

CABLESHIPS STILL HAVE VITAL ROLE IN GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS

Specialist ships abound these days. ***Mighty Servant 3***, a heavylift ship - designed to lift oil rigs out of the water and to transport them long distances - sank off the Angolan coast last week while floating off her cargo, an oil rig.

Initial reports have not given the cause of sinking, although her ballasting system will be investigated. One wonders whether investigators will also consider the possibility of structural failure.

Residents along the False Bay coast will have seen the cables ship ***Chamarel*** doing various manoeuvres in the bay recently. As part of routine crew training - and probably to provide a pleasant interlude at sea for the crew - the vessel that normally is alongside No. 2 Jetty at the Waterfront has been laying a length of cable on the False Bay seabed and, using her remote operating vehicle, will recover it to ensure that, should a fault occur in the undersea cable that runs from Dakar to Malaysia via Cape Agulhas, her crewmembers are well-versed in cable operations.

Her agent, Nils Warner whose career spans 40 years to make him one of South Africa's most experienced and respected shipping personalities, spoke highly of the co-operation of the Navy in granting permission for the operation in waters which they control.

Built in 1974 as ***Vercors***, she laid the cable from Melkbosstrand to Madeira in the early 1990s, and later was renamed ***Chamarel*** when she transferred to the Mauritian flag. She is owned by France Telecom and, apart from her master, her officers and crew have been managed by Smit Marine during her eight-year spell in Cape Town.

No. 2 Jetty has been leased for a further four years to accommodate her. While she is in drydock in Durban in February, France Telecom's most modern cables ship ***Rene Descartes*** will be on station in Cape Town.

With the huge roller in the bow and powerful winches to lift the cable from the seabed, cables ships are indeed specialised vessels that often resemble small passenger ships as, apart from their crew, they carry umpteen electronic engineers and technicians to fix the cable.

These vessels have been part of the Cape Town dockland scenery for years. Among the thousands of negatives in the George Young Collection [See Photographic Archives on this website for details of this collection], I came across some of the British cables ship ***Recorder*** that was built in 1902 and that was on station here during the 1930s. She survived the war and lasted until the mid-1950s.

I have childhood memories of another British cables ship ***Edward Wilshaw*** that seemed to be a permanent fixture at the Cross Berth - the berth that lies adjacent to the old grain elevator and now occupied by I&J trawlers. Somehow we managed to board the 1949-built vessel on several occasions and marveled at her cable-laying gear as well as at the sections of cable displayed onboard the ship. Although cable science is probably more complex in these days of fibre-optics, those old cables were impressive to young minds.

Best known among Capetonians is ***Cable Restorer*** with an interesting history. Launched as ***HMS Bullfrog*** from the Wallsend yard of Swan Hunter early in 1944, she was completed as the Allied forces landed in Normandy. From 1947 and renamed ***Retriever***, she transferred into the fleet of British cables ships that maintained those undersea cable links that were so vital in the pre-satellite era.

Forty years ago, the South Atlantic Cable Company bought her, renamed her ***Cable Restorer*** and based her initially in Cape Town and then in Simon's Town where she lay moored fore and aft to

buoys. Safmarine took over her management, and each week, her colourful Irish master, Captain Goodbody, caught the train to Cape Town to have lunch with his agent.

She once had her funnel lengthened and painted in Union-Castle colours for the filming of a feature on Barney Barnato, the mining magnate who committed suicide by flinging himself overboard from the mailship **Scot** in 1897. (If my memory on this matter is correct, the film company should have left the funnel in its original colour for **Scot's** funnels at the time bore Union Line's buff livery.)

Goodbody was not pleased with the temporary alteration. "*There was my ship,*" he fumed, "*steaming around the bay, with that dreadful thing atop the funnel, and carrying a shipload of actors!*"

Although she was decommissioned in 1993, enthusiasts devised a plausible plan for her to steam to France to participate in the fifty-year celebrations of the Normandy landings. After all, she was commissioned while it was happening! A retired Safmarine master would command her and other qualified officers joined the plan that disintegrated when no sponsor would fund the bunkers.

She became a floating hostel for Simon's Town School's maritime students, but when the lads returned to the ship one stormy night, they found that she had broken free from her aft mooring, and had carried away the electricity, water and sewerage connections and had damaged the small wooden jetty where she lay.

Hasty arrangements to accommodate the boys led to the construction of a permanent boarding facility for which Safmarine donated 47 containers.