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Two Year Articles and All That

by David Haisman

On signing up to join the Merchant Navy, my father advised me to always keep a record or diary of the ships I had joined and the countries I had visited. He had impressed on me the opportunity and value of what I was experiencing and how I would look back on it all in years to come. I can't say that I saw it like that at the onset of my seagoing exploits; my thoughts were forever on the opposite sex and generally having a good time but I eventually took his advice. At the end of it all and with two discharge books, looking back, I realise his advice was invaluable in writing my memoirs and I am forever indebted to him.

The signing of Articles meant that the company had your body for up to two years while you had precious little in the way of rights. If a seaman were away longer than that, the company would have to pay double wages until he returned home.



The M. V. Niso at Alexandria
Courtesy of David Haisman

At the age of sixteen, I signed on a Shell tanker at a Southampton shipping office and was sent to join the *M.V. Niso*, a spirit tanker of 8,270 gross tonnage in Southampton docks. The Shipping Federation in those days, was situated not far from ‘The King Canute’ pub, named after the king of that name who was renowned for trying to stop the tide from advancing on the shore. No doubt the man had visited a pub before trying that little trick!

Shell oil tankers were easily recognised by their distinctive red sea shell emblems on their yellow funnels and always named after the many sea shells found world wide. In the case of the *Niso*, the Latin name for that particular sea shell was the *Niso Venosa*. In the officers dining saloon on all of their ships was a glass case with the particular sea shell relating to that particular ship’s name, usually on a velvet cushion. As I recall, in the case of the *Niso*, the shell was no bigger than a finger nail.

I was “persuaded” to join this vessel by none other than “Shanghai Jack” of whom I knew nothing until later on in my sea career. He rode a bicycle to the homes of all his “victims”, and was always seen wearing a merchant navy officers uniform with just one thin gold ring about the cuff. He was never seen without cycle clips on, whether in the office, walking along the street, on his beloved old bike or just about everywhere else; probably in bed as well! He had rat eyes peering from beneath his peak cap and a king-size “roll-up” cigarette resembling a part exploded firework, stuck into a slit that Mother Nature had etched under his nose as a substitute for a mouth.

His job as a Shipping Federation official was to get crews to join ships that nobody wanted and he must have been pretty good at it as ships generally continued to get crewed and sail on time. He had a knack for keeping out of the way when some of these ships returned and his features remained intact despite the many threats to put his “lights out” and wrap his infernal bicycle around his neck. When spotted around the town in retirement many years later, the man still looked the same as he always did, riding that old bike around the place. Those rat-like features and shaggy roll-up were all still there. Without any doubt, the man was a true survivor.

Before signing on, “Shanghai Jack” had assured me and other crew members, that the ship would be away for just six weeks, sailing up to Stanlow

on the Manchester ship canal, then across the Atlantic Ocean to Curacao in the Caribbean and then back to the Fawley refinery just outside Southampton. Sailing on the 24th of February would work out well, I thought, as I see the last of the winter in the UK and North Atlantic and be back to sign-on the “big ‘uns” for the summer runs across the pond to New York.

We silently slipped away from Southampton on a cold grey early February morning and on arrival at Stanlow a couple of days later, noticed that heavy snow had fallen and the wind had picked up to about a force 6. It was bitterly cold as I recall, standing on the fo’c’sle head on “stations” for several hours without any protection from the weather. We were a frozen motley crew, blowing out steam and continually wiping away icy “dew drops” hanging from our noses as we slowly went up the Manchester Ship Canal to the refinery.

After a couple of days in Stanlow and getting amongst some of the local talent when off watch, we loaded several grades of spirits (known in the trade as “light ends”) and sailed for Curacao and warmer climes.

The *Niso* had a crew of around 30 which included five boy ratings, namely a Galley Boy, Junior Winger (waiter) and 3 Deck Boys which meant I wasn’t the only junior rating onboard. Later on during this voyage, I would be promoted to Junior Ordinary Seaman, having then completed 9 months actual sea service and would receive a princely pay rise from 10 pounds 15 shillings per month to 16 pounds 10 shillings per month! The other 2 Deck Boys had never set foot on a ship before and were fresh out of a Borstal Institution, the Merchant Navy being their preference on release from Borstal as opposed to joining the army. Both deck boys had “form”, the one from Liverpool was later given the name of “Knucklehead” as he forever spoke about all the fights he had been in and had a few scars about his head to prove it. The other, from Tiger Bay in Cardiff, was of Arab descent and had never known his parents. He had apparently spent most of his life in and out of homes and dodging the law. The rest of the deck crew were a mixed bunch with quite a bit of cargo ship and tanker experience amongst them. On signing on, both boys were sent for by the Mate who told them in on uncertain terms that the party was over and he wouldn’t hesitate to put them ashore anywhere, anytime, if they decided to go back to their bad old ways.

My first impressions of Curacao, apart from the huge refinery, were the many Shell tankers alongside the berths and lying at anchor in the bay, mostly from the Royal Dutch Shell fleet. Apart from the heat and brilliant sunshine, there was the continuous stench of various oil products forever in your nostrils from just about everywhere. This smell would be with us for the rest of this 16 month voyage as it was in our clothes, our skin, our accommodation and I'm certain, in our food as well. You just couldn't seem to get away from it. The oil industry has cleaned up it's act and those conditions wouldn't be tolerated these days

Accommodation comprised of 3 to a cabin, no air conditioning to speak of, coconut matting on the green painted steel cabin decks and metal lockers for our gear that had seen better days. Tankers were well known to have good spacious accommodation but the *Niso* in that respect had fallen well behind the times, even in those days. It was becoming clear that this was going to be a far from comfortable voyage, especially now that we were in the tropics.

After a couple of runs ashore, our orders were to get fully loaded with several grades of light oils for part cargo deliveries to Gibraltar, Marseilles, La Spezia in Italy, Palermo in Sicily and then on to Malta. After receiving these orders from the Shell Shipping Agent it looked as though that six week trip to Curacao and back to the U.K. was now no more than a rumour and on a 9 knot ship like ours, we were looking at another month on top of that at least.

On arrival at Gibraltar, us young lads paid "ten bob" for a bottle of Fundadore Brandy from a Spaniard in a bum-boat which turned out to be no more than coloured methylated spirits in a fancy laced up bottle. Despite our protestations and demands for our money back, he wouldn't have any of it and continued to try to flog some more of this fire water to other crew members. The Pumpman onboard was an old tanker man with oil in his veins, had a nose that looked as though someone had performed a "Fred Astaire" act on it at some time or other and had ears like wing nuts. Apart from having a good laugh at the way us young seamen had been ripped off, he suggested a good way of how we could get our own back. As the Spaniard's bum-boat was below our accommodation aft, and directly under the main toilet waste pipe, he suggested that we should flush the bastard away without further ado! On going below and flushing all the toilets

at once along with one that had just been used, a torrent of salt water and sewage poured into his boat, catching our bum-boat Spaniard completely by surprise. Leaping up and shaking his fist up at us, he grabbed the oars and cursing and shouting in Spanish, started to row away like fury. With “Admiral Brown and his fleet,” swirling around in the bottom of his boat along with bits of toilet paper hanging off of his ears, he would have thought twice before trying to flog anymore of his fire water to us lot!

The following day, we took on fresh water from a barge alongside but the Mate was losing his temper in trying to get the crew on the barge to understand English. In exasperation he finally said to a couple of AB's, “If any of you can speak Spanish, then just ask one of them to throw that bloody heaving line up so we can pull the hose onboard!”

One of the AB's stepping forward volunteered, more to wind the Mate up than anything else, and answered by declaring, “Leave it to me chief!” With that he leant over the ships rail and then cupping both hands in front of his mouth, shouted down to one of the Spaniards on the barge, “Hey Pedro! Throweo de ropeo pronto!” After several moments, the line was tossed back up to us with the Mate at this time looking absolutely gob smacked! Glaring at the AB that had just delivered this snippet of pidgin Spanish, the Mate turned away, issuing forth several expletives before ending with the words, “a linguist like you would do well communicating with the bloody Rock Apes!”

On arrival at Marseilles, the Galley Boy and the young Junior Winger were taken ashore to one of the brothels and introduced as “Cherry Boys” to the Madam by a couple of the crew. During the voyage, these two had finally let it out after much prompting, that they were virgins and that was always fatal onboard ship. It was therefore arranged that the time had come for them to have “a dash across the prairie,” and after arrival at Marseilles, they would not let them return to the ship until they had “dipped their wick” as it was commonly known.

On their return to the ship some hours later, the Galley Boy couldn't stop giggling, had quite a flush on his face, and looked as though he was ready for a return match. The young waiter, on the other hand as I remember, couldn't understand how it all went so quickly and gave the impression that he should have had a refund ! He was even more disappointed to find out later that in such

houses of ill repute, it was internationally well known that “Cherry Boys” usually received their first encounter “on the house!”

After leaving Marseilles and then Palermo, we passed through the Messina Straits and saw Stromboli putting on a spectacular display, spewing out fire and hot lava high into the night sky. We arrived in Malta some days later for our final discharge and a further batch of orders from the Shell Agent and again, no mention of us returning to the U.K.

Our next job would be to carry out tank washing on the way to Alexandria, pick up a part cargo there and then proceed through the Suez Canal to Port Sudan and then back to Alexandria again. The six weeks voyage to Curacao and then back to the U.K. was beginning to look not so much a rumour but more decidedly, the work of “Shanghai Jack.” It was becoming abundantly clear that this voyage was going to be a long haul and tramping exercise that would stretch us to that two year article contract. “Shanghai Jack’s” name was getting bandied about a bit more these days and according to some crew members, it was as well that he was still safely residing in Southampton several thousand miles away!

Little did we know at that time that we would do 3 such voyages from Alexandria to Port Sudan before finally on the 4th voyage, heading South through the Suez Canal for the last time, we would be making for Djibouti in French Somalia as it was then known, and then on to Singapore.

On arrival at Suez we anchored off of Port Said waiting to join a convoy of around 12 ships before taking on the pilot and entering the canal. On the approaches to the canal, just off of Port Said, there was the statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the Frenchman responsible for the building of the 106 mile long canal between 1859 and 1869. However, during the Suez crisis in 1956, he was blown out of his boots by the Egyptians at the time that Nasser had decided to take over complete control of the Suez Canal.

A journey through the Suez Canal is quite an experience especially when passing ships going in the opposite direction on one of the canal by-passes. With heat waves and shimmering sand, these ships appear to be sailing purely across the Egyptian desert without a drop of water in sight! Ships of the desert indeed! Half way through the canal, we would anchor in the Bitter Lakes to enable

another convoy of ships North bound to enter the canal and by so doing, would allow our convoy to enter the Southern end.

On going through the canal, a huge search light is erected on the knights head with an Egyptian on lookout on the fo'c'sle head along with one of the crew. Our presence on lookout was for no other reason than that of insurance purposes. Steering at times with deep draught can be a "work up" especially when the water in the canal begins to move along at the same speed as the ship causing steering to be almost non existent in a dead water situation. When this happens, the pilot has to stop her in order to let the water settle down before proceeding again and of course most of the convoy has the same problem, very often turning the whole run through parts of the canal as a stop-start operation.

Tank cleaning on tankers in 1955 was the type of operation that when you look back on it, you wonder why you did it and how the hell ship owners ever got away with it. Gas freeing when at sea entailed rigging windsails over all open tank tops for several days, hoping the sea air would neutralise the gasses in the tanks. These windsails were no more than huge tubular canvas vents suspended on wire spans running from the centre castle to aft and from the fore part of the bridge to the break of the fo'c'sle. About half of the vent was dropped down inside the tank and the other half, resembling a great canvas scoop, was hoisted up to catch all the available sea breezes. The Mate and Bosun had the responsibility of going down each tank after a couple of days of venting and would decide if they were gas free enough before sending any seamen down to start cleaning. Very often the pair of them would come up from the tanks red eyed, giggling, spluttering and coughing before declaring that they were OK to send a watch down on overtime.

For the uninitiated, tank diving is another way of getting pissed although I wouldn't recommend it. Usually after half an hour down there everything becomes topsy turvy with the eyes smarting and the chest heaving.

After several dives throughout the day, the Mate brings out a bottle of rum, giving a generous tot to each hand and by then you couldn't care less what the hell you were doing, with a head like a merry-go-round and a mouth like a sewer. God only knows what those fumes must have done to our lungs in those days, as the dangers of carcinogens and cancers never entered our heads. However, the giant Shell Oil Company in it's wisdom thought that turning tank cleaning into

an overtime job and giving the lads a couple of tots of rum at the end of a days work was all that was required to get the job done and an offer they just couldn't refuse!

The work involved going down an iron ladder to the tank bottom armed with just rubber buckets and rubber shovels, but no overalls or gloves as those items just weren't an option in those days. Wearing just shorts and sea boots, we proceeded to scoop up thick oily sludge including large slate like pieces of rust from around the bottom stringers and strum boxes. Each bucketful was then tipped into a larger container and after being hoisted up, was then thrown over the side. Imagine that going on today!

However, we would be doing this job several times over during this voyage, scattering our oily sludge about the oceans and no one would appear to be giving a damn as educating the masses on global pollution was not much of an issue in the 50's.

Today, tank cleaning is generally done alongside of the refinery and the slops pumped ashore into slop storage and settling tanks. Over a period of time when the slops have separated, the excess water is drained off and profitable by-products come from the remainder such as bitumen, primer and creosote etc.

Other types of tank cleaning involved lowering large chemical blocks into tanks which would apparently de-scale them over a short period and of course the other cleaning idea was the Butterworth method which involved boiling water. Three hose nozzles pointing in 3 directions on a small turntable on the end of a flexible metal hose would be lowered down the tank and pressurised boiling water would spin the hose nozzles around spraying inside the tank, thereby cleaning the tanks that way.

The use of this method had caused mysterious explosions on tankers and there was a school of thought that during this process, a situation developed, much like a thunder storm inside the tank and an electrical charge occurring similar to lightening. It was always difficult to prove at the time but the possibility of such a thing happening was taken into consideration as one or two tankers had exploded during the use of that gear when tank cleaning. The safest and cleanest option had always been to keep ships for the same grades of oil and not change products as is the case when tramping. Some products, especially vap oil

and kero are known as static accumulators and during the loading process must be gravitated for up to a metre or so into the bottoms of the tanks to prevent static and possible explosion before putting the pumps in. Tramping the world with various grades of light oils could be a hazardous occupation and ships officers and men onboard tankers in those days couldn't afford to become too complacent. Water could nearly always be found in many oil products but it rarely caused any problems as it could always be easily drained off from the bottoms of the tanks after settling.

However, great care was always taken with the transportation of aviation spirit whereas the tanks would need to be "squeaky clean" and bone dry before loading. When water is present at 30 000 feet in the fuel tanks on an aircraft it naturally turns to ice causing chaos and leaving the pilot no alternative other than to put his parachute on and inform all passengers that they should remain seated while he pops out to get help!

On our last voyage going South through the Suez, we finally received our orders which would mean we would be making for Singapore and trade around the far East which meant little chance of us getting home in this year of 1955. At this time, we took on fresh water at Port Said and it was common knowledge to all hands that within 24 hours most of us would be suffering from the "trots!"

Our systems couldn't handle this water and although the Chief Steward dosed us up with a concoction of chalk, peppermint and something akin to formaldehyde, it didn't do much for the stomach cramps that usually followed. Needless to say that going on watch, on the wheel or on lookout became a nightmare, forever wondering if you could make the "bogs" in time with a wild gallop along the flying bridge as you wrestled with your belts and bowels!

Running down the Red Sea was uncomfortable on a ship like the *Niso* with no air conditioning other than scoops sticking out of the port holes to catch what air had been created from our great speed of 9 knots! Sleeping up on the funnel deck in hammocks made from old windsails was the option many of us took in order to get a bit of shut-eye between watches. It was during one of these nights that I suddenly woke up to see what must have been the biggest bird I've ever seen, perched alongside of the funnel casing. Calling my mates, we tried to "shoo" it away but it just hissed and spread out its wings revealing a span like

Concorde, making it clear that it wasn't going anywhere! In the darkness it was difficult to make out exactly what our feathered visitor actually was although Ali the deck boy, thought it was a pterodactyl and his partner in crime, "Knucklehead," thought it to be an ostrich! Say no more! Standing back at a distance, we decided to leave it alone and agreed that in the darkness it must have been the biggest "chook" any of us had ever set eyes on and reckoned it would be better to leave well alone. If it had landed on deck during the night for a feed then it made good sense to vacate the area as this thing was big enough to snatch the Galley Boy away!

After breaking down in the Red Sea for the best part of a day, we decided to do a bit of shark fishing using chickens entrails on the end of a meat hook tied to a length of heaving line wrapped around the ships rail. After about half an hour, we hooked a real monster but before we could do anything, it took a dive with all the bait, bending the ship's rail as it did so and when finally pulling the slack line in, found it had straightened out the meat hook. That was some shark!

We left Djibouti in ballast, bound for Singapore steaming into the Gulf of Aden. It was hot in these regions and as the ship was now gas free, the Mate decided that this was an opportune time to get some chipping, scraping and painting done on deck housings, shipside rails, tank decks and flying bridge. All the pipes and utilities for electrical and steam services are built underneath this walkway and this work is usually left to the junior ratings as it's always a bit of a work up. The flying bridge is known as a "catwalk" to some, and can best be described as a raised narrow steel plated footway between the accommodation aft to the centre castle amidships and then continues from the centre castle to the fo'c'sle head. When the ship is fully loaded with only about 3 feet of freeboard, this link becomes vital for getting fore and aft as the tank decks are usually awash a great deal of the time and in heavy weather, submerged most of the time.

After a couple of days in the Arabian Sea, the conditions were those of a typical high pressure system with no breeze and a flat calm sea. After spotting an Arab dhow doing it's best to attract our attention, we slowed down and drew alongside before finally stopping and throwing a heaving line onboard. The craft was becalmed and the occupants, which included several men, women, children,

goats, chickens and other live stock, were showing signs of distress due to the lack of fresh water. We put a hose over the side and into the dhow and watched them clamber over each other in order to get a drink, and after each had satisfied their thirst, poured water all over themselves and their animals in order to freshen up. After filling all their containers and lowering down some bread and rice, our skipper asked if they needed any other assistance but they declined indicating that the lack of water had been their main problem. The Mate, being a real company's man, coupled with a personality like snake bite and so tight that he could peel an orange in his pocket, wasn't too happy about so much water being used. He was however, somewhat reassured by our Captain, who came out with a witty remark saying, "Don't worry Chief! If things get a bit dry, we'll dilute what we've got to make it go round!" The Mate wasn't amused as the Captain turned away and went back up on the bridge with half a smile on his face. Once our thirsty Arabian travellers had received enough water, we let go of the dhow and pulled away, leaving these nomadic types to their own destiny and to continue in much the same way as they had always done for hundreds of years in these regions.

We steamed on into the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, arriving some weeks later at an island and refinery just off of Singapore called Paulo Bukom. Arriving in port was always cause for some anticipation, wondering if we had any mail and waiting for the Shell Agent to give us our next set of orders. According to a couple of notes in my diary, when we received those orders we were heading for Cebu and Davao City in the Philippines with a full cargo of various grades of spirit.

We had a good run ashore in Singapore before leaving for the Philippines, us younger seamen tasting our first chow-mein among other far eastern culinary delights and above all, our fascination in the many beautiful women in and around the city.

The only outstanding event that comes to mind when in the Philippines was when me, Ali and Knucklehead were in a bar in Davao having a laugh with a couple of American servicemen that were stationed there. During that afternoon as I recall, Reg the Galley Boy, walked in with an attractive Filipino girl on his arm that he had met in a bar downtown in Davao City. He was very proud of his

“Little Chickadee” as he called her, not forgetting his last “dash across the prairie” in Marseilles and no doubt waiting in anticipation of getting “in the saddle” once again!. However it was not to be, when one of the Americans who had used the bar regularly, pulled him to one side and told him that his conquest was no more than a bloke in drag! Reg’s face showed utter disbelief before realising what he had gotten himself into and then turning crimson spluttered out something to the rest of us like, “You lot will never let me live this down now will ya?” and then “I suppose now some big mouths will spread this all over the ship now!”

Apart from all of us in the bar having a good laugh, including his “girl friend” the older hands told him that his secret was safe with them and no one else onboard would ever hear about it...yeah right!

Returning to Singapore, we did many trips to Borneo calling at Balikpapan on the east coast and Miri in the north. There was no port to speak of in Miri and we would moor up to buoys about three miles off shore and pick up the discharge pipe line from the sea bed. Shore personnel would come out to assist with this work and we would use the goose neck, which was positioned for use of the kedge anchor on the stern, and hoist the pipe up and couple up to the stern discharge line. Whilst moored up to the buoys during one trip to Miri and working on the bridge, I can remember the Third Mate showing a couple of us the charts of the shipping lanes we were using when sailing around Sumatra and Borneo. There were many large hatched areas on the charts depicting mine fields laid by the Japanese during the last war that were still far from being cleared and were still a serious navigational hazard to shipping. The Shell Oil Company had warned all the masters on their tankers to be extra vigilant about mines in the area and to be aware of piracy in these waters which had always been a problem. On reflection, the trips we did around those islands with the volatile different grades of oils we were carrying, makes one realise that there wouldn’t have been much left of us if we had struck a mine although none of us gave it much thought at the time.

After several months of running cargo’s to several Indonesian ports, we spent Christmas day in Pladjou in Sumatra where another tanker belonging to Eagle Oil named the *San Amado*, was also alongside discharging. She had a British crew onboard and apart from the usual swapping of library books,

magazines. etc. we celebrated in fine style, having a good old Christmas style booze and “nosh-up” on both ships.

During these little “boozy” and gatherings, one of their stewards decided to walk off of our ship with a bottle of something or other and Knucklehead spotting this, went after him like “diarrhoea out of a grease gun” and put his “lights out” down on the dockside.

Coming back onboard some time later with a half empty bottle of spirit and the *San Amado*’s turkey, he was advised to return the bird post haste before creating a riot between the two ships. It wasn’t long after their turkey had been quickly returned that their 20 stone cook came lumbering onboard looking for the low life who could do such a thing on Christmas Day of all days!

Hughie, our Chief Steward, being the worse for drink and doing his best not to fall over, tried to quieten things down a bit whilst at the same time, the local customs officers decided to raid our ship. We knew they wouldn’t find anything but they wanted to join the party and what better way than to make it official and help us polish off our food and drink! As the party continued, one of our Greasers returning from the other ship had great difficulty in navigating the bottom of the gangway and finally fell into the “drink” and was fished out by a bum-boat hovering close by.

It was as well that we weren’t sailing until Boxing Day as it’s doubtful if a full crew could get mustered to set sail but looking back, I can understand why the captain kept a low profile that day. We had now been away for 10 months and during that time, no one onboard had had a day or any time off and tempers were getting short. It was an unwritten law in those days that if you were away for at least six months on articles, it was up to the Mate or Captain’s discretion to arrange for all the crew to have a day off with pay as a good will gesture. Our Mate was a mean bastard and always ducked the issue when it was put to him for fear of his losing a whole days work from the crew and what it would cost the giant Shell Oil organisation!

Christmas day came just in time and served as a release and a bit of a safety valve and just what the crew needed. In those days, Christmas Dinner was served to the crew by the officers who also had a drink with the men as well and

was the one time in the year that you could socialise with them. This helped to keep a lid on things for a bit longer.

During this time back in Singapore according to my diary, we had fresh orders to take aviation spirit and prem. kero to several ports in Japan which caused a bit of excitement to some of the hands onboard that had been there before. It was known as a seaman's paradise in those days with everything ashore really cheap and the girls plentiful although there was a huge American presence there in competition with their dollars. Our ports of call were Kobe, Yokohama, Yokosuka and back through the Sea of Japan to Saikosaki which included some really exhaustive runs ashore. Whilst in Yokohama during berthing we almost pulled a tug under after yawing from a taut towing spring. When this happens, the tug master is almost powerless to pull out of the situation and the emergency procedure is to trip the towing hook by pulling on a line attached to a pin on the hook's tripping mechanism. As an added precaution which is standard, there is usually an axe, in case the trip fails and a member of the crew can then chop the coir and free the vessel that way. That is why all wire towing springs had coir tails on the towing hook

On this occasion we watched helplessly as we were slowly dragging this tug over on her beam ends as one of the tugs crew in a state of panic, hacked away with his axe. Just as the water was about to pour down through the engine room sky lights, the coir parted and the vessel righted itself with just seconds to spare. No doubt it was their lucky day as I would imagine all hands on that tug would have drowned if that situation had gone on for just a few seconds longer.

After a taking a full cargo to Hong Kong our next run would be taking a full cargo of several grades of light oils to Geelong in Australia which included several tanks of dry cleaning fluid and aviation spirit. On our voyage South through the Indian Ocean and then into the Australian Bight we ran into a force 9 with seas high enough to break right over the flying bridge. Andy, the young winger (waiter) had the job of getting the officers meals from the galley aft every meal time, and then serve it up from a hot press in the officers messroom in the centre castle. He had been "caught" several times during heavy weather when on the flying bridge, never ever being able to judge between the peaks and troughs of heavy seas before making a dash for it. Built like a rasher of wind with a sponge for a brain,

once again he completely misjudged the ship's motion and the seas breaking over the tank decks and as a result, came a real "cropper" during one meal time

Poised, ready to do a dash along the flying bridge with a huge tray of food covered in a white cloth, he took his chance and rushed forward only to disappear under a "green one." We thought he had been swept over the side but when the spray had cleared, Andy was left clinging and hanging from the flying bridge railings like a huge wet rag doll, minus the food and tray and lucky not to get washed over the side. Instead of scrambling back over the rail and making a dash for it, he looked down on the tank deck to see where the tray had gone before "copping" another one and ending up flat on his back on the deck plates of the flying bridge looking skywards. A couple of us along with the bosun had just witnessed this and then, after putting his head in his hands for several seconds, the bosun shouted out for someone to "grab the daft bastard before he completely disappears over the side."

Hughie, the Chief Steward ended up getting the meal that day with the Second Cook and Baker moaning about the extra work involved preparing it all again, forgetting that the poor little "sod" had nearly gone over the "wall." The Second Cook was ancient and probably served his apprenticeship on the Ark and was just another example of "Shanghai Jack's" efforts in scraping a crew together as the man should have packed the sea in years ago. This "Old Codger" hardly had the strength to knead dough for the concrete blocks he called bread, but when he did, it was as well that you didn't watch him as the sweat would roll off of his face into the mixing bowl. This was probably why the bread was always thought to be so salty!

Our Bosun, nicknamed "Dead legs," perhaps because of his walking as though he had the rough end of a pineapple up around his nether regions, had a tuft of unruly ginger hair that had never encountered a comb since birth. This gave him the appearance of someone that looked as though they had just stuck their finger into a live power point. He was an old tanker man and a heavy smoker which meant, like the rest of the smokers onboard, that he was only allowed to smoke in his cabin or messroom and never for'ard of the funnel if on deck.

Being a nicotine addict, he couldn't smoke on the open decks so he indulged himself in a disgusting habit when turning-to on deck after each "smoko." He would stub-out his cigarette, take off the filter and lay the butt-end between his bottom lip and lower teeth and suck on the tobacco juices before spitting the soggy mess out later as he went about the ship. When he spoke to you with this revolting cocktail of tobacco juices and cigarette paper in his mouth, it was always safer to stand well back. To stand too close would mean being splattered with instant freckles from the bits of tobacco and debris that flicked out all over your face and in all directions!

Our first port of call on the Australian coast was Geelong where we discharged a part cargo before proceeding to Newcastle, Portland, Cairns, Gladstone and Townsville. Whilst going up the East coast on one of our trips towards the Great Barrier Reef on our way to Townsville, we encountered quite an unusual event. Watch keeping on this ship comprised of just two AB's and a Deck Boy/ Ordinary Seaman, with one on the wheel, the other on lookout and one on standby, relieving the other two. That night I was on the twelve to four watch and doing my two hour trick on the wheel with one of the AB's on lookout on the fo'c'sle. Around 0100 hours with about a force five blowing, we were pitching into a moderate sea with water gushing up through the hawespipes and a bit of spray breaking over the fo'c'sle head. It doesn't take much on a loaded tanker for this to happen and the Lookout quite rightly phoned the bridge to ask if he could continue his lookout duties up on the "monkey island" above the wheelhouse.

This is normal procedure and after the officer of the watch allowed him to do so, we could just barely see his shape in the darkness through the wheelhouse windows as he made his way aft along the flying bridge. At that time when he was about half way along, the bow rose up almost as though the ship started to climb a steep hill and rose ever higher until suddenly, she plunged as from a great height, burying her fo'c'sle head into huge solid mass of water. The fore part of the ship went completely under as a solid wall of water smashed against the fore part of the bridge and wheelhouse windows. The stern had risen so high that her single screw was thrashing around in mid air causing massive vibration throughout the vessel. Many of the crew aft had been thrown out of their bunks or awakened by the din as the crashing and banging could be heard amidships.

The skipper arrived on the bridge in his underpants as if from nowhere and immediately looked into the compass and then going onto the wing of the bridge, asked the 2nd Mate if the Lookout Man had still been on the fo'c'sle head. It had indeed been the Lookout Man's lucky day by just a matter of seconds! We learned later that when he felt her bow going up, he didn't hang around and made a dash for it.

Just as quickly as it had happened, the sea settled down again and it was considered a freak wave and just one of those unexpected occurrences at sea. No one onboard had ever experienced anything quite like it and once again a freakish event like that must answer some of the questions as to why many vessels throughout history had disappeared without trace.

We returned to Singapore after no less than three crew had jumped ship at various ports around the Australian coast and in their place we had signed on DBS seamen. (Distressed British Seamen) These were men that had been put ashore at some time or other from British ships mainly due to medical or other problems and were now fit enough to work their passages back to the UK. They had been told that we would be returning to the UK shortly but it looks as though "Shanghai Jack" must have had an accomplice working for him in Australia as well as we'd heard no such thing!

On arrival in Singapore once again, our orders were to do another run around the Australian coast and then back again for another full load of various grades of spirits. We had been away for over a year now and the men were getting a bit fed up with just about everything. Several of the ships officers were granted leave to go home and Hughie the Chief Steward was sent packing. This had been a long time coming due to his inability to cater for the crew properly and came to a head on this particular trip with the food running out a day before arriving in Singapore. There had been many complaints from everyone about the same unappetising fodder and we were all glad to see him go! All of our dry stores were full of weevils and we ate them with everything as a matter of course as to go without, hunger would have been a bigger problem than it already was.

On our next run down under, I can remember quite clearly another incident whilst on lookout that broke the monotony during the watch. During the night on lookout it's generally quiet and lonely up on the fo'c'sle of a tanker and

you get used to the gentle “swish” of water breaking away from the bow and at times, dolphins playing games in the wash of the bow wave. Sometimes when racing towards the ship’s bow, the phosphorous would light up their trails and they would look like torpedoes heading towards the ship.. Lookouts during the war must have had some frightening moments when these animals decided to play games around their ships.

On this particular night all was quiet when suddenly there was a loud gush of air and water as a huge tail rose up out of the sea coming up level with the fo’c’sle head , before crashing back into the water. This almost caused an evacuation of the bowels until I realised that we had struck a whale and immediately reported the incident to the officer of the watch.

Back in Singapore, a life threatening incident that involved all hands and just about everyone else in the surrounding area was about to take place as we were loading several grades of spirits. A tanker that is loading and has partially filled tanks with high flash point liquids develops a high gas presence and is considered to be at it’s most dangerous during the loading process. We were in that kind of volatile situation when just ahead of us, a large vessel was coming in to berth immediately astern of us and had just developed complete power failure on her approach.

The only emergency procedure at a time like this was to drop both anchors as tugs were not in attendance for these berths as they were easily accessible from the harbour. As the ship approached with quite a bit of way on her, both anchors were immediately dropped but it was soon becoming clear that the action taken would have little effect.

It was looking as though she was going to collide with our starboard side if her anchors didn’t hold and all hands raced around looking for fenders. This was futile of course because apart from there being no time act, ships of this size need enormous fenders that would have to be hoisted over the side with the use of a derrick or a purchase of some sort. Our Pumpman realising the danger immediately got us to shut down as many valves as possible and dived below to shut off other valves in the pump room as the 2nd Mate got on to the emergency phone to stop all pumping from ashore. The anchors had not gained the necessary purchase to take the way off of her and within about a half minute or

so, she struck us on the starboard side just forward of the bridge. The vessel was a tanker of about 20,000 tons and luckily as we heard later, in ballast. On impact, she heeled over considerably making a thunderous roar as she continued to drag anchors, scraping and grinding along our ship side buckling plates, popping rivets, causing paintwork, rust and sparks to fly everywhere. With huge clouds of rust, dust and smoke billowing up between both vessels, the smell of friction was everywhere as the ship finally came to rest further on up the quay after ripping a few wooden piles out of the dockside on the way. The strong smell of gasses wafting about our decks along with those extremely volatile liquids sloshing around in our tanks had turned our ship into a massive bomb, ready to explode. One theory later was that the mixture at the time of colliding was too rich to ignite but looking back, I wouldn't want to bet on it ! Just about everyone that day realised how lucky we all were, especially with the other ship being gas free and not being so highly charged as us.

As "Dead legs" put it after the collision, " We could have all been on our way to the bloody moon by now!"

Shortly after the collision, marine surveyors descended on the ship and with our master, took a launch to inspect the forward starboard side for damage along the water line. Apart from a fleet of buckled plates, sheered off rivets and the lack of paintwork, we were lucky enough to remain sound as far as springing any leaks were concerned. It was decided that our cargo would have to be pumped ashore again and the ship gas freed, ballasted and then set sail for Hong Kong and dry docked immediately.

On arrival at the anchorage in Hong Kong harbour, we were to learn that after 16 months they were finally going to let us fly home. After dry docking, the *Niso* would be fully crewed up with a Chinese crew and remain in the Far East.

For most of the crew, flying was a new experience, flying at 17 000 feet by BOAC on an Argonaut refuelling just about everywhere and arriving at London's Heathrow two and a half days later !

The above is an extended adaptation from David Haisman's book, Raised On The Titanic © David Haisman 2003