

STEVEN YAXLEY

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Interviewer (Q): Lize-Marie van der Watt | History Department | Stellenbosch University

Respondent (A): Steven Yaxley | Chief Engineering Officer | SA Agulhas | 2008+

Q: This is an oral history interview with Steven Yaxley, the Chief Engineering Officer on the SA Agulhas. Suppose you're somewhere in the forties still?

A: Forty-two

Q: Forty-two... and it is today the 13th of February 2011. Now, my first question as always: How did it happen that you sit here, I mean, how did you become a Chief Engineering Officer on the SA Agulhas? Give me sort of an overview of your career.

A: My career started, well, I finished matric in 1986 in Welkom, Free State, and I went to do national service in the South African Navy and while I, just before I went to the South African Navy, I was, I applied to a shipping company called Unicorn Lines to, I was accepted to do a cadetship through Unicorn Lines, so I went to the navy first for five months, or whatever it was, and did my basics and all the rest of it there, and then from there I was seconded to Unicorn, to the South African merchant navy where I had to spend ten years according to the National Defence Force act, or whatever it was those years. So I went there and I actually spent 15 years with Unicorn – I was with them from my cadet right up until Second Engineer and I left them in, well, I was, in 2000 I was seconded to Smit from Unicorn to go and stand by a vessel as Chief Engineer on a little research ship called the Algoa and I actually enjoyed it so much, when I went back to Unicorn I was only there for about six months and I decided to go, I was approached by Smit, and I decided to come back 'cause I enjoy the science aspect of the work. I was in tankers for quite a long time of my career and I just got sick and tired of the commercial stress and the petroleum products and all the rest of it the [indiscernible] all the time, you know, I just saw the science aspect of things and I sort of rekindled a flame in my career and I was on the Algoa for quite a long time. I was there for about four, five years as Chief Engineer, and then I went to the Afrikana. I was there for about two years – two, three years... I don't know how long it was, I think it was close to three years... again as the Chief Engineer, and then I got the opportunity to come here and I've... this is my third voyage now down to the ice, on and off the ship now for about three years as well.

Q: So you're saying, what particularly you liked was the science aspect thereof?

A: Ja, the science aspect and the people aspect of it. You meet a quite diverse group of people that you don't meet in any other shipping industry unless you're on the passenger vessels or something like that. Here you meet ornithologists, you meet weather people, you meet scientists, you meet biologists, you meet oceanographers, you meet all different kinds of people and I find that quite stimulating to myself as well as... I've become very fond of sea birds as of late and for me to be able to sit down and speak to the ornithologist from time to time is fun for me, so, ja, that's sort of... you know... and also the engineering aspect of things like I'm forever helping oceanographers fix this or make this or get that winch going or whatever which is something that we don't normally do so, you know, it's extremely stimulating for me.

Q: The SA Agulhas, what is she like to be an engineer on, being an older vessel, or is she not really an older vessel in terms of maritime...

A: Well, I've sailed on a lot worse and I've sailed on a lot better. She's an old girl and she needs tender loving care at the moment, but she's not a difficult vessel to sail. She is very hands-on – she's almost fully manual, so you need a class of person that can think a little bit, you know, it's not a push button mechanic, you know – somebody that needs a bit of

common sense in engineering. I find most of my guys, I've been very fortunate with the guys that I've gotten, that I actually do the ocean voyages with – I find them quite a good level of engineer, quite high up on the ranks, if I may say so, compared to some of the other guys that I have worked with before and, you know, I get the guys thinking [Mauer] and I explain the system and the situation to them and they find their feet very, very quickly. She's a... as I say, not a difficult vessel to sail, not a difficult vessel to handle, but, ja, she is getting old and she needs a little bit of TLC and if you're prepared to do that, work hard, maintain her properly, you won't have any problems with her at all.

Q: Getting back to maritime engineering, is it something you also study, like at university or a technikon, you do an engineering degree?

A: Yes, you do Marine Engineering.

Q: Marine Engineering. Where in South Africa can you do that?

A: Natal... it's probably, what do they call it now? The Polytechnic of Natal or... when it was my time it was Natal Technikon, and then Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Q: CPUT. And do you get a steady influx of young engineers, or not really?

A: Well, for some or other unknown reason, I've noticed over the years the numbers have dwindled of marine engineers being trained. I mean, if you look at it logically on the ship at the moment, there's four deck cadets... there's not one engineer. The shortage of people at sea is engineers, not navigators. So, you know, obviously industry can't see this or maybe I'm just too short-sighted or something, but to me it's, why isn't it the other way around? Why aren't there three engineering cadets here and one deck cadet? I've got absolutely no engineering cadets... I had one earlier this year that stayed with me for a while, but that was it... you know? For the whole time that I've been on this ship I think I've had two engineering cadets. It's slack... it's very, very bad.

Q: When was your first Antarctic trip?

A: 2008 / 2009

Q: And have you done Marion and Gough trips as well?

A: Yes, lots.

Q: So, can you still remember your first impressions of Antarctica?

A: Well, Antarctica, I mean... it's basically, for lack of a better description, I would say it's a fairy tale come true, you know. When you first get there, it's wow, you know, and look how pretty it is and how beautiful it is and all the rest of it and that has never really left me, you know, I'm still flabbergasted every time I see it for the first time. I love the place. I love going down there... I absolutely adore Antarctica. But, yes, you do get sick and tired of being there, you know, enough eventually becomes enough. Eventually you want a change of scenery, eventually you want to not be cold anymore, you want to be able to go see sun, you want to be able to see dark, you want to be able to... you know, but it's something that I'll treasure for the rest of my life. I love the place, I love going down there and I look forward... once I leave, I look forward to...

Q: ... to the next trip! And Marion and Gough?

A: I love Gough Island a bit... probably because I think it's much prettier than Marion. The... I don't know... it's just something about Gough. Gough is a lovely island. It's a very pretty island; it's an extremely diverse island. There's lots of plants and, different kinds of plants and, there's even a few trees... things like that. Whereas Marion is basically a big marsh – it's grass and ferns and mud and more mud and maaiers and basically that's it, you know. OK, then you've got the birds nesting there and the King Penguins and all that sort of thing.

Q: It's like a thin strip at the bottom...

A: Ja, but other than that, you know... as I say, my favourite is Gough. I love Gough Island. Marion – the base is very nice now, very modern, very... the guys have worked hard getting that lot up and going and hopefully a nice science platform for future use, though the place itself... ah, I like going there, I'm not saying I don't like going there, I enjoy going

there, but, you know, when you want to go for a walk, it's actually more of a 'las' than anything else, you know, because you're forever this deep in maaiers and mud and stuff like that. Whereas with Gough it's completely different. Gough is lovely, it's, you know, my favourite Albatross lives on Gough anyways, so... ja.

Q: Which is that?

A: The Yellow Nose

Q: The Yellow Nose Albatross. So you've been ashore on all these places?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Do you just get like a day ashore most of the times or... an afternoon...?

A: Well, most of the times it's a few hours, ja, an afternoon if you're lucky, you know, just to go for a walk, to go see the animals... well, you know, I feel sorry for the year team and the team that are there, you know, when we, well when I come along, because, all they want to do is show you the base and their base and all that... where they live – which they're actually very proud of and, you know, I can't blame them for that, but me... I just want to get out, I want to go see the animals, I want to go see the birds, I want to... that's what I want to do, you know. Maybe I'm a little bit, you know, I should be a bit more tolerant towards them, you know, shame, it is after all their home, and they are very proud of what they are doing and all the rest of it and... but, you know, your time is so limited, you just want to get to go and see the... you know, what you want to see, but as I say, Gough is a little bit... they need a new base pretty soon, I reckon...

Q: Ja, I've heard...

A: ... but very nice as it is. I think it's probably got the most character of all of them, because it's old... I like old things.

Q: Are there any specific challenges, not on the Agulhas, but on going so far south, for a maritime engineer?

A: Yes, there's always a lot of challenges. Mainly things like you've got no back-up where you are. If something breaks, if something goes wrong, you need to be able to make a plan, you need to be able to get the ship back. You've got, I mean it's not like you can sail into the closest port and get a spare or get somebody to come and service the machine or something like that. Your planning has got to be thorough, your maintenance has got to be thorough, and you've got to have a good team with you, that, as I say, if something goes wrong you must be able to fix it. Otherwise you're stuck – that's it. You're not going to go anywhere. Those are, I'd say, the three biggest challenges – it's maintenance, planning and engineering itself. I mean... and it's not just for the ship that we do engineering, we do engineering for... I do engineering for the bases, I do engineering for SANAP, I do engineering for the oceanographers... it's not part of my job; it's just that if they need something done, then I try and help them as best I can.

Q: Does the weather influence engineering at all? 'Cause you're mostly working inside, but also in terms of the cold – does it actually have an impact on the machines?

A: Yes... well, not really on the machine... well, ja, it will do in extreme cold, but in the engine room itself, no not really, because it's still fairly warm down there. But we use a lot of machinery to keep the place warm, I mean, to make water, to keep the accommodation comfortable and all the rest of it, I mean, we're burning fuel to do that. We've got boilers running, we've got, you know, a lot of machinery going just, now today it's turned into the opposite of it, with the air conditioning on, 'cause it started getting muggy in the accommodation, so now I've got that machinery running, but the cold... no not really. If I had to say anything, it is the motion of the ship. You can imagine if we got to, say, overhaul a unit in one of the main engines, say we have a break down in one of the main engines, and we have to start moving stuff there, I mean things are heavy, I mean it's three-quarters of a ton some of the stuff. The ship rolling around, you've got that swinging around also... so, ja, that becomes a bit more challenging. But basically, ja, that's it.

Q: Where you on the vessel last year when one of the engines... failed?

A: Yes

Q: What was that like?

A: Scary...

Q: You weren't on duty, though?

A: No, I was upstairs, I was busy... it was five o'clock in the morning, so... I went running downstairs basically with very little on, 'cause I... the whole ship started shaking, so it woke me up and I ran downstairs and by the time I got down there the guys had shut the engine down. It took us a while, and we saw what the problem was. I went up to the bridge and I said, "right that's it – finished. The engines are not going to run again for the rest of this trip, and for a Chief Engineer to have to say something like that, it's not a nice thing..."

Q: Did you have to overhaul the engine, or... did you have to get a new one?

A: A Well, we took the old engine out and we changed the bits that were damaged, and put it back, and... Well, we stripped a lot of the engine down on the remainder of that voyage. By the time we got to Cape Town, it took us a week, and we had the whole engine down. And in two months, I think it was two months, we had the engine out and the engine back in and running, so it was good going, it was very good going.

Q: Are you involved with the new vessel?

A: Yes, I am.

Q: In what context?

A: Again on the engineering side and the planning and, you know, the checking of drawings and plans and saying yes this equipment will do for us and that's going to work and this will work and, you know, no I'm not happy with that or... I had been... I've been through a lot of the drawings – very much like Freddy's done on the deck side; I've been involved in the engineering side.

Q: Why do you think it is that South Africa is not really a maritime nation?

A: It's a difficult one... I'd say it's probably because we're not being exposed enough. South African seafarers like of my generation, are very highly though about around the world, you know, 'cause we're not scared to work, we're not scared of the challenge... I just think that industry and government are not exposing this industry as much as they should be. I think if you got more exposure, if you got more money to train, if you got more South African shipping companies, SAF Marines just left now, so there's another one gone, I think certainly, I mean we've got the people to do it, it's just to retain the... what skills we got left and retain them in South Africa to pass them on to the youngsters. So, I think it's basically all about exposure. Personally, that's my personal opinion. I mean, when I went to sea nobody told me... I didn't even know that the sea career was out there, I had no idea. The only reason I found out about it is because my father was at sea, OK, and I was in the Navy.

Q: Will the new ship be bigger than this one?

A: Yes. She's going to be quite a bit bigger than this one.

Q: Also in length?

A: In length I think she's about 15 odd meters longer. In breadth she's about six meters wider. In depth... I'm not sure, I think she's pretty much what we are now, maybe a little bit deeper. The total weight, because of those two dimension your weight increases dramatically, and also she's going to be a lot more powerful. She'll be able to handle thicker ice than this one can.

Q: Is ice sometimes a problem for the Agulhas?

A: O, definitely, yes. I mean she's designed as an ice-strengthened vessel... she's not an ice breaker. And we get more than 0.8, 1 meter if ice that's thick... that's it, we don't go anywhere. We're 'vas', you know, we sit sometimes for a while in the ice and wait for it to break up, before...

- Q:** Just not on this journey where there was no ice at all...
- A:** No, there was no ice at all on this trip, there was nothing, whereas last year we were thick with ice. It changes from year to year.
- Q:** On the Agulhas, as a, what would you call it... research vessel, passenger vessel, cargo vessel... what is she?
- A:** Well, I'd say she's a logistical support and oceanographic research vessel.
- Q:** What is the interaction between the officers on this as a research vessel, between the officers and the passengers like? Is it different from other vessels you've sailed on?
- A:** Well, other vessels are seldom... you don't really have passengers per se, you know, the ships that I've sailed on before I came into this fleet, were cargo ships and very seldom had passengers. So, you're sitting on a ship with 18 people and that's it, you know. Whereas here, you've got a 118. OK, now with the drug and alcohol policy that's in, OK we don't socialise much with passengers so much anymore, but on the oceanographic science voyages we do, we drop you guys off, there is quite a lot of interaction – we play volleyball and we, you know, have tea parties and we do this and do that, and have braais which you didn't see firsthand, 'cause you were in the ship. It's a smaller crowd so you it's far easier to interact than with the big crowd. Look, I know all the PWD guys and I have a chat with them from time to time, I know a couple of the scientists and I know this person and I know that person, but as I say, the social aspect of it at the moment is... you know, we don't interact a 'helluva' lot.
- Q:** And between officers and crew? Is it different than other vessels?
- A:** No, very much the same. Officers and crew again there's a lot of interaction between them because we work together. And, I'd say no day goes by where there is no interaction between us, I mean, I'm with my boys all the time.
- Q:** Ja, do you have a crew specifically attached to you?
- A:** Ja, I've got three greasers.
- Q:** Greasers?
- A:** Ja, well, oilers we call them. They work with me downstairs. There's no day that goes by that there's no interaction between us. I mean... the crew and the officers are always together, we always work together, we're side by side all the time.
- Q:** And... what would you like to call the new vessel if it was up to you?
- A:** Frank Wilde
- Q:** Frank Wilde... explain?
- A:** He's a South African Antarctic explorer in the years of Scott and old Shackleton and all that and he spent a lot of time down there. There's actually a plaque for him... a memorial plaque on the church in South Georgia.
- Q:** Really?
- A:** Ja, I've got a photograph here, I'll show you now-now. So, ja, it's got to be either named after somebody that was involved in Antarctica... I'm not saying necessarily him, or something to do with science, as far as I'm concerned. I don't really see that the ship can be named anything else. You know, it's going down there... all the other ships that go down that area are all named after either science or people that were involved in science or, I mean the Aurora Stralis, the Australian one, you know... the Shackleton, Explorer, and the Endeavour... all of them. It's got to be history related as far as I'm concerned.
- Q:** How do you describe Antarctica to people back home?
- A:** White and cold. No it's, as I say, a fairy tale place. As far as I'm concerned. The colours, and the different shades of white that you get, and, you know, people just don't realise that you get so many different shades of white, and if you can't see them you're not looking properly. You know, to just go outside and sit for five minutes and have a look... it's a fairy tale place as far as I'm concerned. Look, it is cold and it is the white desert, as we all know it... I'd rather get lost in the Sahara than there... 'cause in the Sahara I might stand a chance of survival. Here I've got no chance of survival. But, ja, it's the way I feel about it.

Q: Your interest in sea birds... did that come before or as a product of...?

A: Well, certainly as a product of working in this fleet, but not... I was never really interested in them much before I came to Smit, the DEA Fleet, and it's certainly, I'd say within the last four years, maybe even a bit longer than that, say the last five years from when I was on the Afrikana, that I actually really became interested in sea birds.

Q: Have you seen a change in the sea birds in your time... or not really?

A: Not really. I don't I've been into it long enough to notice anything. The whales certainly I've noticed a big difference

Q: What kind difference? More or less?

A: More. A lot more than when I... but then again it could also be because I've been showing interest in them, you know, that I actually see more, but I can remember when I went to sea about 23 years ago, you know, you very seldom, well, you didn't see as many whales as I do now. But there again, I suppose 23 years ago I really didn't look for many whales. But I certainly think over the last couple of years I reckon I see more and more whales all the time.

Q: What is the relationship between the Chief Engineering Officer and the Captain? I mean to who... do you report directly to the captain?

A: Well...

Q: Or do you just report to yourself?

A: I report basically to myself, but I speak to him... he's got to know what's going on, he's in charge of the safety of the vessel. I'm in charge of basically all the mechanical side, the steelwork side, the electrical side, everything else, you know, to keep the ship going and I... we have a meeting every morning and we sit and we talk and ja this and that and 'waddawaddawadda', 'hannahannahanna' and you know this and that. I'd say the guy I report to is well, there's a superintendent and the vessel managers and that on shore in Cape Town.

Q: How many years do you think does Agulhas have left in her?

A: Ooh, if you look after this baby, she'll carry on going for a long time, ja... no, she's built strong, you know, but again it also depends on how much money you want to throw at it. It doesn't matter what the problem is, it all depends on how much money you're willing to throw at it. You've got a lot of money to throw at it, hey; it will go for a long, long time. I don't think they want her going down south too much anymore, because of the single propeller and all, this story and that story, but as a research platform, oceanographic platform, we throw a little bit of money at the ship, she'll be an excellent platform for science.

Q: Does Agulhas have any kind of special reputation in the South African maritime world?

A: Ah, ja, I reckon, definitely, I mean, she's got such a little name for herself, you know, and you speak to anybody about the Agulhas and everybody knows what the Agulhas is and who she is and all the rest of it, and, no she's... and specifically with the guys that have worked on her, she's very dear to our hearts, I mean, the guys always put in all the extra effort and that to make her look nice and to keep her nice and performing nice and all the rest of it. She's a lovely little ship; I mean the guys are all extremely fond of her.

Q: OK, thank you. Is there anything you'd like to add?

A: No, I don't think there's much more... I'm not one for talking too much.

Q: OK, it's been lovely. Thank you so much.