

**Stevedoring in Melbourne by Chris Hart**

**The Stevedore (author unknown)**

There's a gentleman down on the waterfront with a bright and expansive smile,  
He's one of the best and can handle a jest, in a truly nautical style.  
He knows the ports of the seven seas but has anchored himself ashore,  
And taken to piracy on the side, and they call him the stevedore.  
He's the first on board when a vessel arrives, and the last ashore when she sails.  
And keeps a sample of all her gear, from the galley supplies to nails.  
The amount of his bill makes the skipper feel ill, and uses language that's far from  
polite,  
But this sort of strife is the essence of life to this up to date pirating knight.  
If the skipper protests- well, the stevedore jests, and invites him uptown to dine,  
But between me and you, by the time they are through, it's the skipper who's buying  
the wine.  
He's a fully fledged knight of the Blarney stone, and the very best sort of a chum,  
May he never be missed from the waterfront, for many a year to come.

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In 1979, being a young Second Officer in ANL, life was pretty good. I was about to sit for my Masters ticket. There was only one problem. Well, three really. My wife and my two young children. Spending time away from them was becoming unbearable, and I had long ago reached the conclusion that it made no difference whether one went to sea as a Captain or as a deck boy. *You still had to be away from home for long periods.*

Thus, when a job as a Stevedoring Supervisor presented itself, I jumped at the opportunity. I applied for the job with Patrick Stevedores, who were a respected stevedore in the Port Of Melbourne. My seafaring colleagues warned me that I would never last with those "dreadful wharfies!" and related all sorts of nightmare stories that painted the wharfies as worse even than the worst SUA delegate! With having a distinct sense of martyrdom, I decided to give it a go ( I could always go back to sea!)

I had gained a wealth of stevedoring experience whilst serving an apprenticeship with Strick Line which operated general cargo ships from the UK to Persian Gulf ports. The ships officers were closely involved in the cargo handling in all the ports we visited, and I figured that I knew a bit about cargo handling.

At that time, Patricks worked all types of general cargo ships, so it was all very exciting. There were about 12 supervisors employed, with about half from wharfie- foreman background, and half from a seafaring background, most of whom had their Masters ticket. To learn the ropes, I had to do a period (about 3 weeks) accompanying an experienced supervisor. My mentor, I found out, was called "God" by the wharfies, supposedly because he gave them everything.... The Manager was known as "The Singlet" because he was always on your back...

Other notable nicknames were..."The Rifleman" because he fired so many wharfies. "The Screaming Skull" was another, who often lost his cool...Captain Spits was another, who had a habit of spitting on the wharf..."Bushie"..a cunning ex wharfie who broke all the rules to "set the labour on fire" "Tweety-Pie", "Tow Truck" (heading for a breakdown) and "Torchlight Tim" (always on night shift) were others who made this life very colourful.

At about this time, I gained my own nickname, "Acker Bilk", since I had a goatee beard and "I was a stranger on the shore."

In the early days we were fortunate to have some very good foremen. These blokes had seen the hard times, and the sheer hard manual work it took to load and discharge a ship before the advent of forklifts and other labour saving devices.

They had learned their trade by using wooden trays, "two wheelers" timber hooks & jinkers, in the days when the wharfies hook was a valuable tool of the trade. They knew how to load a "standing brow" of bags or bales, and still had the hiss and rattle of the steam winches in their ears.

In their latter years they learned to cope with the many changes imposed on them, but many retired before containers stole all their skills. They too, had their nicknames, and "Tonnage Tom" must be credited with being the first wharf graffiti artist, with his chalk drawings of a smiley face with a bowler hat plastered in almost every shed. "The nose" was a trusted and experienced foreman with Patricks as was "Punchy" and about another half a dozen or so of "the old school"

I caught on pretty quickly, and took to the work like a duck to water. It had variety, challenge, and to my absolute delight, paid extremely well, with penalty rates and extra payments, something I had never known at sea. Despite frequent "double headers" (back to back shifts) I was still spending more time with my family than I did at sea.

The wharfies in many ways lived up to their reputation, and could be very frustrating, particularly the more militant gangs.

In those days we had the "gang" system where the gang consisted of a team of about 11 men who were an integral unit with their own crane drivers, wharf men, and fork drivers, and would be allocated a hatch. Of course gangs differed in their outlook and performance. Some you knew you could rely on, while others such as the notorious Gang 32 and Gang 60 were always a challenge. You could predict the productivity of a shift simply by looking at the gangs you were allocated for the day.

There were many disputes, and the “safety” card was used frequently to thwart efforts to work a ship. I have known a gang to refuse to work a hatch because of “the dangerous” gaps between the cargo. Unable to deny some risk, carpenters were brought in to construct a platform, which involved considerable delays. Once satisfied the labour would reluctantly start work, and by necessity, destroy the platform after taking the first lift out, which of course required the carpenters to reconstruct the platform, and on it went.

Another frustrating ploy, was for the labour to declare that there was excessive dirt in the hold, which could either be placated by a lengthy clean up job, or the payment of a negotiated “Dirt Rate”. Inevitably the payment of a “dirt rate” was preferred by management, to enable work to continue without disruption, particularly as the extra rate could be passed on to the shipowner.

Of course, eventually the shipowners declared enough, and measures were taken to curb this behaviour, one of which was to break up the gang system, and also tenuous agreements with the MUA to stop this “blackmail” in the interests of the future of the industry in the light of massive changes brought about by the advent of containerisation.

Legislation regarding safe work practices came into force and almost overnight, management became pro-active in safety matters, with a desire to insulate themselves from prosecution.

Thus to get ships discharged or loaded required a unique combination of coercion, pleading, threats, bribing, turning a blind eye, and the ability of gaining respect of the labour by your behaviour over a period of time, and a sixth sense to anticipate and avoid time wasting disputes. Supervisors had to accurately judge labour and machinery requirements, utilizing labour to the best advantage, they had to carefully plan the load or discharge, often still receiving cargo, and sometimes delivering cargo while working the ship, so that wharf logistics were an important part of the operation.

Various cargoes were handled, such as frozen carcasses of mutton, which for some reason always seemed to happen at the hottest time of the year. The trucks with the stillages of mutton would come down to the wharf covered only in a tarpaulin. If the temperature was over 35 degrees the labour would have to have hot weather breaks, ( even though they were working in a frozen hatch!) which left the trucks dripping blood onto the shed floor. Often the meat inspector would write off a truck as it had started to seriously defrost. One had to wonder that the whole thing was a farce, as there were only so many trucks allocated for the shift, and one truck less was an early knock off for the labour!

A local vessel, the "Zincmaster", was worked on the South Wharf. It was an interesting vessel, with a stern ramp, that led into a tween deck on each side of the central sulphuric acid tanks. It carried ingots of zinc, from Tasmania, strapped together to form a 2t unit. This vessel required a fleet of small forklifts, that were restricted in size due to the awkward turn they had to negotiate when leaving the tween deck to get to the stern ramp. They were continually breaking axles on the turn, and a breakdown at that point seriously affected the discharge of the ship. Whilst discharge of zinc was happening, Sulphuric acid in bulk was being pumped ashore from specially designed tanks on board.. What seemed to be an easy cargo to discharge, required a considerable amount of planning to ensure both sides of the deck finished almost simultaneously, with an added challenge of a "gunport " on the port side to assist discharge.



Simsmetal would charter ships that brought in steel cargoes, and then would load scrap steel . One such vessel, was called the "Cape Comorin" which came into Melbourne with a full cargo of some 8000t of steel products, which ranged from steel girders, steel plates, coil, rod etc. All these products had to have their discharge time estimated accurately to ensure correct size gangs were ordered. Space in the shed had to be allocated carefully to assist with the eventual delivery onto trucks. It took some three weeks to discharge the ship, after which she then shifted over to Appleton dock to take on a full load of scrap steel. There were, however, various grades and types of scrap that had to be properly separated, and to ensure compaction had to be bulldozed well into the wings of the ship. The method of loading was by 7t bins of scrap that would come down to the wharf by truck. The double luffing cranes at Appleton dock were generally used, as they were quick, and with the right drivers the scrap bins could be thrown into the wings of the hold. There was a system whereby the bins would release at one end by toggles falling out when the bin was landed, and the bin then lifted to tip the contents into the hatch.

The bulldozer drivers needed nerves of steel when they had to go into the hatch to unhook the bulldozer, as the surface of the cargo was extremely hazardous. Once unhooked, the Bulldozer, having been fitted with thick steel plates underneath to withstand the extreme conditions, was then driven with great skill, to push the cargo into the wings, and to generally compact the cargo.

The loading took nearly three weeks, with the last bin of scrap dumped in the hatch square, with the bulldozer, suspended from the ships crane used to bash the cargo down low enough so that the hatch lids could be closed. The ship took a cargo of about 30,500t of scrap which was a record for the Port of Melbourne, which I am pretty sure, has never been beaten.

There was a great deal of mud stirred up in the wake of the vessel when she sailed!



Other interesting ships were the Tasman Enterprise, and the Tasman Endeavour, which brought reels of paper from New Zealand. These ships discharged their cargo by way of two side ramps on the port side of the vessel, fitted with twin lifts, able to work both the tween deck and the lower hold simultaneously. The reels were stacked, usually about three high on their end in both the lower hold and tween decks. The ship carried her own fork lifts fitted with reel clamps, and the reels would be placed on end on the lifts. The lifts were then sent up to the wharf level. When the wharf level was reached, the lifts would then stop, and the reels would be shifted automatically by a number of tracks out wards on the ramp so that the shore forklifts could access them with a double clamp that could lift 4 reels at a time.

This was a very innovative method of discharge, and very successful, until new and larger machinery in the printing industry demanded larger reels, and with the high speed they operated at, did not allow for odd nicks and tears in the reels, and this resulted in the demise of the ships, with the reels then carried in containers.



My favourite of all were the PAD line ships, three huge roll-on roll off vessels, that had a

massive ramp at the stern, which opened up to three roads on board, one up, leading to decks 4 and 5 one straight ahead, to deck 3, and one down leading to decks 1 and 2. The ships were the “Paralla” “Allunga” and Dilkara” they traded between Australia and the West coast of USA and Canada, bringing machinery, woodpulp, Timber and containers in, and taking Steel products, cars and containers out. The planning for these vessels was complex , with often working all five decks simultaneously, with either 25t Forklift or 40 foot mafi trailers up and down the ramps at the same time as working containers on deck 5 using both ships crane and ramp. They were a challenge, but rewarding when things went to plan!

Bulk grain cargoes were loaded in Geelong or Portland, and often the supervisor would need to be away from home for up to 10 days, working day and afternoon shifts every day.

Many people may joke about the rain in Portland coming down horizontally. It's true! I actually managed to load a ship with grain in pouring rain by convincing the ships master that no rain was entering the hatch, as it was raining horizontally, with a minimal amount hitting the hatch coaming that was absorbed by the dust of the cargo! ( We had to get the ship away!)

Occasionally a woodchip loading vessel would be worked in Portland, which were different again, and the eerie feeling of being on top of the woodchip stack in the middle of a cold night, checking on dozing progress with the steam rising all around you is something I will never forget.

Although general cargo ships were still being worked, it was quickly becoming apparent that container ships were the way of the future, and it was necessary to become embroiled in these ships and the container terminals that fed them. New skills had to be learnt, and computers were fast becoming the tools of the trade. Wonderful computer programs such as “SPARKS” enabled hundreds of containers to be sequenced in a matter of minutes, for their discharge and load, and complex stability calculations reduced to a mere press of a button, however, it still puts a smile on my face when I think back to those days, when despite having sophisticated equipment at our disposal, the yards were checked by foremen and Supervisors on a bicycle!

No matter what type of ship, there was always a close liaison with the shipping agents, who had to satisfy the endless complaints from the ships principal, wanting his ship to sail before it had even arrived, with claims and counter claims for delays encountered for one reason or another.

Thus personalities were important, and it was expected that the job was done safely, with proven stevedoring skills and a professional approach to be able to address ships agents and ships officers with regard to the technical aspects, and to be able to give accurate estimations of labour requirements, and finishing times to assist with the ships dispatch.

Sadly, the waterfront dispute in 1998 saw the Supervisors demise in a peculiar arrangement between Stevedoring Management, Government, and the MUA, where it was agreed the wharfies would work unsupervised. (this was inevitably later replaced by a "shift manager" not necessarily from a nautical or wharf background.)

Ironically, the Supervisors, who had performed such an outstanding job on the waterfront to achieve productivity, were the only permanent casualties of the dispute.

I remained in the Stevedoring Industry in Operational Management, for a further 5 years until I retired from the Industry after 24 years on the Melbourne waterfront.

It was a good 24 years, long hours, well rewarded, with memories of characters, ships, and work skills as far removed from current work practices, as Docklands is, from the "straight six" wharf on which it stands.



Victoria Dock in the Early 60s, looking directly down to what is now "Docklands"