

INSIDE VIEW:

IN COMMAND OF THE QUEENS

Talking with Captain Paul Wright, the first person to have commanded three Cunard Queens.

by

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Few seafarers have the breadth of experience of Captain Paul Wright. Moreover, although he has commanded some of the most famous passenger ships in the world including Cunard's Queen Elizabeth 2 (QE2) and Queen Mary 2 (QM2), Wright seldom talks about his accomplishments. Rather, he prefers listening to others; particularly people who have a good sense of humor. His relaxed style puts people at ease and so he receives the friendship as well as the respect of guests and co-workers.

Captain Wright was inspired to go to sea listening to a relative who was a seafarer. After completing his cadetship on tankers with Shell Oil in the late 1960s, Wright went to work for Canadian Pacific Line in its passenger ships. The most famous of these ships was the Empress of Canada. "She was a nice ship. We were doing Liverpool to Montreal in the summer. We used to go up to Bell Harve, through the icebergs. Then we used to cruise out of New York in the winter down to the

Caribbean."

Caribbean cruising was still in its infancy. "There were hardly any ships down there, maybe one, maybe two." Moreover, "it was amazing just how little there was [for passengers to do] on there."

This ship, however, would go on to lead a revolution in cruising, not under her original name but as the Mardi Gras, the first ship of Carnival Cruise Lines. The ship was purchased from Canadian Pacific by Carnival's founder Ted Arison and another firm. The first months of operation gave no hint of the success that was to follow and so the other firm offered to sell its interest to Arison's company. "From what I understand, they paid a dollar for it and they took on a million dollars debt for the Empress of Canada."

The reason that the Empress of Canada was up for sale was that Canadian Pacific was exiting the passenger ship business. Because of commercial passenger jets, CP's transatlantic passenger service was no longer

viable.

"I spent some time with CP after the passenger ships. I was on their container ships, CP Discoverer, Voyager traveling transatlantic."

"After Canadian Pacific I spent a long time on all sorts of ships. I was on container ships, hovercraft, general cargo, bulk carriers, dredgers. - - I don't think there was anything I wasn't on. Then I did some delivery jobs. I took a 150 ton tug across the North Atlantic in winter." Of course, all of these experiences broadened and refined Wright's seamanship skills.

To Cunard Line

One day an officer he was working with told Wright that there were some openings at Cunard. "I thought that would be nice for a change. So I joined Cunard as a First Officer in 1980. I spent about eight years on the Cunard Countess. I started as First Officer and left as Staff Captain."

Cunard Countess was 17,495 gross tons and carried 750 passengers. She spent the great bulk of her time cruising the Caribbean. "You could set your watch by it. It was San Juan, an island every day apart from Sunday, and back to San Juan on Saturday. It was a nice run. There were just a few other ships around - - the Carla C, the Daphne, and the old Sun Princess. It has changed quite a bit since then" he smiles.

Wright's next assignment was as the Staff Captain of the Sagafjord (24,000 gross tons). Whereas the Countess had been a mass market cruise ship geared toward the British market, the Sagafjord had been purchased by Cunard from Norwegian American Line and still retained much of her Norwegian atmosphere. Indeed, all of the officers were Norwegian. "I was the first Brit. They were suspicious at first but they soon realized that I was just a simple seaman," Wright laughs.

Next, Wright became the Staff Captain of Cunard's flagship, the Queen Elizabeth 2. The QE2 was yet another culture change, being bigger, more formal and more international than Cunard's other ships.



Captain Paul Wright`

"Cunard had a very eclectic fleet - - the Sagafjord, the Sea Goddesses, the Countess and Princess, and the QE2."

In 1993, Wright was given his first command: a Cunard ship but one that relatively few people have sailed upon - - the Atlantic Conveyor. It was Cunard's last cargo ship; a giant container ship that replaced the Cunarder of the same name that had been lost in the Falklands War. "She was as big as QE2 but you go on there and there are only 15 people onboard. It was so different"

"My first command of a passenger ship was on the Crown Dynasty." This was a 20,000 gross ton mass market cruise ship, which Cunard chartered for a brief period in the 1990s. "She was a nice ship. We were doing Alaska cruises."



Captain Wright then went shoreside as Cunard's Marine Superintendent. In 1996, Trafalgar House, which was then Cunard's parent company, was purchased for its engineering holdings by the Norwegian industrial firm, Kaverne. The new parent made it clear from the outset that it was not interested in running a passenger ship company and thus Cunard was up for sale.

"Everybody was coming in looking at the company and we didn't know what was happening. Most of the companies that were coming in were asset strippers. It was a real strange time. People were moving on. I was very close to it myself [but I decided] to hang on."

A white knight arrived in the form of Carnival Corporation, which purchased Cunard in 1997. "Fortunately, Carnival came in - - if it hadn't I'm sure Cunard would not be around now. At one stage it looked like we would fizzle off into nothing. It was very close before Carnival came in."

Commanding QE2 and QM2

After two years ashore, Captain Wright returned to sea in 1999 as captain of QE2. "It was something I had always wanted since joining Cunard. I remember my first sailing from Southampton, you hear that whistle go - - there is nothing like it. You think of the history, the beautiful traditions."

He brought a relaxed, people-oriented style of command with him that was popular with both guests and crew. "It wasn't the traditional [style]. I couldn't be that sort of person. Everybody has different ways of operation. We are all individuals. There is room for all sorts of styles."

Captain Wright was in command of QE2 for the international review of naval and civilian ships during the 2000 Fourth of July celebrations in New York harbor. He was also in command when QE2 became the first civilian ship to enter New York after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Meanwhile, Carnival Corporation was planning to build a new transatlantic liner to take over the transatlantic service from the aging QE2. While new cruise ships were sailing out of the shipyards seemingly every week, no one had built an ocean liner for some 30 years. Such a ship had to be stronger than a cruise ship in order to handle the rigors of the North Atlantic and more powerful than a cruise ship in order to have the speed needed to make a crossing in a reasonable time.

The result of this planning would be the Queen Mary 2, the largest ocean liner ever built. Captain Wright was assigned to oversee her construction in St. Nazaire, France. After QM2 entered service in early 2004, Captain Wright became one of her first captains. "I spent the first 18 months or so on her alternating with [Commodore] Ron Warwick."

"You look down the back end through the bridge window and you think she is . . . big." Nevertheless, "she is more maneuverable than the QE2 and she is a great sea ship."

"She feels like a liner inside. You have traditional things like the Grills, which people appreciate. The traditional bars - - The Golden Lion always seems to be heaving; the Chart Room is always nice. I think the Britannia is a beautiful restaurant - - very imposing and impressive when you go in there."

In addition, the new ship was built to include

all of the features that the public had come to expect on a modern passenger ship. "I think it was a very astute move by Micky Arison [Carnival Corporation CEO] to have balconies on QM2. Everyone was saying: 'You can't have balconies on a transatlantic liner.' But he insisted. I think it has paid off. People do want balconies. Balconies are so important to people."

There was also the addition of new features such as the first planetarium at sea. This physical plant was enhanced by an unrivaled enrichment program. The final result was that "the ship is a destination as opposed to the ports."

During this time, Captain Wright commanded QM2 on her maiden call to Hamburg, Germany. An estimated half million people turned out to watch the ship sail down the Elbe river.

To Princess and Back

Following Carnival's merger with P&O, Wright was seconded to P&O's former subsidiary Princess Cruises. "It was good to see Princess operate. It is a very successful line. They have some nice ships."

"On the bridge it was very much the same. How many different ways can you drive a ship? The main difference was a lot less social functions over there. We still shake hands with every guest as they come in[to] the captain's reception] whereas on Princess, the captain will go out on the balcony [in the atrium] and [address the guests]. The captains are the operators of the ship. [That] is the priority here but there is an emphasis on the social side of it as well."

While at Princess, Captain Wright commanded the Diamond Princess and the Sapphire Princess, both 116,000 gross tons. "Nice ships. They were built in Japan. The Japanese were very much trying to get into the market and their attention to detail was very good."

Captain Wright returned from Princess to become the first master of the Queen Victoria. In so doing, Wright became the first person to have commanded three Cunard Queens.

The new ship was different than QE2 and QM2 but still consistent with Cunard tradition. "Cunard has always had the transatlantic liners [but at the same time, it has had] the cruising ships as well - - the *Coronia*, the *Carmania*, the *Franconia*. I think they wanted to slot it into that."

In order to fulfill, this role "you needed a ship that was a little more flexible. You do not want to be anchoring off everywhere" and tendering the passengers ashore. Thus, while the ship had to be maneuverable like the QM2, it also had to have less draft than a ship

built to do regularly scheduled transatlantic crossings.

While considerations of draft and maneuverability argued for a ship smaller than QM2, the need to achieve economies of scale called for the ship to be a very substantial size.

To satisfy these competing considerations, Cunard began with the Vista class design already employed in ships sailing for Holland America Line, P&O Cruises and Costa Cruises. "It was a proven hull design." Using this design as a base, Cunard lengthened the ship and reinforced the hull in order to enable her to better handle the occasional transatlantic crossings the company envisioned for the ship.

The result was the second largest Cunarder built up to that point. However, because of her maneuverability and shallower draft, "there are very few ports that you can't go to or where you have to anchor. She has been very successful on all her Baltic itineraries, her Mediterranean itineraries and the occasional transatlantic. She did very well on her world cruises as well."

While the Queen Victoria was designed for cruising rather than the transatlantic service, as Captain Wright noted, she has done transatlantic crossings as part of her world cruise and during cruises from Britain to Canada and New England. These have included three winter crossings - - a voyage that is notorious for its rough weather. Nonetheless, "the ship did fine. She moved around a bit."

But that was nothing compared to some of the winter crossings that Captain Wright made when he was on cargo ships and container ships. "You were thrown around all the way across. I went across in a Dart Canada container ship and we got caught in a freezing spray. As soon as the spray hit the deck, it froze. You would not believe what the ship looked like. Ropes were as thick [as telephone poles]. Then she started a lazy roll and it was 'oh dear!' We were supposed to be going to Halifax but we just steamed south to thaw it out."

"I really enjoyed my time on Queen Victoria. I think the ship has a nice feel about it. People have gotten used to her now. It was the same with the [transition from] QE2 to the Queen Mary 2. People came on saying 'I am not going to like this' but eventually they come to like it. I have met people on Queen Victoria that prefer [QE2] and people on [QM2] that prefer that one. There is a different product for both. I think it is slotted quite well into the market place really"

Captain Wright returned to the Queen Mary 2 in November 2010 for his last contract before retiring. As a result, he was in command of the Cunard flagship during the Royal Rendezvous meeting of all three of the current Cunard Queens in New York in January 2011 and during her World Voyage as far as Australia. "The ship

has settled down over the years and we have quite a lot of loyal customers."

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Reflecting back over the span of his career, Captain Wright noted some of the changes in cruising and speculated on its future course.

Perhaps the most readily apparent change has been the growth in the size of the ships. QM2, which is 150,000 gross tons, was "in Barbados recently and ahead of us was the Prinsendam, the old Royal Viking Sun [22,000 gross tons]. I used to think that was a big ship. It is amazing how much bigger the ships have gotten."

"The ships have gotten bigger and the ports haven't. So we are working to much closer tolerances now. I think what they will do next in the cruise industry is start developing a few of the ports. I think that is what has to come next - - the infrastructure ashore."

Another change has been in the composition of the people who operate the ships. When Captain Wright first went to sea, all of the officers on a given cruise line were men from a specific nation. "Now it is very international. Princess is a mixture of Italian and Brits and it works well. I found it great when I went there. Holland America is now integrated quite well. Here, we have had Croatian second officers, Italian engineers, Eastern European engineers. [The captain who succeeded Wright on the Queen Victoria, Inger Olsen] is from the Faroe Islands. [People] are not so worried about what nationality the captain is anymore."

"The biggest challenge now is the crew. The front line of Cunard is the crew. When people think of [a cruise line] they think of their waiter, their maitre d', their cabin steward and the service they get. It is very competitive to get good crew with how the industry has expanded."

Why has cruising grown popular and maintained that popularity even in harsh economic times? "It is a great value holiday [compared to] what you can pay for a resort in the Caribbean for a couple of weeks. It is [also] a safe holiday. You are not going to get mugged going down to Four Deck. For somebody traveling on their own, they can meet people."

There is also something about sea travel to appeal to a variety of tastes. "You speak to couples and it is normally the men who are resistant to going on a cruise and the women who want to but eventually it is the husbands who really like it."

As for the future after he retires, Wright does not see himself slowing down. "I haven't really thought

about it that much. I might even do the odd [ship] delivery job or something like that. It is probably not so difficult for seafarers to retire as people working ashore because we go home for long times. I don't get bored. I can always find things to do."