

ROB YOUNG - A REMARKABLE CAREER FROM CADET TO THE BOARDROOM



The lead vessel in a class of 11 Korean-built tankers, Southern Unity is engaged on the Southern African coastal trade, moving oil products from Durban.



Built in Poland, Rainbow was one of a class of four tankers built for Unicorn in the mid-1990s. She remains on the Southern African coastal trade. Her sisterships Hambisa and Simunye have since been sold at good prices while Helix continues on a long-term charter to Shell Australia.

Talk often focused on ships in the Young's household, hardly surprising when George Young was the shipping editor of **The Cape Times** for 43 years. Also unsurprising was that his sons Robert (Rob) and Alan went to sea as engineers, and subsequently both became chief engineers in the Unicorn fleet.

Rob's youthful days were spent wandering around the docks, boarding ships, including whalers laid up for the winter, and some of the rust buckets of the eccentric Senator Pettersen. He spent his high school holidays aboard Thesen's coasters plying the west coast trade, learning about ship's engines, an interest that propelled him to sea as an engineer cadet.

After being laid up at Cape Town's Number 5 Quay, the obsolete **Griqua Coast** was to be towed to Salamander Bay, within the shelter of Saldanha Bay to be scuttled for diving exercises by the Navy. En route to Walvis Bay, Young's first ship, **Pondo Coast**, would tow her former west coast consort to Saldanha and off went the two-ship convoy like the proverbial snail.

Within an hour of the ships passing the Cape Town breakwater, the tow parted and **Pondo Coast's** master struggled to reconnect the line to **Griqua Coast**.

Young and his navigating counterpart, Charlie Pullen - now a Cape Town pilot - suggested that they transfer to **Griqua Coast** to reconnect the line should it part again. The derelict coaster was worse for wear, doors swung as she rolled, and there was no lighting, except a few hurricane lamps lit to comply with towing regulations. The two cadets bedded down on the deck in the teak wheelhouse, stripped of its equipment and windows. To keep warm as the night drew cold, they gathered bits of wood from the ship for a fire that they lit on the cement base of the telemotor. When they realised that those on watch on **Pondo Coast** might think that the older coaster was on fire, they hurriedly extinguished the fire and spent a cold, damp night in the empty, eerie wheelhouse of **Griqua Coast**.

Arriving off Saldanha Bay the following morning, the master shortened the tow. To his horror he saw the Cape Town-bound **Xhosa Coast** passing over the tow wire between the two ships, her master oblivious of the hawser that could have fouled her propeller.

One of Rob Young's finest achievements was obtaining his second engineer's ticket and promotion to chief engineer at the age of 23. Two years later, he received his combined chief engineer's certificate for motor and steam propulsion, the youngest South African to do so.

Experience gained in a Dutch shipyard during the building of **Voorloper**, South Africa's first containership that Unicorn had taken on bareboat charter from Sea Containers, enabled him to move into a superintendent's position ashore and ultimately, to Unicorn's marine director's chair. He and Captain Dave Rennie are the only Unicorn directors who have come through the ranks from cadet to the boardroom.

Other major milestones mark the career path of this remarkable man. For the company's ships with medium-speed engines, he pioneered the use of the synthetic fuel WO-20 that saved around R130 million in fuel bills over 15 years. Since Unicorn's later ships had slow-speed engines, the WO-20 fuel project came to an end.

Young's wide engineering knowledge and practical experience have engendered the meticulous planning of several recent shipbuilding programmes that began with the ordering of tankers and containerships from a Polish shipyard. An extension of the programme included building product tankers in South Korea, as well as a couple of bulkers and a series of smaller tankers in China.

From a glance at his mantelshelf adorned by two ship models, I would guess that his favourite ships are two coasters, the 1934-vintage **Pondo Coast** that took part in both the Dunkirk evacuation and the Normandy landings, and **Swazi Coast**, custom-built for the west coast trade in 1963.

When the latter vessel grounded at Port Nolloth, she would not budge. Curtailing his leave, Rob Young headed for the Namaqualand port, and, camped on the beach, he joined a small team from the Cape Town office to plan to refloat the coaster. Two weeks later, with pumps going at full bore - Young had replaced the standard fuses with six-inch nails, lest the electrical circuits tripped at the crucial moment - **Swazi** came off the reef.

Rob and his wife Maureen relocate - they are not retiring, I am told - this week to the Breede River area where he will continue his role in Unicorn's ship building programme.

However, absorbed by nostalgia for the old coasters, he will have moments to gaze out over the river where, in 1846, the UK-bound barque **Queen of Britain** loaded wool, aloes, goatskins, horns and ivory, while others over the years loaded all sorts of cargoes, including kwaggas.

The local coaster **Kadie** chugged 25 kilometres upstream to Malgas for six years until she stranded at the river mouth in 1865 and shipping operations to the river ceased. Briefly resurrecting the trade in the 1930s, the coaster **Chub** discharged drummed petrol at Malgas and loaded bagged grain for Cape Town, the last commercial vessel on the river.

Sparked by schoolboy dockland adventures, Young's distinguished career spanning 42 years provides a role model not only in terms of successes in marine engineering, but also in terms of company loyalty and highly principled shipping practice.

Razor wire and Rottweilers in the country's harbours discourage the emergence of latter-day Rob Youngs.