

A Retrospective View

Surveying Extremes - the Southern Frontier - Extending the Geographic and Technological Boundaries, is the theme for the first HYDRO conference ever down under in New Zealand, in the city of Christchurch on 24-26 November 2003. The world is changing and so is hydrography. A retrospective view.

Hydro international has a great wealth of information packed into its pages. Some of the articles I admit are a little technical for me and others relate to spheres of our profession which are not immediately of interest. However, I at least skim them all in an endeavour to keep abreast in this rapidly changing world. Like many others though I read without fail the historical articles by Steve Ritchie.

Whilst I am not quite as old as many of those of whom Admiral Ritchie tells, I feel extremely fortunate that I commenced my hydrographic when I did. A mere 30 or so years ago we were still fixing with sextants and flags, plotting using station pointers and a sharp hard pencil, and conning the vessel along the line with frequent course changes. Thank goodness, echo sounders had been in common use for over 30 years at that stage (though some of the early ones I used still had valves). It was extremely hard work and the days were long since we inked in by hand in the evening (when it got too dark to see the marks, we stopped).

So it was that those of my generation were well grounded in the trade. No-one with a modicum of sense was under any illusion that the vessel really travelled along a straight line between the 60-90 second fixes and the temptation to fudge the fix was always there with the knowledge that one would rarely be caught out. It was an excellent training ground and a good "weeding-out" of those who lacked the gumption for the work (or perhaps those who had sense to see through the perverse pride we took in our long hours and hard work!)

We grew up with computers and electronic positioning systems as they were introduced. We came to expect that the position fixing and depth determination techniques would be highly accurate and we came to accept that one could survey 24 hours around the clock in most weathers with data-reduction in shifts. We learned to cope with massively increasing amounts of data. The work that today's surveyors turn out is of a much higher quality than we produced and the practitioners work just as hard (some would suggest harder). The surveyors are, for the most part, more intelligent and are frequently better educated.

We live then in an era of constant change. Even this magazine has a new editor, but, thankfully, one well grounded in his profession. The administration of hydrography is changing throughout the world as financial pressures and new theologies are brought to bear. Just a few months ago, the Hydrographic Society transmogrified into a series of independent bodies with a central core. It remains to be seen how effective this move will be, but much as I appreciated the Society as it was, change was certainly necessary and we did well not to cling to the past for its own sake.

We must continue to move forward but should occasionally cast our eyes astern: "If we can understand our past we are better equipped to develop our future" and able to survey the extremes". Looking forward to meeting you in Christchurch in 2003!