



Harbour masters Carita Rönqvist from Finland and David Shennan from Geelong talk to *DCN's* David Sexton about their work and offer some thoughts for the future.

Victorian Ports operations control centre

Victorian Ports Corporation

Bringing lessons of the past into the future

Perhaps somewhat unheralded, harbour masters nonetheless play a crucial role in safe shipping, and therefore the movement of freight and commodities, around the world. Harbour masters have been around for centuries, but their roles have evolved, particularly in recent years with new ideas and developments in technology.

A HARBOUR MASTER FROM THE BALTIC

Carita Rönnqvist is the harbour master at Port of Kokkola, the third-largest general port in Finland, positioned on the upper Gulf of Bothnia. Her first language is Swedish and she is also fluent in Finnish, German and English. She originally trained as a teacher of languages and after studying in Germany later worked in London and spent time in Mexico, the United States and Brazil.

The sea was always in her blood, however, her father having been a sailor, albeit her father was unconvinced a maritime career was the right choice.

“My father said, ‘you cannot go to sea, it is not the right job for a woman,’” Captain Rönnqvist says.

Nonetheless, after attending navigation school she worked her way up, starting as a deckhand, with eight years on ro-ro, container, passenger and bulkships, at the same time as balancing the needs of her young family (her daughter Eva was born in 1988 and her second child Ron was born in 1990), her children spending much time with their grandparents as mum and dad both worked at sea.

NORTHERN CLIMES

Captain Rönnqvist tells *DCN* about some of the challenges of managing a port in what can be an extreme climate.

“In harsh winter times the ice can be very thick up to four to five metres. In easier conditions the ice breakers give positions to the vessels where to wait and lead them into the ports in caravans,” she says.

“When the conditions are harder each vessel must be towed (by wire), which means that the vessels are

delayed. The berthing is not easy either because of the ice.”

THE TREND TOWARDS COMMERCIAL PORTS

Ports around the world have undergone much change in terms of the way they do business and Kokkola is no different. Captain Rönnqvist notes how the port has changed from being a “pure” port authority into a more commercial port.

“We own all the warehouses and the harbour cranes and rent them out,” she explains. “Before [the port] was the terminal and stevedoring company. From last year the port itself provided for and sold logistic services. We make direct contracts with the customers, the railway company and invite the stevedoring companies to tender and take the risk until the vessel is loaded.

“I do everything that I have done before, but we are all now also more involved in the whole logistics of the business,” she says.

CHANGES AHEAD AND PANDEMIC

DCN asked Captain Rönnqvist how she saw the role of harbour master evolving.

“There will be more regulations and a need for ports to come up with technical solutions when it comes to the environment and pollution issues,” she says.

“What is not changing is that ships will come and go, they will be loaded and unloaded. There might not be crew to deal with on every ship, but the contact with somebody ashore or on the ship is needed also in the future,” she says.

A MAN’S WORLD?

It is hardly a secret that the maritime industry has a reputation for being “male-dominated”, something noted by Captain Rönnqvist.

“The maritime sector was very male-dominated when I started. I think I was one of those, who broke the glass ceiling several times. It was very difficult





Captain Carita Rönnqvist near bulkers at Port of Kokkola

Many men onboard had problems working with a woman but I thought it was their problem, not mine.

Captain Carita Rönnqvist

to get a job at sea and on deck as a woman when I started,” she says.

“My luck was that they ran out of employees. It was very hard to find a workforce that time so they had to employ all they got. Many men onboard had problems working with a woman but I thought it was their problem, not mine.”

She notes that starting her maritime career when she was a bit older and with some life experience made the journey easier.

“I was older and had been a teacher, had travelled a lot and had some experience,” she says. “Nowadays there are more women at sea, although most of them come ashore when they get a family.

“In the ports, though, there are still very few women as harbour masters. In Finland we are only two of 53 harbour masters at the moment. In Sweden I know of two female harbour masters.”

Happily, Captain Rönnqvist’s father, who voiced his concerns about her choice of career, later took pride in her success.

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR OTHERS

Does Captain Rönnqvist encourage other women to consider a maritime career?

“Absolutely,” she says. “It is a very interesting and inspiring field to work in. It is a lot to learn and you will never get bored.

“Maritime experts will be needed in many places also in the future. But I recommend at least 10 years at sea to get enough experience before looking to work ashore,” she says.

Captain Rönnqvist is due to speak at the International Harbour Master Association Conference in Hobart scheduled for October.

“I will recommend the maritime business for anybody,” she says. “It is an interesting field. The work will change from being an outside work to inside, it will be more technical, more remote but the maritime sector will always remain.”

SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVE

David Shennan is an experienced harbour master and master mariner. Originally from the UK, he is now the harbour master at Geelong and previously held the same role at Melbourne and Portland.

DCN asked Captain Shennan what he considered were the key attributes of a harbour master?

“Qualifications-wise, your typical harbour master has been to sea in some capacity – usually as a deck officer of some kind, and become a master mariner along the way,” he says.

“However, they may have taken any number of different stepping stones within the industry to arrive at the destination.

“These days not all harbour masters are master mariners, but not to be one puts you at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to knowledge of maritime rules and regulations, international best practice and even a feel for how mariners think and operate.”

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

A good harbour master, he believes, has other personal attributes as well.

“The main ones are high quality experience, because this is where sound judgement comes from, and leadership abilities,” he says.

“These are essential because the port is a community, and a safe port community is one in which all members are listened to and actively contribute to safety and effectiveness.”

Like any leadership role, there is a need for emotional intelligence.

“Being a harbour master is like being master of a ship, but just as the old ways of autocratic captaincy do not fly on the bridge anymore, neither are they acceptable in a port setting,” he says.

“That is why I developed and use the concept of PRM (port resource management), which is just like bridge resource management, but involves all the stakeholders in the port community.”

Being a harbour master is like being master of a ship, but just as the old ways of autocratic captaincy do not fly on the bridge any more, neither are they acceptable in a port setting.

Captain David Shennan



A cruise ship turns into the dedicated channel leading to Station Pier in Port Melbourne and a cargo ship continuing towards the cargo wharves of the port



Captain David Shennan,
harbour master,
Geelong

CHANGING TIMES

While change is a constant, it has been less profound during the past five to 10 years, he believes.

“There were more changes in the 10 years previous to that,” he says. “It tends to take a disaster to effect major change, and the most recent of such catalysts was probably the *Sea Empress* accident in Milford Haven in 1996.

“This gave rise to the UK’s Port Marine Safety Code, which I was involved in developing. The concept was introduced to Australia about the time I arrived just over a decade ago.”

A key part of the Port Marine Safety Code was the introduction of formal marine risk assessments.

“As we all know, dynamic risk assessing is everywhere these days and is a great step towards improved safety, but it’s more of a shiny new tool that improves a harbour master’s decision making than a change to the harbour master’s role,” Captain Shennan says.

CHALLENGES IN AUSTRALIA

Captain Shennan notes being a harbour master in Australia has unique challenges, notably the quirks of the federal system.

“Personally, from someone who has come from the UK model, it has certainly not proved easier to navigate,” he says.

“The three most significant challenges are the fact that all states operate different systems, the fact that these are regularly changed (or at least reviewed) when governments change and thirdly, the lack of maritime expertise at top levels of management, on boards and in key decision-making areas,” he says.

“In the UK a company/government department with a core role in shipping or navigational safety would have that expertise on the board, for example. The role of navigational safety is largely consistent and outside

of regular political influence, and there is probably less use of consultants.”

He says the harbour master role in Australia is often quite far down “the chain of influence” and in some jurisdictions the lawmakers have completely changed what the role means (and even the title harbour master) without really understanding the implications of the role and the way it needs to be understood by the international maritime community.

“Of course my peers who have only ever worked in Australia will have a different list of challenges I’m sure,” he says.

LICENCED BY A STATE

Another challenge here in Australia, Captain Shennan says, is the concept of being licenced by a state but ‘hired’ by a commercial entity.

“This may sound like quite a conflict, but it has always worked well in my experience,” he says.

“If needed, I can use my licence to make a safety call in the face of commercial pressure. However, because my employer knows I will always do my best to facilitate shipping movements or customer requests if it can be done, any safety call I have made with my ‘state’ hat on has always been respected.”

GLOBAL COMMUNITY

DCN asked Captain Shennan if there is much sharing of ideas and key lessons between harbour masters in Australia and overseas.

“Quite a lot of sharing goes on, mainly through networks set up by the likes of the IHMA, Ports Australia’s navigational safety working groups and by holding regular state-wide harbour master meetings,” he says.

“There aren’t many of us overall and we tend to all know each other and feel comfortable asking how

our peers have handled or are dealing with issues that might come up in our environment.

"This may be through phone calls, emails or regular meetings and conferences. These are really invaluable for sharing information as our operating environment constantly changes."

A VISION FOR THE ROLE OF HARBOUR MASTER

Captain Shennan isn't afraid to paint a big picture perspective for the future role of harbour master.

"I've now been harbour master of four different types of port authority in two hemispheres, and I've found it possible to bring lessons from previous roles to the one I'm working in," he says.

"I am confident that while I remained there, these resulted in improvements. However, once I leave, it's totally up to the current harbour master whether they stay the course I established or take another direction.

"As for the future, my very clear vision is to leave that for the next generation. I have tried to retire once already and fully intend to succeed second time around. I will retire feeling like I did some good for navigational safety and that is satisfaction enough for me," he says.

THE NATURE OF POLITICS

Captain Shennan says he "can't really see an Australia where the role of harbour master becomes less exposed to political forces".

"It was easier and constant to work in the UK system, but a country is what a country is, and we all work within the environment we're in to the best of our abilities," he says.

"Having said that, Australian's navigational safety record is one any country would be proud of and that is the main thing at the end of the day."

FINAL THOUGHTS ON COVID-19

No interview or conversation with anyone today would be complete without at least one question about COVID-19 or coronavirus, the pandemic that has shaken our lives so profoundly.

Captain Shennan notes the pandemic issue has been "a really challenging one for harbour masters".

"We have to consider our powers of control and direction when allowing ships access to our port," he says. "These can be different in different parts of the world. Whether a ship is granted 'free pratique' is normally determined by a national agency.

"The harbour master does not often have the power to direct a vessel to remain outside the port, unless the safety of the vessel, life or protection of the environment is at stake."

Under COVID-19 conditions, he notes, while there may be a risk to the community in allowing a ship to enter port, it has to be weighed up against the denial of medical assistance to a member of the ship's crew.

"What this has meant for us is that there are some ships we cannot stop coming into port before

completion of a 14-day quarantine period, which would be our obvious preference," he says.

"I am currently working harder than ever because of the challenges thrown up by COVID-19, not least on ensuring we can maintain business continuity so ships with essential supplies will not stop coming into Geelong."

Captain Shennan says backup plans have been developed for alternative shipping control if it is deemed necessary. ■

The 12th International Harbour Masters Congress is scheduled for Hobart from 5-9 October, 2020.



NEW HARBOUR MASTER APPOINTED IN CAIRNS

■ Maritime Safety Queensland says it is continuing its commitment to the highest standards of professionalism for port operations with the appointment of experienced sea captain David Ferguson as Cairns' new regional harbour master.

Captain Ferguson formally took over the post in April after relieving in the position for several months. The job is already a familiar one thanks to his previous five years with Maritime Safety Queensland as assistant harbour master (Northern Ports) working in Cairns, Townsville and Mackay.

Maritime Safety Queensland general manager Angus Mitchell says he was pleased to announce Captain Ferguson's appointment.

"A master mariner, Captain Ferguson has sailed on passenger ships in Europe and the Caribbean, bulk carriers and gas tankers in Asia and Australia and on offshore industry support vessels out of Singapore," Mr Mitchell says.

"He also spent time on superyachts in the Caribbean and sailed locally in the Cairns Reef Fleet.

"More recently Captain Ferguson has gained a wide range of experience and knowledge of the Cairns maritime region, ensuring safe efficient shipping in far north Queensland, as part of the Transport and Main Roads transport network."

As Cairns regional harbour master, Captain Ferguson will oversee 10 ports in Far North Queensland, the region being the largest in Queensland, with 3000km of mainland coast.

"I first moved to the Cairns region more than 20 years ago so I'm practically a local," Captain Ferguson says.

"With 30 years' experience in the maritime industry, I am pleased to continue the great work done by Maritime Safety Queensland as part of the Transport and Main Roads network.

"I look forward to ensuring a safe and efficient maritime industry and for all users of our waterways, as well as protecting the waters of the region including the Great Barrier Reef."