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CAPE TIMES

**Brian Ingpen** hosts a weekly column in the **Cape Times**, called **Port Pourri**, where he shares with his readers the news about happenings in the Western Cape ports. He lives with his ear to the ground and his insights into the port vibes make for excellent reading. On this site, he shares his column and adds some photos as a bonus for an insider's view on the port life.

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## LIFE AS A CADET IS A LITTLE DIFFERENT NOW



**The Topaz** (ex **Empress of Britain**) sailing from Cape Town probably for the last time. In the 1960s, she cruised from Cape Town to South America, fully booked mainly by South African revellers on a sun-fun voyages. Union-Castle's **Reina del Mar** later did the same run.  
Photograph : Robert Pabst

I once viewed a video showing life aboard one of several cadetships operated by the New Zealand Shipping Company, a typical British liner service with a history of almost 100 years. I have just learned that the film on which the video was based was probably shot aboard **Otaio**, built on the John Brown yard on the Clyde in 1958, and that some 30 cadets were aboard at the time.

In 1916, P&O bought the company, and, amidst the container-inspired rationalisation of the British merchant service in the 'sixties, NZSC ceased trading, its remaining vessels operating under the banner of P&O whose own cargo operations were the subject of two later mergers that caused its identity - once among the most prestigious - to pass into oblivion.

To compensate for the decimation of the seafaring population during World War 2, New Zealand Shipping Company - like some other companies - invested in the future by swelling the numbers of cadets, and placed a dozen or more youngsters, fresh from school, on each of the company's cadetships for an introduction to life at sea.

It was a favourable a time for seafaring. Long ocean passages between Europe and the Antipodes and on other blue water services gave the lads time to learn, to savour the fresh air, and to understand that a career at sea involves long hours and hard work.

Ships called at a variety of ports, often remaining alongside for days, enabling most of the crew to enjoy a run ashore. (The video shows the cadets being inspected before going ashore in their uniforms, a practice that if adhered to today, would end in a mugging at the first corner.) Calls at remote islands or in quaint harbours involved using derricks to work cargo over the side into lighters, an interesting and challenging part of life at sea. Aided by small, flickering radar screens and actual noon sunsights taken with a brass sextant, navigation was perhaps more of a craft than that practised on today's electronics-ridden bridges, many of which have enclosed bridge-wings that prevent the occasional sortie into the fresh air by the officer of the watch.

One seasoned master always encouraged his junior officers to keep personal logs to record their own weather observations, marine life they had sighted, or even to note a particularly brilliant sunset.

Some might hanker after "real marine engineering" of a bygone era. Young engineers sweated with the rest in engine rooms where soaring temperatures were hardly ameliorated by a forest of cowled ventilators that dotted the funnel deck. While scenes of grime-covered engineers still exist, their lot has been improved considerably by computerised automation, powerful air-conditioning plant, and engines that barely resemble those in vessels built only a decade or two ago.

With competition from land-based careers - often glamorised by television soapies - shipowners have to work hard to entice the modern school leaver to go to sea, particularly when the average modern youngster has little contact with ships.

In their selection process, some companies employ cadets who, in the longer term, will also make good shoreside fleet managers and superintendents. However, since superhumans have a notoriously short sea-

going career, opting instead for the ivy-covered sanctuary of university, other owners target industrious, honest, oomph-filled lads and lasses who, while not being rocket scientists, seek a worthwhile and unique career. Once a cadet is at sea, more hard work lies ahead to keep him away from the lure of shoreside employment, and to train him to the standards expected.

Thus I particularly enjoyed chatting to ex-Simon's Town School cadets - including Safmarine's first female engineer cadet - who called at the completion of their pre-sea courses at the South African Maritime Training Academy (SAMTRA), prior to boarding their first ships, some on Safmarine's Far East trade and others heading for Europe. Another is joining a Singapore-based tanker company.

Built by the AP Moller Group in 2003, SAMTRA boasts three bridge simulators, an engineroom simulator and facilities to train technicians who work on reefer containers.

One of the configurations built into the SAMTRA simulators revolves around rig tenders of which there are scores operating off West Africa. It's a large potential market for SAMTRA as course fees and accommodation for are cheaper and it's closer to the West African oilfields than similar centres in Europe.

Apart from large trawling companies who have developed proper training courses, the fishing sector still relies largely on inherited skills as fishing craft pass from one generation to the next. Much folklore surrounds the west coast fishing communities and their seafaring traditions as sons learn the ways of the sea from their fathers, the son often collecting a thick ear for any error when hoisting the catch aboard.

With the imminent introduction of international regulations governing crewing and training of fishing vessel crews, mandatory training will be phased in, and SAMTRA's simulators could work overtime to fill a training gap for the fishing sector.

SAMTRA will attract additional clients via their recent expansion into GMDSS (global marine distress and safety system) training, a system that alone illustrates the far-reaching changes to life at sea. The old radio room, cluttered with large pieces of equipment, long aerials rigged between the masts, and the Morse key have given way to extremely powerful, hi-tech, automated communication systems the size of a small computer.

Today's cadets will find life aboard a containership is different to that experienced by their counterparts 50 years ago.

" The German naval tanker **Westerwald** is in Simon's Town, ahead of the main flotilla arriving there on Monday for a week's stay, prior to exercising with the South African Navy. They will also berth at the Waterfront at the end of the month.