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# Anil Bhatia, managing director, Ausport Marine

By JIM WILSON

Originally hailing from the Indian town of Pune, about 100 kilometres from the ocean, it was not exactly pre-ordained that Anil would have a maritime career.

## More than a bucketful

"I'd never seen more than a bucketful of water!" he laughs. However, Anil went to sea at the remarkably young age of 16.

"It was something my friend did. [An apprenticeship] was not easy to get, but I went after it and I got it. It was tough. 16 is a young age. I was a bit too wet behind the ears and I had to grow up quickly".

It was a very different time. Unacceptable behaviour today was merely just how things were done back then.

"I got bullied at sea. Cadets were bullied by seniors," Anil recalls sadly.

It's a hard physical job too, and there was one big problem for the growing Anil.

"As a young man, working long hours and hard work, you were constantly hungry. But there were only three designated meals. It's not enough when you're doing hard physical labour – painting decks, going up and down ladders. You went out there and you worked your backside off. And of course, there was no Uber Eats! You couldn't even go and open the family fridge!", he exclaims with mock outrage.

Nonetheless, Anil seems to have been able to put up with the bullying, arduous labour, and hunger. He also undertook a truly mammoth-sized swing of duty. He needed 36 months of sea time to qualify for the second mate's exam and he got it done in one go. For various reasons, he ended up on the far side of the world from India, in Brazil, sailed to Japan on an iron ore haul, and ended up in Singapore doing a dry dock.

"I left as a boy and came back as man. I had grown up, grown out and had grown a beard. When I got back to my community, no-one recognised me except for my dog!" he laughs.

## Humbling responsibility

Onboard ship, he most enjoyed being a watch-keeping officer. He was fascinated by being able to control the ship, by steering it and by carrying out anti-collision manoeuvres. In those days, sailors did not have GPS and so they would have to navigate through position-fixing and astronomical sighting.



"It was a sense of achievement and responsibility when I was pretty young. It was interesting and quite humbling, especially when you see the scale of the vessel, when you have responsibility for lives and the value of the cargo," he says.

When he became second-in-command, he found he enjoyed carrying out activities such as passage planning and cargo intake.

## Industrial experimentation and a big risk

Industrially, it was an innovative and experimental time, and the shipping industry was experimenting with Ore-Bulk-Oil ships. They were incredibly complex and sophisticated multipurpose vessels that could carry a dry cargo on one leg of

a voyage and an oil cargo on another. The idea of course, was to maximise profit through reducing sailing in ballast, and through being optimally-traded.

Unfortunately, they were just too difficult to operate, especially with the increased awareness of the importance of preserving the environment.

"Cleaning out the tanks was a big challenge. It was a big ask to clean, to put all the wash water in the sump tanks, and then later discharge it over the side. You had to make sure those tanks were completely free of oil. Believe you me, we had to take dinghies into the tanks and every day you would find blobs and clumps of oil. It was all too much risk... you've got the US Coast Guard and their helicopters hanging over you, waiting for you to lose a thimbleful of oil. Then the US Department of Agriculture is waiting for you to issue a notice of readiness to load grain. It was all in 48 hours, it was a big ask. It was tough. And it was not long after the *Exxon Valdez*, so if there was any oil spill they would lock you up and throw away the key," he says.

There are hardly any OBO carriers on the high seas anymore.

"When I went to sea, the world was experimenting with them and, when I left, the world decided to stop building the things," he chuckles.

## Brutal and relentless

Life at sea has its perils, and especially in the northern part of the northern hemisphere. As any mariner will tell you, up there the sea is cold, the wind is fierce and the waves are huge.

Anil recalls a consecutive voyage charter from Sullom Voe, an oil terminal on the remote Shetland Islands, on the border of the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea, to Quebec in Canada.

"There were three or four depressions around us, no escape route. You came out of one storm and straight into another. It was absolutely roaring, man. There were 12 to 15 metre swells. There



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Anil as a young man at sea

was a crack on the fore peak tank, and in those days it was single skins and this crack was about a foot above the water level. The ship was pitching and heaving. The crack started growing. The only way to arrest the crack was to drill a hole on each side of it and then patch it up. As the vessel was pitching and heaving under and above the water, you only had a limited time to drill. We got the crack arrested, changed speed, and eventually got it welded up. We limped into the St Lawrence River,” he says.

Anil’s vessel was one of two identical sister ships making the same run at the same time. The sister ship, which got into port about eight hours ahead of Anil’s ship, appeared to have had an even worse time of it. “Their ship had cracks on the deck plates and there was crude oil all over their deck. The crew couldn’t even stand on the deck. The power of ocean. Brutal and relentlessness. I developed a respect for it,” Anil says.

#### **By the book...**

Being at sea was a big learning experience. In hindsight, Anil recalls that there were many decisions and actions that could have been done better. One

of those hard-learned lessons was to trust in the value of experience, and to perhaps not completely trust what is written in academic textbooks.

Anil was trying to load a ship to take the maximum cargo. So far, so good. He followed the instructions in the book and applied the tables, following the notes that ships can be loaded by a certain amount at the head, and then by a certain amount in the next hold, and the next and then it all evens out. In theory anyway.

“I found out it does not happen that way,” Anil chuckles. “You have to go by the stern first”.

#### **A lesson in advanced gravitational physics**

The reason is simple. Pipelines in ships tend to start near the prow and run towards the stern, where the engine is located. Anyone with a rudimentary experience of gravity will intuitively understand that fluids will tend to flow downhill. So, if the vessel is loaded correctly – starting with the stern – then the ‘downhill’ orientation in the ship will quite happily deliver fluids to the engine.

But do it by the book with a resulting decline that runs from stern to prow and,

well, we’ll let Anil explain the scientific consequences...

“Liquids do not flow upwards against gravity,” he reflects.

“I had to go to the captain and explain that we were two centimetres down at the head. I was terrified he was going to fire me. But he didn’t. The book said to do it. So I did it. Apparently, everyone else had the universal knowledge not to do it. They were all like, ‘didn’t you know that? You idiot!’,” he chuckles.

Fortunately, there was a workaround and Anil had a new lesson to remember. One he has evidently not forgotten after all these years.

#### **High point achieved and a change of focus**

Over time Anil progressed in his chosen career until he reached a high point – it was when he received his first command. “Every young cadet dreams from the first of having his first command. It gives you a sense of achievement of having been successful in reaching the peak of your chosen career,” he says.

Jumping forward a bit in space, time and personal circumstances, and Anil had



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been a ship master for a while. He'd been taking his daughter sailing with him, but she was getting of an age where she needed to be with her peer group and in a regular school. It was time to go ashore.

A new learning experience followed, as he became a supervisor in a container terminal and he learned a lot about the container business, and about business generally. That was followed by a spell at a ship management company where he learned how to tout for business, how to analyse and assess, how to do marketing.

It was quite a daunting task, there was a learning curve. But it got easier. I loved it! It was my world," I was continuing in the same industry, operating ships from ashore, he says.

### Going into business

Over time he naturally leaned toward being in business for himself. In his mid-40s he took the leap into business.

"I felt a bit concerned, anxious. I'd never done it before in my life. I'd always worked

for someone. I was in my mid-40s, and I'd always wanted to do it. And I thought, if I don't do it now, I'm never going to do it. My wife supported me in that decision. So, I took the plunge!" he says.

It was a bold move but it worked out. He started small and his efforts were rewarded by industry. Eventually he was invited to set up a tug company. In 2001 he started a business called Australian Maritime Services, although he later exited after a few years. Anil has, over time, been involved in several businesses.

### And the rest, as they say, is history...

He also started a mooring business in 2001, called Ausport Marine, which went hand-in-hand with towage. The business has flourished and has expanded around Australia. Anil says that the biggest success is winning the trust that the clients have put in the company, and in developing a team and the corporate ability to deliver. Anil gives a good example of how the industry has come to trust his company.

"The minute we decided to start in Sydney, the biggest and most valued clients all started and came out and supported us, as soon as they were free to do so. It was a very humbling experience. Questions were being asked of us: can you go to this port, or that port? It showed there is trust in us, which we are grateful for, which we appreciate and which we want to ensure is maintained".

Reflecting on his time building a business in Australia, Anil is thankful to the industry which he has served. "Thank you for being such a dignified, gentlemanly crowd. The industry is full of wonderful people, and it is a pleasure to work within it," he says.

Ausport Marine provides a wide range of services including surveys, management, superintendency, insurance claims and handling, chartering consultancy, and offshore vessel operations. Shipping Australia was pleased to welcome Anil's company, Ausport Marine, as an associate member earlier this year. ▲



Ore-Bulk-Oil carrier berthed in Quebec