

## Stevedoring in the days of yore - by Capt Peter Varani

The transition from seagoing to stevedoring is not always an easy one , and indeed some have found it quite difficult in the past. However, seamen are an adaptable lot, and I believe most have made a reasonable fist of it. So, in 1955, I decided to try the change and sent off several applications to different stevedoring companies in Melbourne. Most replied in the negative, but I did receive a telegram from one company asking me to attend for an interview the following day. That telegram was to mark the commencement of thirty three years in the industry.

During that time, I believe I have been party to , or seen , most of the radical changes that have taken place , with the possible exception of the almost complete change to computerization of all operations and the introduction of automated machinery in cargo handling..

Looking back, I also believe that the best , and for me the most interesting , were the pre- container days of conventional, Ro-Ro , and unit load stevedoring , and all the variations in between. Life was never dull , every ship was different , and presented it's own challenges , often frustrating , but in the end satisfying when the job was complete and you could say to the Mate that the last sling was on board, and possibly share a drink together before sailing time.

The company I joined was E.P. & A. Fraser, Master Stevedores , a small family company run by the Senior Partner, Arch Fraser , and his nephew Percy Fraser. The Chief Superintendent was Capt. Jim Thomas, who ran the day to day operations, and to whom we supervisors reported .The main cargoes that Fraser's handled were bulk grain, bagged cargoes of flour , wheat and oats , and on the discharge side, timber and newsprint from USA and Canada. Very rarely did we handle much general cargo, which was restricted to one in every three Bank Line vessels, every second Thor Dahl ship , and a number of migrant passenger vessels.

I think I was indeed fortunate that my introduction to stevedoring was with such a company. Being small meant that as supervisors we had to be "jack of all trades", and had to fend for ourselves to a large degree, unlike the other two larger companies, Victorian and United Stevedoring, who had specialized staff to handle certain cargoes. We had only the basic gear to work with, the company did not own a single truck or fork lift, and the only vehicle was a VW flat bed utility which was the exclusive prerogative of the timekeeper, a gentleman by the name of Max West. To say that Fraser's ran a tight ship was putting it mildly. Any special gear that we might need was begged, borrowed, or stolen from our more affluent associates in other companies. Whilst other companies had a number of their own fork lifts, the Melbourne Harbour Trust also operated a large fleet that were available for hire on a daily basis. Woe

betide the supervisor , however, who had the temerity to order one for his ship – Arch Fraser would be on the phone within the hour demanding to know why he needed it – you had better have a good reason.

Despite all this, I think we were a happy lot together , and when times were quiet between ships , as they sometimes were , we had some great social times where we would plunder the savings in the social club fund and have a good night out , foremen, supervisors and office staff and wives. The Hampton Hotel was one of our favourite venues. It was at one of these gatherings that the wife of one foreman complained to me about the number of Saturdays, including afternoons, her husband was required to work. Of course, in those days , Saturday afternoon was sacrosanct, and was only worked if the ship could finish and sail that day , which was very rarely the case. Her husband, a New Zealander named George, was an excellent foreman, having previously served as bosun in the Union Steamship Co. He also happened to be very good golfer who played off a low handicap at Southern Golf Club, and for years he had convinced his dear wife that Saturday was a normal working day on the waterfront, and so he was able to get his regular weekly game in. I mumbled something about speaking to Capt. Thomas to see what he could do , but I am sure the other wives would have soon have enlightened her anyway.

How different things were in those days, when life proceeded at a more leisurely pace and vessels were in port for days, or sometimes weeks at a time. One had opportunity for some social interaction with the ship's people themselves, both on board and ashore, and many long lasting friendships were formed in this way. Contrast the situation with today, where vessels are turned around in a matter of hours, and ship's crews barely see anything of the ports they visit. Such I suppose, is the price of progress , inevitable but not necessarily more palatable.

It was possible to fully load a vessel with ten thousand tons of bagged flour or grain with nothing more than a few rope slings , a couple of crow bars ,and a few hand trucks, plus of course a hell of a lot of hard work. Nowadays, to load a twenty tonne container one has to have a sophisticated container terminal, cranes and straddle trucks, complete with computerized backup, all with a capital cost running into hundreds of millions of dollars. !!!!

Due to various contractual arrangements agreements that Fraser's had at the time with a number of grain handling companies, we were engaged from time to time to load vessels at a variety of ports in South Australia. This entailed sending a supervisor and several foremen to the port in question, where we would then supplement any additional staff required from the local pool of casuals. It was a system that worked quite well , and although it entailed being away from home for some weeks , my longest stay was six weeks in Port Lincoln , it was a pleasant change from Melbourne , the weather was usually good , the locals very friendly , and the local brew more than palatable. There

was an added bonus too, in that for some reason the wharfies gave us great cooperation, with next to no industrial problems, and a better productivity rate than we ever achieved in Melbourne on similar cargoes. At that time , stevedoring in South Australia was operated by a duopoly known colloquially as the Old and the New Companies , and strangely enough they tolerated our intrusion into their domain for a number of years , even to the point of hiring us equipment on occasion when we needed it . I guess they figured that any return was better than none.

So it was , that one summer day in the late 1950's , I was loading a vessel berthed on the straight six in Victoria Dock , expecting to finish late the following afternoon , and looking forward to a few days off before the next job. Capt. Thomas drew up alongside and told me that on completion I would be going to S.A. to load a Baron Line ship with a full cargo of bagged wheat.

When I asked when he wanted me to fly over , he replied “ Oh , you're not flying, you're driving over – to Ceduna. Max West will pick you up at 1700 tomorrow, by which time you should be finished here. Just bring you suitcase in with you in the morning “. I did mention that Fraser's ran a tight ship?

Promptly, at 1700hrs. the next day , my ship having completed an hour or so earlier , Max drew up with the VW laden with side nets , hand trucks , and rope slings , I threw my suitcase in the back, and we set off along the Western Highway en route to Ceduna . Our instructions were quite simple – we were to arrive in Ceduna within three days, contact the local agent and local ASIA representative to arrange the labour, and await the vessel arriving a couple of days later . The foremen would fly in when we had everything arranged. We also carried with us letters of introduction to the Agent and to the local Bank Manager, authorizing us to draw necessary funds as required.

I remember that it was a balmy, moonlit summer evening, which was just as well as the VW had no air conditioning in it. We drove as far as Bordertown, where we pulled into the local motel for the night. Checking into our rooms, the first thing that met our gaze was the spray gun filled with Mortein sitting on the bedside table. Looking at the numerous blood splashes on the walls left by previous occupants it was apparent that we were in for a restless night. This indeed proved to be the case, so after an early breakfast we set off again heading for Adelaide, where we made a brief stop at Howard Smith's yard to load up some more gear, and then continued on our way through Port Augusta, pulling into the township of Iron Knob about 5.30 pm., where we planned to spend our second night.

Pulling up outside the pub, hot, tired, and thirsty, we entered the bar and ordered a couple of beers, before enquiring of the publican whether he had any accommodation for the night. He replied, “No, I've only got one room, and that's a double”.

Without thinking, I said quickly, "That's OK, there's only two of us".

With that, he leaned on the bar, looked Max and I up and down, and announced to the bar in general "I'm not having two blokes sleeping in the same bed in my pub".

Things weren't looking too good, the next township was another hot hour drive further on, with no certainty of a bed there either. He must have taken pity on us, because he said we could try the Coffee Palace further down the street, which we duly did. As luck would have it, it was school holidays, and the two local teachers who had rooms in the Coffee Palace were in Adelaide for a few days, so the kindly landlady let us the rooms for the night. So ended day two of our saga.

In those days, the road between Port Augusta and Ceduna was unsealed for much of its length, most of it being dry, dusty, red dirt, like most of the outback. We set off next morning for Ceduna after an excellent breakfast provided by our landlady, stopping midmorning to assist a middle aged couple whose car and caravan had become bogged in soft sand at the side of the road. Having finally got them back on the road again, we continued on our way, arriving at Ceduna mid afternoon. Checking into the pub, where fortunately two rooms awaited us, we had a little time to explore Ceduna, and also the port of Thevenard a few miles down the road, where the Baron Geddes was due to load in a few days time.

I have to say that I was not particularly looking forward to the forthcoming job. Owing to the uncertain labour supply, I could foresee that it could drag on for much longer than normal. Loading bagged cargoes was a pretty labour intensive exercise, with five gangs utilizing up to eighty men per shift, and the permanent labour force in Thevenard was relatively small, being mainly required for the loading of bulk gypsum. Additional labour was recruited from a casual pool of locals, many of whom were aborigines from the surrounding areas. Whilst these men worked well enough on the job, they were apparently inclined to go walkabout for days at a stretch, particularly after pay day. It was suggested to me that holding back some of their pay until the finish of the job was one way of ensuring their continued attendance. Fortunately, as it turned out, I did not have to put this to the test.

The day following our arrival at Ceduna, a telegram arrived which stated as follows :- "Do nothing till you hear from us. Vessel may be diverted to alternate port", signed P. Fraser. Things were starting to look better, so we settled in to make the best of Ceduna. The publican was an interesting fellow, he had been a steward in P&O, and we were able to swap tales together. I think he fancied himself as proprietor of the Admiral Benbow Inn as he used to walk around with a parrot perched on his shoulder, which would swear at you whenever the

fancy took it . It also had a disconcerting habit of hopping on to the bar, and if you were not looking, taking a swig of beer out of your glass.

The next day, a further telegram arrived, instructing us to proceed immediately to Port Pirie, where the vessel would arrive in two days time. The foremen would be flying in the next day, and would meet us on their arrival. So we set off again, retracing our steps through Iron Knob, until reaching Port Pirie in the afternoon, where we checked into the Central Hotel. First thing the next morning we contacted the Agent, and verified that the ship would arrive late the following day. The ASIA rep. confirmed that there would be plenty of labour available, as there was no other vessel due, and the first of the cargo in about fifty rail trucks was already lined up on the wharf. Things looked set for a flying start. We were soon to be disillusioned.

When loading cargo from rail trucks, in the majority of ports , the trucks were placed alongside and shunted as required by railway staff , using tractors to push the trucks in position. In Port Pirie, however , this shunting operation was performed by the stevedores ,using their own tractors driven by waterside workers . So off we went to see the manager of the “Old Company” to arrange to hire a couple of tractors from them. He was terribly apologetic, but as they had no ships in port, they were taking the opportunity to do major servicing on all their tractors, which were in pieces on the workshop floor. Predictably, the “New Company” had also developed a zeal to service their tractor fleet at precisely the same time. !!!

With the ship arriving late the next day, and fifty trucks of cargo on the wharf with no apparent means of shifting them, things were definitely not looking too good. When in doubt , seek the assistance of your agent , so off we went to see if he knew of any locals prepared to hire us two tractors for a couple of weeks. He replied that a farmer he knew may be able to help, but his tractors would not be fitted for pushing trucks. “No problem”, I said, “We will tow them instead”, “I don’t think the wharfies will agree to do that, they have never ever done it that way before” said our worthy agent.

While all this was going on, the locals were having a quiet chuckle in their beers at the local watering hole, known as “Seaweed corner “So the next port of call was to see the local secretary of the WWF. Who turned out to be a most accommodating fellow. When we explained our predicament, and how we proposed to resolve it, he said he could see no reason why it shouldn’t work, and agreed to instruct his men accordingly. I think he relished the idea of sticking it up to the local companies who dominated all work in the town. Our new found farmer friend had no hesitation in hiring us two tractors, the harvest was finished and his equipment was idle, so the extra cash was welcome.

So after splicing up a couple of tow ropes with quick release hooks , and demonstrating to the wharfie drivers what we wanted them to do, loading commenced the next morning with five day gangs and a couple of twilight gangs. Our wharf foreman was a gentleman by the name of Snowy Greives, who had been a railway shunter in Victoria prior to coming to work on the wharf. He quickly had the drivers on side, and they were soon in the swing of things , like ducks to water. The chuckles in the bar turned to chokes , but there was nothing much else they could do but sit and watch as loading continued without further incident.

Humping bags of wheat weighing 180 lbs. apiece for eight hours at a stretch was back breaking work at the best of times, but these fellows, many with a farming background, made it look easy. The stow was perfect, every bag in it's place, it really was stevedore's dream. Another bonus when working away from home was that on leaving Melbourne we were left very much to our own devices, with minimal contact with Head Office. Beyond a daily telegram, (long distance phone calls were considered an unnecessary expense) to report progress with number of gangs being worked, and tonnages loaded the previous day, how we operated was left entirely to us.

With our first weekend in Port Pirie approaching , and no cargo being worked for two days , it looked like being a quiet time , particularly as the pubs were also closed on Sunday .We need not have worried , the agent took us out on Saturday , and on Sunday our hotel host and his wife invited us to a bush barbecue in the afternoon. The site was a few miles out of town , and our host told us to just follow them , so we set off soon after mid-day in the trusty VW ute. After a while, we turned off the road onto a bush track and soon came across a clearing where there were already a large number of cars . On one side of the clearing the steaks and snags were already sizzling on the Barbie , cold beer was being dispensed from two eighteens on the back of a truck , (courtesy of our hosts at the hotel ) , and the two up school was in full swing in a separate spot. Everything was provided, music and entertainment for the kids , and a right royal time was being had by all. The police, if they were there at all, were not visible, and were probably enjoying themselves with the rest of us. We returned to our hotel in the evening, content, and having enjoyed some real country hospitality.

Due to the draught restrictions in Port Pirie , the vessel could only load about 8000 tons , of cargo , the balance being loaded in Port Lincoln . Therefore , the day we were due to finish loading , I sent one of our foremen , Ted Machin , who had been to Port Lincoln previously, down by plane to organize the labour for the following morning . For the cost of a good dinner ashore, I had arranged with the master, who fortunately was of the old school, for three foremen and myself to get an overnight ride to the next port. We finished loading early afternoon, and were due sail on the high tide that evening , to arrive in Port Lincoln in time for an 0800 start next day. It was then that a most unusual

event occurred. The local secretary of the WWF came over to the ship, and invited myself and the foremen to the union rooms, so that his members could stand us all a drink before we sailed. They thanked us for coming over from Melbourne, and we of course returned our thanks for a job well done. We may have even made a small contribution to the picnic fund to show our appreciation. A nice gesture and one that I have not experienced before or since.

After a pleasant overnight voyage, we arrived at Port Lincoln as planned the following morning, to find Ted waiting on the wharf with the cargo alongside and four gangs ready to commence work. Loading completed two days later , and after completing all the formalities, we all flew home to Melbourne the day afterwards. Max had already returned with the VW from Port Pirie , so we were not far behind him.

Arriving back at the Melbourne office , after submitting the loading report , the most pressing business was to present the expense sheet ( also known as the swindle sheet ) , to the management for re-imburement of out of pocket expenses incurred whilst away. This usually was the subject of some discussion/ negotiation, but eventually a sum was agreed upon and the parties retired reasonably content.

The above account is typical of many of our interstate journeys , which served to broaden our view of stevedoring operations around the country , and had I not worked for Fraser's I may never have experienced them , and would have been the poorer for it.