

Profile

# Ship's master and jack of all trades

**John David of Marine Professionals can look back on a wide-ranging career**



Liz McMAHON

AFTER an eventful career spanning the length and breadth of the maritime industry, Marine Professionals investigator John David finally believes he has found peace delving into murky misdemeanours across the industry he knows like the back of his hand.

Mr David had no nautical calling, if such a thing exists. More romantic than it possibly sounds, he ran away to sea after an altercation with his father and school at the age of 16. He had never even seen a ship.

Despite his rather foolish motivation, Mr David fell on his feet working for a firm he affectionately refers to as "the London Greeks" and he found his first taste of sea life "absolutely fantastic".

The shipping firm had an array of different vessels and even then Mr David could not commit to one type, so he tried his hand at all and consequently developed an enviable and wide-ranging knowledge that would stand him good stead in the future.

At that point, however, all he thought about was how to have the best time possible switching from working on isolated tankers for months on end to earn enough money to blow on the more hedonistic cargo voyages.

The recession of the late 1970s hit the London Greeks and forced them to sell a vast proportion of their fleet and in turn make a swathe of redundancies. Mr David escaped the cull due to his range of experience but this was not



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necessarily as positive as it sounds.

"They were closing down progressively and then I realised I was further away from a captain than I was cadet. As there were only three ships left and 60 of us, I voluntarily bailed out," he said.

This meant Mr David had to pay for his own qualifications and he then made the decision to go to the "dark side" and leave the British flag for a Monaco-based company.

Although he had an equally happy time there, he said the firm was less family focused and there were fewer indulgences.

It was there, however, where he got the opportunity to progress to the position of captain at the tender age of 33.

Mr David said he was never in

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awe of any captain but in turn coveted the autonomy they enjoyed.

He recalls: "All one master used to do was sit in his ivory tower with an entire deck to himself and shout. I knew I could do more than sit on my own deck, be horrible and drink a bottle of gin a day."

It was virtually unheard of to have a captain as young as Mr David, who said it was usually a case of dead men's shoes.

However, his impatience and persistence paid off and eventually the firm took a leap of faith and gave him the position. He was a captain for five years until things eventually fizzled out for him.

"I didn't get bored, but 14-15 hour days took their toll and my social life was crap," he said.

"I had seven to nine months on the ship talking in monosyllables to the crew. They would have walked over broken glass for me but my chief officer was at best an average third officer so there was a huge gap of knowledge and experience between me and the next one down. It was just stressful."

Mr David had seen films in which barristers stood up and waxed lyrical about the sea and he knew that someone must be feeding them the bullets.

"I could quite happily sit in his shadow telling him how supertankers [very large crude carriers] worked and I so wrote to Clydes and told them they needed someone like me and they said they already had several people like me, thank you very much," he said.

Not one to give up at the first hurdle, Mr David's tenacity paid off once more and Clyde & Co offered him a job which saw him spend the next nine years of his life with the firm. And yet he felt that he hit a ceiling at the law firm very quickly.

"When we first joined we had the same progression open to us as lawyers but the rungs were further apart. It was suggested that most mariners who come ashore become lawyers but they are half man, half biscuit and they are competing with so many bright people. I didn't want to struggle," he admitted.

When he realised that he would not be able to become a partner it changed things and he decided to leave and start his own investigative consultancy with a partner who had been at Clydes for 13 years.

When the pair started out at Clydes they had what they perceived to be an open market as up until that point hull underwriters had not been using marine people to investigate claims.

"We had built a good standing in the City but we also had a bad reputation for how much it cost working for a law firm. When I left Clydes I already had hull clients that trusted me," he said.

That was seven years ago and now we have such a mixed bag of great work. It is incredibly good fun. When we talk to people in the market, they listen."

It is difficult to know if Marine Professionals will be Mr David's last marine endeavour but looking at the twinkle still in his eye, it is likely he has at least one more new adventure up his sleeve. ■