

Poseidon Sea Pilot's Captain Robert Buck and the unforgiving sea

By SHIPPING AUSTRALIA

Pictured: Captain Robert Buck is the new general manager of Poseidon Sea Pilots. Photo supplied by Poseidon Sea Pilots.

Mariners say the ocean can be unforgiving. During a voyage as a junior officer, Robert Buck found just out how much. Although he didn't know it, he was a little more than four minutes from disaster.

"We knew the cyclone was out there," Robert recalls.

The crew were carrying steel on the Newcastle-Auckland route in a general cargo ship. The voyage takes about five days, but bad weather adds an extra couple of days. One day out from Newcastle and the weather deteriorated.

Technically, they were sailing through a south-moving extra-tropical depression.

"It was a cyclone in all but name," Robert says.

The weather was awful. Visibility was poor because it was overcast and because of the driving rain. Windspeeds were more than 50 knots (93 kilometres per hour).

The sea state was rough and high, about the size of a three storey-building. Although the vessel was pitching heavily, it wasn't rolling so much because the ship was headed bow-first into a series of big waves.

"The ship was riding over it quite reasonably. I was on the bridge at the time, about 10-ish. It wasn't anything that the ship couldn't normally handle," Robert recalls.

Then the engines failed.

"The lights went out. The ship's engines went silent. Their vibrations stopped. It was eerily quiet," he says.

With a loss of steerage, the ship turned side-on to the waves.

Seawater weighs a little over a tonne per cubic metre. That's about the same as a 1979 Volkswagen Beetle. The waves were wide, long, up to eight metres tall and were moving fast. "Force" is "mass multiplied by acceleration". The impact of hundreds of cubic metres of seawater repeatedly smashing into the side of the ship would have been enormous.

The vessel was rolling violently. It was in imminent danger of being turned over.

"The inclinometer had a 45 degree maximum scale. It went past that! We were stuck beyond 45 degrees to the vertical. I thought that the next wave would push us over," he says.

Then the steel cargo shifted down in the hold.

Suddenly, the lights came back, the engines restarted, the ship regained power and the bow swung back to face the waves. The vessel could again ride out the storm.

"When the engineer got the engines started, it was such a sense of relief. That was probably the scariest experience I've ever had at sea. In a near-cyclone. Driving wind and rain. Not a pleasant experience. I was glad to get out of it," Robert says.

"One thing I remember was that the time it took for the engineer to get to the engine room and re-start the engines was four minutes".

That short period must have seemed like a lifetime, standing on the bridge, in the dark, on an unnaturally quiet and dangerously rolling ship.

The storm ruptured seals, smashed windows, ripped off a gangway, shorted out hatch motors, bent the bulwarks on the fo'c'sle head, deformed the rails, tore off air vents, and flooded all the storage spaces. The shifted cargo caused permanent list of five degrees.

It was in this sorry state that they limped into Auckland.

"The damage was so severe, it took six weeks to repair," Robert says.

Being by the sea is relaxing

Adelaide-native Robert has always enjoyed being by the sea. His parents owned a small beach shack and a little boat. So he fished a couple of hundred metres off the beach.

"It's quite relaxing to be out on the water, and I enjoyed the lifestyle of being by the beach, swimming and anything to do with the sea," he says.

Going to sea felt like a natural progression, especially as a friend had been taken on as deck apprentice and Robert had some insight into seafaring.

"So I wrote a letter to BHP and six weeks later, I was on a ship! Jobs were easy to come by back then," he says.

Robert joined as a deck apprentice in 1974 at 17 years of age.

From apprentice to bulker officer

Seafarer life was hands-on, chipping off rust, priming, and painting. It's a constant maintenance battle. Robert learned many aspects of seamanship: decks, engines, catering, navigation, seamanship, ship stability, and navigation by celestial bodies – no GPS back then.

"There's been huge advances in electronics. Shipping has always been a bit behind the times – the industry's catching up, but it still has some catching up to do. Some of the equipment is so accurate now, it would have been science fiction back when I was a kid," Robert says.

He stayed on with BHP after his apprenticeship to get his Second Mate's Certificate of Competency.

"I was quite elated! It's always stressful studying for exams. It was the first major achievement of my career".

Robert enjoyed the dry bulk trades. He travelled around Australia and enjoyed the 2,000km Inner Route of the Great Barrier Reef from Cairns to the Torres Strait.

Shipping took Robert to many places overseas: to Japan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and southeast Asia. His first overseas trip to Yokohama, near Tokyo, was particularly interesting as it was a half a world away, literally, and metaphorically, from home.

"I had grown up in a traditional Australian family as far as food and culture went. So going to Japan and learning about new cultures was interesting! I ate sushi and used chopsticks for the first time. None of those things were available in Australia," he recalls.

It's a gas, gas, gas!

BHP operated an LPG carrier in 1986 and mariners needed special endorsements to sail it. After several years sailing the dry bulk trades, Robert was keen to try out the gas trades because it was new and innovative. There was lots of new technology to use, and Robert was keen to get involved.

"It was continuous professional development. Anything that opened up new thoughts, new ways of doing things. It keeps things interesting, keeps the mind active," he says.

He was notified of his first command while sailing a gas carrier north to Japan in 1991. He was simply sent an email

advising that he should leave ship upon its arrival back in Australia as he was to be promoted to ship master.

"That was it. No fanfare, nothing dramatic. But getting your first command is always a major milestone in your maritime career. So, yeah, I was quite pleased. Knowing that I was getting my command at the end of the voyage was very happy, very pleasing", he says.

Paying it forward

From 1992 until 1996, Robert was a member of the recruitment team for marine trainees in the BHP fleet. Apprenticeships had given way to cadetships. Trainees would study at the Australian Maritime College in Launceston, practical study and sea-time would follow.

"I spent four years interviewing people around the country. I was doing that in my off-time from my ship. I was still sailing as master. I was paid, but I used my holiday time to do the recruitment. I can remember a few candidates. One young guy was working in a country abattoir. He'd worked overnight, driven down, and fell asleep in the interview! We didn't hold it against him, we felt sorry for him and, as he was so keen, we gave him the job. I'm very pleased to say that a very large number of people I interviewed are still in the maritime industry".

Leaving the sea, becoming a pilot

After years of working around the Australian coast, Robert had become a pilot-exempt master in several ports. Then, in 1997, after 23 years of working at sea, he was offered a job with Port Philip Sea Pilots. It was time for the next adventure.

Becoming a pilot is arduous.

There are a huge number of observations to be carried out on ships, on tugs and in harbour control towers. Then there's a three hour oral exam with an expert board. Answers had to be given solely from memory on a wide range of maritime matters.

"It was a very intense exam; they can ask a lot of questions in three hours," Robert chuckles.

Then there's ongoing training with a check-pilot who observes and signs off on pilotages as they are completed on different sizes and types of ships.

"It only took about three years... on top of 23 years at sea! It was master / apprentice training. It was the only way of

doing it. There are better ways of doing it now. With simulators, you can practice repeats and emergencies. You can't practice a blackout on a ship in a channel, but you can in a simulator," he says.

From pilot to managing director

For Robert, being a pilot has all the best parts of being a ship master, such as ship handling, but it has more variety. Pilots could be on a little rig tender one morning, on a large box ship in the afternoon, and on something completely different the day after.

In 2002, Robert became a director as he wanted to broaden his skills and become more involved with the shore-side and with management. In 2005 he became the managing director.

Robert became involved in all aspects of running the company – everything from human resources, finance, customer relations, working with harbour masters and regulators.

"I was there for just under 15 years. I sort of fell into it and stayed there. It was a very busy life," he says.

Revolving doors

After many years it was time to move on and he resigned from Port Philip Sea Pilots in 2021.

He wanted to spend his time fishing and being involved with his small winery in Springton, in the Barossa Valley.

"I had intended to retire," he laughs.

But well-known industry figures Steve Pelecanos and John Watkinson approached Robert and asked if he would be interested in being the General Manager of Poseidon Sea Pilots.

Poseidon presented Robert with the opportunity to do pilotage in a new, technology-focused, way.

"One of the benefits of Poseidon is its association with AMS Group – a cutting-edge maritime technology group of companies. The combination of maritime experience and technology is a very powerful amalgam of two ways of thinking to improve safety in pilotage. Pilotage has been very conservative over the years. Poseidon presents a new opportunity to innovate and the pilotage landscape in Australia is changing. I'm sure it will make some people uncomfortable. There's no need to be scared. Embrace it. We can move forward," he says. ▲