Maintaining a Viable Volunteer Organisation: The Sydney Heritage Fleet

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SUMMARY: The Sydney Heritage Fleet is primarily a volunteer organisation backed by a small core of paid staff. It receives no direct government assistance, depending on donations, an Art Union and income from using its assets. In its 40 years the fleet has amassed a variety of craft with respect to both age and type, and has undertaken substantial restoration projects.

This paper describes the management of the Fleet’s over 600 volunteers, including recruitment, induction, training, recognition, reward and insurance. Of prime importance is a philosophy that recognises the rights and needs of volunteers and a requirement that they all enter into an Agreement with the Fleet, that enunciates the rights and obligations of both.

Sound business and strategic planning aimed at financial viability as well as organisation maintenance and renewal, are paramount in the successful operation of this enterprise, that has as its goal: To build and maintain an internationally recognised centre of excellence in maritime heritage...

1. GENERAL

This paper is about the passionate volunteers of the Sydney Maritime Museum Limited, which trades as the Sydney Heritage Fleet. We are a totally separate organisation to the much younger, but larger and more securely funded, Australian National Maritime Museum with whom we share premises and indeed, volunteers, many of whom give of their time to both organisations. We gratefully acknowledge indirect support from both the ANMM & the NSW Maritime Authority.

Figure 1. Even volunteers must eat!

Volunteers are the lifeblood of the Sydney Heritage Fleet; without them we could not exist.

The Sydney Heritage Fleet has been in existence for 40 years, being founded in December 1965, under another name, with the acquisition and restoration, entirely by volunteers, of the VIP steam launch Lady Hopetoun, built in Sydney in 1902. Since then the Museum has authentically restored the steam tug Waratah, also built in 1902, the gentleman’s schooner Boomerang, built in 1903, the tall ship James Craig, built in 1874 and several other smaller boats including the 1908 inner-harbour ferry Protex and the 1956 built Manly speedboat Kookaburra. All operate to take the public out on excursions on Sydney Harbour and, for the James Craig, outside Sydney Heads for day sailing and to Newcastle, Eden and, earlier this year, as far south as Tasmania and return.

In addition to the vessels already mentioned we are restoring a number of other ships and boats of significant maritime heritage value, including the 1927 steam driven buoy tender and relief pilot vessel John Oxley and the 1912 Sydney Harbour ferry Kanangra. We also have a large collection of static display boats, either fully restored or under restoration.

The Fleet is primarily a volunteer organisation backed up by a small core of paid staff. We depend heavily on donations and generate other income from the use of our assets, principally through the operation of our vessels, and the running of an Art Union. The Fleet receives no direct government funding, either State or Federal, but it is an organisation registered as a tax-deductible gift recipient.

The group is diverse but cohesive. It encompasses the officers and crew of our ships, the trained guides who share our treasures with visitors, and the shore-based volunteer workers in our office and library, our boat restoration workshops and in our Heritage Shipyard at Rozelle Bay. This magnificent band, volunteers all, make our Museum “happen”.

2. GOALS OF THE ORGANISATION

The goals of the Fleet are best expressed by its Mission Statement which reads:
‘To build and maintain an internationally recognised centre of excellence in maritime heritage for the benefit of all Australians by presenting through research, acquisition, conservation, restoration and operation, our continuing maritime history’.
3. PRIMARY ACTIVITIES
- Restoration and maintenance of historic vessels.
- Conservation of maritime artefacts and records, marine engines and ship models.
- Operation of a Research Library
- Provision of educational opportunities for young people to learn, understand and experience maritime history.
- Operation of an extensive fleet of historic vessels, making them available for public enjoyment.

4. BENEFICIARIES OF THE ORGANISATION
The prime beneficiaries of our activities are the people of Australia who have had preserved for them, priceless items of their maritime past. Beneficiaries too are our volunteers who keep active by working in the various activities of our Fleet. We all benefit through the opportunity to pass on old, perhaps even dying, skills (eg riveting) to younger volunteers thereby keeping alive these priceless gems from our past.

Figure 2. Re-plating the John Oxley

The unique opportunity to experience first hand, the operation of historic vessels is available to all who visit the Fleet.

School children and youth organisations learn of the experiences of their ancestors in arriving in this country by sea by participating in “sleep overs” on board the James Craig and by visiting or cruising on our ships.

5. VOLUNTEERS
There are around 600 volunteers (not all of whom are members as this currently is not a requirement of volunteering with us) assisting the Fleet in one capacity or another. The oldest is in her nineties and the youngest in his mid-teens.

The volunteer hours recorded for 2004/05 show that there were two incredible individuals who gave over 2000 hours of service each. Of the remainder, 310 volunteers each contributed between 1 and 99 hours, 163 between 100 and 499 hours, 57 between 500 and 999 hours and 23 volunteers whose recorded hours were between 1000 and 1999. All this from the volunteers who actually record their hours, and there are many of course, who don’t. The total recorded volunteer hours for the year topped 126,000.

6. ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS
The Sydney Heritage Fleet relies totally on its volunteers and could not continue to operate without their skill, experience and time so freely given. The Fleet is run by a Board of Directors elected by members. Some key positions, eg the General Manager, are held by paid professional staff.

All vessels are crewed entirely by volunteers. Crew size ranges from the 45-55 needed to sail the James Craig to a crew of 2 for manning the small boats. The pool of available crew is several times that needed for any particular vessel.

Our volunteer ethic at times means that we are unable to stage cruises as often as the market might like and which would be theoretically possible if our crews were paid. To pay people for what they enjoy doing free of charge though, would be to fly in the face of what we are here for and would certainly not be an economical proposition. One problem we are facing more and more these days is the shortage of trained steam engineers. This is something we will need to address as old skills die out.

Restoration and maintenance of vessels and artefacts is performed by volunteers although, where large physical tasks are entailed and there exist funds from donations and grants, some labour may be employed on a commercial basis. The skills of volunteers, especially in several dying arts related to the maritime scene, have been invaluable in the process of restoration.

The library and curatorial areas are also staffed entirely by volunteers. The Fleet receives regular enquiries from all over Australia for information on maritime history and is increasingly, being asked for information and guidance from overseas organisations. Our extensive library houses many books, ship’s logs and records of numerous vessels. It has a large collection of old photographs many of which have been referred to in order to achieve authentic restoration vessel restorations.

All guides, both sea-going and for the conduct of guided tours on James Craig when she is alongside, are volunteers and their efforts bring in around $100,000 annually to the organisation.

The most widely recognised of our vessels is the James Craig, an 1874 barque rescued from being aground in Tasmania, and painstakingly restored to a full operating condition over a period of 30 years. For this, the Fleet was awarded the World Ship Trust’s Maritime Heritage...
Award in 2003. *James Craig* is one of only four 19th Century square riggers anywhere in the world, still able to sail and she is available to the people of Australia to experience maritime history in real time.

7. RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER CHARITIES

Although we are, in our own right, a registered tax-deductible gift recipient we believe in assisting other charitable organisations in their work. Examples of this philosophy can be found, for example, in *James Craig* being a venue for the Cancer Council’s “Big Morning Tea” where we ‘donate’ the ship as a major venue and focal point for media. When the Aboriginal flagship *Tribal Warrior* returned to Sydney after her circumnavigation of Australia we hosted, at no cost to the Tribal Warrior Association, a day cruise on Sydney Harbour for over 100 Koori children and their carers to welcome their ship.

The Fleet has, on many occasions, supported “Work-for-the-Dole” projects and ‘employed’ prisoners on day release schemes to assist in their rehabilitation.

Volunteer activity with our Fleet, builds and maintains a sense of pride and self-worth in the individual, young or old and, for the older volunteers, it provides an opportunity to pass on their life skills to others.

8. VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Standing Instructions exist for operating all vessels outlining the Fleet’s policy with regard to operational and manning issues and issues associated with regard to occupational health and safety.

All new volunteers come to a “Meet and Greet” induction session where volunteer policies, insurance cover and all aspects of their participation are covered and they are assigned a “buddy” to introduce them into the team.

This latter initiative is a very important part of induction because once a person becomes a volunteer within our organisation they either become a part of one of the tribes, or they can be left isolated. Our volunteers identify very strongly with their chosen area of activity and, as a result, we have the “Head Office Nation” and “Shipyard Nation”, each of which is then divided into various “clans” such as whether one is a ship, office or workshop worker, each of which group is further divided into the various tribes such as individual ship crew etc. Such an atmosphere can be daunting for the new recruit and we need to ensure that new volunteers are first of all, properly inducted, then trained and then accepted – hence the imperative of a “buddy”, or mentor, system.

To further ensure smooth operation and maximum retention of our volunteer “workforce” we have set up a Volunteer Development Group, comprised entirely of volunteers, whose job it is to ensure smooth integration of volunteers into the organisation. Their brief is to maintain and build an awareness of the importance of volunteers within the Sydney Heritage Fleet, to keep in touch with the volunteer’s needs, to ensure that all departments within the Fleet are supplied with trained volunteers, to record volunteer’s hours and to recognise their efforts and initiative.

Our philosophy is that volunteers have the following rights:

- The right to Representation.
- A written job description.
- Training (induction, safety and job).
- A safe workplace (this is the law).
- Recognition of their efforts (volunteer hours).
- Counselling.
- Access to a grievance procedure.

Our volunteers are aware that they are responsible for:

- Working in a safe manner (this is the law).
- Conserving artefacts and caring for tools, equipment and materials.
- Doing the job to the best of their ability.
- Recognising any shortcomings and request help or training.
All volunteers are required to enter into an Agreement with the Fleet which spells out the rights and obligations of both the volunteer and our organisation.

A volunteer is appointed as Welfare Officer to look after the needs of bereaved, sick or injured volunteers, again on a “needs” basis.

9. COMMUNICATION
Communication with volunteers utilises many channels. By far the most effective, of course, is face to face dialogue. When General Manager I regularly made a circuit of our operations talking personally with volunteers either in one-on-one opportunities or by talking with, and listening to, volunteers in their lunchroom.

Because we operate from several sites and in order to ensure regular communication between the various groups, we have instituted a “Volunteer Newsletter” which is distributed monthly, both electronically and in hard copy. This medium is fairly down to earth and chatty and input from volunteers is encouraged. It performs well in keeping all informed of the doings of others.

In addition we issue a Quarterly in house newsletter, “Mariner” which goes to all volunteers and members. We also utilise what we have described as the “Crew Forum” where volunteers and members can inter-relate via email. In order to ensure some degree of control, in what is disseminated in this way, all communications must go through a moderator. For any organisation contemplating such a method of communicating with their volunteers I recommend such a practice. You would be surprised how many times our moderator has had to use his “censorship” powers. To be effective the Forum is not allowed to be used for political purposes nor for complaints about individuals or groups and certainly not for “telling jokes”.

Another way in which we communicate with our members and volunteers is through our highly developed website via a password protected part of the site. In addition the James Craig puts out its own highly professional quarterly newsletter “Full and By”.

We have an excellent website at www.austfleet.com which covers the entire gamut of our activities. The site also offers people wishing to purchase cruise tickets and merchandise over the Internet, the opportunity to do so securely.

10. THE BOARD
Directors are elected by the members to serve for a 2-year term before having to offer themselves for re-election. All Board Members receive an Induction Manual and are “trained” in their responsibilities by a knowledgeable and experienced volunteer. To ensure that all Board Members are exposed to all areas of our operation each member is allocated a specific area of responsibility. In our case we have 8 Directors and the areas assigned to them are as follows:

- Volunteers and membership.
- Safety, OH&S Policy.
- Restoration (ships, boats, engines, models).
- Fleet operations, all vessels.
- Fundraising and sponsorship.
- Acquisition and display (including library, storage, etc).
- Policy and legal.
- Conflict and complaint resolution.

This particular arrangement ensures that, by and large, all Directors have a responsibility right across our operations and therefore are exposed to, and accessible by, all volunteers no matter what their area of activity.

A Board member, with experience in the area of conflict resolution acts as Ombudsman and will act as mediator should the need arise.

11. BUSINESS AND STRATEGIC PLANNING
The General Manager is responsible for preparing the annual budget (total expenditure $3.0 million) and writes the annual business plan which is presented to the Board for approval before being communicated to members. Long-term planning issues such as future sites and the setting up of a Fundraising Foundation is handled by expert committees drawn from amongst our members and “Fleet friends”.

12. RECRUITMENT OF VOLUNTEERS
By and large we do not have a problem with recruitment of volunteers. On the other hand we need to recognise that a lot of the old skills eg riveting, copper smithing and steam engineering are dying arts and there is a great need to find and train people who can keep these skills alive.

A great number of our volunteers come to us by word of mouth. Others come to us through editorial which we achieve through local and trade press. We have found the volunteer websites, especially Go Volunteer, to be a very good resource although, when seeking specialist help eg accounting, one needs to keep the “job” description very tight to avoid being deluged by enquiries from people wishing to fill in time and develop language and other skills while they search for a paid position.

13. TRAINING OF VOLUNTEERS
The amount of training for volunteers varies depending on the post. For instance, work on restoration requires an induction course on safety matters and where the volunteer has no previous experience, would be tutored by an experienced volunteer, most likely a tradesman, in the task to be performed. Volunteer guides receive full training and a detailed manual.

Crew for the James Craig must undertake a recognised course to obtain as a minimum, qualification as a General Purpose Hand and obtain an approved First Aid
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certificate. A career path exists for such crew for promotion to Watch Leaders and higher. Fleet vessels are made available for volunteers to obtain experience.

14. RECOGNITION AND CELEBRATION OF VOLUNTEERS’ ACHIEVEMENTS
All volunteers are individually named in our annual report with those in the over 2000, 1000, 500, and 250 hour categories especially recognised.

Whenever a volunteer reaches 50 hours of service they are entitled to a 66% discount on the cost of membership, but membership of the organisation is not compulsory for volunteers. After 100 hours service he or she is eligible for two complimentary day sail tickets on the James Craig with a market value of around $400.00.

We are able to recognise our volunteers’ contributions in many other ways ranging from discounts on merchandise and vessel charters, through to media articles and, whenever possible, application for Awards. A good example of the latter recognition would be the granting of the NSW Government’s Heritage Volunteer Award in October 2004.

It needs to be said though that these awards don’t just materialise. They must be applied for with a well thought out application and this takes time and effort. Of course not all such applications result in an award and the key here is perseverance and the more submissions made the greater the likelihood of one coming through. Luck, either good or bad, doesn’t come into it.

We also run a “Volunteer of the Year” award with 6 categories covering various activities of operation and winners of these awards are nominated by their peers and chosen by a committee. Winners are acknowledged at our Annual General Meeting through the presentation of certificates.

The Fleet runs a series of forums for volunteers covering all aspects of our activities and encourages volunteers to contribute through delivery of topics and through frank question and answer sessions. In addition there are functions at Christmas and, indeed throughout the year, where volunteers can buy food and beverage at cost through our Social Club.

The 2003–2004 edition of the Sydney A-K White Pages featured on its cover, volunteers from the Fleet working aboard James Craig – recognition indeed!! Again this recognition did not “fall out of the sky” it had to be proactively sought.

15. INSURANCE ISSUES
All of our volunteers, up to the age of 80, are covered under our Group Personal Injury & Sickness Insurance Policy both to and from our site and at work. The Capital Benefit cover is $50,000 per claim with a weekly benefit of $500. The aggregate limit is $6,000,000. Volunteers over the age of 80 are covered for death only.

We use a broker to negotiate insurance cover on our behalf and have found their service to be absolutely excellent. With around 600 volunteers working for our Fleet, insurance cover costs around $7.00 per head – a very small price to pay indeed for their efforts on our behalf.

16. CONTRIBUTION TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND LONG TERM BENEFITS
Several Work-for-the-Dole projects have been completed including the restoration of the wheel house on the John Oxley. This was the 5th Work-for-the-Dole project, others being also for the John Oxley and for the James Craig. The benefits not only give unemployed persons a positive outlook but a number have succeeded in obtaining jobs. Participants are drawn from the catchment area allotted to Rozelle.

17. CONCLUSION
To finish where we began: volunteers are the lifeblood of the Sydney Heritage Fleet. Without them we could not exist.

We value our volunteers and we attempt to reflect that in the way that we treat them. Desk research, comparing the way we look after our volunteers with that of others, tends to show that we rank with the best. Perhaps that is because we have more to offer in return by way of discounts, free cruises etc. than others. Whatever the reason, we are determined not to rest on our laurels. It is important not only to listen to your volunteers, but also to act quickly to quiet dissent through positive action, to take up the good ideas and discuss with the proponent the reasons for not taking up others.

It is essential that volunteers are treated with respect and it is vital that their contribution is recognised; earlier in this paper, I outlined various methods by which this recognition can be achieved. Not least amongst the ways is through an internal Volunteer Awards Program, but there are many others. They range from application for as many awards as exist (some may come to fruition), media releases covering the virtues and activities of the volunteers, discounted product and merchandise etc.

Above all keep talking, keep listening and keep rewarding your volunteers. A happy, well informed volunteer is an asset to be prized and nurtured!