

# WHAT IT MEANS TO BE STAFF CAPTAIN

A conversation with Trevor Lane, second in command of  
of Cunard's Queen Mary 2.

by  
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The title "staff captain" is not self-explanatory. A literal interpretation would seem to imply that the person in that position is in charge of the personnel of the ship. However, it is not a human resources position. Similarly, while there are some elements of being a chief of staff amongst a staff captain's responsibilities that does not completely describe the job. Seeing the deference the staff captain is accorded onboard, it is clearly a prestigious position but to many passengers its actual parameters are something of a mystery.

To find out what a staff captain does, I spoke with Trevor Lane who is the Staff Captain on one of the most prestigious passenger ships in service today, Cunard's Queen Mary 2. In order to get an idea of how one becomes a staff captain, I first asked Captain Lane to outline his career. Then, we spoke about what being the staff captain on QM2 actually involves.

## *Captain Lane's Career*

Trevor Lane seemingly was destined for a life at sea. He was born in southern England in the town of Woolich, where once Henry VIII maintained an arsenal for his navy. His family's business was in Depford, which had been a shipbuilding center in Tudor times. And, he grew up in Greenwich, which some have called the maritime capital of the world.

"Greenwich Park was my playground as I grew up. There was the Cutty Sark and the Maritime Museum and the Royal Navy College, the Royal Observatory, were all things that I grew up with - I grew up surrounded by maritime history."

At the age of ten, Lane was in a naval uniform attending a nautical school. When he was 15, he signed indentures with Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O Line) and a year later he went to sea as a cadet. "My first trip was on a passenger ship called the Orsova. I went out to Australia, and then I was sublet, if you like, to Eastern Australian Shipping Company, which used to run ships around Australia and Japan and everywhere in between. It was a good way to be at sea because they carried 300 passengers and had five cargo hatches so when you arrived in Hong Kong, for example, you were there for five days while you discharged and loaded cargo."

"My apprenticeship lasted four years during which time I covered cargo ships, container ships, tankers - all kinds and varieties of different ships. But once I qualified, I [went] to P&O's passenger division. I spent many years on the Canberra and was involved in the war in the Falklands as the ship's navigator. Then, I transferred from P&O to Princess Cruises and worked my way up to chief officer of the Royal Princess, which is now the Artemis."

"In 1993, my family and I decided to emigrate



to Canada. I had spent quite a few years doing Vancouver to Alaska cruises, had gotten to like British Columbia and had made friends in British Columbia. My sons were very young and my wife and I decided that a good place to bring them up would be Vancouver Island. So, we emigrated to Canada in 1993. [To be near home], I left Princess Cruises and joined the British Columbia Ferry Corporation."

Lane worked for 11 years commanding large ferries in the water around British Columbia. However, when his children came of age, he decided to return to the high seas. The fact that he now works on ocean-going passenger ships as a matter of choice makes the work experience fundamentally different than when he left the cruise industry in 1993. Whenever he thinks that he is working too hard, he remembers that he is there because he wants to be, not because he has to be there. "Unlike driving a ferry or doing most other jobs, every day here is different. I have a rough idea of what I am going to do when I leave my cabin in the morning. The rest of the day develops as it develops, you handle things as you go along. I found that once my sons didn't need me to deal with their situations as they developed, life at home was less challenging than what I need as a person. It was a great life but I needed more challenge. The challenge really is to deal with things as they present themselves. This life provides that kind of challenge."

Upon returning to the cruise industry in 2004, Lane received a concentrated refresher course in contemporary cruise ships. He was given the assignment of relieving senior officers who were going on leave. Consequently, he served on eight different ships for Princess Cruises and P&O Australia Cruises in a two year period. These ranged from the brand new megacruise ship Caribbean Princess to the venerable Pacific Star. "It was a beautifully built ship. In its day, it would have been fantastic. You had teak about three inches thick and real hard teak. Much of the teak you see these days is very soft but that was real, seasoned, hardwood on that ship."

During this period, senior officers from Princess Cruises and Cunard Line were being exchanged in order to broaden their experience. As a result, in 2006, Lane was assigned to his present position, Staff Captain of the Queen Mary 2.

#### *The Role of the Staff Captain*

The staff captain on QM2 is second in command of the ship. However, he is also one of three department heads who report directly to the captain, the other two being the chief engineer and the hotel manager. Encompassed within the staff captain's



*Staff Captain Trevor Lane of Queen Mary 2.*

department is a diverse set of functions.

The most prominent of his responsibilities is command of the ship's bridge. While the captain takes direct command when the ship is entering or leaving port, the staff captain assists the captain and is actively involved in those operations. At sea, making sure "the ship is going the right speed and the right direction" is the staff captain's responsibility. Moreover, reporting to the staff captain are the six watch-keeping officers who drive and navigate the ship on a day-to-day basis.

"When they are not driving the ship, they all have other tasks that they are involved with. The level of responsibility that they have depends upon what rank they are. All of them are important. For example, an officer might be driving the ship this morning and this afternoon he may be preparing the track chart that is displayed by the Pavilion Pool for the next voyage. As small as that is, a lot of people look at that track chart and if he has us going to the wrong port or puts the ports in the wrong order, it does not give the guests much confidence in what we are doing up here."

Perhaps less glamorous but of crucial importance



is the maintenance of the ship. In the past, much of the maintenance on passenger ships was done during periodic refits in shipyards. However, the cruise industry has become so competitive that it is no longer feasible to take ships out of service as often as they were in the past. Therefore, more of the maintenance has to be performed while the ship is underway.

"A ship like this needs constant maintenance, particularly since it is battling back and forth across the Atlantic in harsh conditions. I always like to use the analogy of dentistry. The ship is like your teeth - - if you keep them clean and you keep your gums healthy, there will not be problems. But, if there are areas that you don't keep clean, there are problems. On a ship, any accumulation of salt or dirt will cause the equivalent of a cavity, it will cause the equivalent of decay. So, you want to keep it salt and dirt free."

"Ideally, you would keep all of the ship clean all the time. On this ship, you have over 1,000 balconies that are all places crying out for constant cleaning. Those are places that are the ideal example of a salt trap - - boxes that are open to the sea that are going to fill up with salt and dirt. Of course, you can't keep them all constantly clean because quite a lot of time guests are sitting in them or guests are sitting next to them, or underneath them. You have to pick your time. It is all compromise."

"Yesterday, we were painting balconies but what we did was research who was going on tour beforehand. We sent the ones going on tour letters asking 'would you mind if while you are on tour, we come in and paint your balcony.' It takes a lot of coordination between different departments working out where we are going to paint."

"The success of the ship is really communication between all of the departments - - everybody understanding each others' issues and trying to work together to resolve them. Understanding that my priority may be painting a balcony but the hotel manager's priority is taking care of that guest. So, somehow we have to come to a compromise because in the end the guest won't be happy if the balcony is rusty. It is compromise and prioritize, which is what you train to do over a long period of time. You train to be a manager to manage these situations."

"Every so often, you get a cavity. You get decay. That decay has to be treated much the same way as when you go to the dentist. The decay itself has to be removed. It is just like having your teeth drilled and the decay scaped out. On a ship, it usually has to be removed with an old-fashioned chipping hammer. You bash away the rust and then you wire brush out the rust. Then, you have to fill the hole and paint on top of the



hole. The problem there again is how do you chisel, scrape and make a noise and still not impose on the guests' onboard experience."

Maintaining the exterior of the ship is only part of the battle. "Below we have a lot of tanks - - ballast tanks and fresh water tanks - - that need similar attention. They all have special coatings on them. The ship is only five years old so most of these coatings are okay but no coating is perfect. Every so often you get a breakdown of a coating and that has to be dealt with and treated. You can only open up a tank when you are in port, however. So, now you have the problem, it is preferable to work outside when in port because I do not want to disturb the guests but I can only work on the tank in port." Further compounding the problem is the fact that with 26 transatlantic crossings a season, QM2 is not in port that often. Also, when the ship is at anchor in a cruise port, the same people who do the maintenance are driving the ship's tenders.

"I only have 35 men. The number of staff in my department is not proportionate to the size of the ship. So, you have to get that much more out of the staff and that is always a challenge - - being efficient with your time and with their time and with the resources you've got, lots of balls in the air and constant prioritizing."

Also reporting to the staff captain is QM2's safety officer whose responsibilities include training the crew in emergency procedures. "This ship has 22 lifeboats and thus needs 22 crews to man those lifeboats. All of them have to be certified. They have to pass an exam in being able to take care of a lifeboat. As people come up through the ranks, we need to keep training people. [This training is] usually given when a person becomes a supervisor or manager, crew members] who have proven themselves to be able to take charge of a group of people. In today's class, we have quite a few assistant housekeepers. They are in charge of groups of bedroom stewards so they can be in charge of groups of passengers. They have that kind of personality and can handle that type of responsibility."



Along the same lines, safety equipment such as the lifeboats has to be periodically tested in order to meet legal requirements. For example, "every five years, the MCA, the governing authority for the ship, requires us to test whether the lifeboats on the davits will take the equivalent weight of 150 people plus 10 percent [in an emergency stop situation]. What they want to be sure of is that you could stop if you were lowering the boat at full speed and you suddenly realize that there was another boat caught underneath it. You can imagine if a boat has that kind of weight in it and is going full speed down the side, there is a lot of dynamic force on those davits if you suddenly stop it. Yesterday, we were doing those kind of tests."

"Then, in the background, the security is going on. I have a security officer who takes care of most of the day-to-day running of things but I am responsible for the security of the ship. We have a staff of 16 at the moment. Security is a very high profile aspect of the job."

The security force is most publicly seen checking IDs and running the metal detectors by the ship's gangways. "When they are not on the gangway, they do fire rounds, so they are patrolling the ship 24 hours a day."

"The security officer investigates all of the accidents. If you have a slip and fall type accident, he will investigate that and submit his report to the chief officer and a report is filed ashore."

A related responsibility is performing safety checks. Security personnel "check fire extinguishers, the routine things that need to be checked - - smoke detectors." They also check the flooring for slipperiness. "There is a machine that crawls along and can measure how slippery it is. [This ensures that] when you spill your coffee on the marble floor, it doesn't make it excessively slippery. We are checking that constantly to make sure we don't have accidents."

The security staff also acts as a police force. "If you have trouble on the ship, which thankfully here we have very little, you would need the security staff to assist you."

Beyond the staff captain's departmental responsibilities, there is more to being second in command than prestige. "On a crossing of the North Atlantic, you have to face a lot of fog [and either the captain or the staff captain must be on the bridge at all times]. If we have several days of fog that can be very challenging - - you are trying to deal with fog and do all this other work as well."

"And the captain has responsibility for the whole ship, so you have to keep an eye

On what is happening in the whole ship, not just

your little domain. You have to know all the issues. He needs to keep you informed in case you have a need to take over."

As a senior officer, there are also social obligations. "We have various functions that we are required to attend. It humanizes the whole thing. Because you are living with the job, the job never stops. You will never be able to say: 'Okay I have finished, today, I have completed everything, I can close the books and open them again tomorrow.' There is always something to do. If you weren't careful, you would work 24 hours a day every day and do nothing but think about ship issues and how you are going to resolve those problems, [which leads to burn out and inefficiency]. The fact that here you are encouraged strongly to take part in the social program of dining with the guests and going to parties with the guests, forces you to think about something different. I have come to believe that is much healthier. It doesn't matter how hard you work, how busy you have been during the day, how frustrating a day you have had, I have found that I sleep better if I go down with the guests. For me that is part of the attraction of working here. It is not everybody's cup of tea but it certainly works for me."

