

GOING TO SEA IN THE 1960'S

By Tony Maskell OW 49-51

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

I will continue with, what should be perhaps the British Tanker, BP Shipping story, but that would not be quite correct as you will see!

On going, on leave from the **British Curlew**, I was called on by the Admiralty to join a seven month induction course this was nominally called P45.

Instructions were to join HMS Victory on a Sunday evening. This was the Barracks, not the actual ship, the course was intended to turn a shambolic load of Merchant Navy Officers into Royal Naval Officers.

Most of them were probationary sub-Lieutenants from a variety of shipping companies, but there was also a group who would become the post masters in times of a conflict. Some of these had done their national service, in the Army, and had never seen a ship let alone been onboard one.

Monday morning all of us were assembled on the Parade ground in civilian clothing and met our Chief Petty Officer who was to be our instructor whilst at HMS Victory. After a few preliminary explanations we were all sent back to Barracks to get into our uniforms and be back on the Parade ground in 30 minutes.



Entrance Gate to HMS Victory

The full RNR group were back in about 10 minutes, the others were a little slower. Formed up in three ranks inspected by the CPO, who nearly had a heart attack when he arrived to inspect the "Posties". Their uniforms were not the approved regular type, one lad from Sheffield had gone to the "50 bob" tailors – usually found in a main street in a town back then – his uniform was dark blue – yes, the trousers had turn ups, the pockets had

flaps, no hacking jacket flaps at the back of the jacket, and there were only 6 buttons on the jacket!

Some of the others weren't so bad but they were sent off the Barrack's tailor to remedy their short comings. Meanwhile we got down to the hard graft of marching and saluting.

In our group of P45, there were two Lieutenants, me and a Peter Paget from Orient Line, the other 8 came from, P&O, Curry Line, Clan Line, Alfred Holt, Port Line, Shell, Canadian Pacific, Bibby Line, and one short service RN sub-lieutenant – who you will hear more of later. There were 11 of us to undergo the seven months together; around the South of England naval bases and schools. First Portsmouth, then Plymouth, Yeovilton and back to Portsmouth.

While at Plymouth, we were billeted in a commandeered large house which before WWII was owned by a Mr Huntley, of Huntley & Palmers, maker of biscuits and who I cycled past



The British Curlew

every day going to my Grammar School in Reading. Many years later I found that my Great Grandfather was the master baker at this factory and lived nearby on the side of the Kennet Canal.

We were introduced to the 40/60 Bofors and to the 4 inch H/A gun turret, which we got to fire at Wembury Island off the coast of Devon, we were pitted against some gunnery sailors, when firing the 4", I'm glad to report that we won in terms of the number of rounds we achieved. – I went back in 2012 with Tony Redfern – see part 3 of previous –and you would never know that the little island had been plastered with shells for a great number of years.

On our way back from Plymouth we spent a fortnight at the RN's air station at Yeovilton, this has two memories, one, was a Mess Night when the most senior WREN – as they were then – a First Officer no less, rode a white horse into the mess after the meal, as Lady Godiva!! The speciality of that Mess was when reasonably full of the joys of life, to set up all the large settees parallel down the mess spread apart to land between them, then take a running leap to achieve a deck landing – well they were "birdies" after all.



The other occasion was when we all **HAD** to go up in one of the aircraft stationed there, in my case it was a twin boom Sea Venom still in RN colours, but it was a civilian contract pilot, they were used to teach Air Traffic Controllers how to handle air craft from a ship or shore, my memory of this was just how fast two jets travelling at 300+ knots took to meet, and also looking down on the English Channel to see an Aircraft carrier at full speed and the wake it creates.

That's rather digressing from the next bit. Our RN short service sub-lieutenant had a fear of flying, but this was an order we had to have an acclimatise the flight training course. So he was allotted a American Phantom Jet that was in use then, he was seated in the navigators seat which as below on the starboard side where you couldn't see out, the Pilot – an RN "Birdie" in this case-. The aircraft handler when buckling the

lad in, said "Now sir, I have taken the pin out of the Martin & Baker seat" and showed it to him, placing into a special bracket. " If the Pilot says **GO** or words to that effect you don't wait, you pull the bracket over your head and out you go"!

Well the Phantoms used to take off in tandem down the runway, with the two pilots having a casual conversation as they went. For some unknown reason, our hero interpreted something in this banter as **GO**! He didn't wait, pulled the Martin & Baker hoop and was shot out of the side of the aircraft. Which by this time, had left the runway and was over a field of cabbages. The seat shot up to somewhere around 200 feet and the parachute opened, gently lowering the sub-lieutenant down.

There of course, was an inquiry, with a four ring captain and two commanders, one a doctor, who inquired of our hero "What height were you when you ejected?" the reply was 5'6" as I am now, Sir!. When the firm Martin & Baker heard of this they presented him with an inscribed beer tankard and a caterpillar brooch/badge, which they gave anyone who had used the seat to save their life.

Next it was to the Gunnery School, HMS Excellent on Whale Island, the old stamping ground of Admiral Fisher! There we had the full works, gaiters to be worn during working hours, doubling away between sessions, plenty of what most Merchant Navy Officers would call "Bull", by this time we were used to their ways and just got on with it. A couple of incidents come to mind. I had a Mini at the time (we did get 8 in one time) and was going home for the weekend, we lived in Henley on Thames at the time, while steaming up the Meon Valley, a Wasp or Bee came into the car and stung me on top of my head. I returned to "Whaley" on the Sunday night, and on Monday morning all of us under training had to be at Divisions, all nicely in three ranks for each course. The overall supervision was with the Parade Training Officer, a

Lieutenant called Frank Trickey, a huge man with a commensurate voice as well. – he organised the funeral of Lord Mountbatten in later years.

Anyway the order, after prayers was "On Caps", mine was a special cap having only a white cap cover no blue top at all, anyway air was trapped under it as I put it, thinking it was another Wasp or Bee, I smartly hit the top of the cap with my left hand. A stentorian voice called out "Stand fast No 3 in P45" so when my team marched off I was left standing, and called to report to Frank Trickey. There we were two Lieutenants standing on the Parade Ground with him balling me out, I thought it funny and couldn't refrain from laughing. I was told to double around the Parade Ground, twice before re-joining my class.

Talking of the Parade Ground at Whale Island, it was fairly large as Parade Grounds go, and still had the WWII air raid shelters on either side. One of the classes was for each individual to stand on top of one of these shelters, while the P45 was in the centre of the Parade Ground and he had to control them, marching, about turning and the like. One sub-lieutenant, who came from Curry Line, and went onto Canadian Pacific later, did not have a strong voice, and it was very la di da as well. To this day none of us knows exactly what he ordered us to do, but the outcome was amazing. The first three kept on marching the next three wheel right, the next three halted and the rest marked time. Now if we had practiced that it would have taken a long time to perfect it. But in this case it was perfect. The Petty Officer supervising us nearly broke down – in tears!!!

Just before we left HMS Excellent there was a Mess Dinner, and we presented a silver cigarette lighter (large) to add to their collection of silver and a silver plate with P45 and our names. What has become of them over the years I know not since the Gunnery School has long since gone. The routine was for the vice-president for the dinner to be the most junior sub-lieutenant present this was one of us, Geoff Smith, which after a few strengthening libations did a very good job.



HMS Excellent - Whale Island

Meanwhile I and another, Mike Bozier from Shell -and my second best man – had hatched up a plot for them, Whale Island to remember us, that is P45. At about 2 am we had already pinched the key to the Wardroom, let ourselves in and removed every chair out through the windows, except the massive Presidents chair, and stowed them in the Squash courts.

Come 6 am and the stewards started to lay up the tables –No Chairs! – the duty officer was called, he sent the duty watch, in their gaiters and boots running around looking for the chairs. Word eventually got to the wise old Commander of HMS Excellent, and he said "Which Course is leaving us?" of course P45 featured in the answer! By that time it was too late, and officers were already going into the Wardroom for their breakfast, some of the more enterprising ones took the typists swivel chairs out of nearby offices and had a marvellous time sweeping up their "Wheaties".



One thing that puzzled us at "Whaley" it had every sports facility, from a rifle range, squash and tennis courts, cricket and soccer pitches, sailing dinghies, billiard tables, swimming pool, you name it they had it, but all these things were hardly ever used, only by us RNR's.

After this we went up the hill behind Portsmouth to the Communications School, the main building a glorious house with a massive but very finely built sweeping staircase that us plebs were not to darken. Here we were given a course in fleet

manoeuvring, ourselves being individual make believe warships getting into line, zigzagging turning together all those sort of manoeuvres.

After this our last session was to HMS **Vernon** the TAS School (Torpedo and Anti- Submarine) there was a rivalry between "Whale Island" and "Vernon" and while we were there it was the Olympics", some normal sporting activities, but the major one was the Bicycle Hockey!!

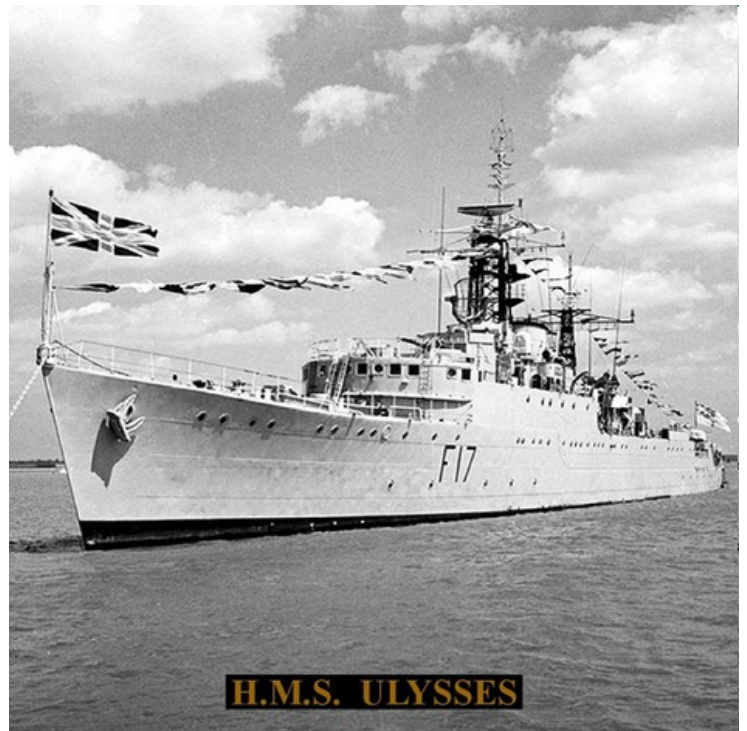
This usually required an ambulance to call before the end of play. At the end of the Mess Dinner, to which the Commander and some "Excellent " officer were invited; there was a Gunnery exhibition, with two teams, one from "Excellent and one from "Vernon" held in ante anteroom to the wardroom,. On the mantelpiece over the fireplace were a moving – yes, moving – warship. At the other end of the room two air driven blow pipes. The "Guns Crews" fell in headed by the respective base Commanders and his gunnery crew. All the normal gunnery orders were shouted as a table tennis ball was loaded into the air driven pipes, when loaded the order to fire was given and an attempt was made to knock the moving ship off the mantelpiece.

I remember the PO WREN Steward behind the bar raising her eyebrows and sending the junior WREN stewards away whilst this was on, since the noise was quite robust!!

This was also the last time I saw Jennifer, who was still my wife, the divorce was going through, when we had a last dinner – ashore – in a restaurant- for all of the P45 and their wives and girl friends.

I had decided to continue with my RNR training by joining a working Naval Ship, and was appointed to HMS **Ulysses** (F17) this was a type 15 frigate, a re-worked WWII Destroyer, converted to an Anti - Submarine Frigate, with 45,000 shp twin screws and capable of the high 35+ knots speed – in a calm sea of course.

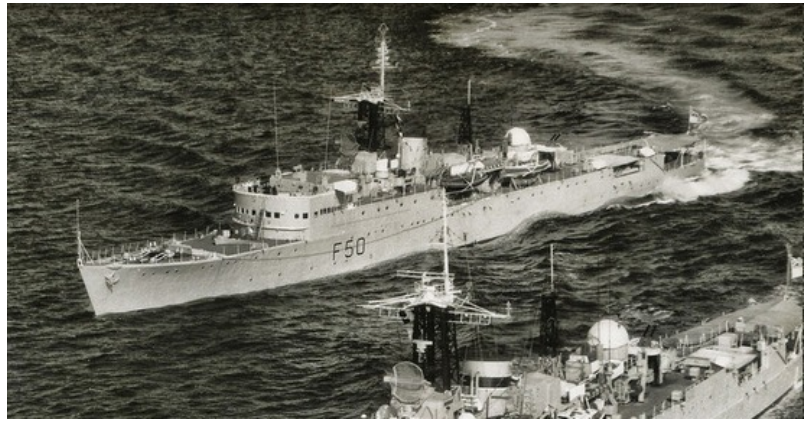
My task onboard was as the Navigator, whether it was because the old one, a RNER had just left or that I had a Master Certificate, I never knew. Off we went to sea, cleared the sound without any dramas, heading for Portland. On arrival it was in heavy fog, so I had to con the ship in by Radar before handing over the ship to Commander Groome RN to berth her alongside. From there we went to Ostend on a "show the flag" visit, there was the usual cocktail party, where upon of the sub-lieutenants had an original opening line, when he spoke to Belgian countess with "Do you hunt very often?", she looked at him strangely and left shortly afterwards!. We had two Midshipmen aboard, they had been at a "Public" school together and then "Britannia" College and now their first ship together; their families lived quite close together, but they didn't really get on with one another. However they went ashore with two of the girls at the cocktail party, one Midshipman returning at about 10 pm and turning in. The other staggered back at about 1 pm, went down to the cabin they shared, woke his mate and punched him in the eye. When asked why, he said "I didn't get any and spent all my money!"



We called into Plymouth on the way back – just for old time's sake!! Little did I know then. On arrival at Devonport, me still navigating, we tied up alongside HMS **Venus** (You should have seen us) another type 15 Frigate (F50) and the ships company transferred over from F17

to F50, except the Commander. We were to be the junior ship of the Dartmouth Training Squadron, our senior was the HMS **Virago** also a type 15 frigate..

On this ship the HMS **Venus**, there was another RNR Officer Donald Swetnam and OW from my era, not my term, a lonely man, served in Orient Line, P&O and Cunard, and he died in November 2008; he was the F'o'c'stle Officer – more of that later. I was to be the Electrical Officer. – In the US Navy Officers could be posted to a range of billets, Engineer on one ship Navigator on another, but in the RN one stayed in the Deck, Engineer, Electrical, Supply specialising in that organisation; so to be the Electrical Officer was quite a change; in reality the electrical needs of the ship were taken care off by my CPO's and sailors, except for one instance – later. I still had a bridge watch to keep, since I had a RN bridge watch certificate by then.



HMS Venus

The occasion where I got my spurs as Electrical Officer, came about in the galley, we had a cruisers galley which was much larger than a destroyers galley, that is a large set of electrical ranges athwart the ship; they kept blowing circuit breakers; and the Chief Electrician couldn't fathom out why this was happening – the cooks were not overflowing their pots and pans! - so I went into the galley to have a "look see!" I thought I could see why!, asked the Chief for a screw driver, and placed it on top off one of the busbars through which the current flowed, press down and sure enough the circuit breaker blew!, I said "There Chief that's your problem the busbar is very slightly too long and when it heats up, expands and bends down to the bar below. And Bingo!".

This did fix the problem. On one occasion just after lunch and the Electrical mess deck we relaxing after their "TOT" in an enclosed mess, with the curtain across the "Burma way" I thought they were a bit late turning to, so picked up an empty bucket and threw it into the mess where it landed on the steel deck, did they come hurtling out to see who had done that.

On one occasion we had gone up the River Seine to Rouen the farthest any ship of any air draft could go, with our running mate HMS **Virago**, berthed just downstream from the road bridge (quite low) over the River. We being the junior ship had berthed outside "Virago", so when it was time to leave, we slipped first; going down the river astern at around 4 knots, to make for the commercial part of the port where there was a turning basin. Now you will have to take my word for this, I was in the lower bridge could see forward and hear everything said on the open bridge.

We got to the turning basin, and went astern into it, gently, but the river current then grasped us athwart it and pushed us rapidly to the south, the command was full ahead both engines, hard a port. Now 45,000 shp is a lot of grunt, the ship sat down in the water and took off, the ship was still at stations, the fo'c'stle still manned. Right ahead was a Merchant ship, loading explosives out of a barge, the next order was stop engines, half astern both engines "x" revolutions, this put the quarter deck under water, then stop both engines. Hard a port, half ahead starboard engine "x" revs, slow astern port engine. On the fo'c'stle all the sailors who had been smartly fallen in for leaving port had gone through a watertight door to inside the ship, the two Chiefs were rather straining their buttocks and Donald Swetnam, who must at some stage looked down **INTO** the barge. Walked with an unsteady gait when finally to order came to "Clear the Fo'c'stle. Although we had a French pilot onboard, the actual con was in the Commanders hands. Never once did his voice become agitated or higher than normal during the turn, the French Pilot could be heard muttering "Sacre Bleu" of something like that.

Commander Hoskyn then sent a signal to the Commander on "**Virago**" that he must watch the river current when using the turning basin!

Another jaunt was up the River Thames to go through Tower Bridge and make fast to buoys just ahead of HMS **Belfast**. It was here that the Chiefs Mess organised a visit to Watney's Brewery in Fulham. Now they were all either "Jakkers" or "Janners" from the west country and not used to a big city like London, so it took time to get from the pontoon at Tower Bridge to Waterloo Station, and then the underground to Watney's Brewery at Fulham; eventually they did and had a guided tour of the Brewery, with a few sherbet's along the way. When it was time to leave they saw a Watney's Ale pub just outside the gates, and collectively decided to see if the brown liquid would travel! In they went, by this time pressure was being felt on many bladders, so off to the outside facility; on the way back in they had to pass a clothes line with many clothes pegs on it, in passing, the pegs fell into many hands and then were clipped to backs of uniforms, caps, or anywhere they could be clipped. Near the end of their stay one chief was laid out on the floor, the rest picked him up horizontally, placed his cap on his chest and went out the door, saying to the customers "Oh he is alright, we always carry our fallen this way" – he lost his cap through a railway window on the way back to the ship.

The Wardroom were not to be outdone, we had been invited by Lloyds of London to visit, which we did; walked the floor where the insurance brokers little open offices are. It also has a museum inside, of memorabilia of Nelson, - one of quite a few in Europe I found out later- the excellent three course lunch was followed with a 1927 Coburn Port!

While on HMS **Venus**, we also went down to Gibraltar for a visit, the last time I walked the streets there. We were invited to the Garrison Mess for drinks, being Navy – either Royal or

Merchant – we have our "home" with us; knives and forks, plates glasses etc. Not in the Army, their goods and chattels go with them. I mention this because whilst having a drink with the Colonel, it was out of a Pewter mug which had a name inscribed on it. I asked the Colonel, "why was this name on it, was it because he had done something brave?" No replied the Colonel, "We don't talk about him!"

On our way back north we did our annual full speed trials up the Portuguese coast and across the Bay of Biscay, overtaking **EVERY** vessel on that patch of sea at that time at 38 knots, the funnel turned brown! Hats on backwards!!

Our next overseas(?) trip was through the Kiel canal to Kiel for the annual "Kiel Woch" - Kiel Week -in which the various NATO navies gathered for sailing and rowing regattas, the memory of the American's spending most of the time as our guests in the Wardroom drinking our bar dry. Also, the passage through the Canal both ways. Arriving back at Devonport

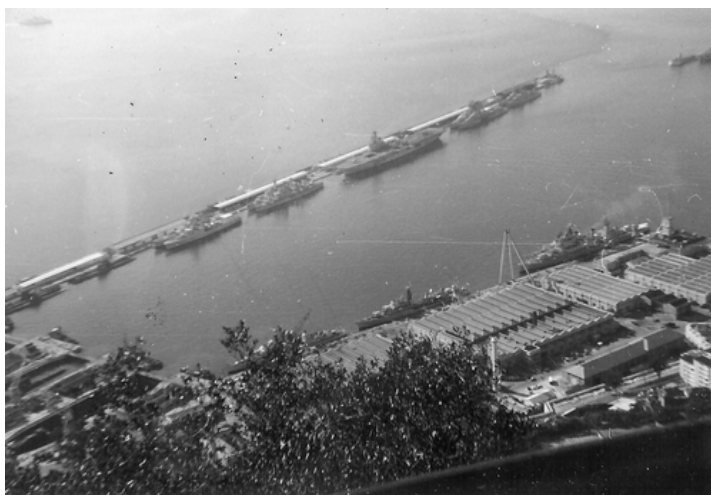
I had used up my RNR time and so had a week's leave and told to join the **British Duchess**.



HMS Ulysses Type 15 Frigate



HMS Venus Type 15 as in Dartmouth Training Squadron



Gibraltar Naval Dockyard

I joined the **British Duchess**, built in 1958 at John Brown's Clydebank of 44800 dwt – later increased to 46K dwt. This was one of the class of most attractive looking BP Tankers, designed to carry crude oil, with all the new technology, Whessoe Gauges, Air-conditioning all through, Auto-steering, Saloon down aft near the Galley, en-suite cabins and internal gangways.

I joined at that well known, by now, watering place, Isle of Grain – now no more - as Second Officer, with Captain Cole and later Captain "Windy" Gale and two Chief Officers.

Captain Cole was about to retire and his ambition was to go to the Munich Olympic Games, he had already booked his tickets! "Windy" Gale was one of the characters of BP at that time and was Commodore, he only wore his dentures when the Pilot arrived until the Pilot left! Or his wife was onboard; she had a battle with my predecessor, she would hang the "smalls" in the wheelhouse to dry, and he would cut them down, she was American and lived in New York when not sailing with him, I never had the pleasure of meeting her. Our trips were from Mena Al Ahmadi to the UK and back a few times, then to Newcastle for drydocking. I left her then to go to Cardiff and join the **Clyde Explorer** as Chief Officer. That is the start of another part of the ongoing saga, still full of rides and spills at the Circus.

The British Duchess



I left the **British Duchess** as 2nd Mate to become the Chief Officer on the **Clyde Explorer**, she was a British Tanker built in 1950 at Belfast, one of the 12K dwt ships, but originally the **British Explorer**, BP changed a number of their ships to a "Clyde" suffix, most likely the bean counters in Britannic House had found some tax reductions or subsidies that way.



Clyde Explorer in Colombo

The ship was physically in the drydock adjacent to the entrance proper of Cardiff docks – the last time I was down in "Tiger Bay" the dock had been filled in!!!

After the mini refit and hull painting we left the dock and went into Cardiff docks, to put our nose up against yet another large wooden block so that the engines could be tested. We stayed overnight alongside, then early the next morning, manoeuvred again into the lock to be able to sail to Swansea.

As we entered the lock, fog came down, visibility was about half a ship's length, we had tugs still fore and aft and a Pilot onboard – his surname was English!! – The Dockmaster who knew of the conditions, after all he was standing on the lock-side, opened the seaward doors of the lock and the forward tug eased us out, we commenced blowing our whistle.

Now the entrance from seaward into Cardiff is a dog-leg, you turn off Penarth Pier to head for the lock, which of course we couldn't see. I was on the fo'c'stle the tug still made fast along with the Serang and four or five seaman. Suddenly the tow wire went slack, and the tug left us. A blast on another whistle and I looked **UP** to see the bows of ship above me coming straight at us. I cleared the fo'c'stle and walked back to the foremast and watched the incoming collision.

This was an Australian ship of the Black Swan Line – I forget its name now. She ploughed into our starboard side just where there were a set of bits and on into the dry cargo hold. We locked together and swung round in the approach channel, I believe her stern narrowly missed the end of Penarth Pier!

The forward tug meanwhile had been taking photographs of the incident, which made the next edition of the Cardiff papers!

I blame the Dockmaster for this incident, he knew that the Black Swan line ship was coming in, he knew the foggy conditions and he sent us out of the lock.

Anyway we went to anchor to appraise ourselves of the damage, the Black Swan line ship likewise, but she only had a nick in her bow, not a deep V" that we had.

So it was back into the drydock we had left shortly before. The Captain, his first command, and it was not long before Christmas, he promptly went home on leave; leaving me with the Inquiry.

We had to have quite a number of ships side plates cut out and replaced along with the frames supporting them, this all took time.

I; as part of the Inquiry, questioned those who could give an appreciation of what they had seen. Remember, I was there closest to the action! I was amazed at what they had allegedly seen to happen, from the Pilot, both 2nd and 3rd Mates, the Seacunny on the wheel and the standby Seacunny on the bridge wing it did make you wonder where they were at the time. Eventually after reporting this to BP and the Shipping Office in Cardiff nothing ever came of it.

When it came time to leave the drydock, the gates would not open, this was in the winter of 1961/62 a very, very cold winter, the dock gates had frozen in place. It took more than 24 hours to unfreeze the gates so we could head off to Swansea to load.

Now moving from 2nd Officer to C/O was not just a matter of an addition of a ring on the sleeve of your uniform. As 2nd Mate you basically did your own thing looking after equipment and charts, the only time you had more than a seaman to control was in berthing or un-berthing.

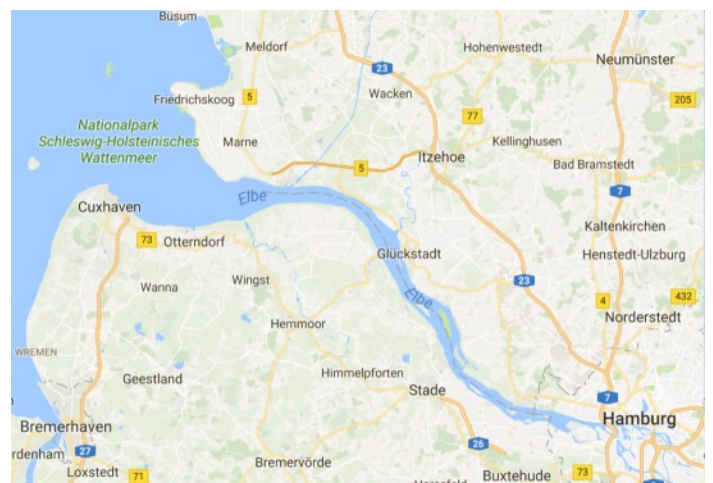
When you become Mate you have control of a number of sailors and Petty Officers, plus the upkeep of the ship, the responsibility for the cargo, loading and discharging and discipline overall on the ship, a whole new ball game.

We successfully loaded fuel oil in Swansea for Hamburg, and as I said previously the cold spell was all over Europe as well, the Rhine was frozen over and we had difficulty passing Cuxhaven, because of the ice flowing down the river, we really needed a flood tide to get us passed the Pilot station there; at one stage we were going backwards with the engines at full ahead!

As I have previously told you I collected Dentists, this time it was a large Frau who attended to my needs? Only she said she couldn't see anything wrong with the remaining teeth in my head, it must be the cold weather, admittedly I had been standing on the Fo'c'stle in the bitter wind for some time during the passage up the Rhine.

We sailed from there, this ice having managed to scrape off all the hull paint which had only been put on a matter of a weeks or so previously. On to Little Aden, to load more Fuel Oil, this time, for Berbera and Port Sudan. Turning round, back down the Red Sea; this time for Abadan. Again more Fuel Oil this time Cochin – yes the Old Morris was STILL going around the circuit just off the jetty!

Then on to "the Road to Mandalay", of Rudyard Kipling fame, the port of Rangoon. There the Customs Officer were most officious and took a fair bit of the crews personal gear ashore with them. I was sent ashore to negotiate with the Head of Customs for the return of these items,





Chittagong Docks

which is how I saw the "Shwedagon" temples and the Golden Buddha. I did get most of it back.

Then around to Chittagong again, the Clan Line ship I mentioned earlier, high and dry on the paddy fields.

On to Bombay and a crew change, this time the leaving crew needed two barges for all their gear, which included bicycles, sewing machines and large old TV/Radio sets in big wooden cabinets.

We were to load here in Bombay, which always involved pumping sea water through the refinery's pipeline system for ten or so hours before being allowed to load.

(more about this later)

Off we went down through the Indian Ocean, heading for Kwinana, though why we should have to take Fuel Oil to the BP refinery there is anyone's guess. After discharging we re-loaded this time for New Zealand, plus my only "dry" cargo I ever had to load. This was a quantity of LPG gas cylinders, for discharge at Lyttleton. While we were alongside, who should come through the heads at Lyttleton but our old friend? the Black Swan cargo ship we had met off Cardiff, this time she was berthed the far side of the harbour to us.

The Captain and I had a run ashore to Christchurch, going through the tunnel from Lyttleton, having dinner at a big hotel in the Cathedral Square, at the time Dame Vera Lynn was playing at the Theatre, much to the disappointment of the BP Installation Representative, who reckoned she looked as old as his grandmother! Unknown to Mary my second wife and myself, we were both in Christchurch at the same time, although we didn't meet till some time later in the UK.



Lyttleton Harbour 1965. Tunnel opened 1964

We had a "please explain" letter from Britannic House as why we had passed through the Cook Straits to get to Lyttleton, rather than the great circle route from Cape Leeuwin south of New Zealand. I had the pleasure saying that the route we had taken allowed us to load approximately 200 tons

more cargo, and if we had taken the great circle route we would be entering the Seasonal Winter Zone and would then have to increase our freeboard by loading less cargo. Nothing was heard back.

As we crossed the Tasman sea, the C/E, Alfie Thompson came up and told us he had to stop the engines and it would take at least two days to fix the problem. We were rolling quite a bit in the Tasman, and after a while he came to me and asked for assistance in the Engine room. So with my Serang and sailors we went down to the Engine room. One of the problems was to hoist the upper cylinder of the Doxford Opposed piston, lower it down onto the deck, then take the replacement off the ships side and replace the broken one. At one stage I had to tell the C/E to get out of his Engine room he was becoming a danger to himself and others around him. Eventually all the parts fitted together in the four cylinders and we then set off again for Kwinana.

Somewhere along the line we had been granted permission to trade on the Australian coast, not granted on an everyday basis. This was to break, the Cabbotage rules on the Australian Coast at the time, and are still in force 47 years later.

Down in Bunbury, not far down the coast from Fremantle, ashore with the 2/E and having a cold one in the local Working Men's Club, we were accosted by a short middle aged man,

who came across and said "You know me"; he expected that everyone should recognise him, his name was Jimmy Little, and he said he was a survivor from the Titanic. I think he more likely he used that line to get free beer.

From there to Esperance, which had a jetty some 1 or more mile long, our cargo of Fuel Oil? was going by pipeline all the way to Kalgoorlie. Ashore only the centre of the town had tarmac on the roads, for about 100 yards in any direction. There was still hitching rails outside the two pubs, one call the "Thirst Aid Centre" and a nearby lake that had pink water, yes, pink I saw it! I have no doubt that now has all changed unfortunately, thanks to tourists visiting.

Then to Tasmania and Burnie, although later in life I visited Burnie quite a few times either as a tourist or on business. This was a wonderfully green spot on the earth, reminding me then of Wiltshire, the paddocks, fields were relatively small with hedgerows. Again the "Old Man, and I had dinner ashore. We walked into the restaurant not far off the ship, and ordered a Steak and Salad, with a bottle of red wine to go with it. The waitress went over to the glass doored fridge and took out a bottle of RED. I promptly asked her to remove the cork and place it in a basin of water. I should add that Tasmania wines are excellent.



The jetty at Esperance West Australia - Modern

Across the Bass Strait to Adelaide, the city of churches, and the last sight of the "Six O'clock Swill", off to Port Pirie which had the railway running down the centre of town, the main export here was lead from the upcountry mines.

Then it was back up the Indian Ocean, with a slight diversion into Geraldton on the west coast of Western Australia, north of Fremantle. While we were tank cleaning one of the sailors, while bending down in the tank, his retina's had become detached. At the time I thought somehow he had become gassed amongst any debris at the bottom of the tank, not really possible on a Fuel Oil tanker. So we made into the port, a doctor came out and said he would have to go to hospital, he recovered the retina of one eye and was flown home to India. It is caused by malnutrition over a long period of time. This was also my one time when I was the Dentist, pulling out a tooth of a sailor, easily!

After loading in Abadan, we set of with gas oil this time to a small speck in the Indian Ocean.



The refinery Mena al Ahmadi
An average day with lots of ships

This was Gan Island, which in those days was a refuelling base for the RAF transiting the Indian Ocean, it had basically just a runway and RAF staff, plus funnily enough one woman who was a Women Volunteer Service person (RWVS) who looked after the NAAFI canteen. Also the Pilot was an old friend, previously talked about, as he then was Flight Lieutenant Tony Redfern.

While we were there I lowered the lifeboats and set up a rowing race between the Engine room and the Deck departments. Also with the crew of an RFA tanker that was there. No I didn't step onto the Island, Tony came to us and stayed onboard, he was there in charge of the Air Sea Rescue launch and services.

After this excitement off to Colombo, then Mena Al Ahmadi loading distillate for LEFO, which, eventually became Grangemouth.

We were inspected by the local BP Shore Superintendent, who said everything was in good order. I overheard one of the shore wallahs; saying "Have you seen that yacht on No. 1 jetty?" Which was gratifying, since we had put many hours into making the ship look bright and clean, Bristol Fashion.

I had been away for round 12 months by then so took some leave, about 3 months worth. I was again single by then so a quick phone call and letter to the Admiralty, and I was posted to a Portsmouth based ship, in February 1963; again a type 15 frigate, HMS Wakeful attached to HMS Dryad the RN Navigation School. We had a large extra chartroom behind the bridge, where up to 10 students could practise their skills without getting in the way of the working bridge area.

Our visit to Ostend and Le Havre did not produce any interesting tales, though coming back to Portsmouth, our Captain, Commander Fisher RN took the ship through the entrance of Portsmouth Harbour, on Radar and his experience, the first I knew, was on the Fo'c'stle a heaving line came through the fog to land at my feet, we were alongside!

Later on in my leave, I was asked to help give a hand in tidying up a Pub in Long Hanborough a small village in Oxfordshire. My local then was up on the hill at Nettlebed, the Bull – not the

four legged one, but a papal notice or instruction. The Landlord there an ex Sub-mariner asked if I would go and help open the George and Dragon, where a friend, the ex-barber of Nettlebed was going to be the Landlord.

I duly went there and armed with buckets, scrubbers, white wash, did out the male and female facilities before opening time. There was at the time, and it make be an urban myth, that to keep its licence and pub must always have a current licenced landlord, there couldn't be a gap between incoming and outgoing, whether that's true or not, I don't know.

Any way I was then asked at this "Grand" Pub opening to take a certain Mary Galling back to Nettlebed, where she was a nursing sister at Ian Fleming's old, family house which was then a recuperation hospital for St. Mary's in London. One thing led to another and we were married before WE joined my next ship.



The Bull Hotel at Nettlebed. Closed 1991

Mary and I were married at Caxton Hall in London, at that time I had been divorced some five years, but we found that no gentleman of the cloth would marry us, even though I was the innocent party in the divorce, neither civilian – run of the mill – clergymen, nor the Naval chaplains. [Caxton Hall](#) [HERE](#)

On the wedding day 18th March 1964, we flew out of Heathrow – the last flight allowed because of snow storms, to Dublin, where I was confined to bed!!!! – with the Flu! When well enough to face the world; we went down to the Shelbourne's lounge, currently described as 5* Renaissance Hotel no less.

It was the time of Brendan Behan's funeral and wake, so there were a number of people in the lounge, from across the theatrical world. One fellow came in from



The Shelbourne Hotel 1964

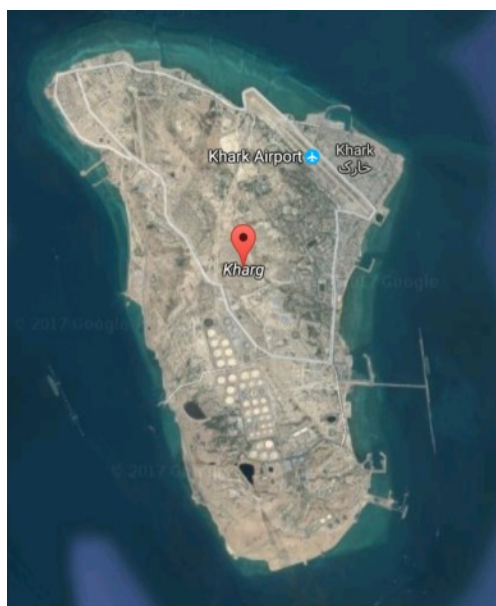
outside wearing an upturned raincoat, took off his raincoat, looked down, as say in a broad Irish accent, "By Jesus I haven't put a shirt on!"

After this back to England and we got ready to join my next ship, Mary was coming with me. This was waiting for us at the Isle of Grain, the **British Statesman** another of those 42,000 dwt nicely proportioned crude oil carriers built in 1959 at Belfast. On this ship I was to be the Extra Chief Officer, the Captain was H.K. Willis with whom I had previously sailed with, the actual C/O was C. Jones, who had previously temporarily been promoted to Master, and was again shortly after this voyage.

The XC/O was not involved with the cargo or ship maintenance but as a watch keeper on the 4 to 8. My cabin was on the centre line of this ship with the internal staircase up to the bridge opposite my door – more of this later.

On our way south through the canal, the very professional Egyptian pilot told us a tale as we passed Ismalia, he knew my wife was onboard so he told me to bring up to the bridge, while he told us this story.

Over on the starboard side, or western side of the canal, on a little hill, was a very small mosque. It was built by the ladies of the area from very little funds, however they believed that when they became pregnant that a visit to this particular mosque would ensure that their first born would be a son, now this had been going on for some time. The Pilot said, he told this story on an Italian Immigrant ship over the Public Address system, on one occasion, with all the single Italian women going out to join partners in Australia; on deck looking across the sand at the mosque. When one bright spark, turned round and shouted up at the bridge, "Why didn't someone tell the Shah of Iran's wife. The Shah had recently married for the second time, supposedly to be able to have an heir!



Off we went to Mena al Ahmadi, the first time Mary had been to the Persian Gulf, loaded and off to Little Aden, we made three runs on this then went to Bahrein for bunkers before going over to Kharg Island.

While in Bahrein, I went some 25 miles across the desert to the township of Al Manamah and the services of a dentist – I did tell you I collected dentists – he turned out to be a very good Irish dentist, who quickly replaced a filling. At the end of which, he went the extra yard, and said "Well that's over, would you like a cold beer?" so we had one each waiting for the taxi to return me to the ship.

From Kharg Island we headed down the Persian Gulf and into the Gulf of Oman, steaming at around 15 knots, it was at the end of my 4 – 8 morning watch, I went down to my cabin and proceeded to lower the jalousies over the windows, when my wife said "Look at the Ship coming towards us, its coming close". I took one look, sprinted back up to the wheelhouse, going through the chartroom. The Third mate had his head over the chronometer waiting to take the time of Captain Willis' sight, the ship was on Auto steering, the watch sailor had his head down below the forward windbreak washing paintwork.

I knocked the Auto steering off, spun the wheel to port and at the same time blew the whistle two short blasts. The incoming ship was tank cleaning and rolling gently, we passed starboard side to starboard side (Yes I know) but we that close when we passed each other I could see into their open wheelhouse door and there was no one, but no one on the bridge!

The "Old Man" came from the rear of the bridge where had just put the sun on the horizon, when suddenly his ship was veering all over the Gulf of Oman!!! He quietened down when he realised what had happened, a lesson that I never forgot about keeping a strict lookout even in good weather.

Our next cargo was out of Mena al Ahmadi, this time for a long haul, down through the Indian Ocean, Mozambique Channel, round Cape Agulhas and across the South Atlantic to Santos in Brazil. We had to be lightered for about 10% of the cargo, our draft was too deep to get alongside straight away.

Mary and I each had one of the best steaks ever, followed with fresh strawberries, can taste them now!

The local authorities became a mite difficult in supplying enough bunkers to retrace our voyage to the Gulf, we burnt approximately 100 tons a day, they only allowed us sufficient to get to Durban where we had to top up for the final leg into Mena al Ahmadi, and home to the Isle of Grain.

While on leave we made arrangements, things like mortgages and things for the building of a three bedroom house in Goring on Thames, so while we were away on the next ship this was being built.

This time it was the **British Seafarer**, built in 1951 of 16800 dwt built in Wallsend and for a clean oil ship, that lasted 22 years before being scrapped in France.

Mary still sailed me, but this time I don't think we ever got to go ashore together the whole time we were on the ship. Joined her on November 1964 at the Isle of Grain, and although we basically coasted or to the continent we were on Foreign Going Articles – so my Discharge Book tells me; from November 1964 to the middle of June 1965.

In those seven months we loaded in Dunkirk 7 times for Rotterdam, and or Hamburg, we were back to a 3 Mate ship, at one period, I didn't get to sleep in my bed in night clothes for a full three weeks. With loading, standby's, tying up, or letting go. Altogether we loaded 23 cargoes in those seven months and visiting, 50 ports, from Norköpping in Sweden and Ravenna in the Adriatic.

When we went on leave the house was ready for occupying, so we then had to hunt around for furniture and fittings.

The next ship was the **British Security**, of 12300 dwt built at Belfast in 1948, later sold to a Greek Shipping Company when she was stranded and then scrapped.

I was sent over to Antwerp to join, take on to Rotterdam and then to Falmouth for drydock. I can't remember the story why Tony Pitt the new first trip Master and I had to take the ship from Antwerp to Rotterdam and then on to Falmouth at which we had to sign Home Trade Articles. After this refit, we took some cargo, bunkers if I remember, to Milford Haven, where we were berthed astern of the **British Admiral**, our then Flagship of 111000 dwt even standing on our light ship's fo'c'stle you had to look up to see the name of the ship and port of registry

We signed Foreign Going Articles in September 1965 and over the horizon, through the Bay of Biscay, heading for all good BP Shipping vessels should; the Persian Gulf, ending up at Bandar Mashur, on one of the jetties that I had dredged on the **Haffar**, some 11 years previous. Again for Little Aden, back to the Gulf to Das Island and a cargo of very light crude oil, easy to refine into petroleum products. Our orders were to take this cargo to Beira. There was a pipeline from Beira to Rhodesia, and at that time the British Government had put sanctions on Mr Smith's government. We did just what we were told steaming flat out at 10.5 knots?? down the eastern side of Madagascar. [A PDF about the situation HERE](#)

We found out later that the press in the UK had headlines in the Daily Telegraph, "STOP THAT SHIP!" meaning us complete with a photograph of us at sea! In the Mozambique channel at the time was an RN aircraft carrier, the HMS **Eagle** |



Beira Patrol

think, a couple of escorting frigates or destroyers and of course aircraft. We never saw hide nor tail of any of these vessels supposed to enforce the sanctions.

We started to discharge, and the Captain as was his usual practice went to stay – at his expense – the best hotel around, left saying, “call me late tomorrow when you have finished discharging”.

The pipeline to Rhodesia must have been empty, because the discharge went very quickly and I had to call him to return quite early next morning, much to his disgust.

Tony Pitt had been with the Company about twenty years at that stage, and most unusual he had never been to India or on the Indian Coast. I told him “ You’ve never seen me loose my temper have you?”; “No” he said, I said “Well about 4 hours after we arrive in Bombay watch out! ”.

Originally we were to do a crew change while at anchor, again two large open barges needed. This took until around 10 pm that night. After which we were to stay at anchor while the new crew found their way round the ship we would go over to Butcher Island to load.

Suddenly the pilot came onboard, no warning, and we were to go to the oil berths to load, the second mate who had only just gone to bed came on to the bridge and said in a very loud voice “This lot couldn’t organise a piss up in a Brewery!” So up anchor, and on the berth.

The shore wallahs, then connected up the hoses and wanted us to pump sea water for ten hours to??clean their lines. They then wanted me to load three different grades in such a manner that I would be unable to discharge these products and remaining afloat at the next port!!, Port Okha and Kandlar in the Rann of Kutch, if you look on a modern Atlas the names have been changed. Yes I did my block, as usual in India , loved Indian and Pakistan crews and got on very well with them, but the “clerical” type of Indian just doesn’t seem to have any common sense.

Back to the well known port up the Shat al Arab – you may know it as the Tigris or Euphrates, but BP it was SHATT!! Al Arab, funnily, all those years up until Mossadeq shut the refinery down, dredgers, **Haffar** included would dredge a ‘dog leg’ across the bar at the entrance. When Abadan reopened it was found that the river purged itself and there was a naturally deep channel further to the west than the one that was used before the closure.

From Abadan we had the usual LEFO which turned out to be Amsterdam, then across the North Sea to the Tyne for refit, and some leave.

I joined the **British Gunner**, built in 1950 of 14500 dwt and came from Govan in the Clyde, she at some stage after I had sailed on her, had the prefix “Clyde”, but renamed after 3 year to “British “again.

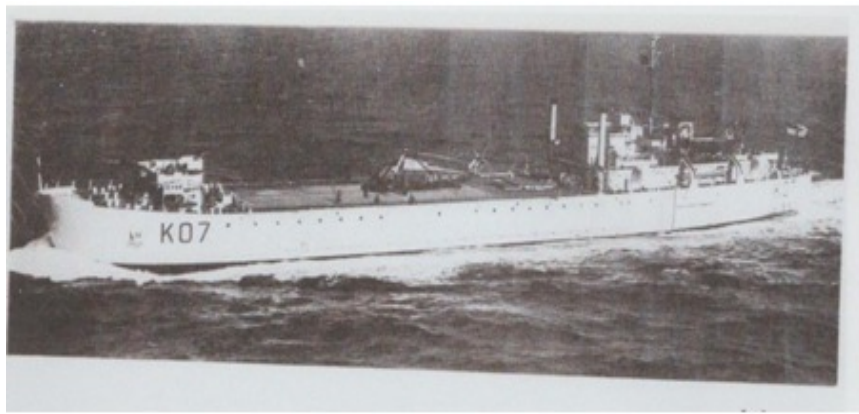
I had two first trip Masters on this ship, one around the Mediterranean, and then after going back to Teesport another Master, joined the ship, I am afraid he; after some time had the nickname of “Twitterpants”. Looking back now I seem to have had a surplus of first trip masters in my time in BP, some 9 all told.

Joined in Thameshaven, loaded her and off to Spain, Santander, round into the Mediterranean to two Italian ports, Leghorn and Milazzo, then off to Little Aden , back through the canal to Ambarli and Piraeus in Greece, followed by Malta, later a cargo from the Isle of Grain to Taranto, but inside the inner harbour in the lagoon, by this time Mary had joined the ship and we when out to Little Aden.

The cargo we loaded was for a place called Masira, on the eastern tip of Saudi Arabia, it in fact at that time was another RAF staging post - the RAF aircraft seem to be a bit short on range in those days!- This was two grades, one of Aviation Spirit and the other of Motor Spirit, but in quite – relatively – small quantities. I had to use sea water ballast to keep the ship stable for the passage and to be able to berth stern on to a pipeline brought up from the sea bed to our stern discharge, the berth was a Mediterranean Moor, with both anchors out and

stern fast to a buoy, no pilot a do it yourself one. Off to Abadan to load fully this time for Hamble and the Isle of Grain and a spot of leave.

It was time to do another trip with the RN, in order to keep my List One status in the RNR. I went down to Portsmouth to join in January 1967 a very "strange" kind of ship. It was HMS **Lofoten**, an ex Tank Landing Craft, built in 1945 as LST3027 in that had a flight deck welded over where



HMS Lofoten

the hold (?) use to be, and some extra accommodation put under the flight deck. We carried four Wessex, twin engine Helicopters, with flight crews and maintenance staff. The Admiralty was using her to see if a seagoing vessel could be used for training purposes in the anti-submarine role.

Out into the Atlantic we went, along with a clockwork mickey mouse submarine, flying off the Helicopters who then dunked their sonar probes and we would try to catch the submarine. This was my first flight

in a helicopter, in the left-hand seat, I didn't know then that I would do it quite often in the North Sea! The experiment must have been good as the Admiralty had the RFA ship **Engadine** built for this training task. On this ship I made my only visit to Northern Island, to Lough Foyle and Londonderry before going back to Portsmouth, to the rest of my BP leave and gardening!

BP then sent me to join the **British Fame**, in March 1967. One of the 16,000 dwt clean oil ships, built at Wallsend in 1949, she lasted 23 years, not bad for a clean oil ship. Joining as usual those days at the Isle of Grain, we then went on a circuit of Danish, German, Swedish, Belgium, French and UK ports, when I was told when we had got to Swansea, that I had to load the ship for a new 1st Mate (I didn't get that luxury) and to transfer to the **British Destiny**, on May Day 1967 which was in Drydock at Falmouth. She was another of those good looking 449000 dwt ships built at Wallsend for the carriage of crude oil. I only loaded 3 cargoes on this ship. One at Das Island, one Mena al Ahmadi, and one at Jabal Dhanna, the last cargo going to Genoa. Most unusually BP sent me on leave flying me home from Genoa with a hotel for the night thrown in!. The runway at Genoa is also the breakwater for the inner harbour, so while we were discharging you would be under the flight path of incoming or outgoing aircraft.

Out of the blue, on the internet on "Ships Nostalgia" I had a "thank you" from one of the apprentices onboard at the time, for the training I had given him on the **British Destiny**

Back on leave again in Goring on Thames, we had decided to try for an adoption, but most societies would not agree to an application from us, because of my job!

It was during this leave that BP Shipping asked me to represent them at the Armistice Parade in London at the Cenotaph, so there I was marching along, with two other officers at the head of a gaggle of seaman from the Shipping Office, just behind the RN contingent, and the RED Ensign, complete with a brass band!

It was time to join my next BP Shipping Tanker, the **British Engineer**, in December 1967, built in 1954 at Belfast and one of a group of 32000 dwt ships, steam turbine driven, which incidentally all the larger ships were at that time whilst those at 16K dwt and under were all motor ships, mostly Doxford's but some Burmeister & Wain. Myself and the Master, another first trip Master, had to join over in Amsterdam where she was undergoing some alterations.

She was retro fitted with Whessoe gauges, these were constant reading of the ullage in the tanks, that is the distance to the top of the liquid in the tank from the ullage port. More of this later!

There some other items, in the engine-room, and we did not have scrubbers in the funnel, only the usual gas vents up the masts.

The big thing though –as seen from Britannic House – was that we were to have the very first integrated Indian Crew, not right then; we had to have a crew change for that, but that was what all these alterations were for. We sailed down the channel for Dubai, and the crew change, our new crew had been brought up on one of BI's white coloured ships.

It was only about 36 hours from Dubai to Kharg Island to load. With an integrated crew, there was only one Serang, and all the seaman were supposed to do any task on the ship.

Well we started loading, sailors positioned by the Whessoe gauges, to call out the moving ullage. Shock, Horror! None of them could read our Arabic numerals! So because we were loading at some 2.5K's an hour, I brought Sparks out on deck, and both the Mates together to read the Whessoe gauges.

We went off to that well known watering hole, called Port Sudan, we had to take some fresh? water there and I somehow contacted a bug, though at the time it had not appeared. Back to anchor off Aden to undertaken repairs to the windlass. The Insurance of our ships said we had to have two working anchors and one side of the windlass would not work so this had to be fixed, quickly. On to Mena al Ahmadi and load for Antwerp, going up the English Channel, the bug, which had been latent began to show its horns. While we were discharging another first trip Master joined and so did Mary. We sailed, for West Africa and the Bight of Benin. Now with an integrated crew, the division of labour for the week was discussed in the "Old Mans" cabin on a Sunday, with the Mate, C/E and 2/E present to decide who, how many and where the workforce was to be split up for the week, although on that ship we didn't have any trouble with this, I believe there were tantrums on other ships with "General Purpose" crew.

A day or so out of Escravos, where we were to load; I collapsed on the bridge on my watch. I was carried down below and because the Captain's Cabin was the only cabin that was air-conditioned I was put to bed in there, with supporting role from Mary. On arrival at Escravos I was sent to the shore doctor.

This in its self was a major operation, first we lower a lifeboat to deck level so I and Mary could get in, then down to the deck level of the small tug that had come out for us, across to the converted tanker which acted as a holding tank to load incoming ships. There a crane dropped down one of those personnel lifts that collapses, so you walk on to it and up we went. Then on to a small helicopter and over to the shore and followed up a small river to land near a group of buildings where the doctor was.

After a couple of tests and prodding's, I had lost so much weight that I had to keep my hands in my pockets to stop the trousers falling down! The doctor told us that I would have to go to London for treatment. So back we went the way we had come, helicopter, tug, up in the lifeboat. Pack our bags and repeat the operation the next day. This time we boarded a amphibious aircraft which took off from the river, having waddled down the river bank, and flew to Lagos, where a BP representative met us and guided us out of an airport, which at that time was heavily guarded by the local soldiers with submachine guns at the ready, there was a little war going on between the citizens of Benin and those of Nigeria – mainly about the profits from oil. Next day we were put onto a BOAC flight – first class no less, by this time I wasn't very interested in eating, but Mary had a very nice meal with cheese and port to follow!

On arrival at Heathrow, all the other passengers disembarked, but I had to wait for the duty doctor to inspect me, finally the rather elderly "duty" doctor was found, he decided I hadn't the plague and let me into the country, BP then had me whisked of to the Greenwich, the Sailors Hospital. [Bit of History HERE](#)

○ On arrival at the Seaman's Hospital at Greenwich, all sorts of tests, X-rays, Barium meals, Blood and other samples taken, all to no avail.

One of my fellow patients alongside in the ward, was the largest man I have ever met, he was somewhere in the region of 25 stone. (360 lbs or 158 Kilos) he was tall as well, and a normal hospital bed could not accommodate his size. He was a Chief Steward in ShawSavill, and during the war had been on a troopship, where the troops galley was between two funnels. It was so hot they had buckets of water to drink out of, which somehow altered his body systems metabolism and he retained all this fluid. He was on a starvation diet of black tea and two little marmite sandwiches at lunch time to loose weight so they could operate on him for a heart condition.

I mention him, because he was visited by Captain Angus Baber OW, who was the Shaw Savill Marine Superintendent in London at this time, my wife also knew him when she had taken passage from New Zealand to the UK, before I knew her, he was the Staff Captain of the Southern Cross at the time.

After three weeks, not being able to find the cause of the virus, infliction, I was sent home to Goring to recuperate and we preserved with to Adoption Societies and finally were accepted by the Anglican Diocese in Oxford, which required an interview with the Bishop of Oxford .

Then out of the blue, a summons to Britannic House this time not by the "Sea going personnel" but by BP Exploration they wanted me to become one of the Captains on a semi-submersible Oil rig in the North Sea, which was then drilling about 100 miles off the Norfolk coast, our base being Great Yarmouth.

Wonders never cease, I was given a fortnights training, onboard an Offshore Replenishment vessel, taking equipment, food, water and sometimes personnel out to the rigs in the North Sea. After that I went out to the rig by helicopter and relieved one of the other Captains on the rig.

We had three Captains, two on the rig on 12 hour shifts, 6 am to 6pm or 6pm to 6 am, the day Captain had the whole weight, the night Captain did all the calculations (I'll come to that shortly), the third Captain was on leave, we spend a fortnight onboard and a week off, handing over to the night Captain on arrival.



Captain Angus Baber OW at 2012 Portsmouth Reunion



Sea Quest sitting on the sea bed before berthing



Sea Quest leaving Belfast

The Oil Rig was **SEA QUEST**, sadly she is at the bottom of the Atlantic now, somewhere off West Africa. She was built in Belfast to the American design of a SEDCO 125, infact she was also named as SEDCO (C) the third of that type. Triangular in shape, yes she had a bow and a stern, and when under tow the bow went first, at the stern was to where the drill was attached, going up to about 150 feet above the deck, which was some 85 feet above the sea.

There was a cultural shock on joining the **Sea Quest**. While the rig was actively drilling, the Toolpusher was in charge, the Captain taking over when moving to another site, or weather conditions dictated that drilling should stop. This was not a hieratical organisation as in a ships organisation. The workforce, was varied, with drillers, roustabouts, electricians, mechanics, crane drivers, chefs, and stewards, a diving team

to monitor the drill head on the sea bed, complete with a diving bell! as well as a continuous stream of specialists to do with the oil industry, and even, while I was there the Prince of Wales, Charles, I still have the "hard hat" that he used. So it was by force of personality that things were done not by a chain of command.

On one occasion we had Bill Tidy and Alan Hackney, a cartoonist and a journalist onboard the rig. When they went ashore they wrote us, the rig, up the February 1969 Punch magazine, and this is how he described me. I quote from the magazine. "He explained , gave a lever a trial squirt (not enough to heel over) and then answered the phone. As well as a yellow hat he wore a large and complicated wristwatch and jodhpurs, as though his subsidiary degree subject had been polo, even when he had majored in knowing how to keep a £3,500,000 drilling platform level." I wore jodhpurs ,because of the cold and there ease of working around the deck in them.

The night Captain had the responsibility of the stability and the safety calculations, so around 2 or 3 am he would go right around the rig seeing how many drill pipes had been used, how much clay had been pumped down the well shaft, how much water had been used and fuel oil, as well as the "irons" at the foot of each leg which had sea water in them. Then using a calculating machine, – no computers then – work out a three sided stability equation, to ensure the safety of the rig. And to make corrections by flooding the "irons" or ballast tanks at the foot of the legs.

The day captain saw to the tying up of the Off Shore Vessel and discharge the drill pipes and the like using a Manitowac, a very fast lifting crane, we had three different cranes around the decks. He would also see to exit drills, yes we did have a lifeboat, but how we would safely get it to the sea surface, in a listing situation I don't quite know!

Anyway, we did have some exciting moments out there in the North Sea. One foggy night we heard a fog signal, very close, it was a Norwegian coaster, about 3000 grt and whether their radar was on the blink or not, our automatic fog signal was going but she missed us by a few hundred yards.

Then there was the 100 years storm, we had out 9 very large anchors on 4" (10 cms) diameter wires spread evenly around the rig, thee from each point. The wind and sea increased, it still increased, and we were looking at cyclone winds of over 100 miles per hour. The drilling had long stopped, and the rig shut right down making every thing fast. It was then noticed that we were dragging our anchors across the North Sea bed, two of the upwind anchor cables snapped and this increased the speed of the dragging, down towards the Gas Pipeline that BP had recently installed from a wellhead to the shore in Norfolk.

A radio call went out for tugs asap. Three Dutch ocean tugs answered the call, and after some difficulty two managed to make fast (we had permanent tow wires made fast halfway up the legs of the rig) They could not make any headway, even after we had recovered the other seven anchors. These when not in use fitted into racks on the footings, normally under water.

As the storm, which lasted, two whole days, at that intensity, quietened down. The tugs could get us underway, we evacuated all non-emergency personnel, but kept all three Captains aboard. We were towed into Flushing on the Dutch coast. Where, arrangements had been made to berth us. Whilst handing over from the Ocean Tugs to seven at one stage, harbour tugs, the wind again took charge and the tugs couldn't hold us. So rather like a submarine, the order went out to "Flood" the tanks and we sat the rig (which was designed to



A Rig anchor on the deck of an anchor handling vessel.

do this) on the sloping sea bed. At slack water we pumped out the footings and very slowly approached the berth. Now we towered over the jetty, the operational and living quarters were 80 to 90 feet above the jetty, so a lift had to be welded onto our stern, which was against the jetty.

We had at this time a relief captain join us – just before the anchor dragging he was under training, so while his predecessor went on leave, and I took my weeks leave he was left to attend to the nitty gritty of administration, while alongside, welded to the jetty; such as shore accommodation, pay, and the like, while the Toolpusher got on to the repairs now necessary.

I came back from my weeks leave, went down to the rig and couldn't find this 'new' captain, on the rig, ashore in the dockyard, or the Hotel we all were staying at. Contacted the agent, who was somewhat cagey about this. I then sleuthed up a local doctor, who showed me into his, consulting rooms, which had wall to wall volumes of how to detect and treat alcoholism. The penny dropped!

I was shown to a hospital run by a group of Nuns, and shown this gentleman, who had been in their care, for a few days by then. He didn't recognise me.

After some hurried calls to the UK and BP I managed to fly him out of Rotterdam to the Tyne, near where he then lived.

My problem with him was, if in that state, he had gone down into the control room and seen various valves in the open/shut positions which controlled the "footings" and tried to adjust these settings AT THAT TIME, he could have caused the rig to collapse onto the jetty, and I couldn't allow that to happen.

Anyway after repairs, two new anchors and wires, plus a strengthen stern area where the drill stem would pass through we set off up the North Sea this time to a location off Aberdeen. Our location had to be quite exact, and the survey vessel which accompanied us had, a High Definition Decca set onboard who arranged to put us on the exact spot for drilling to commence.

Around this time we, Mary and I were told that we could adopt our son, now one year off his 50th birthday! I was in the process of moving the rig once again and could not get ashore, so Mary and her father had to go and pick him up.

After much thought, that after two years on the rig, I would be back to BP Shipping as a C/O no doubt, and then may be command of one of their ships in another year. As we had just adopted our son; that didn't seem at the time, to be a fair suck of the sauce bottle. So on one of my trips up to Aberdeen, via London, I called into Australia House, and inquired whether the Royal Australian Navy would like me. They said sign here son! And after doing my next shift out in the North Sea, I resigned from BP. I took only three week to finalise the RAN bit but longer on the BP side, since I was on a two year contract.

So ended my British Tanker Company and BP Shipping career. It was June 1969.



My story continues in the next PDF covering the 70s