Past catches up for world-voyaging tall ship

NEWCASTLE – Sailing into Newcastle to clear Customs and generally prepare his ship for this week’s International Fleet Review, the captain of the tall ship Picton Castle was already thinking about the vessel’s storied past.

Long before Capt. Daniel Moreland found the vessel for sale in a fjord in Norway where she had been working as a freighter, and certainly before he converted her to the three-masted sailing ship she is today, the ship served as a Second World War minesweeper and was known as the HMS Picton Castle – a role that seemed especially significant given this week’s naval celebration.

Still it was a reminder from an even earlier time that greeted the vessel, now famous for her sail training program and five ‘round-the-world voyages, as she lay at Throsby Wharf this past weekend.

That’s when Margaret Harries and her family arrived. Mrs. Harries is the widow of the late Alan Harries, who died at New South Wales after a career as a merchant seaman and chief engineer. It turns out Mr. Harries started his career on the deck of the steam trawler Picton Castle in 1937, sailing from Swansea in his native Wales. He was just 12 years of age.

Mrs. Harries presented Capt. Moreland with a picture of her husband aboard the Picton Castle, and explained that her son-in-law, John Abernethy, will serve as the vessel’s Liaison Officer during events at Sydney.

“It was a truly sweet and utterly surprising welcome to Australia,” said the captain, who together with his crew was taking advantage of a few days at Newcastle to paint and polish his ship in advance of the sail to Sydney.

The Picton Castle sailed from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands on August 28, travelling nearly 3000 nautical miles to join the International Fleet Review celebration. The ship’s only port call en route was a few days at Vava'u, Tonga.

“With all the spray and seas we have not done much in the way of varnish lately. And the topsides always need painting. We always want to oil the decks more. And tar the rig, and make sails, and this and that. So the crew has been very busy,” said the captain.

Aboard Picton Castle, trainees participate in all the duties required to safely operate and maintain the ship; from hauling lines, handling sail and steering from the big teak wheel, to
washing the decks or taking a turn in the galley on the cook's day off. In this way, they truly earn every mile they sail and every adventure they encounter.

Following the International Fleet Review, the Picton Castle will sail for New Zealand as part of the Sydney to Auckland Tall Ships Regatta. The vessel and her crew will then spend a month exploring coastal New Zealand, including lots of small boat training in the ship's Monomoy pulling boat and sailing dory. After that, the ship will cast off on a multi-week ocean passage to Pitcairn Island, best known as the home of descendents of the HMS Bounty mutineers. From there, Picton Castle will spend several weeks sailing the islands of French Polynesia, visiting Mangareva, the Marquesas, Nuku Hiva, the Tuamotus and the Society Islands. Then the ship will sail for the Cook Islands, calling at Aitutaki, Rarotonga and Palmerston Atoll, before sailing for Samoa and on to Fiji.

It's expected to be June of 2015 before the ship returns to her North American base of operations at Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Canada, the port from which the ship departed in November of 2012.

For more information about the Picton Castle and her award-winning sail training program, including interviews with Capt. Daniel Moreland, please contact the ship's office at 0011+1+ (902) 634-9984 or email castle@tallships.ca