



The piling barge *Thor* and the tug *Kaipara* during the construction of the 78m berth at Silo Park on the western end of Jellicoe Street



Brent Shipman maintains a watchful eye



The piling barge *Kaimahi* helps to place the timber walkway bridge in the Orakei Basin



Pouring concrete into the piles at the Orams Marine Village slipway repair

Waterfront identity drives a **HARD BARGAIN**

BY KEITH INGRAM

Brent and June Shipman recently celebrated 25 years of successful business for Total Marine Services Limited and the popping out of pontoon 1000 from the mould by a sister company, Total Floating Systems.

It was during the dinner speeches, while surrounded by industry friends and colleagues that the big man, who is not noted for his public speaking unless he is cussing some hapless soul on the waterfront, gave a rare insight into his private thoughts.

This was indeed a privilege, as Brent is normally very quiet and rather shy when he is the centre of attention. Clearly we were sharing a success story that started many years before, when his only claim to fame on leaving school to go to sea was a willing pair of hands.

When Brent Shipman started his illustrious maritime career as a young seaman, little did this skinny, freckled redhead know where life's skills would take him as he walked through the gates of the Royal New Zealand Navy's training establishment HMNZS Tamaki at Narrowneck in 1972.

His first introduction to his future life at sea was the screaming skull of the base gunnery instructor. This monster of a man at 5ft 6in (1.68m), who looked much larger in life, still commanded the base parade ground with a black iron boot as he breathed fire and fear into every new trainee. Such were the ways back then.

Funny how the world's changed with all the PC and righteousness. One has to question if it is a better place for all of it.

The 12 weeks of boot camp quickly passed and with exercise and plenty of good naval tucker the Shipman boy was a much larger and stronger lad who was ready with his classmates to take on the challenges of Navy life and suffer no fools along the way.

Brent excelled in seamanship. From bends and hitches to splicing ropes and boat handling, he was a natural. He was also a handy mate ashore when the going got rough, and on more than one occasion he spent time contemplating life's funny old ways sobering up behind bars in some local copper's jail.

Such was the life of a sailor when take no prisoners meant what it said, as some Pom or Aussie gave him and his mates shit while on a run ashore and quickly paid the price.

Becoming a Navy diver only added to the work hard-play hard, lead-from-the-front attitude in life that still remains today.

But how did he get into piling? When Brent left the Navy in 1978, the Auckland Harbour Board was on the lookout for more seamen to work the port's vessels and he quickly learnt the new skills of pile driving and wharf repairs.

This led to a stint on the deck of tugs before taking over as engineer/deckhand and relieving master of the *Tika*, which had just been rebuilt. Sadly, the previous master had lost his life when the tug was girted and rolled over while assisting the small tanker *Selena* from Wynyard Wharf.

Back in those days, the Auckland Harbour Board

was looking to farm out maintenance work in an effort to reduce staff and costs. This was a time when the unions had total control and too many shysters were living the life of Riley, getting paid for the good life with productivity at an all-time low. Containerisation had arrived and the port reforms were a happening thing.

Total Marine Services Limited evolved out of the 1985 Auckland to Suva yacht race. Brent was sailing with mates on the Lidgard 38 *Nova* when the rudder fell off mid-ocean. He built a jury-rigged rudder and hung it off the transom so they could finish the race.

On their return, he and a mate started Total Marine Services part-time doing bottom scrubs for racing yachts and a range of diving and recovery work as it came along. This led to the potential of a mooring contract and the purchase of the motorised mooring barge *Wainui* doing mooring work.

An offer of piling work followed, so he acquired his first piling barge and crane. Just as they were about to start this first piling contract he realised he would need a hammer. More midnight oil and salvaged scrap metal soon produced a thumper that would give many years of service.

Total Marine Services built their first wharf in Bon Accord Harbour on Kawau Island and it still stands today as a testament to the skills of this fledgling company.

Not long after the formation of the Auckland Regional Council, the new harbourmaster took on responsibility for the harbour moorings and identified numerous illegal structures in Te Atatu Creek to be removed.

After the harbourmaster had clearly marked all the structures, TMS was asked to remove them and Brent quickly set about the job.

The structures ranged from shaky jetties made from ti tree to more substantial piles. One structure marked with a big red cross had a boat alongside. The piles, jetty and walkway, which were mainly fence posts, were removed and the boat was left tied to the mangroves. This one proved to be legitimate and the council later compensated the owners. Bugger!

The business grew as both the port company and the

council started to share the work between Bill Morris Hauraki Piling and TMS. This was to change later as Bill wanted to retire and so TMS acquired Hauraki Piling. They next won the contract to build the first stage of the Outboard Boating Club marina in 1993 and Whitianga in 1994. The Whangaroa Marina followed in 1997.

In 1996 the company won the contract to replace the Z Pier working berths, where two large concrete piles required removing. At that time Sheryl, from Seatours, had a large school of resident fish, including a heap of pet parore that she fed daily around the finger.

Unfortunately the piles would not budge to the usual shake, rattle and pull on the crane, so a little more persuasion was required. This came in the form of some plastic-looking stuff acquired from a demolition mate. The first charge just went "Poof" and the pile stood firm.

"Listen here, mate!" said a rather anxious Shipman. "We haven't got all day. We have to hook those things out of there before anyone starts getting curious."

"Okay, okay, you're the boss," came the reply as the diver entered the water again. "Burwump! Burwump!" The surrounding windows rattled as the two concrete soldiers fell over.

Folks came running. "Did you hear that?" they ▶



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Total Marine Service's fleet, from front to back: the Kaitoa, Kaipara and Kaipai manoeuvring the floating restaurant in the Viaduct Harbour



Pouring concrete at the base of the new boat ramp at the Outboard Boating Club

enquired as the workers pretended to be oblivious to all the excitement.

Meanwhile, the resident fish, including Sheryl's pets, floated belly up as the local Greek lunch bar operator ran around with a net. Fish burgers were on special for the next week.

One of the toughest jobs Brent recalls was recovering the 23 tonne keel from the America's Cup boat *Oracle*, the second keel to be lost. The first, in shallow water off Rakino Island, was easily recovered. This one was in 38m of water, hit the bottom at 90 miles an hour and sank into the mud. After recovering the yacht, Brent took this job on under a no cure - no pay contract and the meter began ticking.

Fortunately about a foot of the fin was sticking up and they knew the GPS track of the *Oracle* before she fell over. By towing a diver up and down the track he was able to spot the fin, drop off the sled and attach a line and float to the stump.

Next they blew away 2m of mud to get to the bulb and the bottom plate of the fin. This was removed and a lifting plate attached so the bulb could be lifted up on a jury-rigged horizontal boom lashed to the deck of the barge.

There was no way the crane would lift this weight on the boom. Once the weight reached the surface it was lashed to the barge and the slow trip back to town began. When the keel finally landed on the wharf, Brent gave out a great sigh of relief, kissed it and said, "Pay day, boys!"

Around 1996, Brent saw the writing on the wall when his major pontoon supplier got a bit cute in a business sense and encouraged another operator to do marina construction under contract. In doing so he was not completely honest in creating a level playing field.

To straighten up the play, Brent and TMS established Total Floating Systems, turning out a newly designed pontoon system which included the ability to encapsulate the holding pile within the pontoon and marina structure. Five years later they have now manufactured some 1450 pontoons with two production plants in full swing.

The first big breakthrough came when TMS and TFS were awarded the contract to design and build the 205-berth Whangamata Marina. This was completed on time and on budget with a fully turnkey operation handed over to her owners. The Tutukaka Marina extension followed and then the marina at the Whangarei Basin.

Clients became confident that these two totally New Zealand-owned companies could not only build capable, world-class marinas and jetties, but also do repairs and upgrades.

The key to this client confidence was the ability to talk directly with the boss and if they could not get the desired result, they could drive down the road and throw rocks through his window to attract his attention.

You better believe it. If and when this radical event ever happened you would have Brent's total attention. Such is the Kiwi way this company does business. While support and loyalty is often seen as a rare ethic in the growing corporate world of business and finance, it remains a strong attribute of the waterfront community.

Today the piling company has grown from a modest one man, one barge operation to a company with four piling barges, four tugs, nine cranes and an assortment of hammers, employing 26 staff and operating anywhere in New Zealand.

Behind this noted, hardworking tough bastard of the waterfront is June, his only boss, partner and wife of 36 years. She still does all the bookwork, ensuring the company remains financially stable and the bills are paid on time, while somehow managing to keep "Shipman" out of jail and focused on the task in hand.

And what about the future? "I am not too sure," says Brent. "My sons and staff are kicking me off the tugs and barges to a man cave in a factory loft, so I am not sure I like this bit."

Well Shippy, without fear of argument I would say enjoy the peace and quiet when you can and continue to make a noise when you have to. Give the young ones heaps and work them so hard they haven't got time to get into mischief. Above all, be yourself, mate, as this waterfront would be lost without you and your team. Best wishes for the next 25 years. ■



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