

The Australian Mariners Welfare Society

Reflections of a retiring Chairman

Captain Alan Tait OAM

Since informing the Council at our February meeting that I would not be standing for re-election as Chairman at our next meeting, I have had time to reflect on my fifteen years in that role. This decision was also taken in the knowledge that I would shortly be turning 80.

My link with the Society began 28 years ago when Captain Paddy Rahilly, then Marine Superintendent of Howard Smith Industries, persuaded me to join what was then the Sydney Sailors Home. I was already an active Rotarian and much involved with my work in the shipping industry, which had kept me occupied serving at sea and ashore for 40 years.

Thus, I needed at that stage to reflect on what might lie ahead in my working life having up to then given little thought as to where my future might lie. It was not long before I realised just how little I knew about the industry and more particularly about those in senior positions who made it all work.

The Sydney Sailors Home history records the service of these men, many of whom sat on the Council of the Home and became friends and mentors from whom I learned much.

When asked to take over as Chairman in 2005 I did so believing that my tenure should be a maximum of five years. At that time the Society had only recently changed its name to the Australian Mariners Welfare Society; this had occurred under the chairmanship of John Hunter and Jim Israel and with the valuable advice and guidance of John Bowen, for many years our Honorary Solicitor.

On assuming office, it was clear that my first priority would be to build the Society's profile under its new name. Significant work in this regard had already been done by John and Jim, my two immediate predecessors.

For example we widened the scope of scholarships awarded to seagoing personnel undertaking tertiary maritime studies, expanded our youth sail training program and

introduced a newsletter which was distributed not only to members of the Society but also widely within the shipping industry itself.

Accommodation was also being provided for retired seafarers of limited means in home unit accommodation we had acquired in Horizon Towers, an apartment complex at Hornsby NSW. A history of the Sydney Sailors Home had also been commissioned by the Council so that its role in serving seafarers could be recorded.

At the same time there were also some disappointments. Our move towards legally expanding the scope of our scholarship program was unsuccessful as also were my efforts to introduce female membership of our Council.

On the other hand, the finances of the Society were in good order and this enabled an expansion of arrangements under which grants for specific purposes could be given to seafarers' welfare providers located at 30 ports around the Australian coast.

These organisations include the Mission to Seafarers and The Apostleship of the Sea (Stella Maris) who offer hospitality and support to visiting crew members of all faiths and nationalities and provide free access to Internet facilities enabling them to contact relatives and friends overseas. The operating and replacement costs of these facilities are largely met by the Society.

Since the Society's inception, over \$1.7 million has been distributed under this grants program. Other payments we make in relation to the upkeep of our home units for retired seafarers, scholarships, sail training program and the significant ongoing support for an international fund which assists families of crew members taken hostage by piracy on the high seas, increase our total disbursements to \$2.3 million.

Recognising the number of awards given to the Society and to individual members over the years indicates to me that we have remained contemporary and relevant in the industry. Importantly, we now have representation on various forums within Australia concerned with issues of seafarers' welfare. Wider public knowledge of our work has been greatly facilitated by a first class website.

A milestone in worldwide shipping occurred in 2013 with the implementation of the Maritime Labour Convention 2006 internationally, which stipulates minimum

standards for pay and conditions for crew members of ships and the monitoring of the seaworthiness of vessels themselves. Australia quickly became a signatory to the Convention. In turn the Commonwealth Government nominated the Australian Maritime Safety Authority as the agency responsible for Australia-wide compliance with the Convention, a role which it has performed with vigour and success.

In that context, I also highly commend the International Transport Federation formed 124 years ago to help seafarers worldwide.

Finally, I pay tribute to our serving and former Councillors who brought their knowledge and professional skills to bear on the work of the Society. Much of the success which has been achieved can be attributed to the camaraderie and cohesion of the Board and I am ever grateful for this unwavering support throughout my Chairmanship.

I shall be relinquishing this role at the end of our Meeting of Councillors on 19 May following the AGM. Our Councillor Mr David Parmeter will be standing for election as Chairman. He has recently retired from the shipping industry and brings with him experience which will be of benefit to the Society and has my full support and encouragement. I wish to continue my association with the Society for the time being and accordingly will remain on the board.

It is perhaps not mentioned as often as it should be, but many of us rely heavily on the support of family and friends in performing their role. I have been most fortunate that my wife, Lorraine, and family have always been totally supportive of my work in whatever opportunity I was given to serve.

I wish the society well in the future and will always follow its fortunes with great interest.

Capt Alan Tait OAM
Chairman

24th April 2020