INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN CROSS, DIRECTOR MARITIME INSTITUTE WILLEM BARENTSZ (MIWB)

Training and Education

Since the start of contract offshore surveying private companies have to have an interest in a regular supply of junior hydrographic surveyors. As a consequence training and education is no longer the sole responsibility of government hydrographic services. Is it attractive for universities and the like to have hydrographic education in their package and what is the ideal environment to base a hydrographic school? Hydro international interviewed the Director of the Maritime Institute Willem Barentsz, Terschelling (The Netherlands) on the recent decision to add Hydrography to their disciplines.

Can you give our readers a summary of your maritime career, your connections with hydrography and your reason to take up a job on Terschelling?

My maritime career started on Terschelling, an island in the North of the Netherlands, in 1967 where I was trained as deck officer and after which I sailed for ten years in all ranks in the Dutch maritime and offshore industry. A switch was made to the shore-based maritime field to become lecturer and simulator instructor also at MIWB. A four-year period of teaching maritime teachers from mainly developing maritime countries at the World Maritime University in Malmo followed that. Senior advisor at Kongsberg Norcontrol Simulation for seven years was my employment before taking up the position of director at MIWB in 1999.

Can you give our readers a brief description of the Maritime Institute Willem Barentsz?

The Maritime Institute was officially established in 1875 and was at first mainly meant for the islander seafarers. Later on the school started to attract students from the mainland and now the emphasis is actually on that group. Starting as a nautical school for navigation, the advent of engines introduced engineer training. During the 1980s the institute was at the forefront of the introduction of the dual purpose officer. Since 1993 the Maritime Simulator Training Centre was established at the school as a replacement of the training vessel Prinses Margriet and is used by trainees from all maritime schools in The Netherlands.

You have very new and modern training simulators available at your Institute. Can you give us some details on these trainers? Will there be, now or in future, possibilities for hydrographic students to exercise with simulated surveys?

The simulator centre consists of a large number of systems such as bridge, engine-room, cargo-handling and communications simulators. Additionally, a suction dredging simulator has been added to one of the bridges as well as DP/DT equipment. It is envisaged that the dredging simulator will be of use to the hydography students as the survey data are also reproduced in that system.

Are the facilities at your Institute equally accessible for men and women? What was the procedure in the past and can you give some statistical figures?

We make no difference in men or women students. As the seafaring profession became less physical and more procedural we have started to enrol women. Usually there are about 10% girls among the student population and this number has been fairly stable over the past 15 - 20 years.

Recently the Hydrographic Courses (FIG/IHO Category A) have been transferred from Amsterdam to your Institute. What is the interest for the Institute and what is your opinion on that move? Was it also a late tribute to Willem Barentsz, who was not only a famous mariner but also a cartographer?

The shift of the HBO course Hydrography from Amsterdam to Terschelling has been triggered by the wish in Amsterdam to phase out the course due to too small student enrolment. At Terschelling we see great synergy with the already existing seafarer Marof (dual purpose officer, trained for both deck officer and engineer) training taking place here. Besides that we think that it should be possible to increase the number of the student intake, being located in such a maritime environment with direct access to the wetlands and waterfront. Furthermore, the industry is very pertinent on the attitude and environment that is believed to be necessary for the hydrographers. This includes a large amount of shipboard knowledge and interaction. The fact that besides seafarer Willem Barentsz was also a cartographer only adds to the justification to have the unique hydrography programme located at the Maritime Institute Willem Barentsz!

What is your opinion on the ideal environment for hydrographic education. Is it an Institute like yours or can it also be for instance a Geodetic University?

Both the involved dredging and offshore survey companies and Ministry of Transport (Rijkswaterstaat) as well as ourselves agree that the vicinity of the working environment of the hydrographic surveyor adds to the attraction and intensity and realism of the training programme. It is difficult to judge if this situation is better than the location at a â€˜dryâ€™ or â€˜landlockedâ€™ institute.

What future do you foresee for hydrographic surveyors in The Netherlands?

Based on the estimates from the industry, an intake of some 30 graduates per year is desirable. It should be possible to further increase the number of students from the present 12 to at least 20. This still leaves a shortage in relation to the required amounts which means that the employment security will remain as it is. This should be an attractive element for students selecting a profession which is of such a calibre and type. Clearly the industry wishes to maintain the programme in The Netherlands and this supports our opinion that the future looks very positive indeed.

Is it the intention to educate (and qualify) hydrographic surveyors also for nautical watch-keeping? The combination in one person can be very efficient and cost saving, which is important for survey companies.

As a number of subjects are taken by the hydrography students together with the seafaring students, it seems feasible to also have the hydrography students take the required nautical exams which could lead to the deck officer certificate of competence. Obviously this would be an attractive combination for both the employers and the graduates. As both fields have a tremendous shortage of personnel it seems that this could be the ultimate win-win combination for the students.

The combination of your English citizenship and a Dutch High School may be attractive for foreign students to join the Hydrographic courses. Are there any plans to offer courses for foreign students?

We are definitely looking at also offering the courses to foreign English-speaking students. However this has to do with the demand from foreign students and the skills of our lecturers, rather than of my English language background.

Maritime Education Institutes in general are known to be rather conservative. To what extent is your Institute educating in modern developments like ECDIS? Can you elaborate?

It is our intention through close contact with the branch to include all modern technology, equipment and tools in our course programmes. Obviously budget constraints, especially with small student numbers sometimes prevent the inclusion of the latest developments. However, as a modern state-of-the-art centre we believe that our simulators, laboratories and workshops offer a representative combination of the environment that the students will meet onboard and offshore. ECDIS equipment, DP/DT facilities, fast ferry training, BRM/ERM courses are essential elements in present day maritime training.

There is a shortage of junior hydrographic surveyors and potential students seem to lack interest in a career as surveyor. Is it a general trend in nautical careers? What is your opinion on the problem and will you develop specific action to improve the inflow of hydrographic students?

Both the seafaring and hydrographic profession seem to be less popular with the young generations of boys and girls. This seems due to ignorance of the profession, high standard of living in Western Europe and tremendous choice in training programmes offered in secondary and professional education. The last two causes are difficult to influence by an individual training institute so it seems logical to concentrate on the first aspect. Promotion, education exhibitions, articles in journals, attendance at hydrographic conferences, websites etc, are features open and used to their full potential both now and in future.

What sort of contacts do you have with government services and private industry to assess, quantify and satisfy their needs and wishes? Your Institute is in the middle of rapidly changing navigable channels. Have you considered trying to get a contract from the responsible authorities to do regular surveys for training purposes?

As we have just taken over the programme from Amsterdam College, all energy is now required to set up the proper programme for the students. As this becomes established there will be time and possibilities to offer the training and expertise to government and industrial parties. This could include work related to the direct location of the Institute on the Waddenzee. Limited commercial course activities existing previously, have been taken over by staff members and will be continued according to demand.