

Captain Richard (Dick) Baker was a truly remarkable man, as this tribute to him by his friend, Jim Highfield, shows so well. This tribute was read at Dick's funeral at Papakura, Auckland, on Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> September 2004.

**RICHARD EDWARD BAKER**  
**19<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 1928 – 25<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2004**

I should like you to join with me to celebrate the life of a true Renaissance man of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Richard or Dick, whichever you prefer as he answered to them both, was multi-talented and I could only marvel at his abilities, philosophy and courage.

His voyage, which has so recently ended, started on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1928 and his early schooling was at Walton Lodge, at Clevedon, just down the Channel from Bristol. His father was a senior civil servant who among other tasks helped the Burmese toward democracy and was awarded an O.B.E. The family had several moves around the country and Dick won a scholarship to Loughborough Grammar School.

The war was on and aged 16 he went to sea as a cadet with the New Zealand Shipping Company. He was in the *Hororata* and was later transferred to the *Durham* on her first post war voyage as a cadet ship. One of my pictures of his that I've brought today shows the *Hororata* loading at Auckland Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> June 1945 with the anti-aircraft gun on the port bridge wing (see editorial note below). One of his friends, Don Watson, shared his love of jazz but Captain Dunning banned them from accompanying the hymns on Sunday morning when he heard them rehearse 'Onward Christian Soldiers' in ragtime. Don and Dick would play spontaneous jazz and ragtime duets together during smoko and were known to stop cargo work at No's 5 and 6 Hatches while the wharfies listened. He once mentioned to me that the jazz pianist Art Tatum was one of his heroes and was delighted to know I knew who he was talking about and what is more agreed with him.

Our ships usually had a decorated lifebuoy at the head of the gangway. The one on the *Durham* was designed and beautifully decorated by Dick. He insisted that he alone was responsible for its maintenance and not surprisingly, for cadets are cunning creatures, made the job last from Auckland to Panama, much to the envy of the others who were busy chipping the fore deck.

I first met Dick in Cardiff May 1956, he was Chief Officer and I was 3<sup>rd</sup> Officer of *Haparangi* (Captain Chadwick). We were there for a fortnight undergoing repairs and survey so Dick popped home to Bristol at the weekend and returned in his vintage 1927/28 Rolls Royce which he parked at the foot of the gangway. The Deck Boy then had the daily chore of polishing the radiator with pink silver polish supplied by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Steward. As you can imagine the advent of these lordly wheels enabled us each evening to check the country pubs of South Wales in true dashing NZS Co style. This vehicle was in contrast to the snazzy little 2 CV he drove in later years.

Memories of the following voyage include the poor little Ship's Baker, having been bullied for weeks by the large uncouth Butcher, decided to leave the ship at 0900 on New Years Day taking a packet of sandwiches, a fishing line and a large knife with him. The only problem was that we were outward bound in the middle of the Pacific. Dick and his emergency boats crew of Stornawegians, who had better things to do that day, made quick work of bringing our deserter back on board and a couple of young officers going out to join Union Company helped maintain a vigil on the patient until we reached Auckland. One was Ted Hubbard who ended his career as Harbourmaster at Tauranga.

One Sunday morning in Lyttelton Dick went up on the Monkey Island to paint the scene of Diamond Harbour and descended at lunchtime despondent as he reckoned he'd done a far better job years earlier as a cadet.

Again on a sunny Sunday when in New Plymouth he and I decided to scale Mt Egmont – we failed but enjoyed the experience.

One of Dick's more exciting moments was when in his first command, the *Middlesex* outward bound near the Channel Islands, had an engine room fire. After repairs in London someone had left an oily rag on top of the funnel and the trap door open – the result was that Dick and the *Middlesex* spent the next three weeks recovering in Falmouth.

Dick regularly entered the painting competitions organised by the Seafarers Education Service and I happened to see and admire his winning entry of the final voyage of the last Thames paddle steamer, which is now in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. In 1981 I persuaded Dick to do the Mark II version for me and this now has pride of place among his other works. Another of his paintings, a River Mersey scene, was used on their Christmas card but Dick was very scathing about the reproduction as the focal point of the picture had been lost.

It is humbling to realise now that this modest man had exhibited his work at the Royal Society of Marine Artists in London; the principal US marine gallery at Mystic, Connecticut, and at galleries in London, Victoria British Columbia and here in Auckland. He is represented in the permanent collections of the British Maritime Museum, the Marine Society, University of Southampton and in private collections including the P&O Group London, Fletcher Challenge (NZ) and Nissan (Japan) and like me many of you will own your own favourite examples of his work.

He didn't confine his paintings to ships; when he was in command of *Middlesex* we were in Gladstone Dock together and when I visited him and Liz he had just tried his hand at portraiture with Liz as his sitter.

In 1963 my wife and I bought our first home in Bristol and discovered to our delight that Dick's parents lived just around the corner. So when Liz came down from the Cotswolds to visit them she would pop in and see Pam.

With three young children, Jane born 1965 and Thomas and Martin in 1967, Dick came ashore determined they should know him and not as a six-monthly visitor. He joined Sperry for about two years and then joined Cargo Care in Huntingdon for whom he travelled all over Europe. It was there that he again met Jeremy Theakston, a meeting that was to affect the rest of their lives.

In 1974 he joined Jeremy in the new building ship the *Cement King* in Norway. At the same time I had left P & O General Cargo Division and through Jeremy obtained a temporary berth on the other cement ship here in New Zealand, the *John Wilson*. While on passage out the company agreed to employ a permanent 3<sup>rd</sup> Mate on *Cement King* so with two complete crews required both Dick and I became permanent employees. Throughout all our time in the *Cement King* I don't think we ever sailed together, but being on opposite crews would meet at regular fortnightly intervals. At this period Dick was instrumental in encouraging our elder daughter in her art. Another New Zealand artist, Pat Hanly, has just died and she imagines them discussing their painting techniques.

When the ship was sold to Portuguese interests Dick decided to retire, however we still kept in touch and Pam and I would visit when in Auckland and they would come and see us when in their timeshare in Paihia. In fact on a separate wall to my ship paintings I have three of Dick's Bay of Islands paintings. Despite a painful arthritic right hand Dick continued painting, however you had to remember to give him a left-handed handshake when greeting him.

As I mentioned at the outset Dick was multi-talented. Not the least of these talents was to have chosen a wonderful wife; Liz was the ideal, a strong supporter of all his artistic aspirations, cheerfully sustaining him right to the end.

After retirement Dick turned his hand to composing music and Liz, tired of hearing the same notes played and replayed as Dick perfected his muse, had the brilliant idea of buying him a silent piano.

When I last saw him a few weeks ago I wondered what I should take. I then remembered his sense of humour in happier times, a devastating impression of Colonel Bloodknock, so took him some tapes of The Goon Show, which I hope gave him a few chuckles hearing the old characters and jokes.

There was certain camaraderie, a cachet, belonging to the New Zealand Shipping Company. The turn out at Christchurch in 1998 is testimony to that.

Dick was a character of many polished facets, humble, a kind and true gentleman. One of the brightest stars to pass through the portals of 138, Leadenhall Street.

© 2004 Captain Jim Highfield

### **Editorial Note**

It has not proved possible to scan the image of the painting of the *Hororata*. However, it seems entirely appropriate to feature another painting by Dick Baker, and this is shown on page 4 below.

It was painted by Dick in 2000, and it shows the Cadet Training Ships *Rakaia* and *Otaio* passing at sea.

Grateful thanks go to Captain F S Angus, who owns the original of this painting, for his kind permission to display this image.



***Rakaia* and *Otaio* passing at sea  
by  
Richard Edward Baker  
19<sup>th</sup> March 1928 – 25<sup>th</sup> September 2004**