



Figure 1 RIL House Flag



Figure 2 James Patrick Shipping House Flag

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AUSTRALIAN MARITIME HISTORY – THE DUTCH CONNECTION

Introduction

These are some of my memories over a forty years' association with Australia's maritime history, the first fifteen years as a Dutch national emigrant, the next twenty-five as a naturalised Australian.

The forty years between 1946 and 1986 represent an era of change. From what we called conventional ships that looked, smelled and felt like ships we went through greater mechanisation to palletisation, unit-loads, Scandia type vessels, the Lash concept, etc to fully containerised ships, car carriers and the like which looked, smelled and felt like floating boxes.

From a largely casual industry we went through acceptance of permanent labour concepts and from antiquated rules, regulations, restrictions and imbalances to a situation where common sense finally prevailed.

Proper training and sounder industrial (read human) relations have been established away from the "them and us" syndrome with resultant greater productivity with all participants sharing in these benefits.

All this involved people. The whole shipping scene is a "people" industry. I have made many friends, enjoyed the benefit of mentors, colleagues, and superiors and also gratefully acknowledge the luck factors involved.

However, I have resisted the temptation to name any of them, my purpose is to sketch the Dutch Connection over forty years – it is not up to me to identify those mainly responsible.

Sydney 1946 – 1947

I came to Australia for rest and recreation from a Japanese prison camp and was offered a job in the Sydney office of KPM (Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij), one of the principal Dutch shipowners.

Complying with post-war (manpower) regulations I secured a movement

order to Sydney and sharing the wartime accommodation shortage I spend my first night in Sydney on a bench in Hyde Park. An auspicious beginning indeed!

KPM Sydney before the war had been engaged in the Australian trade as General Agent for KPM since 1908. They were also general agents for Holland – Australia Line (VNS – Verenigde Nederlandse Scheepvaart Maatschappij) and most other Dutch flag vessels calling at Australian ports.

KPM's main trading area was the Netherlands East Indies archipelago where they owned and operated some 150 vessels purpose-built for specific trades and commodities, passengers and mail. Most were self-sufficient to cope with often primitive port facilities, and sizes ranged from a few hundred GRT up to seven thousand GRT. Island traders in the real sense.

By the time the Netherlands East Indies capitulated to Japan (March 1942) half this fleet had been lost in war action but provisions had been made for the remainder to proceed to Australia or British India to continue supporting the Allied cause. Thus, 21 vessels managed to reach Australia augmented by a further six re-assigned from British India to Australia later. These 27 vessels were chartered by BMOT (British Ministry of War Transport) and assigned to US Army command. They were put to work to establish a supply line from Australia to New Guinea and Papua and played a vital wartime role.

In the critical war years they carried 100,000 troops and in excess of one million tonnes of military supplies, including artillery and tanks. Two out of three vessels engaged in this task were KPM ships under the Dutch flag – no mean contribution by the Dutch Connection!

KPM's Sydney Office from an agency office overnight had become a Head Office; they had to create a head office set-up with Nautical, Technical, Catering and Crew Departments and act as husbandry agents for this fleet. Being a Dutch organisation, naturally they also acted as general agents for other Dutch non-KPM vessels. A busy place indeed.

My first job in KPM Sydney was to prepare lists of stores and equipment on board KPM ships to prepare them for off-survey and re-delivery to owners (KPM).

I subsequently joined the Freight Department and having been brought up on the metric system had to learn the intricacies of tons, hundredweights, quarters and pounds and the monetary units of pounds, shillings and pence to see this effort wasted when Australia went to the metric system some 20 years later.

We wrote cargo-manifests by hand, pressing hard to secure 10 carbon copies but fortunately nobody then had heard about repetitive strain injury. The job included collecting interim tickets (mate accepts) from wharf offices, issuing Bills of Lading, collecting freight and sorting/stacking charges.

An unexpected development broadened my experience; the ban on some

KPM ships by militant maritime trade unions.

KPM's main fleet had returned to the Dutch East Indies when the war ended. However some eight of them were still in Australian ports docking and repairing after years of exhausting war service in the Allied cause. These now became the target of the unions who sided with the young Indonesian independence movement and placed a ban on these ships, which were urgently needed to carry relief, and rehabilitation cargo and refugees back to the Indies.

Volunteer KPM office staff were asked to load these ships for which they were paid at wharf labourers rates that exceeded our weekly wages. Such practical experience in cargo handling indeed is essential for every shipping man.

Incidentally the boycotted ships had the last laugh – they all managed to slip their moorings and with good staff work, great seamanship and daring they got away and rejoined the fleet in the Indies.

The ban was not lifted until January 1948, re-imposed in December 1948, but finally lifted a year later.

In November 1947 I received an urgent transfer from KPM Sydney to KPM's Singapore office.

On January 1st 1948 the KPM overseas shipping business merged with the Java – China – Japan Line (JCJL) into KJCPL, trading under the name of RIL (Royal Interocean Lines).

Singapore 1947 – 1950

My first job upon arrival was to supervise the loading of railway trucks looted by the Japanese army at the Singapore Naval Base. Malaya at the time was fighting communist insurgents and was under the control of British Military Administration (BMA), which had adopted a “can do” philosophy, and Singapore was booming. There were never less than a dozen KPM ships working every day in the inner and outer roadsteads and alongside the Harbour Board wharves. Shifts of skilled and disciplined workers toiled from 7 am till 11 pm, it was all hands-on challenging and educational. I was sorry to finally leave that scene because I received another urgent transfer; a week later I was on the wharves of Tandjong Priok, the port of Batavia (Djakarta).

Tandjong Priok 1950 – 1951

Similar work but different conditions. The newly independent Indonesia was struggling to establish itself and conditions were anarchic. Under difficult conditions KPM still managed to turn their vessels around, sometimes 16 ships per day at various wharves or on the buoys.

I was not sorry when it was my turn to go on home leave late in 1951.

Rotterdam 1952

The amalgamation of KPM and JCJL into Royal Interocean Lines reduced

KPM activities principally to within Indonesian waters. That did not appear to me much of a future and consequently I reluctantly resigned during my leave.

After a short time working in Rotterdam for an A-1 owner I decided to emigrate to Australia and try my luck there.

Sydney 1952 – 1961

I was offered a position with the regional staff of Royal Interocean Lines in Sydney, the successors of KPM Lines. Same office and same faces as before, but a different name and another type of business.

Commercial trade relations and normality had been re-established. I started off a canvasser trying to get cargo for Holland – Australia Line and RIL.

Subsequently as the business grew I joined the Traffic (Operations) Department and thus became involved in what I would call the golden decade of RIL in Australia.

Analysing this growth, the main reasons appeared a Federal Department of Trade keen to promote Australia's commercial image overseas, a responsive and enterprising RIL Board of Directors and Management, the availability of good ships with masters with a commercial trading background, a reservoir of goodwill on the part of merchants, traders, exporters and importers and a strong backing by competent RIL offices and agents around Australia and in New Zealand.

From two vessels on the East coast and one on the West coast, both liner services, RIL went to seven liner services operating some twenty-three vessels by 1961. The Holland – Australia business also expanded, as did the entry of other Dutch shipping interests in the period.

With runs on the board we all enjoyed the challenge.

By 1961 I began to realise that as a regional staff member, as distinct from my colleagues engaged in Holland, my prospect with RIL were limited. A well-established, friendly company and RIL's stevedores in Sydney, James Patrick & Co. Ltd offered me an attractive position and I reluctantly submitted my resignation to RIL which was accepted.

Melbourne 1961 – 1986

I started as Assistant Manager and a Director of the Stevedoring Company at Patrick's Melbourne Branch office.

My brief was to look after overseas clients and expand that area of activities. Obviously considerable and enjoyable overseas and interstate travel was involved. A few spectacular takeovers made Patrick the largest stevedore and we acquired the main USSR and People's Republic of China business, together with considerable tramp work, solid lines agencies, etc.

Growth also brought added obligations to OSRA (Overseas Shipowners Representatives Association), Chamber of Shipping, the Association of Employers of Waterside Labour, the Melbourne Port Authority and the Marine Board of Victoria.

The greater the growth, the greater the risk. Commission agents when

successful attract their Principal's interest in their commission earnings. Result - a squeeze on these earnings or worse still; the Principal opens his own office. Conflicts of interests follow, divided loyalties, amalgamations, take-overs and "reconstructions" all disturbing the status quo and adversely affecting alliances.

One of my former bosses taught me that a Head Office's main tasks were to direct, to correct and inspire. Although I have not worked in a Head Office I believe in this statement.

Finally James Patrick was taken over by a major Australian shipowner and tug operator, Howard Smith Ltd in the late seventies which came as quite a surprise to the uninitiated.

In the early eighties the backroom boys became increasingly interested in IT, computers, etc., which admittedly were multi-functional. However shipping as a people industry became increasingly impersonal as a result of these innovations.

Soon I became aware that new times were upon us and I accepted early retirement when it was made available in 1986.

Reflections

I have been through a period of increasing tempo of change. Standout matters have been Trade Union attitudes, permanency of labour, the introduction of door-to-door cargo movements in containers, the training of all people on the waterfront, the changes in regulations and practices and finally the action by government to drag legalisation out of antiquity by the late nineties.

Most foreigners were used to view our maritime unions as militant busybodies whose aims eclipsed traditional concerns with wages, conditions, training, safety issues and health. A united union membership usually prevailed against groups of divided employers. Hopefully we have learned from history that blame cannot be apportioned to just one party; it has to be shared.

Permanent labour in a casual industry does not necessarily change entrenched attitudes vested in history, however it was an important step forward and created something to work on towards normality.

Once redundant legislation, regulations, restrictive practices, etc had been positively addressed, the full benefits of the restructured industry became evident.

None of the shipping companies in my Dutch Connection are operating today, but they have a shared legacy and they have made an outstanding contribution off and on over four centuries. They should be remembered with pride.

John Helfrich
Melbourne, 5th August 2006.

*PS - John passed away on 30/6/2011 in his room at the Regis Bayside Gardens in Melbourne. A service was held at Trinity House 15 Black Street Brighton, VIC on 6/7/11 at 2pm.
John Papenhuyzen*