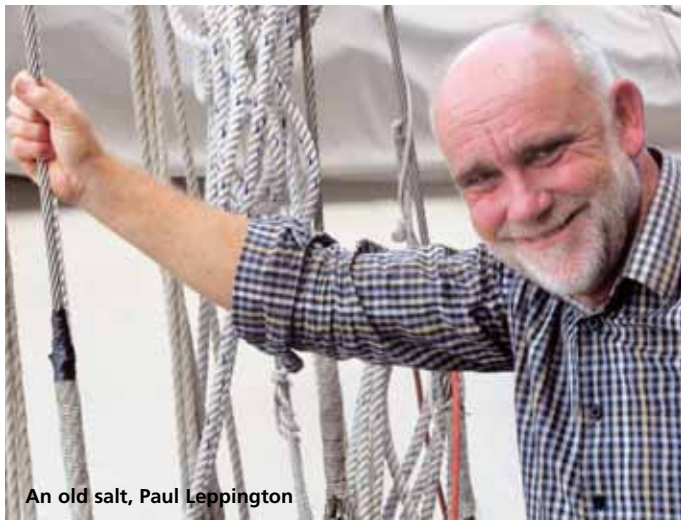




LEPPY!

BY CAROL FORSYTH



An old salt, Paul Leppington



At sea – tallship sail training

Say the name “Leppy” in the right crowd and everyone knows of his association with the Spirit of New Zealand Trust and tall ships. But what really makes Paul Leppington tick?

Paul says he loves working with wood and is restoring a 39ft William Garden yacht “as a long-term project”. His business specialises in rigging and masting large sailing ships. His adventurous life has taken him on sailing ships, building ships and travelling around the world in large ships, “to see what was on the other side.” And he values family life and faith and the integration of both.

Born in a fishing town in the north of England, Paul attended a private nautical school for entry as a naval cadet officer in the Royal and Merchant Navy.

He enjoyed being involved in rigging yachts, sailing small boats and working on North Sea trawlers in the holidays. In his third and fifth years he trained on *HMS Foudroyant* and sailed on the *Sir Winston Churchill*.

In 1969 he took an apprenticeship with the Bank Line and gained his Second Mate Foreign Going at aged 19, and three years later his First Mate Foreign Going Certificate.

Fast-forward another three years and his long association with the Spirit of Adventure Trust was just beginning. Sailing as a

volunteer mate or sailing master, Paul also volunteered to serve on Melbourne’s topsail schooner the *Alma Doepel* and historic sailing ship *Polly Woodsides*. During this time Paul also worked for the Union Steam Ship Company.

Early sea trials on the replica film ship *Bounty* saw Paul selecting and training her crew, who were former *Spirit of Adventure* trainees, in square-rigged seamanship.

Having gained his Master Foreign Going ticket, Paul resigned from the Union Steamship Company and pursued a career in square rigs with full-time work on the *Bounty*. For the next three years he immersed himself in sailing, rigging and filming as the *Bounty* sailed to Tahiti and New Zealand.

After two years on vessels supplying offshore oil rigs, Paul accepted a six-month contract with the Spirit of Adventure Trust. This was extended to a full-time position as master. In 1986 his extensive skills were called on during the design, layout, construction and rigging of the *Spirit of New Zealand*.

As the permanent master, Paul commanded both the *Spirit of Adventure* and the *Spirit of New Zealand* in all weathers around coastal New Zealand and her trans-Tasman journey to Hobart and Sydney for the Australian bi-centenary celebrations.

While acting as the master of the Australian-built *Endeavour* replica during her construction, Paul was able to expand his knowledge of early 18th century square-rigged ships and gain further experience in crew training and management. “It was particularly inspiring working on this project with specialists from around the world,” said Paul.

By now he had developed a reputation for specialist rigging and supply for large, square-rig vessels around the southern Pacific and Australasia. His skills were further expanded overseeing the rigging of *Fritha*, the replica of *Jole Brise* and the *Spirit of New Zealand*, along with various other local projects.

In the early 1990s, Paul was once again back in New Zealand full-time on both the *Spirit* ships in various master roles. He formalised his love of training by completing the Diploma of Training with the New Zealand Institute of Management, and these skills proved valuable when the trust took a hard look at its youth development programme.

A committed Christian, Paul was responsible for setting up the Christian Fellowship Afloat and its marine activities working

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with disadvantaged teenagers. He also completed a degree in theology and ministry, majoring in counselling.

"This was hugely enjoyable and incredibly demanding," says Paul. "In the last year we were very busy counselling face-to-face and following up with research projects."

After teaching the British Nautical Institute's Square Rigged Masters course for 10 years, Paul has become the New Zealand examiner. "I find I am still teaching in the exam room when someone hasn't grasped a certain manoeuvre or principle."

In recognition of his distinguished service to the Spirit of Adventure Trust, Paul Leppington received the Topgallant Award, its highest award. He continues with the trust as senior master and marine director to this day.

Given his distinguished career, it might come as a surprise to hear Paul say the highlight of his seagoing career has been serving on hospital mission ships.

"They are a great leveler. It's just fantastic to use your skills to get a dentist, doctor and nurses into an isolated island. We went to islands with charts that were last updated in 1855."

The navigation skills required are largely sight, sextants and common sense, certainly not trusting GPS, as many reefs are not even marked on the old charts. Permission from the Fijian government is needed to get to some of these out-of-the-way places.

"We see kids with rotten teeth and people with cataracts and life-threatening conditions who really would die because they can't afford the boat or airfare to the mainland. This is now, not 100 years ago!" says Paul.

Extracts from Marine Reach continue the story: "We made our way across the deserted beach and proceeded to walk through the jungle canopy following an old railway line used to transport

goods across the narrow land mass that made up part of the horseshoe-shaped island.

We emerged on to a large lagoon and waited. Eventually a small boat came by and after the initial introductions, transport was arranged for our medical teams to be transported to the village of Udu located several miles from the ship's anchorage.

The team went to work, seeing 45 of the 84 people living in the village. Reaching the rest of the island proved more of a challenge, as 35 knot winds made the passage through the narrow reef opening into the lagoon dangerous for the ship.

It was decided to transport the medical teams to the nearest beach in our inflatable and have them walk across the narrow peninsula and arrange a second boat to take them across the lagoon. It was a slow process, but effective in reaching the island's interior.

Communication was impossible with the island's main radio out of action, but after several tries and days later, the medical team, headed by the ship's medical director, Maredydd Cronin, made it to the main village of Tovu.

About 64 men, women and children crammed into the makeshift clinic that day seeking medical attention, while a special women's team met the women of the village to discuss and pray through their respective issues and concerns."

Marine Reach continues to target communities which are often overlooked when it comes to physical and spiritual assistance. "No matter how small or isolated a community may be, God's heart reaches to the very ends of the earth!" says Paul.

Once again, here is a mariner who has gone far and returned back to the basics of a seafaring life to use his skills to make the world a better place for those who are following in his footsteps, and helping others less fortunate than ourselves. ⚓

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