

INSIDE VIEW:

A Conversation With

CAPTAIN KEVIN OPREY

of Queen Mary 2

by

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Captain Kevin Oprey displays the quiet, understated confidence of someone who has been around ships all his life. “I was born in Southampton and from a very early age I was sailing. I was out on the water every five minutes. I used to go down to Southampton Water [to see the ocean-going ships] and they fascinated me right from that time. When I was out sailing, I was out being an absolute nuisance getting as close as possible to them.”

After coming home from a career at sea, his father became the master of a tender that would ferry passengers ashore from ocean liners that were only pausing in Southampton for a few hours on their way to other destinations. “Every time I had time off, I used to go with my father down to whatever ship was in. I was dumbfounded by their size, everything

was amazing and I wanted to be involved from there.”

Accordingly at age 17, Oprey became an officer cadet for the Pacific Steam Navigation Company. His ambition was to follow his brother onto passenger ships but the opportunity did not arise and so after completing his cadetship, Oprey worked on cargo ships, oil tankers, cross-channel ferries and high speed catamaran ferries as well as working for a time as a Southampton pilot. “Every ship you go on is another learning experience.”

Then an accident threatened to end his career at sea. Having obtained his master’s certificate, he was the mate on a sailing ship for the Sail Training Association. During a heavy November gale in the Bristol Channel, Oprey had to climb the bow sprint in order to cut down

a torn sail that was affecting the ship's navigation. Just as he was completing this task, the ship was hit by a large wave and Oprey went flying. Badly injured, it looked like his time at sea was over.

Now in his late twenties and married, Oprey had to re-train and begin a new career on land. He chose computers and for eight years was a successful systems analyst. However, because of an economic downturn, companies started to cut back on their systems analysts. Some analysts were continued to work without pay but Oprey decided to try to return to sea. He went back to college, re-took his license exams and obtained a position as Second Officer with Geest Line.

Next, Oprey satisfied his ambition to work on passenger ships when he went to work for Royal Caribbean International. It also gave him the opportunity to sail for a time with his brother who was a hotel director.

During the course of ten years with that line, Oprey worked on Vision class ships, Radiance class ships and finally on Freedom of the Seas, which was then the largest cruise ship in service. "The Radiance class ships were the best. You could just accelerate them and they would take off. They were great to handle as well. Their turning ability is phenomenal."

In 2007, Oprey came to Carnival UK, becoming staff captain on the Oriana and then captain of the Arcadia of P&O Cruises. He was then asked if he would like to switch to Cunard.

"I was very happy to - - this company's name has been in my mind ever since I was seven. I think it was because I was new to the group and not

too P&O-orientated and because I had pod experience. I thought at some point I would be taking the Victoria [which is similar technologically to Arcadia]. It was a complete shock when they said I would be taking this."

This caused Captain Oprey to recall sitting with his brother outside of a local pub several years ago. It was the last time that the two would ever have a beer as his brother died not long after. From the pub, you could see Southampton Water and the Queen Mary 2 appeared. "He said: 'Wouldn't it be amazing if you ended up as captain on that one day.'"

Commanding the Queen

With keen enthusiasm, Captain Oprey cites three reasons why Queen Mary 2 is different than any other ship.

First, "she was built and designed specifically to uphold all of the traditions the company has, which goes back 170 years or more."

Because tradition is so important at Cunard, to learn about the company's traditions, Captain Oprey has turned to people such as Stephen Payne, the naval architect who designed QM2 and John Duffy, the legendary hotel manager who served on the original Queen Elizabeth, was synonymous with the Queen Elizabeth 2 and who recently retired from QM2.

"Having only been here a year, I can't turn around and say I'm a Cunarder. I can't talk in my speeches with the experience of the people who have been here for many years. I wish I had come here 20 years ago and become a Cunarder. I am not a great one for reading it and just

saying it; I want to experience it and then say it from my own heart. That will only come in time.”

Second, “she is different as well in that she is an ocean going liner. She is built for the Atlantic. She is what it says on the label - - she is built as a transatlantic liner.”

Third, “she is in the public eye all of the time.” Because she is the heir to the Cunard tradition and the heritage of the great transatlantic ocean liners, QM2 has a unique public reputation that extends beyond the cruise ship industry. In addition, her participation in public events such as the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee celebrations places her in the spotlight more than other passenger ships.

The unique nature of the ship places additional demands upon her commanding officer. “You have to be very aware of what she is and you have to be very conscious of what you do. It’s a greater responsibility in my mind than any other ship that you can command.”

“What I have to do in the time that I have got here is to retain what [QM2] has got. It goes back to what she is; she is a traditional ocean liner. First and foremost, you have got to try and keep that. To try and make it something that it is not, to try and go with the rest of the market and be something different would be completely wrong. So the first thing is to uphold the tradition of what the ship is and what the company is.”

However, one of the traditions that has enabled Cunard to survive for more than 170 years is the ability to reconcile respect for the past with the ability to adapt to the demands of contemporary life. The best illustration of this is the life

of QE2, which continuously evolved over the course of her 40 years in service.

“I was very fortunate during the world cruise to go across [with John Duffy] to QE2 in Dubai. I walked around with him and he told me quite a lot about how things changed. That ship went through several different transitions to keep going. When you think back and look at it, how clever they were as a company to manage to survive.”

This difficult balancing act remains a challenge for Cunard today. “They have got to keep the tradition of the ship. They have got to find ways of keeping what this ship is all about going. [At the same time], they have got to find new ways of taking the ship forward. They have done all the things with RADA, Julliard and songwriters at sea and the three-D cinema but they can’t let the product settle as it is. They can’t be complacent.”

This does not mean that Cunard should just follow whatever passing fad that becomes popular in the cruise industry. Any changes made to QM2 have “got to be something sophisticated to make [them] work and have got to have of a lot of elegance.”

“One thing I would really like to see is to try and encourage some of the famous people back to the ship. If you look back through the history of the company, you see all the film stars and politicians [that have sailed with Cunard]. We had George Bush and Barbara Bush onboard recently. They were really very friendly, very approachable to everybody onboard.” Other notable names traveling recently on the ship included Edwina Sandys and rock legends Roger Daltry

and Roger McGuinn. “I just think that that would start to instill another era.”

Some changes are forced upon the ship by external forces. For example, historically, the shipping companies emphasized speed and vied to have the fastest ocean liner on the Atlantic. While QM2 remains faster than any liner or cruise ship in service today, the high cost of fuel keeps her from using her speed except on rare occasions. This is because there is much greater fuel consumption at higher speeds.

“They schedule this ship to operate on seven day [crossings] now, which is on average 22.6 knots or so. [But during the world cruise], I put everything on coming down from Dubai to Muscat. We did just over 28 knots. If there is a need to do it, we do it. We are a liner service, we have to be there at a certain time.”

“We are no different than any other business. We have to be careful how we spend. Fuel as it is right now is extremely expensive. What the company can achieve in fare prices has to be balanced against what we spend on fuel and everything else. If you don’t make these decisions, something is going to go. It is better to look at the business now, manage it properly and operate the ship as efficiently as you can to sustain what we have.”

As captain, Oprey is responsible for the efficient operation of the ship on a day-to-day basis. This involves providing leadership to over a thousand crew members.

“When I came here I found that with the crew that we have, you could almost let [the ship] run itself because

they are dedicated to what they do. They are Cunard/White Star; they are trained that way. You only have to see how they operate in the restaurants to know that they are pretty committed to what they do.”

“With regard to leadership, I tend to look at it as I’ve got a team that I work with and the team is the important part of the ship. We have our senior management team meetings and our executive team meetings and I use what I hope is a skill in trying to get the best out of those guys. I like to think that I am approachable. I know when I have got to make a decision and they all know that too. And I know when I have to put my foot down a little bit harder and they know that too. Being able to listen, being able to encourage people to do things, take ownership of things and take the initiative to me is what my style of leadership is all about.”