengthy talks and providing him with a desk in our office we learned all about King Island kelp and the need to transport it to Ayrshire in Scotland. While he worked on the plans for a plant to dry the kelp we devised a logistic solution to get containers onto the Island and door to door to Girvan via Melbourne, Tilbury and Glasgow.

By now the ‘Scot’ had become a friend and following successful trial shipments his company approved the plans for a factory on the Island. (with a little help from the Tasmanian Government!) Thus started a highly successful new export which was shipped exclusively in OCL boxes for many years. Eventually, the media took an interest with television, newspaper and magazine coverage.

This led to similar interest in the British media and for a number of OCL Board meetings in London the kelp shipments were included on the agenda!! However the greatest value was the enduring friendships that followed and continue today. If only all business ventures could be as good!

BRITAIN:

In late 1979 I was posted to a role in the Australian & New Zealand Trade Division in London and together with the family embarked on a memorable experience.

Shortly after I arrived I discovered that the Company was a sponsor of the Covent Garden Opera House and the 6 prime seats allocated weekly for each production were not always used.

I promptly offered to use them to host clients. This proved highly successful and the ticket allocations became primarily ours! I even recall being approached by certain Directors enquiring whether any tickets were available!! Very satisfying!!

Then there were opportunities to attend events such as “Badminton”; “British Open”; “Royal Ascot” and “Wimbledon” – all with clients – many of whom travelled from other regions. Many a problem was solved whilst enjoying ourselves.

One not so happy memory concerned our Middle East group who adjoined my office area.

One evening I overheard a telephone call to my colleague (over the partition) and when completed I asked him to explain! It was with the deputy manager in our Jeddah office who calmly explained the police were on the way to arrest him! It transpired that it had happened before so there was a procedure in place to deal with such a hazard. Apparently an import container arrived and the police had found liquor hidden in the contents. They were not interested in the Importer – If the container was branded OCL then that was where they started!!

So arrangements to supply food, water and bedding to this poor guy were put in place. I met up with him when he was released after 8 days and was flown back to London. No wonder OCL staff had nil ambition to be posted to Saudi Arabia!

BACK TO AUSTRALIA:

By the mid 1980’s that with a flood of new ship building and a rash of new operators there was not enough trade for all to survive. Even OCL began to struggle and in the end was absorbed by P and O who, not long after, was taken over by Maersk Line.

By that time I had joined a Malaysian Company – MISC – to assist in the launch of a new service between Australia and South East Asia. This was quite a change in operation and management style but with a small staff in Melbourne and Sydney and agents elsewhere we got off to a flying start. Within 3-4 years the initial 3 (small) ships were replaced with 3 new, larger vessels and we found ourselves the largest operator in the trade.

It had long seemed to me that Lines had rather underestimated Tasmania’s potential. For some years we traded as an independent operator which made it fairly simple to add a Bell Bay call to the existing Burnie call to serve Comalco (on a handshake!). A profitable business rapidly followed – not only to S.E.A but to many parts of the world by transshipment at

Singapore. This attracted all manner of other exports (seasonal and year round) and we developed a reputation for service innovation!

By the early 1990's it was announced that the bulk service contracted to carry newsprint from Tasmania to Fremantle would not renew. We discussed the possibilities of using our ships and finally worked out an acceptable solution to the need for a coastal permit – (they would do it!!) and every ship commenced to carry increasing volumes of newsprint. This quickly led to other shipments of produce and commodities and we quickly built a significant trade!

I must clarify that the emphasis on Tasmania did not mean we neglected our mainland ports – quite the contrary – but it was always hard to convince our offices in Fremantle, Sydney and even Melbourne that they were not playing second fiddle to Tasmania!! Some years later, changes to schedule caused by our involvement in a Consortium eventually meant we had to relinquish the Bell Bay call – but by then there had been a drop in demand, particularly from the smelter.

Right through this period we were fortunate to have willing staff who sometimes worked under difficult and demanding circumstances, but who were highly motivated.

A rather different responsibility was as Chairman of the Australia to South East Asia Shipping Conference. A lengthy name but for many years a useful body to represent the member lines in negotiation with shipper bodies and on regulatory matters. However a 'forgettable' experience was dealing with the ACCC who, following a complaint from West Australia, decide to formally investigate the Conference and review the legal umbrella which allowed it to conduct its business. We always knew that the ACCC wanted to eliminate the relevant legislation and this was yet another attempt.

I was to find this a pretty challenging experience because it is a feast for lawyers and Conference representatives had to be prepared to be "interrogated"! An enormous amount of data had to be compiled, checked and understood. We even had to be prepared to spend hours with ACCC staff explaining how liner shipping operated!!

We had grand support from our secretariat staff and in the end the ACCC issued a press release on Xmas Eve exonerating the Conference!! One of those during a career is quite sufficient!!

Another more interesting experience was being appointed to a Government committee (chaired by Customs) reviewing all aspects of the coastal shipping policy and the permit system. We made many recommendations most of which were adopted.

In this industry you are lucky to enjoy one 'green field' development such as the container revolution! I was fortunate to enjoy a second opportunity – the golden days of MISC in Australia – now sadly only a memory!
I retired in January 2002 but retain regular contact with the many good friends I made over my working period – including the UK and Malaysia – but particularly Tasmania!!

Melbourne
February 201