

Captain John C Briggs

1939 to 2nd September 2016

Member of the League 1988 to 1992



John was born in England in 1939. He died peacefully in his sleep in Spencer NSW on the 2nd September 2016.

At the age of seven, together with his Mother in 1946, he joined the wartime built liberty ship Fort Glenora for passage to Australia and of which his father was the Captain. Photos of that time show an always, immaculate Captain Briggs despite being in command of a coal burning tramp ship. Standards were set high early for this young man.

The family settled in Abbotsford and John became a pupil at The Kings School, Parramatta. In 1956 he joined the British India Steam Navigation Company (BI) and reported on board the "Chindwara" a cargo

ship which had been purposely built to accommodate and train 39 Navigation (Deck) Cadets. Sleeping arrangements were in 14 bunk dormitories.

There followed three years of hard work greasing and oiling cargo gear, painting, splicing mooring ropes and learning to keep a navigation watch on the ship's bridge the reward for which was the princely sum of eight pounds a month!

There was also much boyish fun in these years – much of it censored. The ship voyaged to India, East Africa, and Europe. In 1959, John qualified as a Navigating Deck Officer and his career at sea took off. He served on BI passenger ships, notably “Kampala” and a number of cargo ships.

Facing a wait until in his 50s to achieve command of a ship and having obtained his Master Mariner qualifications, he left BI in 1965 and joined Manners Navigation of Hong Kong trading to Cuba, Europe, Australia and Siberia. Here he gained command of a number of Manners' ships.

In 1968 he married Akiko (Anne) a Japanese citizen who accompanied John on many of his voyages. John loved Japan and for a few years he and Akiko lived there. They had two children John, born in 1972 and who went to sea with the ANL and Carole. In 1973 John started work with the MSB driving the Sydney Pilot Cutter. He rose through the 'ranks' to become The Sydney Harbour Master in 1986. In what little spare time he had he commanded the Sail Training barquentine “New Endeavour” and served as Captain on the iron hulled brigantine 'Eye of the Wind' for one epic Pacific voyage. As Harbour Master he was both popular and highly skilled. His many contemporary audiences – the Navy, the fisheries trade, the cargo trade, the yachties and the tourist fleet - all bore testimony to this.

In 1988 he managed the entire Bi-Centennial operation on Sydney Harbour, which included the 200 Year Re-enactment and the magnificent sail pasts of the tall ships. It was by every measure an outstanding success. Sadly the nature of maritime management was changing and in 1991 the position of Harbour Master was abolished.

He joined the fledgling Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) in a senior management role where, with distinction, he chaired a number of committees as the Australian representative on the International Maritime Organisation, itself the United Nations sub-committee dealing with all things maritime. He took great joy from the fact that AMSA itself was promoting ship safety and the Australian Merchant Service.

Sadly Anne died in 2004 and John retired in 2005. John moved to live in Spencer on the Hawkesbury in 2005 and was later joined by his future wife Paddy Boxall a long time sailing mate from the days of New Endeavour. In 2012 he and Paddy were married. They shared their life with Bozo and a majestic flagpole from which John regularly flew the Australian Merchant Red Ensign. In his retirement John wrote two worthy books about his life.

John will be remembered for his vast maritime experience, his wisdom, his entertaining wit, his humility, and his seafaring skills. There have been a significant number of tributes from the web page Ships Nostalgia.

I tell this tale of John Briggs, my good friend. When I was newly appointed by the MSB as Port Manager of Sydney, John came to me as his new boss to ask if he could do anything to help me. You remember those people – they are rare. He invited me out on one of the MSB's three tugs. Upon completion of the trip he asked if I had any views that might be helpful. Yes, I said, the large canvas cover, which was used to protect the very prominent searchlight stood out as being very scruffy compared to the rest of the vessel, which was immaculate. He said he'd fix it. Just two days later on a visit to Goat Island I noticed the same tug with a magnificent blue canvas cover on the searchlight. On returning to my office I phoned John and said

“Gosh, that was quick. Well done. How did you organise that so quickly?” After a melancholy pause he came back and said, “I turned it inside out”.

Thanks to Richard Pocock for copy of his obituary, which appeared in Sydney Morning Herald 4th October 2016.