



Main picture: From left to right, Kit Villiers, Mohammed Al Qallaf, Abdul Aziz Al Qallaf, and Sadeq Al Qallaf, in the workshop at the Dhow Builders Diwanina. Inset: Sharing photographs and memories: left to right, Abdul Aziz Al Qallaf, Kit Villiers, and Dr Nasser Al Nejdi.

Amid their masts and memories, in moments precious a collapse of time

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brass triangle. The latter is a type of protractor, known as a hindaza, and is used to set up the slope for the stem and the stern by measuring angles in respect to the vertical.

"Only the master shipbuilder can use the hindaza," said Sadeq. "He works with the design of the ship all in his mind, nothing is drawn or written."

As he showed Kit Villiers how the long hand saw is used, the son of the Australian mariner exclaimed, "Good heavens, that looks dangerous!"

Sadeq explained that even the long iron nails were all made by hand in different sizes, with the largest ones up to a meter in length. For each different sized nail there is also a correspondingly-sized bow drill.

Mohammed Al Qallaf demonstrated how rope is wrapped around the head of each nail to seal and waterproof the gaps. "Before this is done the rope is soaked in coconut oil," he said.

"Anyone who wants to learn the art of shipbuilding is welcome in our workshop," remarked Sadeq. "We are mostly retired people but fortunately there are some young men, like Mohammed, who have learned the traditional skills."

The shipbuilders ushered Kit Villiers into their small museum across the hall so they could show him the models of the different types of ships. Sadeq explained that there were about ten different types of sailing vessels commonly built in old Kuwait and each type was used for a different purpose. Kuwait's specialty was the boom, mostly used for trading voyages but also adapted for other purposes such as carrying building stones from quarries or for transporting fresh water from the Shatt Al Arab River in Iraq.

The museum is chock-full of wooden models ranging in size from about thirty centimeters to over a meter in length. Amid a forest of masts and rigging and surrounded by shipbuilders eager to teach him about the products of their craft, Kit Villiers found himself briefly immersed in Kuwait's age of sail.

Pointing to the raised rear deck on the model of a trading boom, his hosts explained that this is the privileged position where his father sat with Captain Nejadi. "This is first class, only for VIPs," they joked. "And here, underneath the poop deck, is where any women passengers would have stayed, in order to have shelter and privacy."

"Oh dear, they must have stayed in the dark the entire voyage," Kit Villiers remarked.

"Look, here is a model of the baghala, Al Badri," said Sadeq to his guest. "The design of the baghala is adapted from the Portugese Man of War, with very ornate carving on the stern. Your father loved this ship and was thinking of buying it."

As fate would have it, rather than buying a baghala, Alan Villiers went to the UK when the Second World War broke out and joined the Royal Naval Reserve. He saw combat action in various campaigns and by the end of the war had been promoted to Commander and awarded the British Distinguished Service Cross.

Mohammed directed Kit Villiers' attention to a model of the boom, Bayan, which he himself had made. "This is an exact replica of the ship on which your father sailed," he said.

The shipbuilders pointed out the sailing ships equipped with oars used to row around the pearling banks. "Your father went on a pearling voyage in the summer of 1939, after he returned from Africa. He travelled on one of these types of ships."

"In my home I have many models made by my father Khaleel," said Abdul Aziz Al Qallaf. "Some are very rare like the model of a batteel, a type of pearling ship, that cannot be found anywhere else."

There is a beautiful photograph of Khaleel bin Rashed Al Qallaf in Sons

of Sindbad taken by Alan Villiers during the voyage of the Bayan. With a look of intent concentration the young marine carpenter worked on building a boat that he was intending to sell in East Africa.

Marine carpenters often sat on the decks of the big booms during the long trading voyages, constructing smaller vessels they could sell to make some extra income. Villiers observed that Khaleel "had built our cutter earlier on the voyage, on the way from Basra to Mukalla via Muscat. This was also for sale."

After such a condensed lesson on Kuwaiti shipbuilding it was time for small cups of black sugary tea served in the adjoining diwanina. Here the shipbuilders and Kit Villiers were joined by Dr Nasser Al Nejdi and his grandson Hussain, and talk turned to Dr Nasser's grandfather, Captain Ali Al Nejdi.

There is a book called Sons of Sindbad The Photographs, featuring stunning black and white images taken by Alan Villiers during his voyage with Captain Nejadi. The pictures were selected and introduced by William Facey, Dr Yacoub Al Hijji, and Grace Pundyk. The introduction explains that although Captain Nejadi was puzzled by Villiers' mission to document the journey as a book, during the course of the voyage he couldn't help but grow to respect the Australian's knowledge of navigation and his friendly, down-to-earth demeanor. Alan Villiers, in turn, was deeply impressed by the Kuwaiti sailors' agility and endurance, by their easy camaraderie and ability to endure extreme hardship without complaint.

"Nejadi was a dashing young captain of about thirty years of age, only a little younger than the thirty-five-year-old Villiers. He was a natural leader, whose crew gave him unquestioning loyalty," the introduction stated.

Villiers maintained his ties with Kuwait and in 1967 he returned for a visit with his wife, Nancie. Waiting to pick them up at the airport was Captain Ali Bin Nasr Al Nejadi. Their poignant exchange of greetings is quoted in the introduction to the book of photographs.

"Allah is great," said Villiers. "His winds are free."

"Allah is great," Nejadi replied. After a while, he added as if to himself, "And sometimes I wish that I could use His winds again. For it was a good life that my sons can never know – no Kuwait sons shall know. We cannot bring those ways back again."

Kit Villiers recalled that his father never really talked much about his journeys and adventures, unless he was asked. But his mother spoke a lot about her trip to Kuwait and how very well looked after they were.

"My mother was whisked off to stay with the hareem, the women, while my father spent his time in traditional coffee shops with Nejadi and the men of the Al Hamad family, with whom he had also kept in touch. My mother was very interested to meet Dame Violet Dickson, who hosted my parents for lunch along with top Kuwaitis and the British Ambassador."

Nancie Villiers was British, and she and Alan had married in 1940. They settled in Oxford, UK and had three children, Kathy, Peter, and Christopher who is known as Kit.

Dr Al Nejadi and Kit Villiers had both brought along old photographs to share and the men tried to identify all the people in the pictures. Dr Al Nejadi pulled out a picture he had taken of his grandfather in August 1978.

"This was the last photograph taken of him before he died at sea in February 1979," he said. "He was fishing with friends between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia when a sudden storm sank his boat. Although he was an old man, he was very strong inside."

"I can see he was a strong character," said Kit Villiers examining the photograph. "My father passed away not so much later, in March of 1982."

Dr Nasser remarked that Kuwaitis and Australians share a common bond in their love of the sea and wanted to know if Kit Villiers has any ties to the world of seafaring. Villiers replied that he worked in shipping for many

years and lived in Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Oman. He also studied law and practiced maritime law as well as general litigation and arbitration. In recent years he began a third career as a teacher of English as a second language in his hometown of Oxford. His hobby is running, and upon leaving Kuwait he was going straight to Cambodia to take part in a Half Marathon.

"I've been running in the Angkor Wat Marathon for the past six years," he said.

The conversation turned to the exhibition of Alan Villiers' black and white photographs on display at the Amricani Cultural Centre until January 31, 2020. The title of the exhibition is "Alan Villiers & the Sons of Sindbad: An Australian in 1930s Kuwait." It is presented by the Australian Maritime Museum, Dar al Athar al Islamiyyah, and the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, in association with Royal Museums Greenwich, and supported by the Australian Government and the Council for Australian-Arab Relations. The photographs are powerful and evocative, and Kit Villiers acknowledged that his father had a natural talent for photography.

The men also discussed the plans to make an international documentary drama film based on Alan Villiers' Sons of Sindbad book. A Kuwaiti production company will produce the film on an international level, with a leading actor to play Alan Villiers and a script written by Farouq Abdul-Aziz.

Kit Villiers remarked that his father had done lots of television and movie work during his distinguished career. He remembered going to the shops in the village with his father when he was a boy and people recognizing him from the 1950s BBC television series, Merchant Navy, in which Alan Villiers starred with Peter Scott.

"In those days we didn't even have a television, or a car. But limousines would pull up to our door and whisk my father off to the BBC in London, or to the airport so he could jet off to America," Kit Villiers recalled.

Of all the accolades bestowed upon his father, Kit Villiers likes to point out that in 2017, an English Heritage Blue Plaque was mounted on the wall of the Villiers family home in Oxford. Blue Plaques celebrate the links between notable figures of the past and the buildings in which they lived and worked.

"My mother was 101 years old at the time and very proud. A citation was read at the event, and I keep typewritten copies of the last paragraph to give to people who stop and read the plaque, but by the time I open the door they've gone!" he laughed.

He pulled out a piece of paper from his wallet, unfolded it and read, "Purposeful, versatile, and superbly gifted as a writer, Alan Villiers was a pioneer. In choosing to spend his life in sailing ships and to photograph and record their passing, he brought both knowledge and pleasure to millions who would never go to sea themselves, but could share his enthusiasm for the sea and its international community. He inspired a generation of sailors, conservationists, and environmentalists before 'green' issues reached the political agenda; for was the wind not free? Like his father before him, Alan Villiers was a poet, a poet who chose to go down to the sea in ships."

It was time for Kit Villiers to be whisked off in a chauffeur-driven car from the Australian Embassy and with that, his visit to the Dhow Builders Diwanina came to an end. Before he said goodbye to his hosts they presented him with a hand-made model of a Kuwaiti sailing boom, a memento he said he will treasure.

It was evident from the tremendous interest in Kit Villiers visit that the winds are still free. They still whisper their tales of discovery and adventure, and with the renewed bonds forged by his short sojourn in Kuwait, the exhibition of his father's photographs, and the upcoming documentary film, many more people will be listening to them.