

CHARLTON SAMUELS

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Venue: SA Agulhas
Interviewer (Q): Lize-Marie van der Watt | History Department | Stellenbosch University
Respondent (A): Charlton Samuels | Chief Officer on the SA Agulhas | 2002 +

- A:** 49, ja, 49 East.
- Q:** OK. And it is today the 11th of February 2011. First of all, your own career, how did it, how did you, take me through your journey, I can almost say, until becoming Chief Officer on the Agulhas.
- A:** Alright. Uh, my sea career actually started in '97 basically. After I left school I was actually doing oceanography for about a year. And, uh, then I decided "Nah, it wasn't for me" so I left that and then instead of working under the water I decided to work on top of the water.
- Q:** OK.
- A:** In '96 I decided to go and do my T1 and T2 at Tech and completed that. And then I got a cadetship at my present company, Smit, in '97. And that's when I started.
- Q:** When was your first trip on the Agulhas?
- A:** My first trip on the Agulhas only came about 2002.
- Q:** 2002?
- A:** Ja.
- Q:** And was that as...
- A:** That was as Second Officer.
- Q:** As Second Officer. And when you started going to sea, was it always something you'd wanted to do, coming on the Agulhas?
- A:** It's...no, I never even was interested in going to sea. It was only when I got to Tech and I realised, you know, OK I'm not really interested in what I'd decided on and I changed my mind and then went into it and approached my father because my father was working in the harbour services and spoke to him about ships, because he's pretty much involved with that stuff to get information.
- Q:** OK.
- A:** But it was totally something that I didn't even think about...
- Q:** Think about?
- A:** When I was at school, you know, I was always, I always had other stuff planned.
- Q:** [Laughs] And when you started with your cadetship and you started going to sea with Smit, was it always something that you'd talk about yourself, that sometime in the future you would like to go on the Agulhas? Or was it...
- A:** The Agulhas was...
- Q:** Because at that time it was still a DEA vessel.
- Q:** Although it was a DEA vessel it was sort of a trip that, or a ship that everybody, you know, said, you know aspired to, you know, if they get the opportunity they would take it with open hands, because of the unique trips that she does. And it was always at the back of my mind, you know, if I get the opportunity I'd really like to go, you know, especially this voyage going down to Antarctica. The other two are also, because it's also very unique, no other ships go to Marion and Gough, in our industry in South Africa, at least. But ja, it was definitely something that I always thought about, you know, if the opportunity would come I would grab and take it.
- Q:** OK that first trip as Second Officer in 2002, was this to Antarctica?
- A:** No, that was actually, my first trip was down to Marion Island.
- Q:** To Marion Island. What do you remember about that trip?
- A:** Lots of science work. [Laughs]
- Q:** [Laughs] Science work?
- A:** Ja, it was my first trip and...

Q: Who was the Master?

A: The Captain at that time was Kevin Tate.

Q: Kevin Tate.

A: Captain Kevin Tate, ja. And ja, it was very nice. It was a new experience for me. It was actually my first trip also as Second Officer, on the other vessels I'd been as Third Mate and it was my first trip as Second, so it was also a work challenge and also a new environment and a new ship.

Q: Were the seas rough?

A: Um, that voyage it was fairly OK, it wasn't too bad, but the one after that was hectic.

Q: What was that?

A: It was sort of a charter, it was a 'berg trip, and we went down to Marion Island. We had all these old elderly people that went on this charter and there was very much a concern about the safety of these people, having to, going up and down the seas and the outside ladders, so, but that trip we had some hectic weather.

Q: With all the old people, the hectic weather? [laughs]

A: It was also a special trip because we went to the ice edge. From Marion Island we went right south and went to the ice edge and steamed past a couple of 'bergs and it was my very first time, with uh, sea ice experience. I've been around 'berg in the northern Arctic, but this was my first sea ice experience and it was also a new one.

Q: So during that journey did you pass the polar circle?

A: No. No, it was fairly, mid-, early winter, so the ice was already forming. It was far from the Arctic Circle, well Antarctic Circle.

Q: Antarctic Circle. So you had Arctic experience before that?

A: Yes.

Q: On what vessel was that?

A: It was the Wolraad Woltemade, which is now no longer with us. She's been scrapped, unfortunately. [Laughs]

Q: And so the Wolraad Woltemade, was she a salvage vessel?

A: She's a salvage tug, well, was a salvage tug. And ocean-going and ocean-towing. And we had a contract to go and pick up an ice wreck that was up in Wainwright, north of Alaska, right in the Arctic Circle and, luckily for us it was summer. There was not a lot of sea ice, but lots of 'bergs. And that's where my first encounters with 'bergs came, and cold weather and so.

Q: Do you have to do something differently when there's lots of 'bergs around?

A: Um, it's just, the danger of growlers and small bergy bits. It's difficult to see them in rough weather. The Wolraad wasn't an ice-classed vessel. She was, although she was ice class 1, same as this one, she wasn't strengthened the way this ship was. She wasn't built for breaking or going through ice, you know, but we went up there and picked up the rig and it took us 30 days to tow her back down to Korea.

Q: To Korea?

A: Ja. We dropped...

Q: I'm trying to figure out how you went.

A: We went, we got the call, we were in Singapore and we had to go from Singapore up the east past China and then north of between Japan and Russia, Kamchatka Peninsula there, and went up to the Aleutian string islands, where Dutch Harbour is, I don't know if you know Dutch Harbour, in Alaska, and then went past the Bering Straits right up north and then picked her up and came with the same route back.

Q: Wow.

A: And it was quite a long voyage.

Q: Ja, it sounds like it. OK, your first trip to Antarctica proper, when was this?

A: It was 2003, 2002-2003, in summer.

Q: And that was also with Captain Tate?

A: That was with, that was actually a special voyage. It was the last voyage that Captain Tate did and Captain Hall, the ice pilot. He took over from him in that same year.

Q: And you were Second Officer?

A: I was Second Officer.

Q: What are the duties of the Second Officer?

A: Second Officer is in charge of mainly navigation, so you are the guy who does all the plotting, laying of courses from Cape Town to Antarctica and back, and wherever she's going to go, and also in charge of medical if the doctor is not here. So he looks after the hospital and then is assists doctor when the doctor is here. Doctor's not here, you're the doctor. [Laughs]

Q: So you need an extra kind of knowledge about first aid or something?

A: Ja, you've gotta get yourself heavily involved in the first aid and also drug administration.

Q: And your first trip as Chief Officer, when was that?

A: My first trip as Chief Officer was actually on the research ship Africana, but my first trip as Chief Mate here was 2009.

Q: 2009 as Chief Mate. And then, how do your duties change? The Chief Mate probably has a lot more responsibility?

A: It's a vast difference. There's a big difference. Although you're still involved in navigation on the bridge, in your watch, the four to eight watch, you're not so involved in the navigational duties of getting the ship from A to B like the Second Officer. Um, the Chief Mate has got lots of responsibilities. First of all, its navigation and then the cargo work. A big part of it is the stability of the ship. Then also the safety; he's also the Safety Officer of the vessel, and then also the Security Officer of the vessel. So, it's a big...

Q: Somebody is security, you mean? If somebody breaks the law on the ship, you're in charge?

A: Not necessarily. It's interaction between Port Facilities and the ship, interaction between the ship and other vessels, and then also, ja basically the security of the vessel itself. Making sure that everything is safe when we're going to a new port or even back to Cape Town, you know. There's...

Q: So you are extra on board for cargo work, and the safety...

A: Cargo, safety, security. Stability, very important on the vessel.

Q: So, preparations for a journey like this one, what does that involve? Before you even get on the ship. Or is it mostly ship-bound?

A: Preparation for this voyage? For this type of voyage?

Q: Ja, for this type of voyage, to Antarctica with the irons.

A: It starts long before December. It starts mid-winter already. Or even when this one are finished, you already planning for the next one, what can be done differently and what you should get for the next voyage. And then the planning is mainly from here, after August-September, then you start planning, you know. Getting...finding out what sort of weird cargo you going to get, 'cause there's always weird cargo. [Laughs]

Q: Like the garage.

A: So you need to prep yourself for that, because you more or less know what you take down there every year. And you know those things have got special spots on the ship to put them in. But then you need to plan ahead for unknowns, find out what they are planning, like the bakkie, for instance, this year. We had to make special arrangements for that. For picking it up, first of all, getting it onto the ship, and then how to get it off on the other side. So we're heavily involved in getting information about the vehicle, first of all and then planning how to get it on the vessel safely without damaging it. And how to get it back on that side.

Q: And how to pack, I suppose. 'Cause to me it seemed a lot of it is playing Tetris.

A: That's right, yes.

Q: How to...

A: You've got to be very good at puzzles. 'Cause you shift around stuff, and then you initially start "OK, we're going to put this there" and get the list from the DCO and this is coming to the ship and then you get dimensions and weights and that. And when the stuff arrives on the shelf it's a little bit different. Then you gotta quickly think "OK, put it that side first and we get the other stuff on and then we'll make a plan later".

Q: And the other...is it mostly the Chief Officer who operates the crane or is that just something that you're good at?

A: It's an unfortunate case now for the last two years that the Chief Mate has been seconded that duty. Unfortunately...it normally is the practice that the Second Mate and Third Mate are

the drivers for the crane and that. Only the heavy lifts the Chief Mate will do. And...the training for the junior officers has...I won't say it's fallen away a little bit, but it's, with a big turn-around of staff there hasn't been really time to get them up to scratch as to operate the crane proficiently. And for the last two years the Chief Mate has been, you know, sitting in that crane, whole day long. And it takes you a bit out of the picture on the deck. Because you sit up there and you're controlling weights. While you're swinging a load back onto the ship there's new cargo arriving and it's a little bit different to the list now. It needs to be planned. And sometimes the Master or the Captain has to take over on the ship as to what we're going to do with that because I'm involved with the crane. So I'm a little bit...it takes you out of the picture a little bit as to...they call you up and they say "What do you want to do?" And then you're still driving, concentrating and then you gotta think about the next one. And it was, it's been a lot of help, especially with Captain Hall here, because now he's sort of overseeing. The Captain is busy manoeuvring the ship and I'm in the crane, so he can assist the DCO as to, "OK, leave that one for now, bring the next one and we'll take that one" while I'm getting my ducks in a row there.

Q: OK. It seems like a very warm place to be, that crane. I mean it's kind of small and stuffy.

A: It is. It's small, it's cramped. There is a nice heater inside there, but only your body heat is enough in there. So most of the time I sit there with the window open anyway.

Q: Just coming back to your first trip, what were your first impressions like of Antarctica?

A: "What the hell am I doing here?" [Laughs] No, no, no. Antarctica has always been a special place for me. I always wanted to come here. The first time I got here I was just gobsmacked by...the ocean side of it is for me very intriguing. The formation of ice, how it depletes. How it changes every year, the amount of ice around. This year has been very unique. There was one season when we were down here, summer season, when we were stuck for eight days straight in the ice. I mean, that was hectic.

Q: And now we have this hectic swell and the ice shelf.

A: So, ja, for me Antarctica has always been impressive. I've never really, some guys, they get, come down here year after year and for them it's just another trip, by now, you know. But the amount of times I've been down here, it's still amazing, every time. I don't underestimate this place. 'Cause anything can happen at any time. I mean, the cold comes in, the snow comes in, you can't see nothing and then there's growlers and 'berg bits all over. It's scary.

Q: OK. And have you ever had the chance of going to the base itself?

A: No, I have not had the opportunity to go there. It was planned for this year, if there was the opportunity but it never came about. I've always been busy when the flights are in operation, 'cause when the weather is good, we have to work. And I had the fortunate chance to go to the summer station, purely because I had to go and look at 'gaga'. But I took advantage of that and we actually went into the old Neumeyer II base which is under the ice and it was amazing.

Q: All the crystals, the ice crystals...

A: Yes, ja. It's beautiful.

Q: I also had a chance to go.

A: It's stunning down there, with those crystals. And then also, the one Sunday I was busy with catching up on paperwork and the Captain called me up and said "Would you like to go to the Neumeyer base?" I said "Yes". So ja, I got the opportunity to go to the Neumeyer station, at least.

Q: The new one. The fancy hotel.

A: The Neumeyer III, ja.

Q: The spaceship on ice. And did you get a chance to go onshore at South Georgia?

A: South Georgia, yes, I managed to get about half an hour there to go walkabout, so ja, it was also another...a new one for me. I haven't been to South Georgia.

Q: And Marion? What do you remember about Marion?

A: Marion...for me it's...a lot of guys like Marion Island. I'm not so fond of Marion Island.

Q: Why not?

A: The weather.

Q: The weather.

A: The weather, it changes. You can have four seasons in one day. It's a very popular saying on the ship for that place.

Q: Yes, I know that's true. People think weather changes quickly in Antarctica.

A: That's easy.

Q: It goes back and forth.

A: Marion Island has its own challenges. It's...for us having to hide away from the weather there is very difficult, 'cause there's not a lot of shelter there and you've also always got to think about the safety of the ship in terms of the weather as well. But it's interesting work, it's nice work. The trip down there is not so long. It's usually about five, depending on the weather, six days. But to get there is difficult sometimes. They plan for the Marion trip, it's very close to winter, and for the past years with the construction of the new base the ship was forced to go down there IN winter and we've had two very bad trips last year.

Q: Was that when...were you on the vessel when the engine broke?

A: I was on that trip, when we lost the one main engine.

Q: What was that like? Hearing that?

A: I was actually on watch when that happened.

Q: Oh really?

A: I was on the bridge. I was actually on the bridge when it happened.

Q: And who phoned you?

A: No, I, well, I actually heard a flippen' big bang up there, and we felt the massive vibration. And I was with my one hand on the stick, just about to pull back, when the phone rang, which was going to be my next thing, to phone down to the engine room and that's when the Second told me "Listen, big trouble. Pull back." And I was already busy.

Q: The Second Engineer?

A: Second Engineer, he was on watch. So...

Q: What time was that?

A: That was just about, between half past four and five in the morning. And that incident woke up the whole ship. I mean, people were standing outside their cabins in their life jackets.
[Laughs]

Q: [Laughs] I would have probably been one of them.

A: But the situation was manageable because we still had one main engine. It was a big concern that we won't be able to complete the trip with the one main engine. But we planned all sorts of contingencies for that, so we continued. But that experience was, it was hectic, it was very challenging to get through. What was it? Thirty-six days on one main engine.

Q: Who was the Captain?

A: Freddy.

Q: Oh, was it Freddy?

A: Ja, Freddy.

Q: So did you have to wake the Captain then as well?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, everybody probably woke up.

A: Well, that was my second call down to him. When I got the phone call from the Second we stopped the ship and then my next call was to him. And then I just turned the vessel into the weather and she sat nicely in the weather and we sorted things out, first of all downstairs, got the bar thruster going and, just in case we needed it, and manoeuvred into the weather. The weather wasn't that bad at that stage, but it was building. It was about a four or five metre swell. The wind was with us, so we were lucky.

Q: The passengers? How did you manage them? Or did you just make an announcement? Like "OK, it's all under control."

A: No, we sort of got the message down to Bernie and he took care of it. He was the guy that looked after the passengers. But at that time nobody knew what was going on, they were just, you know, wondering, you know. So the message quickly spread around the ship, and that's very easy. [Laughs]

Q: Ja, I've noticed. It's very easy to spread anything on the ship, any kind of...

A: The word got around very quickly that there was some sort of trouble. And Bernie just put them at ease, I suppose.

Q: Was he a good person for that job?

A: Ja, no, Bernie is very good at looking after the packs. He's very experienced and very good at that.

Q: He's very experienced. OK, in terms of incidents at sea like that, were you involved in any others, like rescue missions or being on the vessel when a guy got killed?

A: No, I was on other ships in the fleet when the major incidents happened. The only big thing that I was involved in on this vessel was in the Cape Africa salvage. We were just completing our Marion take-over trip. We were on our way back to Cape Town when we heard about the casualty when a bulk carrier got into trouble with a big crack in the port side. She was taking on water and was busy sinking. And the John Ross at that time, which is now the Smit Amandla, the sister ship to the Wolraad [Woltemade]. She was commissioned to tow her into False Bay. And we were commissioned to assist, 'cause we were a helicopter platform and also all the accommodation we had for all the salvage masters and salvage crew that was working on that project stayed on the ship. And we were logistics support...

Q: But did you first complete the journey, drop your own packs, or...

A: We were on our way to Cape Town. So we went back to Cape Town and dropped of the packs immediately, sailed back out and got them on the way, so...the helicopter crew which was CHCF that time, before Titan, they also were involved. They got the contract to be the helicopter support. So they didn't sign off, they stayed on the ship.

Q: What are the challenges in terms of working on the Agulhas specifically?

A: In my job, you get used to working with the cargo and the stability and the safety aspects, the security, navigation. My biggest challenge for me personally is managing the people. I've got a squad of ten deck personnel and two officers below me. And then sometimes up to four cadets like we have at the moment that I've got to look after.

Q: And do the cadets all resort under you?

A: Yes. So they fall are under me. So first of all you gotta keep them busy, which is easy on this ship. But managing their interaction is difficult. People problems, personality conflicts and that type of thing. I've always tended to shy away from that when I was in Second Mate and Third Mate position, 'cause it was something that I really didn't like to do. But in Chief Mate position you are forced to that point because you're in charge of the deck department. That's the whole squad of fourteen, fifteen people on this ship. So to me that's a very difficult thing to manage. On this trip it's been a very easy couple of days. So, ja, we've got a jolly good squad at the moment, no real big problems with interactions and discipline, personality clashes.

Q: And the weather has been good as well.

A: We've been blessed with very good weather on this trip.

Q: South Africa doesn't really strike one as a sea-going nation. Why would you say that is? Even though we have such a big coastline.

A: Ja, I think in the past it used to be, with the absolvment of SAFMarine, that sort of fell away. In the past, when SAFMarine operated all the cargo ships and containers ships around the coast, I mean, everybody knew about our sea-farers and that was a very popular choice for young people to go into, to go to sea. But I think after that it sort of fell away. We didn't have a national carrier anymore and the other companies that operated still tended to go for foreign employment, you know.

Q: When they tend to go for foreign employment, what nationalities are they mostly? In South African ports now.

A: In the South African industry...world-wide they tend to go for Filipinos and the Indian market. They are relatively cheaper, salaries and that wise. But in our company they tend to go for Russian, Eastern block people. And that's sort of been stopped. We've come back to employing mostly South Africans.

Q: Well, I've noticed on the Agulhas at least it's almost only South Africans.

A: Only South Africans, ja.

Q: And if not South Africans, people with permanent residency. So would you like to become the Master of a vessel?

A: Well...

Q: Would you like that kind of job?

A: Yes, yes, definitely. That's sort of the ultimate goal of a deck officer. I've got two more trips to complete and my sea time will be full. And hopefully by the end of the year I'll have my Master's ticket and my first trip. So ja, looking forward to that.

Q: So, how many...does it go on hours or days that you have to complete?

A: It's...the sea time is counted in months, from your Chief Mate, once you've got your Chief Mate and you're sailing as Chief Mate you need twelve months sea time.

Q: Twelve months sea time. Well, doing Antarctica trips probably helps because it's three months at a time.

A: It's three months, ja. It takes that out of...

Q: That's like four Antarctica trips. Are you going to Marion now?

A: Going to do the inauguration trip and I'm also doing a take-over trip.

Q: In terms of VIP voyages, like this inauguration trip, are they different?

A: Yes, no definitely. The ship is repaired in a different manner, you know. Everything is spotless. Ja, there's also some other contingencies that you've got to look out for, you know. Keeping them busy for those four days. Five or six days down to Marion. It was normally...with the take-over crew and that, you know, they keep themselves busy with getting ready for their projects, making sure that they've got their gear sorted, preparing their stuff, you know. For the VIPs, I mean, six days on the ship, so you've got to plan that, keep them busy, you know, so...there's lots of talks and there's tours and little events.

Q: And I suppose not all of them are necessarily sea-fit?

A: That's the other thing, ja. Most of it, most of them will be land-lubbers, won't have sea-legs, so gotta prepare for that also.

Q: Extra medical, extra...What do you enjoy about going, about working on the Agulhas? That's Agulhas-specific?

A: In our fleet, this is the only real cargo ship that you've got. And that's one of the challenges of my job, especially, and it's nice. But the Agulhas has got, it's got that aura, you know. Everybody wants to be here. And that makes it sort of special.

Q: Do you think the new ship will be as special?

A: The new ship will definitely, I mean, she will continue where the Agulhas will...well, I'm not sure yet what's going to happen with her, but when she goes out of the equation and the new one takes over I'm sure she will just carry on where this one leaves, you know. And everybody's looking forward to the new Agulhas, and everybody's sad about this one, especially now that we're still not sure what's going to happen to her. But the new one everybody's looking forward to it, everybody's always...new build is, it's a lot of hard work. First of all to get the initial systems up and running, and get procedures and that type of thing going. And getting used to the new ship. Everybody's looking forward to that. But it's going to be sad when this one has to go.

Q: When...if you could choose a name for the new ship, what would it be?

A: SAS Agulhas II. [Laughs]

Q: OK. No, it's a good answer! It's a good answer. It's probably the most common sensical one.

A: Ja, it's...I mean...but the tendency in the fleet has been to go for female names. And it's been females involved in the struggle of the past years. It's been...and I'm sure it will be something like that. But, I mean, the predecessor to this one was the RSA, and from that the SA Agulhas, maybe just Agulhas, I don't know.

Q: There's not that many females left to name ships after. Speaking about females, what do you think about women at sea?

A: That's a bit of a...it's nice, nice to have a female aspect on the vessel, 'cause they sometimes put different thinking behind certain challenges, you know. I've always been comfortable working with females on the ship. I've never really had a problem with it. But sometimes, the difficult part of it is you can see sometimes where a person, even with a male crew member, where the person is not really suitable for it. It's easier, I suppose for a man, to just fall into this man-type of work. But you get sometimes females on board that you can see, you know, this is not something that will suit them. And the difficult part is to then tell them, where they

have put such a lot of effort into becoming, first of all into the system and then having to carry on with that. And it's difficult to tell, them "Listen..."

Q: "...it's not maybe your world."

A: This is ja, maybe you should say like "Think about something else in the same industry", you know. But fortunately I've never really been in that position to do that. I suppose it will be difficult. But as I said I don't have a problem. We've had some lovely ladies in our fleet which unfortunately have gone to better companies, the greener pastures, foreign companies. But, ja, there's still a couple in our company that's with us. And I'm sure they will stick it out for the long run. I must say, I've had some wonderful, I can especially remember one Chief Officer. I can remember one Chief Officer that was pretty good and I always looked up to her, well respected.

Q: Would you like to take your family along to Antarctica or show some of your family members?

A: It's always been something that I wanted to do, especially the wife, and now my daughter. I would really like to take them, but it's never been practical. Especially with the work situation, and now she's studying. So it's never been, just to stop, take a couple of months off from work. It wasn't, it wasn't practical. But ja, when the opportunity comes, yes definitely.

Q: Does your wife have sea-legs?

A: She's been on a couple of harbour trips and around Robben Island. Short day trips with us. She tells me "Yes", she's a strong sea-farer, because her father was in the Navy and she used to go out to sea with him when she was young. On those day trips, ja, she was strong.

Q: Maybe you can take them on the Marion voyage sometime.

A: Ja, we'll see, we'll see. When the opportunity comes then definitely, ja.

Q: OK. Is there anything you would like to add?

A: Nah.

Q: Thank you so much for your time.

A: Ja, thank you.