

Basic Detail Report

ANMS1130

Title

Material relating to the maritime career of Captain Basil Helm

Date

1942 - 1954

Name

Archive series

History

1. Basil Moffitt de Bohun Helm (1903-1996) was born in Sydney and went to sea at the age of 15, in 1919. He served his-four year apprenticeship with Burns Philp on the auxiliary sailing ship MAKOA, trading to Tonga and the west coast of America. As a junior officer he served in sailing ships in the Pacific Island region until 1925, when he went into steam ships. He served in various Australian coastal ships with Howard Smith Company until 1928 when he went back to Burns Philp. He served on several well known ships in their Main Line fleet, on the services between Australia and Papua, New Guinea and the Pacific Islands. At some point he gained his foreign-going square-rigged Master's Certificate (ie for sail and steam), No 0066, Commonwealth of Australia, issued in Sydney. (This certificate is not in the collection, but is referred to in a letter, without date.) In 1938 Burns Philp sent him to Scotland to attend the fitting out of their new liner M V BULOLO, and to return on the commissioning voyage as Chief Officer. His first command was MV MAIWARA in 1939, back in the Pacific Island routes. He brought his wife and two children from Sydney to live in Rabaul. As World War II escalated, Helm evacuated a large number of expatriates in his ship MULIAMA. His family returned to Australia in separate ships. At this time Burns Philp ships were beginning to be requisitioned for naval and military purposes. Helm declined to join the RAN (according to his daughter he did not want to be told what to do) and instead applied to join the Queensland Coast and Torres Strait Pilot Service. By now he was exceedingly experienced and knowledgeable in navigation of the eastern coast of Australia, the Barrier Reef, and particularly the ports and waters of the Pacific Islands. In his letter of application in 1941 he wrote 'I was in command of a motor vessel of 700 tons for 18 months in the inter-island trade of Papua, Mandated Territory of New Guinea, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and know all the ports in those areas well. I have also been in command through the Torres Straits as far as Cook's Passage for about 8 months. I have been through and know well the following openings in the Barrier Reef....I hold pilotage exemptions for Sydney, Newcastle, Brisbane, Cairns, and a Compass Adjuster's Certificate.' He was accepted into the Queensland Coast and Torres Strait Pilot Service in October 1942. Helm, like other Australian merchant seamen with experience in this region, provided valuable help as a pilot to USA naval and military officers, many of whom had been recruited in large numbers, had only basic training and no knowledge of the seas and islands where the most intense conflicts of the war against the Japanese took place. Furthermore, charts did not exist or contained little information for most of the inter-island routes and ports. Burns Philp masters knew the

reefs, shoals, tides and weathers for the places and made their own charts. A large notebook in the collection contains hand-drawn charts for many of these areas. After the war, Helm continued in the Torres Strait Pilot Service until he resigned in 1954 to make a new life as a grazier, at a property named 'Jillamatong' near Braidwood in New South Wales.

2. Burns Philp represents an important and unique chapter in Australian shipping history. Originating in a trading company in Townsville in the 1870s, Burns Philp developed its own shipping line and trading empire throughout northern Australia, New Guinea and the Pacific Islands, along with a network of plantations in the islands. By the 1920s it was a household name. It operated a fleet of large main-line ships in conjunction with a fleet of smaller inter-island ships. Its main-line ships ran regularly as far afield as Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong. Burns Philp passenger liners were well-appointed and well known, with their black and white chequered funnels and the Burns Philp thistle on the house flag. Many BP captains were legendary colourful figures, and the company's name conjured up the romance of the South Seas. During World War II both ships and personnel were taken into war service, and the company's specialised knowledge of the Pacific was put to use by Allied commanders. The company's flagship, its then new liner BULOLO, in particular had a distinguished war record, when it was requisitioned into the British Royal Navy and served in actions in both hemispheres. One Burns Philp liner, the NEPTUNA, was destroyed in the Japanese raid on Darwin in 1942, with the loss of 45 lives. Burns Philp resumed operations and commissioned new ships after World War II, but sold its last ship in 1971. In the 1980s the company made vast operating changes which resulted in an organisation bearing little relation to the past shipping and trading company, and brought it to near-bankruptcy. It continues to exist but has no maritime connection.

3. Queensland Coast and Torres Strait Pilot Service The QCTSPS originated in the 1890s as an association of pilots licensed by the Queensland Marine Board to pilot ships through the dangerous passages of the Queensland coast and the Torres Strait. Before 1884 individual pilots had offered their services, and shipping companies which regularly used the routes employed their own pilots. Licensing began in 1884 along with regulations as to how pilots should conduct their business. In 1893 a family firm of marine insurance brokers, Banks Bros of Sydney, became the secretariat of the pilots. The pilots themselves were self-employed, operating as a type of co-operative in which all the work and expenses were shared using a turn-by-turn system. At the end of WW1 there were 12 licensed pilots, at the beginning of WWII there were 15, by 1957 there were 31, by 1980 there were 40. In 1993 the Australian Maritime Safety Authority took over administration of the QCTSPS. The name was changed to Torres Pilots. With the diminishing number of ships on the Australian register, Australian mariners with the required expertise in the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait became harder to find. In 2006 there were 30 pilots in the service, and pilots from other countries were being sought and trained. Pilotage extends from the Queensland border at Danger Point to Booby Island, a distance of 1372 nautical miles, making it the longest single pilotage in the world. Pilots also extend their pilotage to New Guinea and Bougainville, or as far as Western Australia. Since 1991, pilotage has been compulsory for all ships longer than 100 m, all oil and chemical tankers and liquid gas carriers, to employ a pilot. Membership of the Torres Strait Pilots has always carried prestige. Licensed pilots have to be master mariners, and until recent years had to have extensive experience in the passages of the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait. Applicants to join the service were always well known to the pilots, because they had necessarily sailed through the region with them for many years. New pilots had to be acceptable to the existing ones. Licenses to join the pilot service were keenly sought after. Only two were accepted in 1942, the year Basil

Helm joined.