

From Ratings to Officers – Part II

Gozitan Seafarers who Achieved Certificates through Education between the Early 19th Century and the Second World War

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Introduction

In Part One we saw how Gozo had approximately 116 *Padroni*, or Master Mariners of the Third Class, during the period between 1813 and 1907. We were introduced to two of such *Padroni* who were highly decorated for numerous rescues they performed at sea – Chev. Luigi Aquilina and Chev. Joseph Camilleri.

Compared to the 116 Masters of the Third Class, only five Gozitan seafarers went on to achieve the Chief Mate and Master Mariner of the Second Class certificates. These were Capt. Salvatore Pisani, Capt. Giuseppe Pisani, Capt. Giovanni Xuereb, Capt. Giovanni Pisani and Capt. Andrea Camilleri, my great-grandfather. Between 1875 and 1923 they were the highest certified Gozitan Deck Officers. Capt. Giovanni Pisani and Capt. Andrea Camilleri were also the only Gozitan Master Mariners to be in command of a foreign-going British merchant ship during the First World War.

Master Mariners of the First Class

During the inter-war years things changed further for Gozitan seafarers. Three Gozitan seamen achieved the highest certificate in the maritime industry for the first time, the Master Mariner of the First Class. They could command any ship of any size in any part of the world. By order of date of issue of their certificate, these were Capt. Orazio Mizzi, from Nadur, Mr John Pace from Xewkija, and Capt. John Elia Zammit Haber, also from Xewkija.

Capt. Orazio Mizzi

Capt. Orazio Mizzi was born in Nadur on 19th May 1896. He moved to Xewkija after marriage, and later resided in Malta.

At 17 years old, in May 1913 he could be found as an Able-Bodied Seaman (A.B.) on board the barquentine ‘Gesù e Maria’ departing Malta for Heraklion in Crete¹ with Capt. Giovanni Pisani, mentioned in Part One to this article.



Capt. Orazio Mizzi in Master Mariner's uniform.
Source: Mr Francis Mizzi.

He continued his sea service on board British merchant ships throughout World War One in the rank of A.B. On 19th December 1917 he signed on the steamer ‘Mabel Baird’.² After departing Penarth, Wales, with a cargo of coal, on the 22nd December, his fourth day on board, the ship was hit by a torpedo from the U-boat UB57³ Fortunately enough, Mizzi survived.

1 NAM, CUS, L368.

2 www.ancestry.com, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927, Orazio Mizzi Second Mate Certificate.

3 <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?82237>

In June 1919 he was examined for the certificate of Second Mate for steamships at the port of South Shields in England, and on the 27th June such certificate was issued.⁴ From then on, he sailed as Third Mate or Second Mate in four British steamships, until the end of 1920.⁵

On 12th May 1922, Orazio Mizzi was issued with the First Mate certificate for steamships at the port of South Shields.⁶ On the 1st of September 1922, at age 26, he took his first command as Master of the Second Class of the British 165-foot steamer ‘Taurus’⁷ on passenger service between Malta and Tunis.

Just two years later, on the 4th April 1924 his Master’s certificate for steamships was issued at the port of South Shields.⁸ Capt. Orazio Mizzi was the first Gozitan to be issued with the highest certificate in the maritime industry, the Master Mariner of the First Class. He captained many Maltese steamships, both on cargo and passenger service.

He was the Master of the 270-foot ‘S.S. Maltana’, a steamer owned by Mr Joseph Gasan, maintaining daily services between Malta and Syracuse. The ‘Maltana’ remained on this service alongside the ‘Lubiana’, with Capt. Orazio Mizzi as her Captain from 1926 until 26th March 1927. The ‘S.S. Lubiana’, also owned by Gasan, was captained by Capt. J. W. Sweetman.⁹

In 1937, as Master Mariner, he inspected the vessel before purchase and brought over to Malta, from the U.K., the ‘M.V. Royal Lady’ for service between Malta and Gozo.¹⁰

Between the second half of 1939¹¹ and February 1940,¹² he was Captain of the Maltese 175-foot

steamship ‘Golley’, trading between ports in Malta, Tunisia,¹³ Sicily¹⁴ and Croatia.¹⁵

Between April 1940 and July 1945,¹⁶ he was Master of the British steamer ‘Marvia’, trading round UK ports, as far north as Reykjavik in Iceland, down to Freetown in Sierra Leone and also in the Mediterranean.¹⁷

Capt. Orazio Mizzi was the only Gozitan Master Mariner in command of a foreign-going British merchant ship, venturing out into the Atlantic Ocean during the Second World War. He was therefore the highest-ranking and most certified Gozitan seaman in service during the War.

In 1947 the Pace Brothers bought and registered, in the port of Malta, the largest Maltese steamship at the time; she was named ‘Valetta City’ and had a gross tonnage of 5501 tons and a length of 409 feet. For Maltese seafaring history she made some historical voyages, departing Grand Harbour for Montreal in Canada. In fact, there she made headlines as the largest Maltese ship ever to call at a Canadian port. She was manned by a Maltese crew under the command of Capt. Orazio Mizzi (Wickman, 2002), making this event the highlight of his seafaring career.

A veteran of two World Wars, Capt. Orazio Mizzi died on the 11th February 1965 aged 68 at his home in St Julian’s, Malta.

John Pace

John Pace was born on the 21st January 1895 in Xewkija, and he was the second Gozitan to achieve the Master Mariner First Class certificate, after Capt. Orazio Mizzi.

4 www.ancestry.com, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927, Orazio Mizzi Second Mate Certificate.

5 www.ancestry.com, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927, Orazio Mizzi First Mate Certificate.

6 Ibid.

7 www.ancestry.com, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927, Orazio Mizzi Master Certificate.

8 Ibid.

9 NAM, CUS, Series 11, Items 55M00008, 55M00018, and 55M00028.

10 NAM, MFA01, 17818/1936. Passport Application with reason for travelling being “inspecting a vessel and embarkation”.

11 NAM, CUS, Series 11, Item 69M00017.

12 NAM, CUS, Series 11, Item 69M00141.

13 NAM, CUS, Series 11, Item 69M00058.

14 NAM, CUS, Series 11, Item 69M00041.

15 NAM, CUS, Series 11, Item 69M00123.

16 TNA, BT 364/027/139 and TNA, BT 381/3338, Official Number 144596 ‘Marvia’ Crew Agreements.

17 TNA, BT 389/20/160 – ‘Marvia’ Merchant Shipping Movement Card.

In March 1913, at age 18, when his first passport was issued he departed to England to embark on his seafaring career.¹⁸ He sailed throughout the First World War on board British merchant ships, starting out as an Ordinary Seaman and progressing up the ranks to Bosun by the end of the War. He served as Quartermaster (a Deck rating in the level of Petty Officer responsible for steering the ship at sea among other duties) on board two hospital ships during the War – the ‘HMHS Karapara’ and the ‘HMHS St Margaret of Scotland’.¹⁹ For his service in the British Merchant Navy during the Great War, Pace was awarded the British War Medal, and the Mercantile Marine War Medal.²⁰



A 29-year-old John Pace, still a Second Officer on his way to the UK for his Chief Mate’s examinations.
Source: NAM, MFA01, 00113/1924.

On 17th February 1922 he was issued the Second Mate’s certificate for steamships from the port of Cardiff, Wales.²¹

His sea service as Second or Third Mate was done on board three Maltese steamships. These were the ‘S.S. San Paul’, owned by the Mifsud Brothers and commanded by Capt. Salvino J. Galea (a Maltese First Class Master Mariner who is laid to rest in the Immaculate Conception Cemetery in Qala), the ‘S.S. Lubiana’, owned by Gasan and provided passenger service between Malta and Syracuse and the ‘S.S. G.M. La Vallette’ with frequent sailings to Tunis.²²

On the 14th April 1924, Mr Pace passed the Board of Trade examinations for First Mate for steamships at the port of London and such certificate was issued on the 5th of May 1924.²³

Back in Malta he continued to work on board the ‘S.S. G.M. La Vallette’ for another five months and a half, this time as Chief Officer. Between 1925 and 1926 he was the Chief Mate of another Maltese passenger steamer, the 175-foot ‘S.S. Odin’.²⁴

On the 19th July 1926, John Pace sat for the Master Mariner examinations successfully and his certificate was issued ten days later, on the 29th July 1926 at the port of Cardiff, Wales.²⁵

After this he left the Maltese scene – he re-joined British ships and in 1930 got married in Wales.²⁶ He ended his seafaring career on board the 401-foot ‘S.S. Merchant Royal’ in 1936, either as a Chief or Second Officer.²⁷

The title of ‘Captain’ is given to *“those who are in possession of an Internationally recognised Certificate of Competency, issued by the Government of an established Maritime Nation who are serving or have previously served, in Command of Seagoing Ships whether or not engaged upon International or Domestic Trade”* (IFSMA, n.d.).

Unfortunately, the author does not have any evidence as to whether John Pace ever sailed

18 NAM, MFA01, 0551/1913.

19 www.ancestry.com, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927, John Pace Second Mate Certificate.

20 TNA, BT 351/1/108286.

21 www.ancestry.com, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927, John Pace Second Mate Certificate.

22 www.ancestry.com, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927, John Pace First Mate Certificate.

23 Ibid.

24 www.ancestry.com, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850-1927, John Pace Master Certificate

25 Ibid.

26 www.findmypast.co.uk, England & Wales Marriages, 1837-2005.

27 www.findmypast.co.uk, Britain, Merchant Seamen, 1918-1941 (TNA, BT 348/22/96/229608).

as Master of a merchant ship during his career. However, he should be appreciated for his educational achievements and responsibilities he assumed in the Merchant Navy.

In 1937, he moved to Queensland, Australia²⁸ together with his family.

Capt. John Elia Zammit Haber

Capt. John Elia Zammit Haber was born in Xewkija on 15th December 1909. His father was Chev. Lorenzo Zammit Haber, a member of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta.



Capt. John Elia Zammit Haber in 1944.
Source: MFA01, 28731/1944.

All of the Master Mariners and Officers mentioned in this article started out as deckhands but Zammit Haber began his seafaring career from the rank of a Deck Cadet – an apprentice directly learning the duties of a Deck Officer on board ship. Being

a Cadet, his wages were way lower than that of a deckhand though.

When the 260ft brand new ‘R.M.S. Knight of Malta’, Capt. C. A. G. Roberts, departed Malta on her maiden voyage to Syracuse with passengers on the 23rd February 1930, 20-year-old John had the privilege to make part of her first crew as one of four Maltese Deck Cadets.²⁹ In my humble opinion the ‘R.M.S. Knight of Malta’ was probably the best-looking steamship this country ever had, although she had a tendency to roll!

On 1st July 1930 he applied for a passport so as to travel to Rotterdam in the Netherlands³⁰ to join a ship and continue his seafaring career.

The start of the Second World War found Zammit Haber based in the UK. In fact, he got married in Essex in March 1941.³¹ In 1942 he travelled as passenger from Newport, Wales to Halifax in Canada to join ship as a Third Officer.³²

For his service as a Deck Officer in the British Merchant Navy during World War Two he was awarded the 1939-1945³³ Star, the Atlantic Star, the Africa Star, the Italy Star and the War Medal 1939-1945. The medals, being awarded by area of operation and length of service, show that Zammit Haber’s ships operated mainly in the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean.

Researching Capt. Zammit Haber proved to be difficult as neither his sea service records nor details of his certificates were found from the The National Archives at Kew, UK. However, the author has confirmation from his son, who was also a seaman, that he was certified as a First-Class Master Mariner. His certificate was issued from the port of London, England.

During the late 1940s, he served on board the Maltese steamship ‘Valetta City’ as Chief Mate. He was under the command of Capt. Orazio Mizzi

28 www.findmypast.co.uk, Australia, Inward, Outward & Coastal Passenger Lists 1826-1972.

29 NAM, CUS, L535.

30 NAM, MFA01, 6441/1930.

31 www.ancestry.com England & Wales, Marriage Index, 1916-2005.

32 TNA, BT 27 Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and Successors: Outwards Passenger Lists, BT 27-147896.

33 TNA, BT 395/1/108309.

mentioned above when in Montreal, Canada.³⁴ It is very interesting to know that the two most senior Officers on board ship in this venture to Canada were from Gozo.

In 1950, Capt. Zammit Haber was Master of the Maltese barquentine 'Maria Dacoutros'. Years back, the 'Maria Dacoutros' was owned by the Gatt family of Nadur and Capt. Giovanni Pisani and his brothers as was the 'Gesù e Maria'. Zammit Haber was Master of the sailing vessel which was once owned and captained by one of his lecturers, Capt. Pisani mentioned in Part One to this article. During a voyage from Candia, Crete, to Malta the barquentine met a powerful storm. Sails were ripped, the deck cabin and the ship's wheel were destroyed and the crew had to steer by means of a tiller. About forty barrels of wine had to be jettisoned so as to make the ship lighter. Yet in the end, with an exhausted crew, she limped into Syracuse harbour.³⁵

The seafaring career of Capt. Zammit Haber continued well into the 1970s serving as Chief Mate on board the Sea Malta Company steamer 'S.S. Marsa'³⁶ among others. Finally, in 1978 he is found as the Chief Officer of another Sea Malta Company vessel 'M.V. Dwejra II'. During this voyage the Master fell ill and Capt. Zammit Haber took command of the vessel and proceeded towards Lisbon harbour, Portugal.

Serving for around fifty long years at sea, World War Two Merchant Navy veteran Capt. John Elia Zammit Haber passed away at 83 years on the 3rd of January 1993 at his home in Xewkija.

Engine Officers

Although we started out this article in the Deck Department, mostly because during the 19th century many ships were still sail-powered, with the introduction of steam power, the Engine Department assumed increasing importance. This Department

required certified Officers and unlicensed Ratings, just like the Deck Department.

There were various Maltese Engine Officers at sea, yet Gozo seemed to hold back for some reason or another. And that may be one reason why we have this old saying within the Maltese maritime industry, "*Tal-magna mill-Kottonera u baħri Ghawdxi*" (Engine personnel from the Three Cities and Deckhands from Gozo).

In fact I only found two Gozitans who were actually certified as Merchant Navy Engine Officers prior to the Second World War.

Interestingly though, the law during this era had a loophole. A junior engineer on board ship could be a person with a knowledge of engineering yet without any certifications. In this article, only those who have studied and passed the proper First-Class and Second-Class Engineer examinations are being considered.

These two Gozitans were Engineer John Vassallo from Ghajnsielem who had a First-Class Engineer certificate, and Engineer Joseph Gatt from Nadur with a Second-Class Engineer certificate.

Engineer John Vassallo

Engineer John-Baptist Vassallo was born in Ghajnsielem on May 19th 1886. Unfortunately at the time of writing the author has very sparse information about Vassallo's seafaring service yet details of his certifications are known.

26-year-old Vassallo arrived as passenger from Malta at the docks of Tilbury in London on March 17th 1913. He was already listed as a Marine Engineer.³⁷

Within months, on 26th August 1913,³⁸ John Vassallo was the Fourth Engineer of the 'S.S.

34 Information passed to the author by Mr Emmanuel Attard, a late seaman from Nadur, who happened to be on board the British steamship 'S.S. Dunsley' in the port of Montreal at the same time when the 'S.S. Valetta City' was moored there.

35 Information passed to the author by Mr Joseph Grech of Nadur, one of the last surviving sailors to have experience and sailed on board ships with traditional sails. He was on this faithful voyage with Capt. John Elia Zammit Haber.

36 Information passed on to the author by his late grandfather, Mr Louis Grima, who worked on board the 'S.S. Marsa' as Bosun with Capt. Zammit Haber.

37 TNA, Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and successors: Inwards Passenger Lists.; Class: BT 26; Piece: 562; Item: 79.

38 TNA, BT 165/775.

Camberwell', a 368-foot steamship owned by the Well Line of Newcastle. The ship had a complement of ten British Officers and apprentices and more than fifty Indian crew. Between the above date and 4th November 1914,³⁹ the steamer made three runs from Middlesbrough, England, to a number of ports in India like Calcutta and Rangoon in Burma and also to Colombo in Sri Lanka and back.

After signing off at Middlesbrough,⁴⁰ Vassallo, still an uncertified Junior Engineer, sat for the Second-Class Engineer examinations and his certificate was issued at North Shields, England, on the 22nd December 1914.⁴¹

On 15th January 1915 he signed on as Third Engineer on board the 'S.S. Ardoyne' from Cardiff,⁴² Wales. The 'Ardoyne' was almost 300 gross tons larger than the 'Camberwell'. He worked on board for almost a year, until the 29th November 1915, signing off at Hull,⁴³ England.

On the 23rd March 1917 he was issued with the certificate of First-Class Engineer after passing all of his Board of Trade examinations at the port of North Shields.⁴⁴ Engineer John Vassallo was issued with the highest certificate of the Engine Department in the Merchant Navy. He was therefore the most certified, or most probably the only certified, Engine Officer from Gozo during the First World War. It is not known, however, whether he actually sailed as Chief Engineer of a British merchant ship after achieving his First-Class ticket.

Vassallo sailed on board British merchant ships throughout the Great War, yet for some reason his medals were not issued. In 1920, he left the Merchant Navy and immigrated to the United States.⁴⁵

He never returned to Gozo – he died in Detroit, Michigan, in Grace Hospital on 22nd January 1943. First World War veteran Engineer John Vassallo died at the age of 56 years.⁴⁶

Engineer Joseph Gatt

Engineer Joseph Gatt was born on the 10th December 1896 in Nadur. He came from a family of Merchant Navy Officers and sailing vessel owners (Grima, 2017). Engineer Gatt's uncle was Capt. Andrea Camilleri, the author's great-grandfather, mentioned in Part One to this article.

The earliest information about Gatt relates to the 13th January 1915, when he was 18 years old. He was examined by the Board of Marine Engineering in Malta "for a licence to act as an Engine Driver of Steamboats plying for hire in the harbours, and bays, and between the Islands."⁴⁷

In 1917 he was an Engineer on board the 'S.S. Gleneagles',⁴⁸ the well-known ex-Malta-Gozo steamer requisitioned by the Customs Department as a Contraband Control steamer during the First World War.

On 13th July 1917 young Joseph Gatt was accepted as a Third Engineer on board the British cargo steamer 'S.S. Leucadia'.⁴⁹

The system used by seamen in the British Merchant Navy in those days was the Merchant Navy Pool. Once a seafarer was in the Pool, he could embark on board any British ship of any company. However, many British companies still directly employed some personnel from outside the pool. To qualify, Gatt had to demonstrate he was a true professional. Such persons were called "Company Men." They

39 TNA, BT 99/3027.

40 Ibid.

41 TNA, BT 352/0942 - Index to Registers of Certificates of Competency, Masters, Mates, Engineers and Fishing Officers Home and Foreign Trade (1910-30).

42 TNA, BT 400/3877/2.

43 TNA, BT 400/3877/3.

44 TNA, BT 352/0942 - Index to Registers of Certificates of Competency, Masters, Mates, Engineers and Fishing Officers Home and Foreign Trade (1910-30).

45 www.ancestry.com. Michigan, U.S., Federal Naturalization Records, 1887-1931.

46 www.ancestry.com. Michigan Department of Community Health, Division for Vital Records and Health Statistics; Lansing, Michigan; Death Records

47 NAM, CSG02, 178/1915.

48 MHA, Leucadia O.N. 124565, Crew Lists and Agreements 1917.

49 Ibid

received very good pay and contracts and many perks.⁵⁰

None of the Officers mentioned in this article were employed directly by a British company, except for Engineer Joseph Gatt. Between October 1928 and June 1945, he managed to become a “Company Man” for The Hain Steamship Company,⁵¹ a subsidiary of the prestigious P.&O.!



Second Engineer Joseph Gatt in the 1940s. Photo taken in the UK. Source: Kenneth Grima.

During these 17 years he worked on board various company steamers like the ‘S.S. Treliske’ and ‘S.S. Tregarthen’, starting with the company as a Fourth Engineer and being promoted along the way on various Chief Engineers’ recommendations.⁵²

On the 4th of April 1940 his Second-Class Engineer certificate was issued at the port of Cardiff, Wales.⁵³ His first appointment as Second Engineer started on the 8th of April on board the 400-foot (Mercantile Navy List, 1940) ‘S.S. Treminnard’⁵⁴ during the first months of the Second World War.

Between March and May 1942, while Second Engineer of the ‘S.S. Trehata’⁵⁵ he was involved in two Arctic Convoys, code-named PQ14 and QP11. Arctic Convoys are considered to be highly dangerous because in addition to sustaining German attacks they also had to endure extreme weather conditions. Prime Minister Winston Churchill himself described the Arctic Convoys as “the worst journey in the world!”

During Gatt’s first convoy from Reykjavik, Iceland, to Archangel and Murmansk in northwest of Russia, out of 24 ships of convoy PQ14, 16 had to return to their port of departure as heavy ice interrupted their passage. The ‘Trehata’ was one of the eight ships to continue the journey. Further into the voyage, very bad weather hit the convoy, and not even the Germans could sail to attack it! During the outbound convoy QP11 from Murmansk back to Iceland, the ‘Trehata’ suffered ice damage to the hull and the propeller!⁵⁶

For Engineer Gatt’s service in the British Merchant Navy and the Mercantile Marine Reserve during the First World War he was awarded the British War Medal, the Mercantile Marine War Medal⁵⁷ and the Victory Medal,⁵⁸ while for service during the Second World War he was awarded the 1939-1945 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Arctic Star, the Africa Star, the Burma Star and the War Medal 1939-1945⁵⁹ – nine medals in total.

Retiring in 1960, well-decorated Engineer Joseph Gatt passed away on 6th April 1978 at the Blue Sisters Hospital, Malta aged 81 years.

50 Information passed on and explained to the author by his late grandfather, Mr Louis Grima, who was a British Merchant Navy seafarer himself.

51 The St Ives Museum, Cornwall, The Hain Steamship Company Personnel Register.

52 Ibid.

53 TNA, BT 352/0270 - Index to Registers of Certificates of Competency, Masters, Mates, Engineers and Fishing Officers Home and Foreign Trade (1910-30).

54 The St Ives Museum, Cornwall, The Hain Steamship Company Personnel Register.

55 Ibid.

56 TNA, BT 389/30/106 – ‘Trehata’ Merchant Shipping Movement Card.

57 TNA, BT 351/1/49751.

58 www.ancestry.com UK, Naval Medal and Award Rolls, 1793-1972.

59 TNA, BT 395/1/34562.

Conclusion

All the men mentioned in Parts One and Two of this article started out as Ratings, from the lowest of ranks such as Deckboys.

However, unlike the rest they managed to work their way up to higher ranks, overcoming many obstacles, both educational as well as work-related, in times of peace and war, to reach a position held by only a few on this island.

Through this article, their stories and achievements have been made known. May this serve as a way for them to be remembered for their service away from our shores as esteemed members of the Merchant Navy. I hope that this article serves as a tribute to their contribution to our industry and island and that they will be given the honour they deserve.

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Kenneth Grima read for MCA Chief Mate Unlimited (Reg. II/2) at South Shields Marine School in the UK. He currently works as Tug Master on board tugboats within Maltese waters and sails as Chief Officer in offshore towage contracts on company tugs. In his free time, he is an ardent researcher and is a regular contributor to a local journal '*Luminaria*', where he writes about maritime history.