

Nelson seafarer Gilbert Inkster remembered as a delightful companion

BEN GIBBS

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Captain Gilbert Inkster pictured in 2002 when he retired for the second time, aged 78.

Much-loved Nelson seafarer, Captain Gilbert Inkster, died on April 30, aged 92. He was patron of the Nelson branch of the Merchant Navy Association. Here is an edited version of the eulogy delivered at his funeral by the association's secretary, Ben Gibbs.

The great loves of Gilbert's life were ships and the sea, mountains and outdoor life, his wife, family and dogs, and his multitude of friends.

Gilbert's salient personal qualities were quick wit, playfulness, a whimsical sense of humour, and a penchant for mischief or devilment. Gilbert was subversive. He liked to surprise and disconcert people.

Secondly, warmth, friendliness, generosity, and old-fashioned courtesy.

Thirdly, competence in everything he undertook, especially as a seaman and leader of men.

Gilbert Inkster was born in a nursing home in Mount St in December 1923.

His parents had the Rising Sun pub in Waimea Rd at the time. Later they shifted to a house in Golf Rd, Tahunanui, where Gilbert grew up.

His father, Thomas Inkster, was a Shetland Islander who had been a merchant seaman. Thomas Inkster returned to seafaring a year or so after Gilbert's birth, serving as a mate on Anchor Company ships. He was often away at sea during Gilbert's childhood.

These were difficult years in New Zealand. There was widespread unemployment in Nelson, and a lot of poverty and hardship; and a good deal of class snobbery, which Gilbert detested.

As a teenager growing up in these troubled times, he developed strongly left-wing political opinions and a sympathy for the underdog, which he retained all his life.

Yet Gilbert was something of a juvenile entrepreneur. While he was at Nelson College he worked at a variety of part-time jobs – caddying at the golf course, making apple cases, delivering milk, selling firewood - and earned enough to buy himself a 12-foot clinker-built dinghy, with oars and a small sail, for £5 (\$10).

He kept the dinghy at the creek by the golf links, at the bottom of Parkers Rd. With this dinghy, he explored all the islands in the Waimea estuary, circumnavigating Rabbit Island twice. Often, he would leave the golf links creek early in the morning on the spring tide and go across to the seaward side of Rabbit Island to collect firewood.

He had a dog called Dufter, a Russian collie, which would chase rabbits while Gilbert was stacking firewood on the boat. Gilbert always loved dogs. There was never a time in his life when he was without at least one.

Gilbert was never very happy at Nelson College, which in those days was a highly-regimented, class-conscious institution. A month into his fourth year, he cycled home and told his mother he was not going back to the college. He had set his heart on going to sea, like his father before him. He was 16.

It was early in 1940 and World War 2 had begun.

Gilbert's father had always opposed his son's wish to go to sea, but now at last he relented. He spoke to Sonny Tregidga, the owner of the scow Pearl Kasper, and Gilbert joined the crew as a deckboy. He remained with the ship for two years, first as deckboy, then as ordinary seaman, finally as leading hand.

The duties of a deckboy included cooking all meals and scrubbing the crew's accommodation, as well as working cargo and standing the 4 to 8 watch, morning and night. During his time on the Pearl Kasper Gilbert was thoroughly trained by the Tregidgas in the seaman's trade. In those days, there was no better school of seamanship than a Blind Bay wooden-huller.

Gilbert used to enjoy telling stories of his pranks and adventures on the Pearl Kasper. Once he fell overboard off D'Urville Island. The ship was passing him doing six knots, and Gilbert was wearing a pair of long sea-boots. Sonny Tregidga's son George was leading hand at the time. He prodded Gilbert with an oar, pushing him underwater, laughing and saying "Drown, you little bastard, drown! I want those sea-boots."

Of course he soon pulled Gilbert back aboard the ship and allowed him to keep his sea-boots.

As a sailing scow the Pearl Kasper had a long bowsprit. On one occasion she left Waitapu in the middle of the night, and when daybreak came the boy on the wheel saw a large object dangling off the bows of the ship.

It turned out to be a long-drop dunny from the Waitapu wharf, snagged by the bowsprit as the ship swung round in the darkness to head out to sea. Luckily no one was in it the time.

After leaving the Pearl Kasper, Gilbert worked for a couple of years as an able seaman on Anchor Company ships – the Alexander, the Kaitoa and the Rata, and the old Holmlea.

In 1945, after a stint on the Government lighthouse tender Matai, he signed on the four-masted barque Pamir for a trip to Vancouver and back. On the way, news of VE Day – the German surrender, victory in Europe - was received aboard the Pamir. An official telegram from Lord Leathers congratulating the Merchant Navy for its contribution towards victory was pinned up on the messroom notice-board.

Gilbert purloined the telegram and kept it safe for many years, until Merchant Navy Day last year, when he presented it to the Nelson Provincial Museum. It is a document of considerable historical interest.

A day or so after the Pamir left Vancouver on her return journey to Wellington, an American cruiser turned up and circled the Pamir with all its guns trained on the defenceless barque. The Americans probably wondered what a four-masted sailing ship was doing in the Pacific at that late stage of the war.

A week or so later, when the Pamir was in mid-Pacific, news was received that the Japanese had surrendered and the war was over.

After the war Gilbert studied at the Auckland School of Navigation and obtained the certificates needed to work as a deck officer. Over the next 10 years he served on a variety of Union Shipping Company vessels, and in 1956 he qualified as master, foreign-going.

He also gained an endorsement as master of a fore-and-aft rigged foreign-going sailing ship. This qualified him to serve in later years on the youth training ships, Spirit of Adventure and Spirit of New Zealand, and as relieving master of the Australian three-masted barquentine Leeuwin.

When the replica of Captain Cook's barque Endeavour visited New Zealand in 2000, Gilbert was invited to pilot the ship through French Pass.

Gilbert took a period of leave from the Union Company in 1956 to visit his father's birthplace in the Shetland Islands.

He arrived in the autumn, and there something wonderful happened, perhaps the best thing that ever happened to him.

Gilbert was an accomplished piper, and he was asked to play the pipes at a wedding.

During the wedding celebrations he was introduced to a charming young woman named Christine.

A whirlwind romance followed, and within three months – on January 10, 1957 - Gilbert and Christine were married at Mid Yell Kirk.

Gilbert took a job for a while relieving as second mate on a ferry running between Lerwick and Aberdeen. Then when his period of leave from the Union Company expired, he was sent to stand by the building of a new cargo vessel, the Konini, at Henry Robb's shipyard in Leith.

When the Konini sailed for New Zealand, Gilbert went with her as a deck officer.

Chrissie flew out to New Zealand to join her husband. She found the long arduous journey something of a challenge. It was only the second time she had been outside the Shetlands, and this time she was travelling alone to the far side of the world.

Gilbert met her at Christchurch airport wearing a newly-cultivated beard, to her consternation. Then he sent her off to Nelson to live with her in-laws, whom she had never met, while he disappeared back to sea.

Over the next few months, though, he began considering whether it was time to look for a shore job, where he could enjoy the comforts of married life on a more regular basis. Eventually, in September 1958, Gilbert resigned from the Union Shipping Company and began working for the Nelson Harbour Board as dredgemaster and pilot, and later as harbourmaster.

He served the Harbour Board for 16 years. During that time he handled no less than 1223 different vessels. Yet pottering about in the harbour, directing the operations of a dredge or a pilot boat, never really satisfied Gilbert. He still felt the call of the sea, the open sea.

In 1974 he resigned from the harbour board and signed on as second mate of a bulk cement carrier, the old Milburn Carrier. Later, he became master of a new cement carrier, the Westport, built in 1976.

Many have heard the famous story of Gilbert bringing the Westport through the Cut in reverse, making use of the bow thruster, just to show it could be done.

Gilbert retired officially in 1988, but he continued going back to sea for years afterward whenever he had the chance – relieving sick deck officers, delivering ships from one port or country to another.

His post-retirement jobs included five trans-Tasman crossings, a delivery voyage as master of the trawler Tasman Viking from Iceland to Nelson, and another delivery voyage as mate of the trawler Rehua from Norway to Nelson.

Gilbert often asked himself and others what it was that he found so attractive about the seafaring life. Why are people drawn back repeatedly to work in such a hostile environment, with all its discomforts and dangers, and despite the loneliness and boredom of shipboard life on long voyages?

How can one explain to a landlubber the thrill of excitement felt by a seaman who has been a long time ashore, when his ship leaves port and reaches the open sea and starts moving in response to the surge of the waves?

Gilbert struggled to explain that sudden joy, that feeling of exultation and freedom. The best he could do was to quote a poem by Emily Dickinson, which he read at the end of a talk in 1995 on "Adventures at Sea".

Exultation is the going

Of an inland soul to sea,

Past the houses, past the headlands

Into deep Eternity.

Bred as we, among the mountains,

Can the sailor understand

The divine intoxication

Of the first league out from land?

In 2005 Gilbert and Chrissie shifted from Victoria Heights to a house in Jubilee Way, Tahunanui, not far from Gilbert's childhood home in Golf Rd. In his final years - his real retirement years - Gilbert enjoyed walking on the beach every morning with his dog. And he enjoyed receiving visitors to Jubilee Way, especially former seafarers, with whom he could exchange jokes and tell stories of old ships and the men who sailed in them.

Gilbert Inkster was a delightful companion, a staunch friend, a true gentleman. We are blessed to have known him. May he rest in peace.

- Stuff