

GOING TO SEA IN THE EARLY 1950'S

By Tony Maskell OW 49-51

Pictures and links added by Colin Thurlow OW 62-65
My comments in blue,

In the 1950's ships were a lot smaller, but with bigger things to come. The majority of the British Tanker fleet was around 12,000 dwt or if you like the mythical gross tonnage of 8600grt. I say mythical as it is a cubic capacity divided by 100, or in other words a algebraic equation to determine the size of a vessel, not the amount of cargo which pays its reason for being on the high or low seas.

Anyhow I joined the **British Ardour** built in 1949, so in 1952 she was still relatively new, the class of 54 of them, were known as the 3 x 12's. (12K cargo, 12 knots – sometimes when going downhill - , 12 something else that I can't remember!



British Ardour

During my time on her, some 10 months, we travelled extensively from 51 degrees 30' North to around 38 degrees South, calling in quite a few ports in Europe, the Mediterranean Persian Gulf, East Africa and Australia.

The Captain was W.S. Vittle a well respected and very good ship handler, who on this occasion sailed with his wife "Diamond Lil", the Mate was a RNR type who would have footed the bill as the "Cruel Sea" corvette commander, he did try and teach us seamanship!, the 2/O was a " pool" man and the 3/O an uncertificated officer who we lost somewhere in the trip and the senior Apprentices, Tommy Copeman – the British Tanker Company's Commodore's son, then became the 3/O. We started with 4 apprentices but over time these became whittled down to myself and one other.

The first excitement came when leaving Avonmouth in ballast, bound for the Persian Gulf. We headed out into the Bristol Channel into a force 8 gale, heaving and pitching, I was on the 8 to 12 watch with the 3rd Mate. The new Deck Boy had been sent up to scrub the wheel house deck, but after about five minutes succumbed to " Mal de Mer" all over the deck and his bucket. Yours faithfully, was then detailed to clear up the mess and scrub the deck instead of the Deck Boy!!! No, I wasn't seasick or any other kind of sick, and I was never seasick on any British Tanker or vessel.

We went round the tip of Cornwall, into Falmouth on Christmas Eve to pick up a 4/E, this is where our gallant Captain took the Pilot ,who had come on board without being requested, slightly the worse for wear, by the scruff of his jacket and heaved him over the ships side onto the pilot ladder; telling him, "I put the ship here and I'm taking her out"!

The Captain was W.S. Vittle a well respected and very good ship

Tusks along Moi Avenue Mombasa circa 1950's



The Tusks were first built in 1952 to commemorate the visit of then Princess Elizabeth II and Her Husband Prince Philip in the company of their Two young children. However the Visit to Mombasa was cancelled owing to the sudden demise of Princess Elizabeth's father King George V in England whilst the family was in Nyeri residing at the famous treetops hotel.

[HERE](#)

Some time later we had loaded at a port in the south of France (Port de Bouc) and took the cargo to Mombasa. Here the ship tied up to a very small pontoon, with only enough room to receive the discharge pipelines, so the gangway had to be on to a detached sponson, with a narrow gangway on to our foredeck and a handrail only on one side. The locals said that there were crocodiles??? In the harbour!. The crew made their usual dash to the flesh pots, but coming back seem to collectively remember the warning. As the sun rose, there on the jetty were laid out the majority of the crew sleeping it off too afraid to tackle the rickety plank to the ships gangway.

We sailed, sadly from Mombasa, as the world woke to the news that King George VI had died and that in Kenya at that moment we had a new Queen Elizabeth II. [HERE](#)

From there it was back to the Persian Gulf, this time to load a cargo of Crude Oil for Melbourne.

While alongside, leaning over the rail, surveying the scene on the Mena al Ahmadi jetty, which was wooden; the planks turned on their side not flat as you might expect (short edge up). The Port administration was up a slight rise from the foot of the T jetty, which had a loop connecting the shore to the eastern end of the jetty, and a raised edge around the jetty. One of the loading master/pilots used to wear an Arab headdress and ride a racing bicycle to the jetty from their office. As I said, leaning over, down came the pilot on his bike but the headdress suddenly covered his eyes and he went right up the jetty and hit the curb, then went sailing, along with his bicycle into the blue waters of the Gulf!!!, all this to cries of joy and amusement to seafarers on the tankers loading at the time.

Off we trudged to southern climes, it took us some 20 odd days to raise Cape Leeuwin and another five days across the Australian Bight. Up the Yarra and berthed alongside a jetty which was tacked onto a grassy paddock, opposite the main road from Melbourne to Williamstown and a pub.

Now in that field there were a number of horses and cows, quietly munching on the grass. It being the "6 O'clock swill time" in Victoria at the time of the 1950's and it was their summer time so still quite light at 6 O'clock or after. There was also another British Tanker further upstream also moored to a similar jetty and both crews came out of the pub and on across the main road to the gate of the field. They spied the animals and suddenly it was Rodeo Time, with worse for wear seafarers try-ing to ride horses and cows around the field! [End of the swill Video](#). [HERE](#)



Back up through the Indian Ocean to the Gulf, this time to tie up to Palm trees in Iraq at a place on the left bank of the Shat-al-Arab, a more desolate place you could ever see in those days, it had a particular crude/type of crude oil that the refinery in Venice required.

In later years on another ship we did 4 trips straight off, Fao to Venice the last one was stopped by the Suez Canal being closed due to the Israeli's, British and French try-ing to take over the Suez Canal!!!

During this time I was on day work, and one of my daily tasks was at around 3 pm, to pump fresh water from the tanks down aff to the tank up on the monkey island. On one afternoon I forgot to go and stop the pump, so the tank overflowed and went into the Captain's night cabin and flooded out "Diamond Lil" and himself out of Bed!!!!!!

By this time we were getting a little short of crew members, either to desertion, or sickness and took on 6 Italian Able Seamen, they were very hard workers but a bit slap dash in their working habits.

While in Venice there was an "Incident" Captain Vittle called me into his cabin and said what did I know about the other Apprentice and his going ashore habits? At this time there were only the two of us Apprentices on board. Apparently he had been receiving strange radio messages and it was thought he might be involved with some drug problem, anyway he was removed from our cabin the cabin searched from top to bottom and he was put in one of the "passenger" cabins on the portside, and I was put on the 4 to 8 watch with the Mate until we got to drydock in Falmouth. There the other Apprentice had to front up to the Superintendent and was quietly whisked away from Falmouth.

"Diamond Lil" you may ask, this was the crew's nickname for her, because every time she and the Captain went ashore the price of duty free cigarettes and tobacco went up and she sported something new, either on her fingers or clothes on her back. They came from Mumbles and had a bank clerk as a son.

To return to the story. My next ship was a war time built ship, built in 1941 by Swan Hunter at Wallsend, another 12500 dwt ship – she lasted 18 years, possibly since she only loaded either Crude Oil or Fuel Oils.

Off to Hamble in Southampton water, not far from where another Training Ship the **T.S.Mercury** used to reside, now the **HMS Gannet** in Chatham. The **British Character** set off to Swansea to load, fuel Oil, this time for Aden. Little Aden the BP Refinery had not been built at this time. Somewhere after crossing the Bay of Biscay, we developed an engine malfunction had had to put into Gibraltar for repairs, anchoring in the Bay.

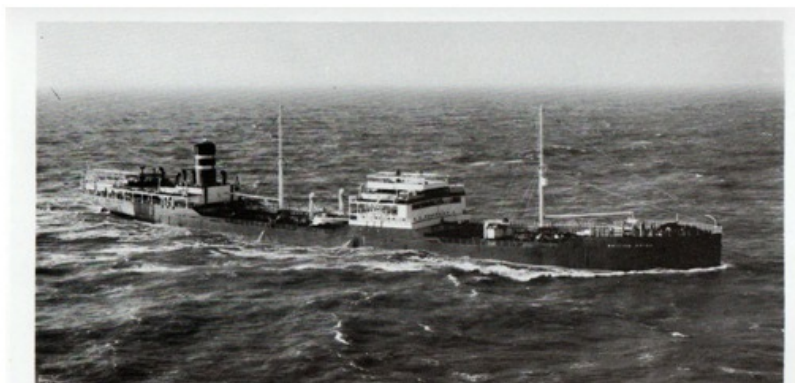
Leave was granted but we had to go ashore in a small open launch, after sampling the delights of Gibraltar, and the all lady band, at one hostelry; we set off back to the ship, unfortunately on the way back there was a "disturbance" and the pumpman ended up in the Bay. We stopped and recovered him and the crew then settled down.

We then went through the Suez Canal, discharged at Aden laying at buoys off Steamer Point. Then to the Persian Gulf, and my second visit to Fao; making fast to the Palm trees again. This time we were going back north through the Red Sea at Christmas time, on the actual day a party developed in the Captain's cabin with us Apprentices running back and forth from the bridge giving up to date positions of other ships around us.

The cargo, was duly delivered to Finnart up the cold (at that time) Loch Long. Eventually after a couple of cargoes from Lebanon we went into drydock on the Tyne, after seven days passed, and I was transferred to the **British Pride**, built in 1931 of 11000 dwt. nearly the oldest ship that I served on. The crew were accommodated in the foc's'tle, the galley was coal fired, the coal bunkers were on the starboard side at the break of the poop.

On deck the only Company contract personnel were the Captain and Third Officer, and the Apprentices of course. The C/O was a Shetlander, and even his wife addressed him as Mister Wilson. You could tell if he was in his cabin by the steady stream of the sound of a beer cans being thrown into his gash can!!!!

The ship itself was somewhat unique, and today there would be a very few seafarers who actually sailed on a ship with Summer Tanks, I'll come to those shortly. The other unique thing about this ship was that she had repairs undertaken in the United States, and some ten tank



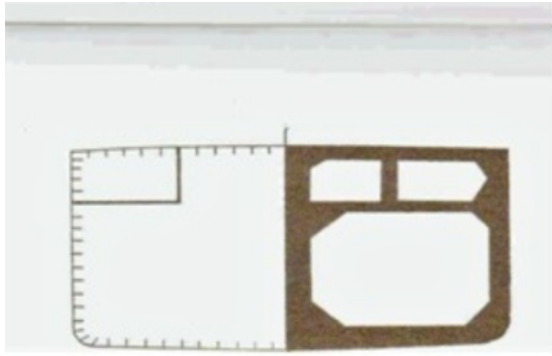
26. BRITISH PRIDE of 1931 survived WWII to be scrapped in 1955.

valves had been replaced. The American valves worked the opposite way to those that had been installed when she was built! (American Valves turn clockwise to open)

We headed off from the Tyne, across the Atlantic to Curacao, where we were to load 4 different grades of "white" oils. In fact the refinery put different colour dies in the product, so that one was red, and other green, a light blue and a yellow-ey orange. I mention the colours because of what comes next.

The Mate decided to load all four grades at the same time, somewhat dodgy to say the least especially since we were a Summer Tank ship.

"Summer Tanks", they ran down either side of the ship in under the tank deck and covered two cargo tanks below. The only way to load them was through a small 6" spindly valve on the ships side, actually in the scuppers – the same valve to discharge – to get product into the Summer Tank you had to have a head of product in the main tanks below the Summer Tank and get hydrostatic pressure to force the product up through the small ships side valve. – when discharging you had to list the ship the opposite way to that of the main tanks to drain the Summer Tanks.



Cross section of ship's hull with Summer Tanks. Summer Tank upper left the neck adjacent to the right.

So there we were loading, not particularly fast on each product but trying to hold the pressure in the neck of the main tanks, when down off at No. 9 tank; it overflowed, whilst attending to that, the fore deck tank overflowed and then the amidships tank, so we had colourful fountain

spouting out of the ullage holes all over the deck. After we had stopped loading, to be able to control this flow, the scuppers were quite full of highly inflammable liquid, a judicious easing of the scupper plugs soon took care of this problem; today there would be fines, fire engines and god knows what over an incident like this, but in the 1950's it was all part of a day's work!

We headed off across the Atlantic with this NATO cargo, first to a small port in Italy up near the French border, called Vado, down to Malta but on the southern side at an unpronounceable name of Marsaxlokk, then to Tripoli in North Africa and finally Port Augusta in Sicily.

When we arrived at Port Augusta, I had put in to see the Dentist as I had raging toothache, - over the years I used to collect Dental visits all over the world!!! – It was a fair distance to the township from where had moored up to discharge to the Italian Seaplane base, so off we went.

The Agent kindly took me to the Dentist and left me there.

Up into the chair and he decided that the tooth would have to be pulled out, a quick novocaine jab and into the business of try-ing to yank the tooth out –he thought! – The first set of pliers didn't make any impression, so a larger set of pliers were used, still no joy, another set, by this time he had pulled me out of the seat and we were rolling around on the floor!!!!

After this I staggered off down the main street looking for the rest of the crowd, meeting up with Sparks who said they had gone to a nearby Taverna.

Now, our Sparks was a lovely man, very tall well over 6 feet, and very black skin, his father was a Surgeon in a London Hospital and came from British Guyana (as it was called then) and his mother French and lived in Paris. Sparks had done his National Service in the French Paratroopers, and because he had dual citizenship did not want to 2 years in the British Army as well; so he had done a course with Marconi and this was his first solo trip as a Sparks.

Anyway, we found where the rest of the crew were, it was the local brothel!!!!, complete with the Madam at a high bankers desk just where the participants would pass to gain a bedroom(?)



HMS Mauritius

From there we went to southern France to load, this time for Mauritius and East Africa. In Mauritius tankers actually went alongside to discharge while general cargo ships moored between two buoys. The Cruiser **HMS Mauritius** was paying a courtesy visit while we were there, we had come down in the SW Monsoon, and to see the green mountains of the Island was a sight for sore eyes, I subsequently visited the Island again much later on.

Across the Indian Ocean to Durban and Port Elizabeth, then round the Cape of Good Hope for a never ending slog up the South Atlantic to Corpus Christi in Texas. The slog was 32 days from Port Elizabeth, the ship was getting on in years and had an engine malfunction every few days requiring us stopping for 5 or 6 hours at a time, I can't remember now whether she was a Doxford or B&W engine.

When we arrive off the entrance of the port, we had to make our way – with a pilot – through hundreds of “Nodding Neddies” set up in the gulf/bay all pumping crude oil to the refinery; and we had to pass through a lifting road bridge, the pilot didn't seem to be bothered whether there were cars crossing at the time we went through.

When going ashore, and we were there for about ten days loading and engine repairs, we apprentices could not really afford a taxi into town so we tried hitchhiking; this was not very successful, as we learnt later single drivers at least would not stop, because they could be mugged or be assaulted. However on the upside, the Texan's were very generous, they heard that we would like some old magazines, so what happened, cars would turn up and in the boot of the car would be hundreds of magazines, we eventually filled one of the amidships cabins with them and they lasted until we got back to Texas again.

On arrival at Corpus Christi a Pinkerton's Agency man was stationed on the end of the gangway, to stop desertions!, and everyone except the Master, C/E, Mate, & Chief Steward had to have a “short arm” inspection.

We had onboard three quite tall crew members, the Sparks, one other Apprentice and the Third Mate all well over six feet, but ashore they were amongst the local natives they looked small; yes in those days the Texan work his cowboy boots a BIG hat and a six shooter on his hip, just walking down the street!

Back across the Atlantic, this time to Alexandria and surprise! surprise! Port Augusta but no dentist visit this time, up to Port de Bouc loading and off again to East Africa, this time Mombasa, Dar as Salam and Beira, again round Cape of Good Hope up through the South Atlantic this time to Brownsville in Texas, on the river Rio Grande, the border between USA and Mexico.

While we were loading off a small wooden jetty on the river side, a large American Station Wagon drew up, and out got a REAL Texan, cowboy boots, Jeans, multi coloured shirt and a BIG hat. He came aboard, saying “I'm just down from the Panhandle with my family and have never seen the sea, where can we hire a boat” I advised him – we were perhaps 20 miles up river – “that there was a fishing harbour, on down the road he had come and perhaps he could try there!”

We slowly made our way back across the North Atlantic to the Humber and Immigham a port I had visited when on a GSNC ship during the summer holidays from the Worcester gaining sea time experience. I left the ship there after 15 months without any leave.



Photo Courtesy of Library of Contemporary History, Stuttgart

British Renown

The next ship was the **British Renown**, of 11000 dwt, the oldest ship that I sailed on built in 1928 at Sunderland, she was then 26 years old and I am afraid looking it. [She was hit by a torpedo in the war HERE](#)

We went from Queens Dock, Swansea again to my favourite Palm Trees in the Shat al Arab, that is Fao; and took that cargo Little Aden, then in ballast, cleaning tanks up through the Red Sea, through the Mediterranean, Bay of Biscay and finally the “Tail’o’ the

Bank to be scrapped. There was one incident there, which was published in Sea breezes July 2011 under the title "Fear", which I won't repeat here.

My last ship as an Apprentice was the then "super Tanker" **British Talent**; of 30,000dwt built in 1952 at Hepburn, one of the six "supertankers" with names beginning with A,B,C & R, S, T; this was commanded by Commodore Tommy Copeman, the father of my first senior Apprentice way back in 1951 and now I was the senior Apprentice. I only made two cargoes on this ship one out of Baniyas to Genoa, then through the Canal to Mena-al Ahmadi and back to the UK – Coryton. When steaming through the Mediterranean, I came up through the hawse pipe to sign on as a Cadet on AB's wages, since my indentures had been completed.



British Talent

One of the Apprentices on the ship at that time, I sailed with again when we both 2/O's on the Scandinavian run, and we meet quite regularly here in Sydney, where he ended up as the Harbour Master for the Port of Sydney.

So that was the first part of the 1950's, if you are lucky you can have the second half of the 1950's after I went up for 2nd Mates at "King Teddy's"

Well, that was the Apprenticeship completed, now for the 2nd Mates (Foreign Going) exam's. I went to "King Ted's" in Commercial Road, Limehouse, E14, but lived at the Missions to Seaman just around the corner.

In those days, 1954/55 the six stories of the Mission stood well above any building in the area, which being close to the Docks it was well and truly bombed in WWII. Here and there were some single story "pre-Fab" houses but parking in those times was a breeze!

One thing that got up the students collective noses, was, having to sign on at the Labour Exchange – as it was called in those days – We, or most of us, were no longer employed by a Shipping company, and to avoid being snaffled into National Service we had to show that we were registered and could draw somewhere in the region of £6.00 per week, at least it paid for our stay at the Mission.



Sir John (Barry) Trelawny
1949-1951

Quite a few Old Worcesterers arrived at "King Ted's"; some of my term mates. One had an old London Taxi in which we crammed 11 bodies and took off to the "Prospect of Whitby" at Wapping. We, the Students sang the cleaner popular versions of songs whilst the Nurses sang the more colourful versions! The owner of the Taxi was a term mate of mine, at the time we didn't know that he was in fact Sir John Trelawny a baronet no less, we knew him as Barry Trelawny, sadly he passed away a few years ago.



[Memories from Tony HERE](#)

I passed the exam – obviously, but had to take two goes at the signalling test my 2nd Mates certificate 74009 was issued at the Shipping Office on 17th February 1952.

Surprisingly Cadets who on the Worcester did very well in their exams there, didn't seem to be quite so good at Second Mates, one ex cadet who has served his time in Cunard – mostly on

the Mediterranean runs – had at that time taken 5 attempts, and still hadn't passed by the time I had left.

Contemplating on whether to tramp, up and down Leadenhall Street for a slot in a Cargo Liner ship. I then thought, "well the devil you knew was easier" so around to Britannic House and was accepted as a Third Officer and sent up to the Tyne the next day to join the **British Purpose** a war time built ship of 8500 dwt in 1943, she was later sold to a Norwegian company.



Photo courtesy of the Allen Collection

British Purpose

The Captain was Tommy Govan, he had been torpedoed at winter time in the Atlantic and spent a number of days in an open boat, and suffered very painful arthritis in his hands. To ease the pain he had to keep moving his hands, one of the ways was to retire to his toilet on the after end of the wheelhouse deck sitting on the toilet and play a violin. Another of his foibles was that he would only have certain subjects with which he would converse with his mates. The Mate obviously the ship and its cargo, with the 2nd Mate it was books and libraries, and with me the 3rd Mate it was cars. (I didn't own one at that time! I sailed again with Tommy Govan later on.

Anyhow the time came when we left the Tyne for Rotterdam to load for Bombay. We were what you would call a handy size then, and went from eastern refineries to Indian ports on both sides of India. One of the ports we visited a couple of times, was Budge Budge, this was well up the Hooghli River, just before the entry to the docks at Calcutta.

Now this was a tie up! The jetty/pontoon was floating with vertical freedom to move up and down, the ship made fast to a buoy ahead and astern with our own anchor cables. First we had to hang off the starboard anchor, then lower two shackles to a barge, attach to remaining anchor cable to the head buoy, whilst the barge took the two shackles down aft, these were then made fast to the after buoy and the two lengths brought inboard on either quarter. The whole operation was known to take up to six hours to make fast. Over the years I had to do this six times!! and dead cows, and sometimes a dead human body would float past on the strong flow of the river.

The reason for the mooring with anchor chains was the "Bore" which roared up the river with anything up to 4 feet from crest to trough going against the fast flowing river, when it arrived at your ship the after cables went bar tight and groaned something out of a horror film. Ships of the Burmah Oil Company had after hawse pipes with anchor cables permanently attached, so they only took a couple of hours to make fast.

With a quick trip, to Mauritius and Beira where between those ports; I had my 21st birthday and was allowed a full case of beer to celebrate!!!. Little Aden which had commenced business, and the Red Sea ports of Djubuti and Port Sudan up to and including Fanara in the Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal. While at Port Sudan, on this occasion, we needed a Doctor, who duly came down to the ship. I met him at the gangway, and he said in perfect Oxford English accent, "Now where is this sick man" he was well over six foot and had a little man carrying his bag, but his face had all the scars of his tribal markings.

The refinery at Abadan, which had been closed since 1951 now re-opened and I finally visited; what was at one time the largest refinery in the world, it was situated on the eastern side of the Shat al Arab in Iran, but the pilots up the



The Refinery at Abadan

river were Iraqi, and had to get off the ship before berthing which was done by Iranian pilots.

We finally headed North through the Canal to discharge our cargo at Hamble where I paid off after seven months away.

My next Third Mates and the last 3rd Mates job was on the **British Scientist** built in 1948 at Birkenhead of the 12000 dwt series, joining at the Isle of Grain. The Mate was Jimmy Guy who suffered stomach ulcers and had a diet of poached eggs for most of the twelve months I was onboard. The 2nd Mate was Tony Redfern, a few years older than me, married with a small daughter, he later was my Best Man at my first wedding in Horsham.

We spent the winter of 1955/56 trading to Europe and the Baltic; some 13 different ports. After a quick drydocking in Falmouth, actually a fortnight long, we were off to that old favourite; Fao in Iraq. The palm trees were again put to good use, we then did three consecutive trips Fao to Venice, the fourth was interrupted by the British, French & Israeli storming the North of the Suez Canal, effectively shutting it.

One thing that Tony Redfern, (who gained his extra Masters went into the RAF Marine Craft section, ending up as a Professor at Plymouth University) remembers is because both our birthdays are on the same day in July, and we were discharging at Venice, Jimmy Guy gave us both – very unusual – the day off to go into Venice. We were at a restaurant just off St Marks Square having a meal, nearby were two blonde American girls also having a meal. Good hearted Arthur, that's me, took out his trusty penknife and cut a flower from the vase on our table and presented to one of these girls, shock horror I had nearly sliced the tip of my finger off and there was blood everywhere!!! He still reminds me of it when we meet, which over nearly 60 years; we have quite often, in Aden, North Wales, Gan Island, Plymouth and his home in Devon and here, my home in Australia.

Because the Canal was shut, we were drifting around the Gulf of Aden awaiting instructions from London, there were quite a few ships doing this, just drifting along, engines stopped. Eventually we went into Little Aden and discharged our cargo of Crude Oil, to be sent to Abadan to load for Colombo, and Bombay followed by Cochin.

The entrance to Cochin is rather like that to Dar es Salam, the tourist's idea of a tropical seascape, blue waters, yellow sand and palm trees. Tankers after entering would go hard a starboard away from the city and berth quite away from any action.

Except, and over the years I visited Cochin a number of times. The same old Morris open tourer was used by an Indian Driving instructor to teach his pupils the finer aspects of driving, including double de clutching on this monster of a car. Round and round they went just off the jetty every time I was there.

We then went back to Abadan, where I got a shock, I was to be transferred from the **British Scientist** to Bombay to become the 2nd Mate on one of the companies "other" ships, - British Tanker Company as it was then had tugs, dredgers and even a small case oil cargo ship – I was to fly out from Abadan to join the **Haffar** a suction dredger used originally to dredge at the bar of the entrance to the Shat al Arab. Mossadegh shutting the Abadan refinery caused the tugs and dredger to leave Iran rather quickly to other places.



The Suction Dredger Haffar

Anyway, the traumas started as I left the ship. For those of companies that traded world wide, the amount of gear you had to carry when joining a ship was considerable, since it could be that the trip was to the Baltic in wintertime or the Persian Gulf in summer time and you had to be equipped for that range of climate. A short wave radio set as well, this quite often amounted to a tin trunk, a large suitcase a brief case and your trusty Sextant in its wooden box and a box for the radio. – to listen to the "Goon Show"-

. In those days we were just not set up for aircraft flights.

I packed my trunk, and brief case, and my Sextant but had to leave my suitcase and radio behind on the ship, to be taken care of by Tony Redfern as the **British Scientist** was going the long way home, around the Cape of Good Hope into the Mediterranean to Volos in Greece where the crew was flown home on a charter flight.

So I waved goodbye to the **British Scientist** at Abadan, to take up residence at the "Club". It was not long before Christmas 1956, and we actually had snow in the streets of Abadan. One problem that had to be overcome was that I did not have a British Passport only my Seaman's Discharge book (R560311) and that did not have any stamp in it for my arrival in Iran.

A photo was taken of me and taken by courier to Basra where there was a British consul who issued the Passport. When I was in possession of this, I was then booked on a Scandinavian Airways flight passing through Abadan to Karachi. Taken to Abadan airport at about 6 am and told not to show the passport to anyone until on the plane!!!! (No entry stamp)

The plane arrived at around 4pm, when I was feeling slightly peckish by this time, after taking off we flew down the centre and to the west of the Gulf before turning to head for Karachi, Lunch? was served a revolting curry made in Abadan – need I say more.

The excitement didn't end there, we arrived in Karachi, where I was to stop overnight before catching a Pakistani Airways flight to Bombay. A car took me to my Hotel, not one of the 4 or 5 star ones near the airport but to the, wait for it! The Taj Mahal in downtown Karachi.

I was shown to my room, supposedly with an en-suite bathroom. This turned out to be a concrete room off the bedroom with a single dripping spigot high up on the wall and a very small wash hand basin with one tap. The clock time being two hours ahead of Abadan dinner was being served, so I went to the restaurant. This was straight out of Somerset Maugham. At one table were two very mature ladies, complete with elbow length gloves, an Army major with moustache and toupee, and the menu was Mulligatawny Soup and Roast Mutton, followed by Apple Pie, I was hungry by then, so I had the lot!

Before turning in I approached the reception desk to order me a taxi for 6 am to be able to get to the airport, so 25 miles away, in time for my flight to Bombay. 6 am came and went, no taxi. Just then a Portuguese Artillery Officer came out of the hotel and offered me a lift to the airport. What with his gear and mine, I'm sure the front wheels of the taxi only made contact with the road surface occasionally.

We duly arrived at the airport, just as my flight was closing the entrance door, I ran across the runway – you could in those days – waving my brief case and shouting "Stop!", but to no avail, they shut the door in my face.

Back to the arrivals/departure area, only to find that that Scandinavian Airlines didn't have a flight in that day, that no more flights to Bombay with Pakistani Airways were scheduled for that day, finally talked my way onto a Air India flight some hours later in the afternoon.

Thinking, because I had missed my flight that had been organised; I had better tell someone, the agent, in Bombay that I would be , so I sent a telegram off to the Agent.

Arrived at Santa Cruz airport (Bombay) no one there to meet me, no money!, caught the bus with my gear into Bombay and was dropped at the Mission to Seaman, where I stayed the night. In the morning the agent turned up and said they had arranged for a boat to take me and my gear out to the **Haffar** which was anchored in the harbour. We swung around the anchor for a couple of weeks, but after three days a small boat came out from the shore waving a piece of paper. It was my telegram from Karachi saying I would be late into Bombay!!!! We were getting ready to return to the Persian Gulf and to dredge the new wharves at Bandar Mashur, but first we had to go to Abadan.

The Captain was Frank Langford, who had been in the RNR during WWII, prior to that a professional Yachtmaster, captaining large luxury yachts, mainly in the Mediterranean. The Mate Teddy Hayward.

On our way north the only navigational equipment we had was a Chronometer, we had our Sextants and a periscope magnetic Compass on the monkey island. I was able to get a sun

sight after a number of days in the SW Monsoon, and with this single position line able to avert running up on the coast of Iran.

On arrival at the bar off the Shatt al Arab we picked up our Iraqi pilot for the passage to Abadan, he came up to the bridge and said "OK 2nd Mate you've been up here before, call me when we get to Abadan!!!" and with that he went down aft to enjoy the Masters hospitality!.

I should add here that the **Haffar** had two engine rooms, one forward and one aft and four identical engines, two for twin screw propulsion and two for the actual sucking up the dredged material, she could turn on a six pence. It was the first of many Indian/Pakistan crews that I sailed with.

After a brief stop over in Abadan we went off to Bandar Mashur, dredging the approaches to a new jetty. The experience of the local "club" was enlightening. We were the new boys on the block, and we went in there on a Thursday morning (Their Saturday equivalent) at which there was a midday dance!!!. As we went in emissaries were sent from all round the room, some from the up country oil drillers, some from the engineering staff of the local plant, and of course some from the Iranians. We only visited once!

After a week or two dredging back to Abadan; to have the end of the suction pipes hardened, they were wearing away.



Super Constellation

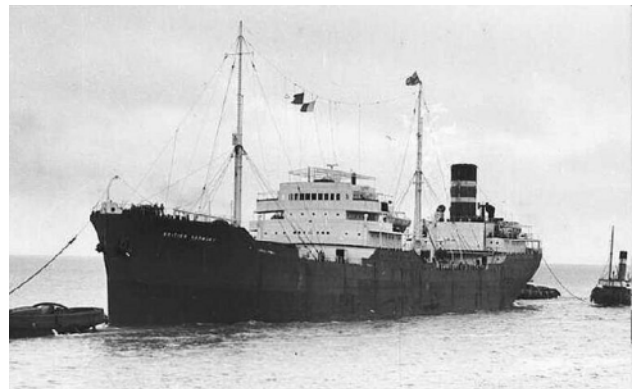
By this time I had plenty of time in for my Mates certificate, and paid off, flew back to the UK courtesy of BOAC in a Super Constellation – my favourite aircraft – hop skip and a jump and we were off the runway heading west. We had a crew change at Rome, the number of crew exceeded the number of passengers!!!!

I must mention the dog we had onboard; a real sea dog, I don't think he ever! went ashore, ever. He was aboard when we swung at anchor in Bombay harbour and had been trained to bark and growl at anyone with a dark skin – except the butler who fed him – if a seagull or any bird for that matter landed on the ship he would go nearly hysterical and chase them off.

After arriving in the UK I had lashings of leave due to me, but went to live with Tony Redfern who was up for his Masters and me for Mates, living in Bristol and attending the Fry Nautical College there, but I took my exams in London. It was still in the 1950's, in fact I still had still had some 4 months leave due to me after getting my Mates ticket (Foreign Going) No. 79764 in the beginning of May 1957.

I retained my rank as 2nd Officer after getting my Mates certificate to join the **British Harmony**, more of this later.

After gaining my Mates (Foreign going) Certificate I still had quite some leave up my sleeve. I saw an advert in the (British) Daily Telegraph, for a group to go to Spain by road for 14 days. I applied and was told to front up at Waterloo station. I hadn't been to Spain then and the Costa del Sol, so why not! There were about a dozen cars involved each with four passengers.



British Harmony - Photo Richard Cox

There I met my fellow travellers, the driver of the car a Government Vet Paul, Barbara a girl who worked in Essex, Jennifer Wright and myself all in a red Renault Dauphin. Down to the Newhaven to Boulogne ferry where the car was hoisted onto the ship, and again hoisted out of the ship at the French side of the Channel.

We made our through France stopping a couple of night en-route crossing into Spain near the Mediterranean border and on to where we had been booked in. We took one look at this establishment and said "No Way", left the group and went to a nearby brand new Motel, the two men taking up the girls costs. Remember the Costa del Sol in those days did not smell of Fish & Chips and warm Beer!

We had made sure when we left the group that our homeward route and hotels were still available for us for renegades!! Some time, towards the end of the trip I proposed to Jennifer and was accepted.

On the British Harmony in Port Said.



We were married in Horsham on 14th July 1957, had a very brief honeymoon before I was called to join the **British Harmony**, another war time built ship at Wallsend in 1941 and 12,500 dwt.

We went, both of us to join the ship which was in Barry Docks, In the drydock there. Even today, I can picture the railway sidings behind the ship with may be 100 small tank engines, that had been used to move the coal trucks around the port, just laying there nose to tail, waiting the furnaces of Port Talbot.

After the usual engine trials up against a wooden block on the dockside, the only trials that were ever taken to my memory in the British Tanker Company when leaving drydock!!! We were off to Swansea for a big trip!, - Falmouth where Jennifer left us and we went out to Little Aden and LEFO the well known destination, "Lands End For Orders" but actually back to Falmouth.

There we all moved across the deck onto the **British Isles** another of the 12's built in 1947. She had been laid up in the River Fal, fully loaded with Fuel Oil which we took to Swansea, at that time the Company was using some of its Tankers as portable holding tanks. We then went off to Newcastle for drydocking, the weed on her bottom had grown to strands longer than 5 metres and about 2 metres across, she was eventually scrapped after only 15 years.

I was sent up to Grangemouth to join the **British Resolution**, built in 1937 at Swan Hunters yard in Wallsend. The Captain was Alan Brown, his first trip as Master, the Mate J. Mckinnon and the Third Mate John Sketchley, who I was to meet a couple of times, much later.

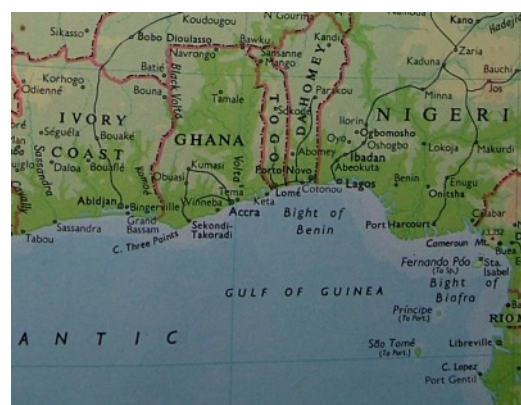
Jennifer had by this time found us a flat in Richmond, overlooking Richmond Park, where she could easily travel to the West End and the play she was appearing in.

The ship went down to the Isle of Grain, loading three grades of "clean" oil, and set off down the channel for northern Italy. The weather was very poor, over cast all the way out into the Atlantic, no celestial sights or sight of land.

The Chief Engineer came up onto the bridge and told the Captain that if we had to stop for any reason he could not guarantee to be able to get the engines restarted.

So we made a passage down the coast of Spain and Portugal well off into the Atlantic, when on DR (Dead Reckoning) altered course in towards the Straits of Gibraltar. Which after some radio traffic we had been told to make for.

We had a good operating Radar, with a range out to 40 miles, but nothing was showing when we should have seen Cape Spartel, we kept on our eastern course, when suddenly the echo sounder start to show shoaling. Hard over and back we went out into the Atlantic. Later we worked out that it was the cold Atlantic current going in under the warmer outgoing Mediterranean. By now darkness was approaching so we continued steaming east, to turn around in my 12 - 4 watch and head for Gibraltar. When we picked up the pilot and rang stop, the engines couldn't be restarted.



After the adjustments to the engine we set off down the west coast of Africa for Takoradi and Lagos. Here when we were alongside it became a new year, 1958; and all the steam trains set off their whistles and then all the ships in the port and at the anchorage did like wise, quite a tuneful 30 minutes.

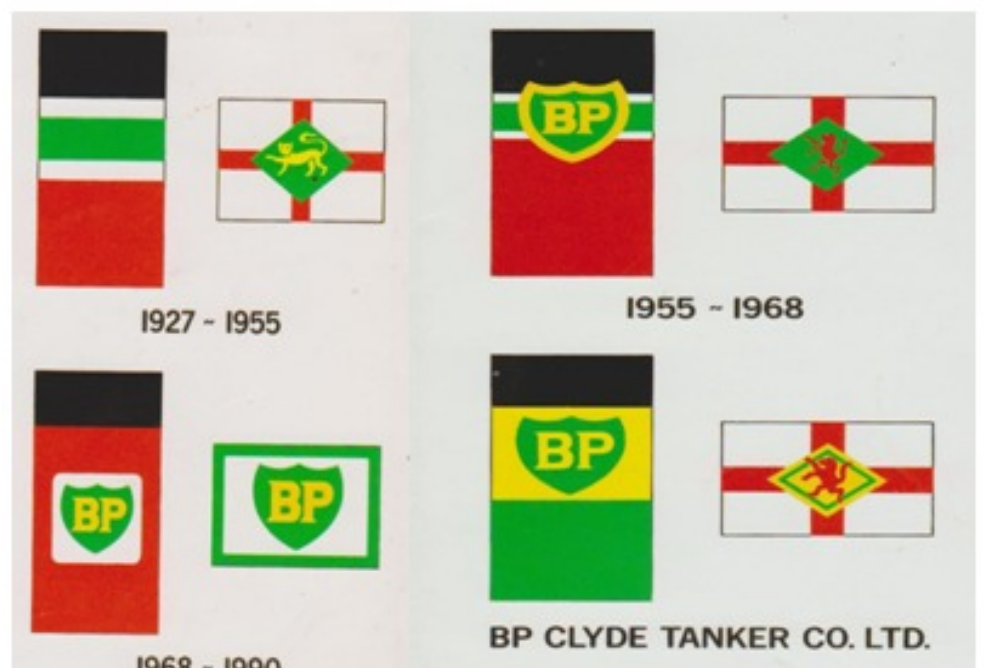
We had in, the British Tanker Company two – at that time- different Gyro compasses-, on some ships, it was a Browns which required maintenance – by the 2nd Mate, it was supported on a jet (?) of mercury which meant that you had to allow the gyro to run down and stop; take out the mercury and replace with new mercury, re-assemble and run it up again. The other type was a Sperry which didn't require this performance.

Later as we circumnavigated the African continent and were heading north from the Cape of Good Hope steaming against the Agulhas current, again in poor overcast weather, we did have a radar set, but no gyro, a medical condition of one of our crew was becoming critical and we needed to know exactly where we were, again we were lost!! The second time that trip!, eventually the seaman's case had become quite serious. Now on that ship, for my sins apart from the normal Second Mates responsibilities, I looked after the Medicine Locker. The Indian fireman came up with a bloated stomach and unable to have a pee. The Shipmasters Medicine book didn't quite cover this affliction, so we radio-ed the 24 hour doctors in Rome, who advised us to insert a catheter into his penis and make for the nearest port.

The Captain and I had a discussion as to who would do this deed, and I drew the short straw. I sterilised everything in sight. Put the fireman into a warm bath in the hospital and gingerly inserted the catheter, with the "old Man " watching. I had a little trouble getting it past the pelvic bone but once into the bladder, Whoosh, it came flooding out! Meanwhile we had altered course for Mogadishu. We were not told to leave the catheter in place, so I took it out, but two days later the same occurred again and this time I couldn't insert the catheter into the bladder.

On arrival; we were too big to go alongside, so we anchor as close as we could, close enough to see in to the open doors of the ambulance waiting for him. A work boat came out, with a piece of equipment, up until that time I had never seen. Two wooden hoops connected by canvas the bottom covered in canvas, the top hoop had lifting lines and was picked up by our derrick. When the top hoop was picked up the canvas side opened and lifted the bottom hoop, up on deck it collapsed and with the fireman on a stretcher, laying down on the bottom hoop, up with the derrick hoist, over the side and into the work boat and off he went, we saw him from the ship into the ambulance. He had a cancerous tumour across his stomach which blocked his bladder, after surgery he recovered and flew back to India.

After loading in Little Aden we set off across the Indian Ocean to Cochin, and yes the old open Morris tourer was still going around, the gear lever and hand brake being on the outside! Around Ceylon and up to Budge Budge once more. The Pakistani crew had been on the ship for quite some time by then and were getting a little toe-y, so round Ceylon to Karachi, they were a Pakistani crew. The new crew arrived in three coaches and it took just 30 minutes to come aboard with their gear and settle into their cabins. It took 4 hours to get the outgoing crew off with all their gear that had been



These are the funnels and house flags that I sailed under in British Taker Co & BP Shipping.

collected around Europe and the all the rice that they had saved from their rations!! Sacks of it!

From Karachi to Abadan another cargo for India and Budge Budge, back to Abadan and loaded Avgas for Mena al Ahmadi to be pumped to Kuwait airport.

We eventually went back to Grangemouth where I paid off and returned to the flat at Richmond. This was in May 1958, when after about three weeks; Jennifer told me she had fallen for someone else and she wanted a divorce. At that time in the UK you could not get a divorce in under three years and then one had to show cause why it should be granted. I was devastated, I moved out of the flat, taking just my clothes, books, navigational equipment, nothing else and never went to the flat again.

I contacted BP saying I wished to go back to sea as soon as possible, and they sent me to "stand by" the **British Dragoon** in Falmouth this didn't last very long and I was transferred to the **British Commerce**, built in 1946 a small handy tanker of 8400 dwt. I was to be aboard for nine and half months.

Although we all joined in Falmouth, Captain Billy Young, C/O Tommy Richards, myself and 3/0 Derrick Knight, and three apprentices, Head Office sent us to Palermo in Sicily for the actual drydocking, most unusual in those days when the companies ships were only drydocked in the UK. But we were only there for a few days while they scraped the barnacles off and painted the hull above and below the waterline.

We loaded in Little Aden for a voyage up the Red Sea to Aqaba with multiple grades of clean oil, which we discharged into road tankers brought out to us at the anchorage two at a time on a barge. We were guarded by a RN frigate – later two minesweepers – at the anchorage and a company of UK Paratroopers ashore. From where we were anchored we looked at four countries, Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Our nightly entertainment was the explosions of land mines between the various borders being set off apparently by Camels wandering into the minefields. This cargo was from the USA as a gift to Jordan and we took 3 three weeks to discharge it.

Although the sharks at the top end of the Gulf of Aqaba are massive, as long as a ships lifeboat, at that time they hadn't been known to attack any swimmers. We used our lifeboat to go ashore for a swim in the warm, warm water. Once whilst the lifeboat was at the bottom of the accommodation ladder. Its engine running, and the second engineer was sitting on the after gunwale; the junior engineer put the engine into the ahead position, which caused the tiller to swing violently across the stern knocking the 2/E into the sea. At this moment stationary under the lifeboat was a very large shark – doing no harm – the 2/E who had completely gone overboard was back into the lifeboat without getting his swim suit wet!

Off then to Bombay to load for Cochin , and yes the car was still going round and round 4 years later!

Later it was back to Abadan to load another cargo of Avgas for Mena al Ahmadi, this time we had a little excitement there. We had to moor to a single point buoy a little way south to the loading jetty, pick up a pipeline from the seabed. We commenced discharging; only during the night a strong wind had come up, blowing us off position and stretching the pipeline lines attached to the ship and the sea bed. As dawn was breaking the Pilot/Loadmaster came out of where he had been sleeping and promptly had a hissy fit.

As it was my watch, I had to stop pumping, close the line down at the manifold valve. This may sound easy, but it was dangerous, because there was a head pressure of Avgas in the pipeline going over the ships side; and when I disconnected there would be a lot of very explosive volatile Avgas splashing around the deck.

I cleared the deck sending everyone away as far as they could go, took the weight of the pipeline on the winch, slackened the "knock off" clamps at the manifold with a brass spanner, then with a brass hammer knocked the clamps right off. The undersea pipeline was pulling the flexible hose one way and the ship/winch the other way, eventually the overflow ceased and I was able to lower the pipeline back into the sea. I can't remember now how we disengaged the derrick runner but we did.

We then did our stint on the Indian Coast, which included a visit to what was then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh to the port of Chittagong. Where you could just see a Clan Line ship high and dry on the land, plonked there by a fierce Cyclone some time ago. [PDF of the incident HERE](#) Again this was a Pakistani crew and we had a crew change this time at anchor off Karachi, the leaving crew filling a London River size barge with their gear.

We left again for Chittagong, this time with a deputation from the crew as we round Cape Galle. They said they couldn't sail with one of the Bhandaries we had just taken on. This was at a time when Indian/Pakistani crews were allocated from a central office in either Karachi or Bombay; who picked the crew members regardless where they came from; where before the crews were picked by the Serang of a village and all crew acknowledged him and were friends of their own village, their Bhandaries curries were liked.



Anyway when we got to Chittagong we paid this particular one off and engaged a new one all was peaceful.

After some more traversing the Indian Ocean, and calling at a port in the Hindu Kutch named Port Kandla, not recommended for the tourist trail!!!! In those days pretty basic facilities, and I mean basic!

Then loading in Little Aden and LEFO, which turned out to be Shellhaven in the Thames, where Jennifer came down to the ship, this was the last time I remember her visiting a British Tanker.

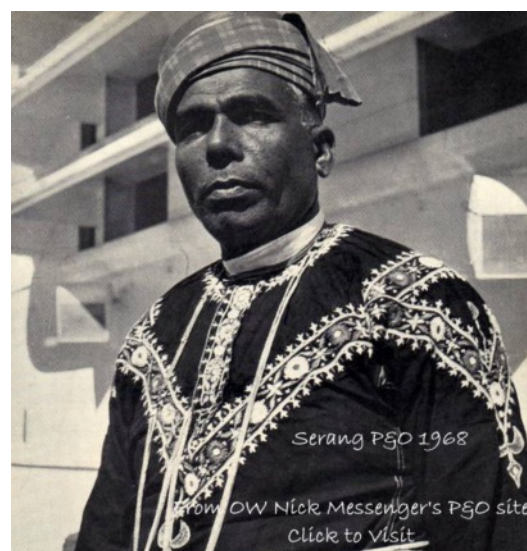
Then it was to Plymouth where the ship was laid up nearly under the famous Brunel Railway bridge. I was detailed to take the whole ships crew by road to Newcastle upon Tyne where they were to join another ship.

It was a "WirthsCircus", there were two coaches and a removal truck, all the gear went into this, and myself in one coach and a man from the Shipping Office in the other. We deliberately set off at 8 pm, this was because there had been cases of crew members leaving these kind of ship transfers and melting into Indian communities along the route.

Our first stop was at an all night "Good Pull up for Truckies" on the Exeter Bypass. As our coaches rolled into the car park there were perhaps ten long distance trucks also there, we counted them off the coaches and into the café. As fast as our crew went in, out came the truckies and into their trucks and away! Back into the coaches and off northwards during the night, our next stop was just outside Sheffield, once again we counted then in to the roadside café which had been warned that we were coming and a two course meal was waiting for us.

Unfortunately the manager had been told that we were a Chinese crew, so had pork roast meat with vegetables, and had put on the tables as soon as the crew started through the door. Since we were counting them in, I was not aware of this problem until the Serang came up and said, "We can't eat this Sahib!" – mind you some of them had already scoffed some of the plates! A compromise was reached with the café, the crew were serve the desert first and scrambled eggs and vegetables second. This worked quite well.

Off again, we had been told not to arrive before 4 pm which we duly did. However I was disgusted, the local Superintendent knew we were arriving and at what time; but nothing had been set up for our arrival no galley made



[Nick's Site HERE](#)

ready, no blankets or mattresses even, I forget what the name of the ship was but it was being changed from a white crew to an Indian crew, so there some significant alterations that had to take place, none of these were done. The Local Superintendent and I had a few words over this, didn't get me any "brownie points" there. I tried to organise something for them, at least an evening meal, but then caught the train and went on leave.

After a somewhat lonely leave, I was sent to join the **British Earl**, built in 1946, at Wallsend 12K dwt clean oil. Earlier in her life she had been damaged by a mine in the Danish Great Belt, and it had twisted her keel, she had been cut in two and re-aligned, later the other side of the canal she broke her crankshaft off Aden and had to be towed back to the Tyne by the **British Baron**.



British Earl

When I joined her she was making short voyages from the Isle of Grain up into the Baltic. Also onboard was an old friend from the **British Talent**, Gordon Reid only in those days he was known as Tom. We had two 2/O's on some ships which were trading on short voyages, he was designated as the Extra Second Mate whilst I was the Second Mate! As I have said previously we met again in Sydney before he became the Sydney Harbourmaster.

We had visited some 8 different ports in just under a month, when tying up at the Isle of Grain, I was down aft, hanging on to a chain stopper and put my back out. I could only just make to amidships and my cabin. I had to be helped down to the toilet, it was that bad. At that time I had only a few days needed to complete my sea time for Masters, so I stayed onboard until those two days had been completed and my discharge book now showed I had the full sea time.

So off to Bristol and the Christopher Fry Nautical School, this time living in a B&B type of hotel, I basically only had my allotted "study leave", plus a week so it was eyes down and study. It got fairly boring going out to a local café or restaurant for dinner each night, their menus never seem to change!

One of the courses I particularly studied was the "Pacific Charts" which came in a massive form and needed some 2 to 3 hours the first time you attempted it, not that this would be available in the exam. I mention this because when I went up to London for the exam it was in the Navigation Paper for Masters and was worth about 50% of the marks and the pass mark was 85%. Now I know out of the twenty of us sitting that day, only myself and one other went up to get the relevant form, and I passed – everything on that occasion. So at least 18, failed that day.

After telling BP I now had my Masters (Foreign Going) Certificate they promptly sent me to the laid up ships in the river Fal, to be OIC of the **British Marquis**, built in 1946 another of the terrible 12's. She was fully loaded with fuel oil as were most of the 15 laid up British Tankers at that time in the Fal.



The joining routine was to drive to the King Harry Ferry and then to the mothership that all the ship caretakers lived on, complete with steward service. I was fortunate in that the **British Marquis** was in the same trot as the living ship.

Our main task was to keep the accommodation aired that the electrics were working and keep the world wide folio of charts up to date. In between that we made one of the professional films for safety at sea. It took three days to make a film

about working aloft in a Bo's'uns chair! Even with a dummy installed and falling down onto the tank deck!

As I have said earlier, I use to collect Dentists, this time I went to visit a Dentist in Truro, halfway down the hill into town coming from Falmouth. I was in civvies. The receptionist told me that the Dentist was presently up at the hospital checking out damage to some one in a car crash. Anyway go and sit in his surgery which was on the second floor of the house; and he shouldn't be too long. I bought a paper and sat down reading, nearly finished when in came the Dentist. He was some where in the region of late 60's, remember I was 26 at the time. So he told me to jump up in the Dentist Chair, and he then inspected the damage. He told me it would have to fill it!. While he was probing with those terrible tools of his trade, and it was a lovely sunny morning the window open, he couldn't find the particular probe that he wanted, so he picked them all up and threw out through the open window, where they landed in a pram and a baby received a direct hit, judging by the wails. Halfway through the drilling, when the phone rang, and although one couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, our end was hilarious. A friend wanted to borrow his boat tied up in the Fal, no problem. But he then explained in the most minute detail how to find this boat which was called Maria after a prostitute he had known in Rome!!! I was in that "Chair from 10 am to about midday, with constant interruptions, the next patient(s) arrived at 1130 am and told to sit down in the surgery while he finished me off holding a conversation all the time.



We had quite a collection of cars towards the end of my time there ,but we didn't keep them at King Harry Ferry – no room for one thing and too much passing traffic, instead we kept them over on the St Mawes side of the river on what had been built as a ramp for D-Day landing craft to load. I had two cars at the time ; a Connaught and a Hillman Husky the first wildly impractical, expensive to run you could only manage a brief case in the boot, and at over 100 mph the front end tended to leave the tarmac. Whereas the slow old Husky would take all my gear and get me there in one piece. One of the other ship keepers was a Scotsman,, Robert Cook who had a Sunbeam Talbot, and because I knew the roads around that part of Cornwall we entered it in a Car Rally, we didn't do too badly for a couple of newcomers to the Rally scene.

While on the Fal, because I was an ex-RNR Cadet, I applied to the Admiralty to join the RNR again, if accepted BP would give me time off to complete any courses. I was summoned to the Admiralty in London, taken by a very old wrinkled retainer to have a medical, and a board interview of an Admiral and two Captains and a Commander. I was accepted and duly had a Commission as an Acting Lieutenant RNR.

My next ship was the brand new **British Curlew** built in 1960 Stephens & Sons in Glasgow of 15000 dwt. And although a "clean oil" ship had heating coils in the tanks. To start with we were



The British Curlew

doing the Isle of Grain and Scandinavia trips. One mild occurrence was while in Aarhus we were tied up but not working cargo, but still keeping watches. I was leaning over the after rail looking down on the tank deck, when out of the crew accommodation, came a petite blonde, certainly NOT one of our crew, she made it to the gangway, looked up and said "Its alright Second I've had my fun" and proceeded ashore. She had; the lad needed some medical ministrations a few days later.

We loaded some cargo in the Isle of Grain and topped off in Rotterdam, a

very valuable cargo of Lubricating Oil, it was estimated to be worth more than the value of the ship. First stop was Alexandria, then Bombay, finally Kwinana in West Australia. There however we struck a snag. Our heating coils had leaked into the Lube Oil!!! So there were millions(?) small water globules in the oil!

Then after Kwinana we headed to Durban, then Laurencos Marques and Beira and Little Aden.

We had a couple of passengers and their equipment, taking them from Little Aden to Berbera across the other side of the Gulf of Aden, while we discharged gas oil to the power station, our "passengers" one of whom was a "Hard Hat" diver the other his breathing attendant, searched for an anchor and cable lost by a previous ship at that port.

Then on to Malta discharging at a small bay on the north side of the island called St. Paul's Bay, it was time for our "Guarantee" drydock in Glasgow and leave for me. The ship was sold later to a Hong Kong shipping Company but was damaged by shell fire when laying at Basra in the Gulf War, one of the 14 "Bird Boats of BP, the first that I sailed with A/C electrics.

My story continues in the next PDF covering the 60s