

More forgotten industrial heritage

Admiralty Floating Dock No.35 – Return to the Far East



MICHAEL CASSAR

Admiralty Floating Dock (AFD) 35 was ready for use in July 1948 but the hulk of AFD 8 was still at the berth planned for it at Magazine Wharf. It was ironic that the Royal Navy had ships stemmed for docking but was unable to use its newest and largest asset.

An operational berth was created in Dockyard Creek by removing buoys and several craft to make space for the huge structure. Dockyard Creek being shallower than Magazine Wharf, the dock had a reduced operational working draught of 28 feet compared to a maximum of 40 feet at the latter.

The move from Boiler Wharf to Dockyard Creek was carried out on the morning of August 2. The *Times of Malta* reported that the operation seemingly blocked the harbour. The length of the dock was roughly the distance from South Street to St John Street. Then, "this floating mass of steel and intricate machinery, linked by 46 miles of cable and some 10 miles of copper tubing, was on the move again, this time tugged and patted to the berth it will occupy in Dockyard Creek until such time as Malta's old dock, one of the early victims of the blitz, is cleared... By mid-afternoon the operation appeared to be complete, a solitary mooring vessel busy in mid-stream laying the final anchor."

After a month of tests and sinking trials, the aircraft carrier HMS *Ocean* was docked on September 21. Were it not for photographs of the floating dock blocking the creek for 15 months it would be hard to believe these are the same waters where sleek, luxury yachts now berth at the Cottonera Waterfront.

After the successful salvage of AFD 8, the new floating dock was moved from Dockyard Creek to Magazine Wharf on the morning of October 24, 1949. The civil engineering chief bucket dredger St Albans had deepened the seabed to enable the dock to sink to its maximum depth. Another month of adjustments, tests and sinking trials followed until November 25,

when HMS *Glory* was docked for the first time.

The Suez Crisis of October-November 1956 was the last occasion when Malta-based British forces were used as a spearhead for an attack on a neighbouring country. It was also the last time that the Dockyard would be called to rise to the occasion by meeting deadlines and carry out urgent refits and repairs. The debacle that followed marked the end of Britain as a world power, and led to a decision to whittle down and even close overseas bases, notably the massive Malta Dockyard establishment.

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On March 29, 1959, part of the Dockyard was leased to C. H. Bailey, a Welsh ship repair firm. The next morning, 6,300 men clocked for work with their new civilian employer. All the docks, except for AFD 35, were transferred to Bailey (Malta) Ltd. The floating dock continued in operation, with the Admiralty responsible for docking, and Bailey providing labour on commercial ships. AFD 35 was tested to the full with the docking of some very large oil tankers, such as the 53,000-ton *George F. Getty* in February 1961.

Bailey undertook massive Dockyard development by enlarging Nos. 4 and 5 docks, lengthening Boiler Wharf, and building a tank-cleaning farm at Ricasoli. The company failed to see its projects materialise when, on February 14, 1963, it was relieved from the concession owing to alleged financial irregularities. Bailey (Malta) Ltd continued to exist on the

HMS *Ocean* enters the dock on September 22, 1948.



books but Swan Hunter & Wigham Richardson was appointed manager of a new entity, Malta Drydocks.

In August 1964, the Ministry of Defence issued tenders for the sale of AFD 35. The tender was awarded on September 9 to C. Bajada & Son, Coal Importers, established in 1898.

Although Bajada was technically the new owner, there was one final naval docking, that of HMS *Lion* on September 25, to inspect damage sustained in a collision with HMS *Lowestoft* in the Firth of Forth on September 4.

Efforts to retain the dock for use in Grand Harbour failed. Bajada

asked for government support and then offered to enter into partnership with Swan Hunter who, with its dockyard expansion programme completed, was not interested. The dock was expensive to maintain, was labour intensive, and the berth at Magazine Wharf was distant from its facilities in French Creek.

In January 1965, *Cantieri Navali Santa Maria* of Genoa entered into negotiations with Bajada to purchase the dock. The sale was concluded on March 11, but delivery was delayed until June 5 when the government issued an export

licence. The Italians commissioned Bugsier, a German towage company, to tow the dock to La Spezia.

A lot of planning went into the operation. The dock had arrived in two sections; it would be leaving as one. Departure was postponed twice owing to strong winds on Wednesday and Saturday. On Sunday, June 6, several people lined the bastions and the barrakkas to watch the German ocean tugs *Pacific* and *Heros*, assisted by Admiralty and civilian tugs, tow the massive structure out of harbour. At Corradino, Magazine and

Laboratory wharves were revealed for the first time after years of being hidden behind the dock walls.

The day after the departure of AFD 35, the chairman of C Bajada & Sons spoke to the *Times of Malta*, expressing regret that the dock had not been retained. He said they had not originally intended to sell, but admitted it was uneconomical to run, even if shipyards at Palermo and Piraeus competed for work with Malta Drydocks with similar floating docks.

AFD 35 arrived at La Spezia on June 9. In September it was sold to

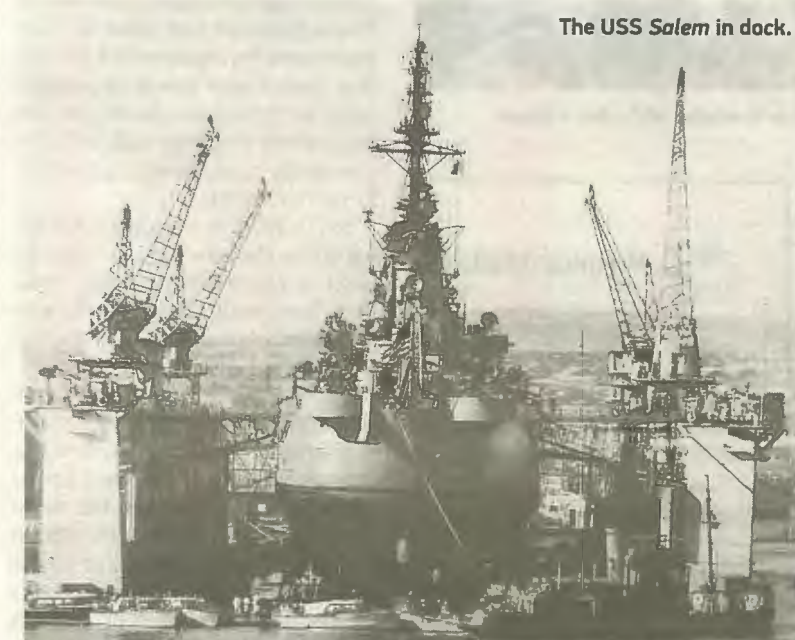
C.Y. Tung, a Hong Kong-Chinese shipping magnate. Once again, the sections were separated, fore/aft and centre for the long voyage east to Yokohama. The fore/aft section left La Spezia under tow on October 26, arriving at the Mitsubishi yard on March 18, 1966. The centre section was towed out on October 31; it arrived at Yokohama on March 26.

The sections were rejoined. Now renamed *Chung Shan*, the dock served Mitsubishi until 1971. Between 1971 and 1982 it was operated at Hong Kong by Overseas Drydock Corp. at the Tsing Yi Yard, and subsequently by Hong Kong United Dockyard. In 1995 it left Hong Kong for demolition in Xinhui, China.

By another fluke of history, Malta continues to have a connection with Admiralty floating docks. On a visit to Coal Wharf below Corradino, it is still possible to see two former Admiralty reinforced concrete floating docks (RCFD). At 550 tons they are tiny compared to AFD 35. Reinforced concrete reduced the use of much-needed steel during wartime; they were completed in six months by less skilled workers for a fraction of the cost. The 16 RCFDs that were built cost £1.48 million.



Countdown before the sale.



The USS *Salem* in dock.



One of S. Bezzina's reinforced concrete floating docks.

The original name and date of arrival of one of the RCFDs is still to be traced. The other was the former AFD 52 built by Holloway Brothers at Gravesend in 1944. It was also planned for Trincomalee but never left the UK and was sold to Dutch owners at Vlaardingen in 1946. It was sold to S. Bezzina & Sons and arrived in Malta under tow from Rotterdam on September 5, 1967. It is still in use

after 64 years – a testimony to the durability of reinforced concrete.

(This is the conclusion of an article the first part of which was published last Sunday.)

Michael Cassar is an eclectic author whose fascination with his motherland's rich heritage has led to the production of several books and articles.

The departure on June 6, 1965.



A draught of 41 feet reached during sinking trials on November 16, 1949.

