

Past answer to present-day crisis

maritime training

AS CADET training ships make a comeback in some parts of the world, veterans from a British training flagship reunited in Liverpool last month after half a century...

SOME had not seen each other for half a century. Some had travelled half way around the world to be there. But for all of them, it was a magical moment — a reunion to mark the 50th anniversary of the maiden voyage of the UK's first purpose-built cadet training ship — the *Otaio*.

For the 80-plus people attending the event — held at Liverpool's Maritime Museum last month — it was a day to recall not just their own memories of going to sea in what many regard as the golden era of the British Merchant Navy, but also to reflect upon the impact of the passage of time on individuals and the industry as a whole.

Built for the New Zealand Shipping Company at the John Brown yard on the Clyde, *Otaio* was a 13,314 gross ton refrigerated cargo ship with a difference — the difference being accommodation for up to 40 deck cadets and 30 engineer cadets, together with classrooms and a mess, deck and engineering lecturers, and seamanship and physical education instructors.

For almost 20 years, *Otaio* launched the careers of several thousand seafarers — in the process giving many of them what they still consider to be the best years of their lives.

Harry Simpson was one of the 34 cadets on the maiden voyage from Liverpool in April 1958, and about 18 months ago — thanks to the wonders of Google — he came across a posting from former cabin mate Dave Collick asking if there was anyone still around from those days.

"We thought it would be good to organise a reunion to mark the anniversary and it just took off from there," he said. "Lots of people had been talking about it, but nobody was doing it — so I decided to organise it."

Harry went to sea at the age of 17, but completed only four voyages on the *Otaio* — torn between a maritime career and his passion for playing rugby.

He went on to a wide range of different jobs — from selling to working for the CID in Newcastle — before his career came almost full circle as shipping manager in the French port of Fos.

"We were chartering ships from companies like Stolt Nielsen, and I had to make sure all the charter parties were correct — especially denaturages," he recalls. "After the intervening years, it was good to be working in shipping again and I found I could still go onboard ship and talk to the captain in his own language."

Although his seagoing career did not last long, Harry has nothing but fond memories of his time at sea — "I loved it."

Tony Lane was also a deck cadet on the maiden voyage, and he describes *Otaio* as "an amazing ship — no one has done anything like it, before or since."

Otaio sailed out from the UK carrying cargoes such as locomotives and cars, returning with products such as meat, butter and cheese. The cadets waved goodbye to their homes for the next five to six months, and literally opened their eyes to a new world.

These were the days when ships spent days, not hours, in port — and the cadets took full advantage of the opportunities it opened up. Bob Hughes recalls trekking off to climb



Cadets on the *Otaio*'s maiden voyage, including Charles Hufflett, centre front row, Tony Lane, second from right in the front row, and Dave Collick, on the left of the third row

mountains, while Charles Hufflett — cadet captain on *Otaio*'s maiden voyage — remembers a rugby match in Suva. "It was advertised as England versus Fiji, and hundreds of people were there. They had scored before we even took our hands out of our pockets and they ended up playing in bare feet to give us a chance."

"Not everyone got the chance to get a good run ashore, however. It was a privilege to be earned — often by getting decent marks in 'homework' on such subjects as ship construction and nautical astronomy, or by memorising the collision prevention regulations. 'By the time you were a final trip apprentice, you knew the whole lot by heart,' said Tony Lane.

Otaio's arrival in port was also welcomed by New Zealand's young women — with the company arranging dances onboard that were attended by debutantes. Some fortunate cadets managed to hook up with partners who worked as telephonists — therefore managing to wangle free calls home.

Many of these visits led to long-term relationships. Charles Hufflett was a case in point, meeting his wife Elena when she came onboard — and ultimately moving to New Zealand and building a business in fishing and shipping.

Whilst some *Otaio* apprentices went on to pursue long careers at sea, the vast majority went ashore after a decade or so. Many ended up in a rich variety of different positions — anything from a senior post at Mærsk to a lucrative waste management business in London.

Former engineer officer Mike Drake, who spent 14 years with the NZSC, went on to become an engineer with a cosmetics company. "Every water board, electricity company and hospital was full of former ships' engineers," he said.

Fellow engineer John Hallgren went from shipping to commissioning and building pipelines all over the world. "My time on *Otaio* was

the best two years of my life, and it set me up for the future," he says.

Dave Collick spent 13 years at sea before moving into the travel industry and ultimately starting up airlines in Iraq and Pakistan. "*Otaio* was a unique thing, and it brought together people from all sorts of backgrounds and one of the skills it gave me was to cross the divide between east and west and to get people from different cultures to work together."

"We were very privileged young men," he adds. "It was like a dream to be travelling the world, getting a good training and getting paid for it. We worked hard and played hard, and as a result of our time on *Otaio* we were all better people for it. It sounds like a cliché, but it really was the university of life and I couldn't think of a better grounding for a young person in any career."

Richard Newnham reckons the training on the *Otaio* was the best in any industry at the time. "We started scrubbing toilets and finished understanding the officer of the watch, and you would never give an order for anything that you hadn't done yourself."

Tony Lane — who went on to become a professor and the director of the Seafarers International Research Centre at Cardiff University — suggests training ships were 'mini public schools' despite the cadets' broad range of social backgrounds.

"You only had to look at the sports equipment onboard to know that it was different — rugby kit, fencing and cricket — and all from Lillywhites," he recalls. "No expense was spared."

However, the costs of running training ships started to be seen as a luxury as the shipping industry moved into the hard times of the late 1970s. *Otaio* — whose management had been transferred to F&O's general cargo division in 1971 — was sold to the Lagan Bay Shipping Company in 1976 and went on to

train cadets from the Indian sub-continent for the next five years.

"Us, the Scandinavians and the Germans had standards of seamanship which were higher than anyone," said Dave Collick. "But today it is all about cheapness. You read about collisions in the Channel and ships going around in broad daylight, and it's all about the lack of experience of the crew and certificates that can be bought for a couple of hundred dollars. It's all wrong."

"I would love to see British training ships once again," John Hallgren reflects, "but I just can't see it happening — we have got no fleet of our own any more."

Charles Hufflett thinks the training ship concept could not work today because of changes in the education system. "*Otaio* was a school at sea, but the apprenticeship model has gone, and today it is all about polytechnics and degrees," he says.

Bob Hughes remembers being inspired to go to sea after seafarers coming home for leave joined his commuter train. "I was travelling between Taunton and Exeter for a job as an apprentice land surveyor, and these seamen came into the carriage full of life and sharing their beer. I just thought: 'Who are these guys?' They are happy..."

But, Tony Lane points out, the world of seafaring is very different now. "Today's merchant ships, no matter who owns them or the strange flags they fly, often do not have single nationality crews. It's true that very few of them have had the quality of training that we had, but that's not their fault. They do the same job, but in much more exacting circumstances."

"Their ships are almost empty of people, they spend on average 95% of their voyage time at sea and, unless they're Europeans, will be stuck on their ships for up to 12 months at a time. But they shift the world's goods and raw materials, just as we once did..."

Time to revive the concept

TRAINING vessels are making something of a comeback as shipping companies start to grapple with the growing global seafarer skills crisis — although, sadly, not in the UK merchant fleet.

It is Japanese owners in particular who are taking the lead in launching new vessels with special onboard educational facilities and additional berths for trainees.

Pictured right are cadets on the Panamanian-flagged *Spirit of MOL* — the first training vessel to be launched by the expanding operator MOL, which came into service last year.

The 4,878gt vessel is claimed to have a unique feature — a training bridge on a deck above the actual bridge. It operates with 10 full-time instructors, who provide education and practical training to 150 trainees per session on voyages lasting from four to six months.

Cadets from countries such as the Philippines, India, Russia, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia are trained together onboard. The company says it believes that "intensive training in a cross-cultural atmosphere will not only help these master maritime skills, but also develop a stronger sense of pride and



Multinational cadets on the Japanese-owned training ship *Spirit of MOL*, which came into service last year

teamwork".

MOL said it had launched the ship to ensure it has the seafarers it needs at a time of major fleet expansion and increasing international skills shortages.

Another major Japanese operator, NYK, last month introduced the first of six

newbuildings with special cadet training facilities. The LNG carrier *Grace Cosmos* has accommodation for up to 20 cadets who will be trained by dedicated instructors during the course of normal operations onboard.

The company said it needed to boost its training

capacity in response to its expansion plans, which will result in a fleet of some 1,200 ships within the next five years. NYK said there was a particular need to train directly-employed LNG carrier crews, in a sector where the skill shortages are most acute.

It was like a dream to be travelling the world, getting a good training, and getting paid for it

Dave Collick ex-*Otaio* cadet

Otaio regarded as 'one of the best'

BUILT in 1958 by John Brown and Company (Clydebank) Limited, the New Zealand Shipping Company's *Otaio* is regarded as one of the best ships used to train British cadets in the boom years of the 1960s and 70s.

The NZSC, which also operated the cadet ships *Durham* and *Rakaia*, was one of a handful of companies — including Alfred Holt, British India, and Elder Dempster — running dedicated training ships in this period.

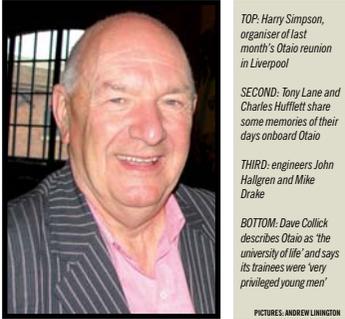
A refrigerated cargo vessel of 13,314gt, length overall of just over 526ft, and an insulated cargo capacity of 429,300 cu ft, *Otaio* was powered by two six-cylinder single-acting Doxford diesel engines, giving a service speed of 17 knots.

The ship transferred to the Federal Steam Navigation Company at the end of 1966, but remained under NZSC management until being transferred to P&O in 1973.

In 1976, *Otaio* was sold to the Lagan Bay Shipping Company and continued operating as a training ship under the Liberian flag until 1981, before being broken up at Gadani beach in 1982.



The training ship *Otaio* at sea, left, and during sea trials in 1958, above



TOP: Harry Simpson, organiser of last month's *Otaio* reunion in Liverpool

SECOND: Tony Lane and Charles Hufflett share some memories of their days onboard *Otaio*

THIRD: engineers John Hallgren and Mike Drake

BOTTOM: Dave Collick describes *Otaio* as 'the university of life' and says its trainees were 'very privileged young men'

PICTURES: ANDREW UNINGTON