

## **'Piloting Big Boats' Presentation**

**By Trish Stanley**

On August 24, Squadron Member John Biffen made the serious sacrifice of leaving Hamilton Island with its glorious 26°C to fly back to a wet and cold Sydney to talk to us about his experiences as Chief Pilot for Sydney Harbour. His efforts were appreciated by the 44 members and their guests who braved the lousy weather to come and listen.



John began by explaining the steps he went through to gain his Master Mariner qualification prior to becoming a big ship's Pilot. He started in 1996 working on a lighthouse ship in Queensland and then became a cadet of Burns Philp & Co, the largest coastal trading Company on the east coast of Australia, which specialised in shipping goods and people to/from PNG. John explained the difficulties of landing goods in PNG where no wharfs existed, the technique being to anchor off shore then surfing the goods ashore in small boats. When Burns Philp sold all their ships, John moved to running ships carrying bauxite from Weipa to Gladstone. In 1980, when the lonely life of the now Master Mariner palled, John decided to move to Sydney and started working as a Pilot on the harbour.

To explain the workings and responsibilities of the Pilot fleet, John showed 3 movies.

The first was made in 1946 and showed the beautiful Captain Cook Pilot vessel (complete with Captain Cook figurehead) taking a pilot outside the heads to meet up with a tanker. The standard dress for a Pilot in those days was a suit, complete with gabardine trench coat, leather shoes and fedora (just like Elliot Ness). The film showed the difficulty of transferring to the tanker, first lowering the dinghy from the Captain Cook Pilot, rowing to the tanker, then climbing the swinging ladder (in leather shoes) with the volume of swell only adding to the difficulty. This movie was much appreciated by the audience.

At this point, John explained that in 1888-89 when pilots first started operating on the harbour, they would row dories from Watsons Bay (where they lived) and individually negotiate with the ship's masters for the job – a very cutthroat business. The Government finally took over around 1900 which was the advent of the Maritime Services Board. This was then privatised into the Sydney Ports Corporation in 1996 which looked after 780 berths and buoys in the harbour. Sydney Harbour continued to operate as a “commercial harbour” until the Labour Government decided to move all bulk carriers to either Botany Bay, Port Kembla, or Newcastle.

The second movie showed the process of berthing big ships with the aid of tugs. First shown was the movement of an oil tanker to Greenwich Oil Terminal and the second was moving a large container ship to a berth in Botany Bay with the added complexity of missing the Container Handling Gantry which is built right on the edge of the wharf. These were shown in ‘fast forward’ while a rollicking tune was played which added to the entertainment value.

The third movie showed the recent pilot boarding of a ship outside the heads in a big swell. Current pilots have abandoned their suits, trench coats and leather shoes in favour of modern wet weather gear, boat shoes and life jackets. The modern pilot boats can now manoeuvre directly alongside the tankers/cruise ships all of which have different access points and ladder types. Most of these ships still sport swinging ladders and two hand lines. Regardless, access is still very challenging in big swells. In all, being a pilot is not a job for

the faint hearted, says John, who is now retired from the service which he obviously loved.

As the audience then bombarded John with questions, it was obvious that everyone enjoyed his presentation and most stayed on for dinner with a limited course menu in the Carabella Room to continue discussing the topic of the evening.