

# 68 YEARS AROUND THE WORLD



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Telegrams/Telepost: 1/10/2000-2004  
Telegrams/Telepost: 1/10/2005-2009  
Telegrams/Telepost: 1/10/2010-2014  
Telegrams/Telepost: 1/10/2015-2019  
Telegrams/Telepost: 1/10/2020-2024

GORDON'S BAY.  
OFFICE OF THE  
GORDONSBAL  
SAFETY OFFICER.  
SA

SOUTH AFRICAN NAUTICAL COLLEGE  
SUID-AFRIKAANSE SEEMANNSKOLE  
"GENERAL BOTHA"  
"GENERAAL BOTHA"

In reply please quote No. 2248.  
in a separate self-addr.

BY PERMISSION OF THE SECRETARY FOR TRANSPORT  
THE HOLDER OF THIS CERTIFICATE IS ALLOWED  
SIX MONTHS REMISSION OF SEA SERVICE TOWARDS  
HIS EXAMINATION FOR JUNIOR NAVIGATING OFFICER.

HAS COMPLETED ONE YEAR PRE-SEA TRAINING.

NAVIGATION.	SEAMANSHIP.
91%	75%

AWARDED TO: *On Jan. 1910*

Conduct *Very Good.*  
Ability *Very Good.*

*[Signature]* Master Mariner,  
Vice-Principal.  
*[Signature]* Commander,  
S.A. Navy,  
Natal College



Volume II  
FIFTEEN YEARS IN THE MARINE INDUSTRY  
By Otto Peetoom

I dedicate this manuscript to the fond memory of my parents  
Jan and Miep Peetoom  
My father taught me that no job is worth doing unless it is done well and  
to the best of my ability

My mother instilled, patience, determination and above all to be  
Meticulous and precise in everything I do

I would not be the person I am today if it wasn't for their guidance in  
my upbringing and I came to understand that one should never consider  
oneself better than others as humility is a virtue

Initially it was to be one book, but it has grown in size to a point where  
I decided to split it into three volumes

**Volume I** - Includes my early years to 1963, my Dutch connections,  
Family Friends, Uncles, Aunts and cousins plus  
My Sister's Family

**Volume II** - This volume includes my Fifteen Years in the Marine Industry  
from 1964 to 1978

**Volume III** - Includes my Travels with my wife under the title  
1982 - 2013 Around the World with my Best Friend

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*68 Years Around The World*

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*Pre - Sea Cadet Otto Peetoom - Taken 6 April 1964*

**FIFTEEN YEARS  
IN THE  
MARINE INDUSTRY**

Volume II  
**1964 - 1978**

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*By Otto Peetoom*

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# Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	The Plain Truth.....	1
	The Six Stages to any Project.....	1
<b>Chapter I</b>	<b>The General Botha Nautical College.....</b>	<b>2</b>
	1964 A Year at Sea School in Gordons Bay.....	2
	Reflections on the General Botha in Gordon's Bay - The 1964 General Botha Fallout.....	3
	The 1994 Thirty Year Reunion - The General Botha Old Boy's Association (G.B.O.B.A.).....	6
	Photographs of the March 1994 Thirty year reunion.....	7
	1997 - The 75th Anniversary of the General Botha.....	8
<b>Chapter II</b>	1965 - 1967 A Cadet with Safmarine - Cadets on Cargo Watch during the 1960's.....	9
	Farewell Glasgow and a Bull with a sore head - A Tragedy in Durban.....	10
	The last voyages on the SA Merchant.....	10
	On Leave and a New Ship - A Very Impressive Deck Cargo.....	11
	To America and back to Europe.....	12
	Illustrations - 1966 The SA van der Stel loading Buccaneers at Hull.....	12
	Illustrations - SA van der Stel, a Mini salvage & a Heavy lift at Newcastle.....	13
	Last Voyages as a Cadet - 1967 Second Mate's Certificate.....	14
	What was expected from a Navigation Deck Office.....	14
	My Nautical Library - Navigating - Other Duties.....	15
	First Job as a certified Second mate.....	16
	1968 Third mate on the SA Victory - Transatlantic and getting hitched.....	16
	1969 On an Oil drum for seven month.....	17
	Liverpool College back to sea and my First Mates saga.....	18
<b>Chapter III</b>	<b>Any Ship Will Do 1971 - 1974.....</b>	<b>19</b>
	1971 Farewell Safmarine, quit smoking - Rock dodging and new horizons.....	19
	1971 - 72 Initial years in the British Merchant Navy.....	19
	The decline in conventional shipping in the early 1970's.....	20
	1972 A deep sea trip with Blue Star Line.....	20
	Relieving and a 360° Degree Round Turn.....	21
	An end of year decision 1973 - End of Rock dodging and back deep sea.....	22
	To New Zealand and back on the Port New Plymouth.....	23

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	A Ro-Ro Containership across the North Atlantic.....	24
	Study leave and deep freeze Canada.....	25
	1974 England to South Africa Via Brazil, Mauritius, Singapore and Australia.....	26
	The final leg of the journey to South Africa and college.....	27
	Time with the family & back to England finding a job.....	27
<b>Chapter IV</b>	<b>1974 - 75 With Borneo Straits Offshore.....</b>	<b>28</b>
	Java - The ARCO field in Indonesia - 1975 Working in Borneo.....	28
	A Second trip to Borneo - Singapore Company head quarters.....	30
	A change of name - Dumping explosives at sea from the Straits Gold.....	30
	Private Enterprise - Combating boredom with Canasta - My first trip to Burma.....	31
	My last trip to the East - Japan, Singapore and Burma.....	31
	Burma Charter - A Green flash at sunset - Arrival Rangoon and away to the anchor location.....	32
	How to lay an anchor in 20 minutes instead of 6 hours.....	32
	Personalities in the Company.....	33
	A Summary of my Activities during 1974 - 75 - Reflections on Offshore supply work.....	34
	Communicating American Style - 1976 A Year with Swire Northern Offshore.....	34
<b>Chapter V</b>	<b>The Last Two Years 1977 - 78.....</b>	<b>36</b>
	1977 An Acid Tanker, the North Sea and the Bahamas - The Fresh water crises in Nassau.....	36
	Our own Ferry Service – Hitting the bottom in the Andros Channel and the consequences.....	37
	Back to Nassau and to Drydock in Fort Lauderdale.....	37
	1978 My last year in the Marine Industry - American Farmers with their own personal oilfield.....	38
	The Farmer at a Cadiz Shipyard - Chief Engineer – Svein Foss.....	39
	Spellacy the whirlwind Offshore Consultant - A Year’s Victuals and Steak Olè.....	40
	Away from Cadiz to Ghana with a Scouse Crew and a \$60 dollar can of beer.....	40
	Illustrations 1978 On the Farmer in Ghana.....	41
	My last months on the Farmer - Postscript - Prospects of becoming a Captain.....	42
	My thoughts on Self Employment - A change of direction - How it came about.....	42
<b>Appendix 1</b>	Shipping Companies and Employers.....	43
<b>Appendix 2</b>	1966 to 1978 Flights during my Seagoing days.....	44
<b>Appendix 3</b>	Musandam Island and the “Hole in the Wall”.....	46
	Photos of the Borneo Gold and Port Auckland.....	47

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# Introduction

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My ambition to go to sea began when I was quite young and because my father had been a marine engineer he advised:

*It was all very well working below decks in a hot and sweaty engine room while you are young, but it was likely to lose its appeal as one grew older.*

He suggested I ought to become a deck officer and not a marine engineer.

I followed his advice and in 1963 I completed my high school education in Afrikaans at *Helpmekeer Boys High* in Johannesburg. After leaving I had to switch my tuition to English and with an Oxford dictionary I developed a routine to check the spelling or meaning of words I was unsure of. I never gave up that habit and later found that my grasp of the English language became much better than most people whose sole language was English - to this day I am still tri-lingual.



*20 November 1975 - The Straits Gold tied up to a Jack Up Rig in Burma - the White Dragon 4*

Starting with a year of pre sea training at a Nautical College, what follows is an account of my fifteen years in the Marine Industry. During that time I worked for fifteen shipping companies, on approximately forty five ships, called at 750 ports and covered half a million miles at sea. I have tried to make the following pages informative, added some humour and none of it is fictional.

By nature I am meticulous and in a notebook I recorded every ship, each port, dates of arrival and departure plus distances between destinations. Starting in 1968 I also kept a diary - unfortunately the one for 1978 cannot be found.

I am also fortunate in that I have a very good memory and by going through the diaries, it has sparked my recall of several incidents or events.

There may still be individuals who have no idea what people on ships do and may be tempted to ask a question such as:  
*Who steers the ship when the Captain goes to bed?*

To lay such a naive question to rest, I have collated some informative information to give some insight as to what we did.

## THE PLAIN TRUTH

I commence this volume with a few maritime ditties which some of you may find amusing.

### A Captain

Is said to be a man who knows a great deal about very little, and who goes along knowing more and about less and less... until finally he knows practically everything about nothing.

### An Engineer

On the other hand is a man who knows very little about a great deal & keeps knowing less and less about more and... until he knows practically nothing about everything.

### Surveyors

Start out knowing everything about everything... but end up knowing nothing about anything due to their association with Captains and Engineers.

Another amusing ditty I cut out of a nautical magazine a long time ago reads:

### The Six Stages to any Project

1. Enthusiasm
2. Disillusionment
3. Panic
4. Hunt for the guilty
5. Punishment of the innocent
6. Reward for those who had nothing to do with it

There is a lot of truth in the *Six Stages* - In the offshore industry in particular under an American system, with every major mishap, someone was fired and it was usually not the person responsible, but a scapegoat.

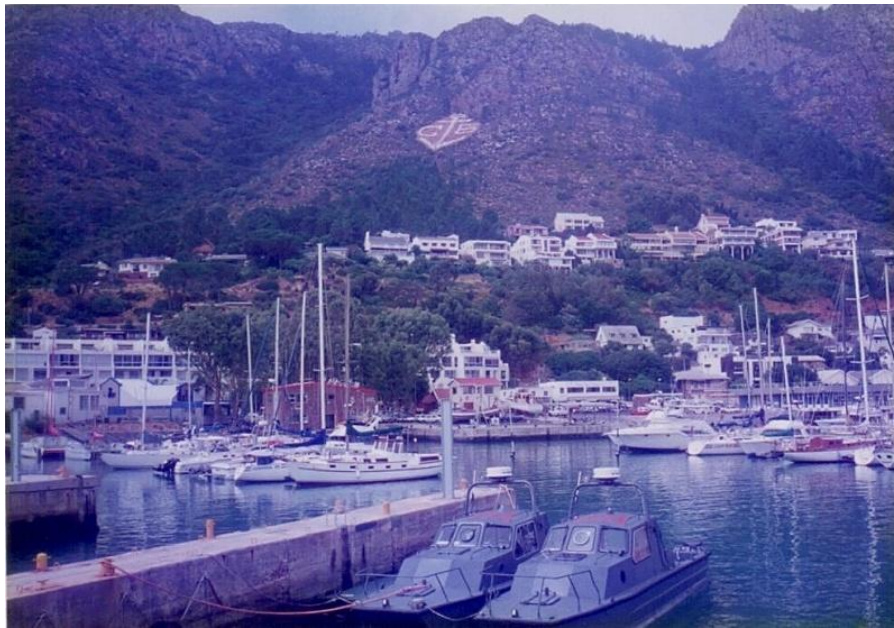
### This ditty does not require an explanation

*A Collision at Sea can spoil your whole day!*



My original *General Botha* cap badge issued in January 1964

# The General Botha Nautical College



Picture taken during 1997 at the 75<sup>th</sup> GBOBA Anniversary of the General Botha in Gordons Bay - Looking across the harbour at the Anchor with its letters GB which denotes General Botha and not Gordons Bay!

The General Botha College was situated adjacent to the harbour in Gordons Bay, across False Bay from Simon's Town and near a seaside resort called the *Strand*. My parents received a circular letter from the college dated 14 November 1963 that informed them: *Your son has been accepted for admission to the SA Nautical College "General Botha" subject to his passing the Ministry of Transport Eyesight Test.* The eyesight test was not an issue for me as I had taken it in Durban earlier during 1963.

The letter continued - *He will be required to report here on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1964...In view of the probable difficulty in regard to rail accommodation it would be advisable to book his seat immediately to ensure his arrival here by the above date. A rail concession certificate is attached to enable you to secure reduced fare for him. A return ticket should be taken out to Strand Station, from whence our own transport will convey him to the College... An Officer of the College will meet all main line trains at Cape Town on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1964... You should advise your son to keep a look-out for this officer, who will be in uniform. Your son should come down with the clothes he stands up in only. He will take his civilian clothes home with him on the first leave.*

## 1964 General Botha - Class of twenty four

### Cadet No

2235 Bain Gordon  
2236 †Baxter JD  
2237 †Beamish Rory  
2239 Collins Geof  
2240 Gates Mitch  
2241 Gibson Clive  
2242 Hey Ian  
2243 †Hobel-Nielson Arne

### Cadet No

2244 Judge Andrew  
2245 Morgan Glyn  
2246 Nelson Mike  
2247 O'Hare Peter  
2248 Peetoom Otto  
2249 Pistor Dieter (Dap)  
2250 Preiss Brian  
2251 Rice Butch

### † = Deceased

### Cadet No

2252 Schaap Jan  
2253 Stacey Peter  
2254 Swart Piet (Blackie)  
2255 †Van der Meer Tony  
2256 Viljoen Al  
2257 †Watchem Tony  
2258 Winterbach Richard  
2259 Zandee Pim

Thirteen other clauses follow and No 3. Fees: R240 for 1964 must be remitted quarterly in advance (£120 for the year).

The first term commenced on Monday 27 January 1964, Easter holidays 26 March to 6 April and half term leave was from 19 June to 12 July. There was short break from 30 September to 4 October, the course ended on 4 December and we were to leave the College on Monday 7 December.

## 1964 A Year at Sea School in Gordons Bay

In 1964 I went to Nautical college and was determined to make a career in the Merchant Navy. There were twenty four of us; twenty two went to sea to serve their time as Cadets.

At the outset many of them were not entirely sure whether they were doing the right thing and the result of the foregoing meant a high fallout rate.

My train journey to the Cape started in Johannesburg and at a major rail junction in the De Aar other carriages from different starting points were joined up for the last lap to Cape Town. Gordon Bain from Pietermaritzburg joined there and he was the first fellow cadet of the *Year of 1964* that I met.

The accommodation block had four dormitories on two floors, on the ground floor, in the middle there was a boiler room and two bathrooms at each end known as *The Heads*. On the first floor our twenty four cadets shared a dormitory known as *Quarter Deck Division*, divided into four Watches of six and we slept in bunk beds one above another. The other three dormitories housed Navy conscripts who were being trained for Officer selection and by tradition all the conscripts were known to us as *The Peasants*.

The General Botha cadets had separate classes and our own lecturers. Other than that we had to observe Naval discipline that included musters, marches, spit and polish and you were not allowed to walk anywhere as all movement was by jogging *On the Double* only.

The college was referred to as *The Ship* and at the harbour there were several boat sheds with an array of equipment including small craft that included dinghies, whalers and cutters.

Note there is not a Cadet No 2238 - Was that number perhaps assigned to an individual who cancelled his application?

### 1964 A Year at Sea School in Gordons Bay - continued

We were all assigned daily cleaning stations and each Saturday there was *Captain's Inspection*. On several occasions we were told our dormitory had not been cleaned properly and we were given half an hour to smarten it up for a second inspection.

We soon tumbled to the fact that the foregoing was a mere charade and after awhile we would not touch anything during our so called *extra-time* and on each second inspection we were informed that *the place looked much better!*

Sunday's was church parade and small parties of cadets had to march into the town to attend whichever church they belonged to. After church the local families, hopefully with girls of our age, invited the cadets for tea and cookies.

In order to do the rounds of these groups I often joined different church parades and experienced how God may be approached from other points of view.

At least once a month we could leave the College from Friday to Sunday afternoon provided we had somewhere to stay.

To this end the parents of the cadets who lived in or around Cape Town invited others to stay at their homes and I was fortunate to stay with Rory Beamish at his parent's house in Fish Hoek.

Many new subjects were introduced such as seamanship, knots and splices, navigation, astronomy, signals, ship construction, ship stability, safety at sea, rule of the road, first aid and managing the small craft as mentioned on the previous page.

I have a copy of my mid-year results dated 24 June 1964 which were: *Mathematics ... 83%, Physics ... 45%, Navigation ... 76% Seamanship ... 77% and Signals ... 97%*.

*Remarks were: Has good leadership qualities. Always gives his best and his results generally good. Has the ability and should successfully complete the course.*

At the Easter break three of us got a lift with our Signal's Instructor Mr Ellis. He dropped me and Mitch Gates in Sedgfield and Gordon Bain continued to Durban.

Mitch Gates came from Zambia and he joined me, along with my parents and my sister, during the holiday at Sedgfield - situated between Knysna and George.

During our June/July break we all went home by train and by coincidence the parent of Cadet Swart had moved to where I lived in Modderfontein. Thus Piet, nick named *Blackie* and I spent a great deal of time together and often went to the social club in the afternoon to play snooker.

I also recall being taken into Johannesburg to pay a visit to Tony Watchem, his parents were quite affluent and Tony had arrived at the College in January, complete with his bag of golf clubs. Tony was a jovial outgoing person who seemed to have the ability to get on with everybody.

We also made contact with Richard Winterbach and met his parents as well. At the outset Richard was quiet and reserved, but as the year progressed he came out of his shell and proved to be quite a comedian.

Our five day break from 30 September to 4 October was too short for most of us to go home and courtesy of our signals instructor Mr Ellis we went camping at Cape Hangklip some 30kms from Gordons Bay. I can't remember how many of us went, but we had a great deal of fun.

After our final exams there was prize giving and our Sailing Dinner. I received two awards, a book *Metrology for Seamen* for my achievement in Mathematics and a set of drawing instruments being one of two Navigation prizes.

Peter Stacey from Durban was the Senior Cadet Captain for 1964 and received a Gold Medal for best Cadet of the year.

The year was invaluable to us all and the excellent tuition we received provided a solid basis to go to sea and gradually turned the theory into practice.

We had arrived as boisterous school boys and left as proud young men. We were taught discipline, cleanliness, hygiene, fitness, teamwork and self respect. Qualities that are often absent from recent generations.

### Reflections on the General Botha in Gordon's Bay

Established in 1922, it was for many years a two year course whereby the students were expected to complete their last two years of schooling plus their pre-sea training. In later years it was found that most boys passed the pre-sea part, but not their schooling.

Starting in 1963, the *General Botha* underwent a change of strategy whereby one had to complete high school before commencing pre-sea training. Thus the entire pre-sea training section became a one year course with places for thirty students per annum. During 1964 I was part of the intake of the second one year syllabus.

South Africa is not a Seafaring Nation thus the thirty available places were under subscribed and several boys were accepted even though they had not passed their final year at high school.

As one may imagine once we went to sea we received a lot of flak from our superiors because they had all done a two year course.

They called us the *One Year Wonders* - *they had it so much harder and we shouldn't even be allowed to call ourselves Old Boys, after all we were only a bunch of nancies who would never have been able to endure what they had experienced.*

I was never in a popularity parade and always stood my ground. Even when I was young, I have always been a person who did not allow anyone to belittle me or tolerate being trodden on, thus my reply to them was:

*Let's face it took you two years to learn what we did in one!*

### The 1964 General Botha Fallout

The two cadets that did not go to sea were Rice and Collins and it was thirty years on before I saw them again.

**Butch Rice** hailed from nearby Strand, wore glasses and had somehow secured a place at the *General Botha* for a *gap year*. Because of his eyesight he could not go to sea. Butch is a brilliant mathematician; he was awarded the premier prize for the subject and went to University after 1964. Butch was at the 1994 reunion and the OBA Christmas lunch in 2003.

**Geof Collins** was supposed to go to Blue Star Line, but he had a change of heart and found a job ashore. I encountered Geof in 1994, 1997, at the 2003 Christmas lunch and again in Port Elizabeth in 2012.

**Jan Schaap** is the only person on the list who I never saw again, at some point in time he lived in Port Elizabeth and he is now somewhere near Cape Town.



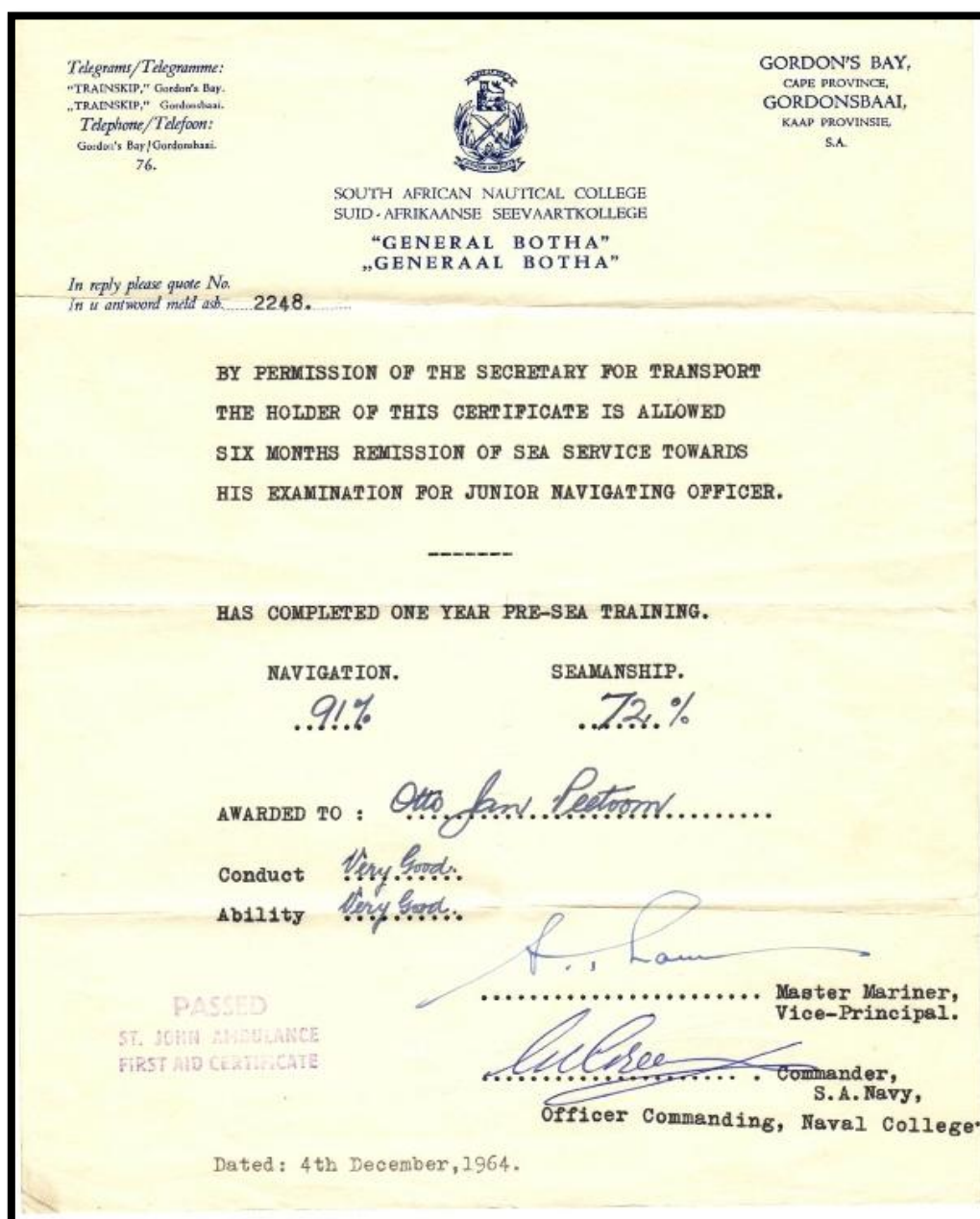
**The 1964 General Botha Fallout** - continued

**Clive Gibson** was nick named *Dogfight Gibson* and he had the sort of stature whereby he would still look scruffy in a Savile Street suit. Clive had a tremendous sense of humour, nothing ever fazed him and took everything in his stride. He initially joined Clan line and became a Tugboat Captain. In 1970 he was at the Granger Bay College in Cape Town when I attended it for my First Mates and I saw him again at the 1994 Reunion.

**Ian Hey** was nick named *Jonah* and during 1964 whenever he snapped to attention he always introduced himself as I.A. Hey Cadet 2242. Ian also joined Clan Line and after we left college, I saw him once onboard ship on the South African coast and completely lost touch. Ian later immigrated to New Zealand.

**Arne Hobel-Nielsen** came from Durban and was from Norwegian stock, the last time I saw him he was an AB on a ship belonging to Swedish Atlantic Line. I believe he fell in love with a female radio officer and ended up in Scandinavia. None of us ever saw him again and he has since passed away.

**Peter O'Hare** was nicknamed *The Bushpig* and went to Blue Star and after completing his seetime, married Jenny an Australian and settled in Sydney. He came ashore and worked in the motorcar industry. In December 1993 I telephoned him from Perth and we met in Johannesburg airport in March 1994 on our way to the 1994 reunion. After reacquainting, I have spent time with him and Jenny on several occasions in Australia. Peter is an active member of the Australian Branch of the G.B.O.B.A.



4 December 1964

My end of year certificate after successfully completing my pre-sea training and confirmation of six months remission of Sea service

Endorsed lower left in violet - PASSED ST. JOHN AMBULANCE FIRST AID CERTIFICATE

**The 1964 General Botha Fallout** - continued

Those of us who had South African passports had no choice as to which shipping company we would be employed by and the vast majority were absorbed by *Safmarine*.

**Brian Preiss** hailed from Port Elizabeth and after about one year, was the first cadet who gave up the sea. He too went to the motorcar Industry and I have bumped into Brian on a number of occasions. He was at the 1994 reunion, I visited his home in Pretoria and Brian returned to Port Elizabeth after retiring - I had dinner with him in October 2012.

**Mitch Gates** came from Zambia, left *Safmarine* and worked for Maersk line; I bumped into him at Barclays Bank in Liverpool on 18 November 1968 and encountered him again at the Nautical college in Liverpool. Mitch and Cathy, the latter a girl from Wigan, came for a visit to my flat in New Brighton on Friday 1 August 1969.

They married on 4 July 1970 and immigrated to New Zealand where he later became a Tugboat Captain.



*April 1964 - On Holiday at Sedgefield during Easter leave  
Left to right my sister Ina, Otto and Mitch Gates*

We lost contact and it took me years to find him again; I visited New Zealand on several occasions and often looked in numerous telephone books, but to no avail. Then in January 1996 during a stay in Auckland it was suggested I contact the New Zealand Seaman's Union and tracked Mr Gates down onboard his tug in New Plymouth.

On 20 October 2000 we enjoyed a mini reunion in Port Elizabeth and had a barbecue at Gordon Bain's place with Mitch, Gordon, Blackie Swart and myself plus our respective wives present.

**Gordon Bain** After serving his time he came ashore, later moved to Port Elizabeth and worked for the Municipality. We saw one another at the 1994 and 1997 reunions and on many subsequent occasions when my wife and I were in Port Elizabeth. Gordon is retired in Summer Strand, we have enjoyed many hours together and he taught me how to work on- and construct a website.

In 2013 he and his wife Lynda came to England and spent a few days with us in our village of Roos. It is ironic that Gordon was the first cadet of our year that I met and the only one who is ever likely to visit me in Roos.

**Piet Swart** - In English his surname means Black and it is usual in South Africa to call people with that name *Blackie*. I recall during 1964 in winter that he had the knack of dressing himself under the blankets before leaving his bunk.

We reacquainted during 1994 and subsequently spent time with him and his wife while he was still a Harbour Pilot in Port Elizabeth. As a senior Pilot he became fed up with the politics in his job and went back to sea working on a diamond dredger off the coast of Namibia. I have not seen him since he relocated to Cape Town.



*After the 75<sup>th</sup> reunion we met up with Blackie and Gordon in Port Elizabeth. The picture above, at right - Gordon doing a Braai and on the left Blackie offering a toast.*

**JD Baxter** and **Dap Pistor** I last saw both of them in Cape Town on 2 July 1968. I never saw either of them again.

**Baxter** came from East London, was long and lanky and could manage to land himself on his top bunk with a backward flip. We nicknamed him *Kangaroo*.

He was impatient and volatile and if he did something wrong he would punch the object of his frustration. The foregoing would hurt his hand which made him even more cross with himself and he would be at a loss what to do next.

I believe he came ashore and went into Stevedoring, it is thought that he developed a serious drink problem which resulted in an early demise.

**The 1964 General Botha Fallout** - continued

**Andrew Judge** was from Cape Town; we sailed together as cadets on the *South African Merchant* for more than a year and shared a cabin. Andrew later worked with the offshore oil facility at the Bluff near Durban. During 1970 Andrew was at Granger Bay when I was there and I last saw him at the 1994 reunion. After he retired he moved to New Zealand.

**Rory Beamish** was an only child and lived in Fish Hoek; I know nothing of his sea career and last saw him at the 1994 reunion. He operated a business called *Beamish Buggies* which provided *Beetle Bits* for VW Beetles. He passed away on 31 August 2011

**Mike Nelson**, hailed from Kimberley, we met in Durban when he as on the *SA Statesman* on 17 March 1968 and during 1970 I encountered him on 21 June in Walvis Bay on the *Zwartland* and then in Durban on 20 September. Mike was by then ashore and was cleaning tanks on ships and by 1994 he was in the Knysna timber trade.

Mike appears to have put his head in the sand and no longer showed any interest in the class of 64, a great shame as he was a real character who one could not help but like.

**Peter Stacey** came from Durban and remained there, he was probably the second best academic after Butch Rice. At college when Peter jogged he appeared to do so on his toes and was promptly nicknamed *Twinkle Toes*.

After Safmarine he later moved to a small coaster belonging to Durban Lines and I saw him on 16 September 1970 in Beira, he was Master and there were two other Engineers on that ship I knew well. There was Hamish Matheson who I had sailed with on the *SA Victory* and Mike Ross I sailed with twice on the *SA Merchant* and the *Koberg*. Later Peter came ashore.

**Tony van der Meer**, *A Cadet and his Socks* - During 1964 he was proud of the fact that he had never washed his own socks for the full year at college. This was thanks to the Navy conscripts at Gordons Bay. Each day Tony would take down a pair of socks off the washing line that belonged to one of *The Peasants* and would hang his dirty pair in their place.

In late 1967 Tony did his Second Mate's in Liverpool and had a bedsit on Croxteth road during the time I was there. He married Anne, a Liverpool nurse, worked as a fisherman out of St Helena and later sailed on South African coasters.

On 5 March 1970 I saw Tony on a coaster in Port Elizabeth and that same year, on 25 September I paid a visit to him and Anne in Durban. Later on he operated a stone quarry in Swaziland. Tony was the first of our year to lose his life and was crushed to death when a heavy piece of machinery fell on him.

**Tony Watchem** - As far as I am aware he did not go to sea for long and became involved in Real estate in Johannesburg. After I passed my Masters in 1974 I phoned him and he made a point to come and visit me that same afternoon.

Then in 1989, while I was in South Africa I contacted him again, we went out for lunch and both forgot to go home. We reminisced about the year of 64 and probably had a beer for every week we were there. In early 1990 my wife Gill and I had dinner at his place. Tony lived on a small holding somewhere north of Johannesburg. I saw him for the last time at the 1994 reunion, he was a very heavy smoker by then and he actually looked tired. Sadly he is no longer with us.

The remaining cadets I had little contact with, **Glyn Morgan**, **Richard Winterbach** and **Pim Zandee** I did not see again until the 1994 reunion. The last cadet on my list is **Al Viljoen** and I finally saw him after 39 years at a 2003 O.B.A. Xmas Lunch.

By the time I was doing my Masters' in 1974 I was the only remaining Foreign Going Officer out of our year.

I have the general impression that several Cadets, after completing their seatime, came ashore to pursue non related marine jobs. They either failed their Second Mate's certificate or simply did not bother with it.

Others changed from Foreign going to the coastal trade. Those who completed a Masters certificate invariably went ashore as tug boat captains or harbour pilots. Others performed marine tasks such as stevedoring, surveying, claims or insurance. In later years at least three individuals returned to sea and remained there until their pensions brought them ashore.

**The General Botha Old Boys Association (G.B.O.B.A.)**

When we left the *General Botha* at the end of 1964, all of us joined the Old Boys Association. At the time the reason for the foregoing was really to get a G.B.O.B.A. badge that one displayed on the front pocket of a blazer. I still have my original badge. I don't believe that many of us really bothered with the Association.

Over the years my life changed quite dramatically; in October 1968 I got married at the age of twenty two and became domiciled in England.

I joined the British Merchant Navy in 1971 and moved to the Offshore Oil Industry in 1974. In 1979 I became a Professional Stamp Dealer, never gave the G.B.O.B.A. another thought and lost all contact with the boys of 1964.

One weekend during 1993 I was sat in my office, minding my own business, when the telephone rang. It was Tony Nicholas, the Chairman of the G.B.O.B.A., who asked would I like to rejoin the Association and did I know that *Blackie Swart* of our year was organizing a thirty year re-union in 1994?

The above led to Gill and I attending the 1994 re-union at Gordons Bay with a turnout of fifteen of us.

**The 1994 Thirty Year Reunion**



*30<sup>th</sup> Reunion*

*Foreground  
Dogfight  
Gibson*

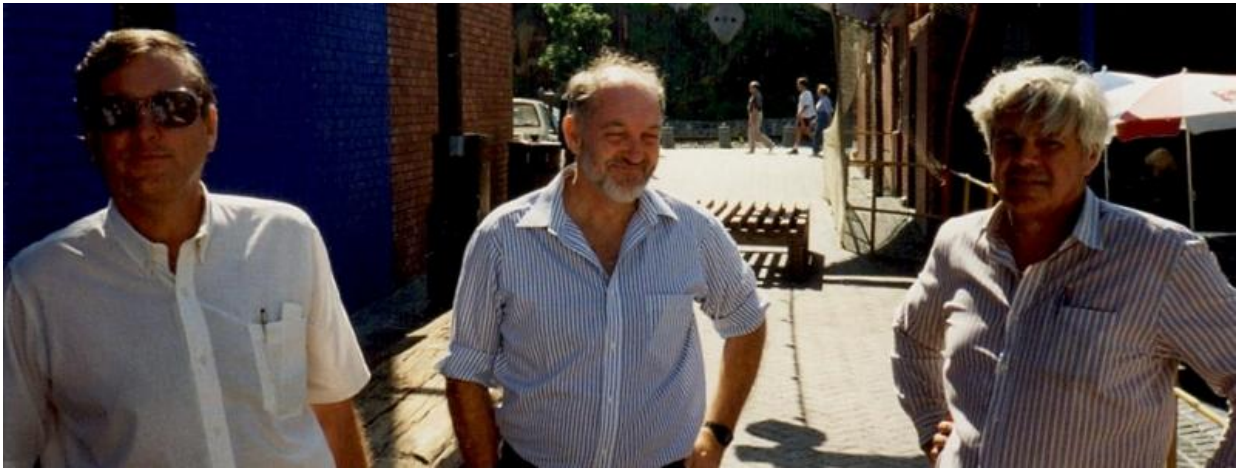
*Far left Bushpig  
O'Hare*

*Far right  
Morgan & his  
wife plus  
Butch Rice*

This reunion brought several faces along that I had not seen for a very long time. They included Gordon Bain, Rory Beamish, Geoff Collins, Clive Gibson, Andy Judge, Glyn Morgan, Peter O'Hare, Brian Preiss, Butch Rice, Peter Stacey, Piet Swart, Tony Watchem, Richard Winterbach and Pim Zandee.



*March 1994 Thirty year reunion of the class of 1964 - Above, Lunch in the Ward Room at the General Botha*



*Left to right Gordon Bain, Glyn Morgan and Tony Watchem at the Cape Town Waterfront*



*20 March 1994  
Sunday at the  
Cenotaph on the  
Foreshore*

*The 1964  
Mafia  
Left to right*

*Brian Preiss  
Blackie Swart  
And the boy  
from Sydney  
Peter O'Hare*

**19 March 1994  
Thirty year Reunion**

**Front row left to right**

Joe Almond our  
Seamanship Instructor,  
Stacey, Swart, Beamish,  
Zandee, Morgan  
and PTI Smith.

**Middle row**

Collins, Bain and Watchem

**Back row**

Gibson, O'Hare, Peetoom,  
Winterbach, Rice and Judge

Picture taken at the  
*General Botha* in Gordons Bay  
In front of the Mess room



Gill and I arrived in Gordons Bay on 18 March and stayed at the *Van Riebeeck* Hotel, we were joined by Blackie and his wife and Peter O'Hare stayed there as well. On Saturday 19 March we gathered on the parade ground at the *General Botha*. I was intrigued to see whether I would recognise everybody.

Clive Gibson introduced himself to Gill as *Captain Fantastic* and told her he was in the *Iron and Steel* business, his wife did the ironing and he did the stealing!

What was interesting was that some of the stories that were related were not remembered by others and vice versa. I was reminded that on one occasion someone had caught an octopus and put it into my bunk. When Gill asked why I had not told her of this particular incident, the answer was that it was not in my memory - Perhaps it was one I wanted to forget!



30<sup>th</sup> Reunion Peter O'Hare, Otto and Glyn Morgan

After our reunion we repaired to the bar at the *Van Riebeeck* and on the Sunday we attended the Cenotaph on the Foreshore. Glyn Morgan invited everyone to his house in the afternoon for a braai (barbecue). While in Cape Town we visited Butch Rice at his home and that was the end of the hype.

As a result of that reunion I enjoyed contact with a few people on more than one occasion.

**1997 - The 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *General Botha***

The most marvellous re-union was the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *General Botha* in 1997 as this involved all the old boys. There were not many of the 64 intake at this event and only recall Blackie, Gordon Bain, Peter O'Hare and me attending.

It was on for a week and I reacquainted myself with many people that I had either sailed with or knew and not seen for twenty to thirty years.

There was Ian Fishley, Robin Gratjois and Rob Riley ex 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Mates on the *SA Merchant* (1965-66)

There was a day at Simon's Town as guests of the Navy that included a look at a submarine plus an explanation why the Navy built ships that sink! A trip to Gordons Bay and a lunch at the *General Botha* plus a day at the Waterfront.

Sadly, since then, several of them have moved onto the big Shipping Pool in the sky.

I don't believe the G.B.O.B.A. can ever replicate that marvellous week during 1997, the highlight of which was a dinner for eighty people in the Castle in Cape Town, laid out on one long table.

I remember sitting opposite Captain Buchholz, a retired Safmarine's cargo Superintendent, who was consuming bottles of beer and I insisted on buying him a drink. I filled an empty bottle with water and replaced the top.

When he took his first sip I got a look that could kill - he was a tremendous character.

In his day many feared him; he was just another man whose bark was worse than his bite! I liked and respected him.

## Six Years with Safmarine 1965 - 1970

### 1965 - 1967 A Cadet with Safmarine



1965 - 1970 My Safmarine Cap badge

I was employed by a Cape Town based shipping company called Safmarine which started in 1947 operating a general cargo service to South Africa. When I joined in 1965 their operations were to the east coast of the United States, the United Kingdom and the Continent, later on it included the Mediterranean and South America. Soon it also included refrigerated ships that exported South African fruit.

Their general cargo fleet consisted of second hand ships that limped across the ocean at around 14 knots which suited everyone as it allowed sufficient time to accumulate enough money for wine, woman and song when the ship reached its destination. Discharging and loading took around six weeks and it was an era when it was fun to go to sea.

I joined my first ship the s.s. *South African Merchant* in Durban on 18 January 1965. She was a 10,000 ton general cargo ship with five hatches and a service speed of 14 knots - Built at Fairfields in Glasgow in 1955.

She was renamed the *SA Merchant* in February 1966.

As a first trip Cadet you were told that you were lower than shark shit and should you feel aggrieved, you could go and kick the ship's cat, but unfortunately we did not have one.

We often worked with the crew, but as there were three Cadets we were frequently set tasks as a team.

Of course one got the banter from our superiors, in their day they had it much harder than us and were of the opinion that, at R38 (£19) a month we were grossly overpaid.

My first trip was to the West coast of Britain and the first port was Avonmouth in the Bristol channel. I was sent up to the bow to do standby duty with the Chief officer. After awhile I was chilled to the bone and my feet felt like lumps of ice, just as I reached my lowest ebb, the Mate piped up with a cheerful voice *At least it isn't raining!* Next, Liverpool, Belfast, Glasgow and here I must relate a true story.

### Cadets on Cargo Watch during the 1960's

The Second or Third Mate would be officer of the watch and cadets were assigned to assist so that they could learn the ropes. Reality was that the officer in charge informed the cadet in which cabin he was swilling beer in case he was required. That was fine during the day, on night duty the officer became *tired* and would take a *nap* from which a herd of elephants could not rouse him. The foregoing was not too serious as the cadet's worst nightmare was loading whisky in Glasgow.

Invariably a gang of 6 to 8 Dockers worked a hold – when a pallet of whisky appeared you couldn't move for the number of Dockers present. Special cargo usually went into secure lockers in tween decks. Cadets were used as security guards to prevent pilferage and noting all damage or breakages.

On my first trip on the *Merchant* a Clown in some office had the bright idea to load cases of whisky into the deep tanks of the lower hold. Once the lids were on it would be secure, getting the cargo there was another story. Where does a lone cadet position himself in order to observe all? It doesn't really matter because when the show was over the score would be – Dockers 10, Cadet nil! – Here is how it worked:

**Plan one** – Stop pallet before it enters hatchway, whip a case under a tarpaulin on deck and send pallet into hold.



The *South African Merchant* at sea

### **Cadets on Cargo Watch** - continued

**Plan two** - Bearing in mind that cadet only has two eyes, when a pallet lands each Docker grabs a case and dashes off in a different direction.

**Plan three** - Loading into a deep tank, it depends on the position of the cadet, if he is in the tank, swing the pallet away from the opening, grab a case before lowering it into the tank.

**Plan four** - If Cadet is not in the tank, land the pallet on the edge of the opening causing the entire load to crash into the tank, pick up cases with broken content and drain whisky into empty containers.

No whisky may pass through the dock gates, so it needs to be consumed there and then. More and more Dockers fill the hatch; work on neighbouring ships is at a standstill as their workers are all on our ship having a whisky festival. More cases are dropped and breakage occurs, not on purpose, everyone is pissed. Several hours later, rope nets are lowered to discharge Dockers who lost all ability to stand or walk, let alone climb up the hatch ladders.

Having not witnessed such a spectacle before, I was shocked, appalled, horrified, upset and disgusted. Thankfully I never again had to load whisky into deep tanks. Containerisation stopped breakage and petty pilfering, nowadays they simply hijack entire containers full of whisky - modernization is wonderful!

### **Farewell Glasgow and a Bull with a sore head**

After Glasgow we loaded at Swansea and Birkenhead and then back South to the bottom of Africa. Leaving the UK, just aft of the accommodation, we had a box on deck with a magnificent young bull and I got the task to feed and muck out during the voyage - I named him Curly Wee. No one knows how he did it, but one morning there was the bull with a broken horn bleeding profusely - now what?

We needed to bandage the injury, but it is not wise to approach a wounded animal. It became a waiting game, by lunch time the Chief Officer, John Stewart, had a solution on how to anaesthetize a bull. You hit it with a hammer; problem was exactly where and how hard? Once the bull had lost a lot of blood it became unsteady on its legs and we were able to push it onto its side and dress the wound.

The bull survived its ordeal and for the rest of the voyage would give me a forlorn look with a lop sided head and a large clump of bandages wrapped around his broken horn.

### **A Tragedy in Durban**

A second trip to London Immingham and the continental ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam, Bremen, Hamburg and back to South Africa to discharge along the coast.

I believe it was during September 1965 on a Saturday afternoon at C berth, with a floating heavy lift crane alongside. In the wing of a lower hold was a large wooden crate stacked on top of other cargo. It contained a 21 ton roll mill and it took some 3/4 hours to break the crate out into the square for lifting. By the time that was achieved the senior Stevedore superintendent was present and the mill had shifted its position in the crate as part of it was visible at one side.

Once slung and lifted a few feet into the air, the crate hung at a precarious angle and after deliberation it was decided to send it up as it was.

As the load cleared the hatch, the roll mill slid out of its crate, bounced once on the tank top, struck a large rectangular machine part and unbalanced the hatch foreman who was stood on said machine part. He fell backwards and the roll mill settled across his chest. I was a few feet behind him, I looked up and then back at the man and knew that life had already left him.

Strange as it may seem, after all these years, I have tears in my eyes as I relate this long lost tragedy.

As a first hand witness I had to go to the police station to make a statement and the captain, Simon Young, advised me to only say what I had seen and not to venture any opinions.



*SA Merchant at Sea*

### **The last voyages on the SA Merchant**

On my third voyage we sailed from Walvis Bay on 14 October 1965 enroute to the east coast of the United States, we bunkered at St Vincent in the Azores and docked in Boston on 1 November 1965. As a complete coincidence my sister Ina was an au-pair with an American family and we met and had lunch in Boston.

Working practises in America ports were quite different to those in Britain. The *Longshoremen* were on piece work, thus loading or discharging was very rapid and time in port was short. We discharged at ten ports and after Boston called at New York, Port Newark, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Norfolk, Charleston, Jacksonville, Houston and New Orleans. At this point the voyage turned around and the loading began, using the ships derricks bales of cotton were swung onboard at a rate of knots. We managed a run ashore to the city's famous Pat O'Brien's music hall on Bourbon street.

Loading continued at Pensacola, Charleston and back to New York where the bulk of our cargo was taken onboard. All the *Longshoremen* were Italian and although born and bred in the USA, they lived in their own areas and did not understand or speak one word of English.

Our time on the coast covered a total of thirteen ports in five weeks. We had Christmas at sea and arrived in Cape Town on 28 December 1965. After discharging in Durban the ship went for its annual dry docking and underwent a change of name that modified it to *SA Merchant*. We loaded at the usual run of ports of Lourenco Marques, Beira, Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Walvis Bay.

In Portuguese East Africa, runs ashore were for mountains of fresh prawns washed down with Portuguese *Lagosta* wine and a kilo tin of cashew nuts was £1. Friends in England would ask me to bring a tin of nuts for them and I always bought two as I then consumed one during the voyage. Stays in Durban were usually the longest and East London often only afforded few hours, usually taking on tinned Pineapple.

My final trip on the ship was to the West coast of Britain calling at Avonmouth, Liverpool, Belfast and Glasgow. We loaded at Antwerp, Rotterdam, Bremen, Hamburg and also at Santa Cruz in Tenerife. The latter was highly unusual as we generally only called at Las Palmas for bunkers. After fifteen months I paid off in Durban on 22 April 1966.

### On Leave and a New Ship

Three months at home with my parents in Modderfontein and I came to realize that in two and a half years I had matured a great deal. Being the youngest person on a ship meant that you constantly associated with persons much older and that reflected in my behaviour pattern. The boys I went to school with were still kids and the older generation had no difficulty with the way I conducted myself. Being up country everyone I knew asked me what it was like to be a *Sailor* and telling them I was to be an officer appeared to go right over their heads.

On 14 July 1966 I was flown to Amsterdam to join a new ship being completed by Verolme in Rotterdam. This was the company's first new build called the m.v. *SA van der Stel* with a speed of 21 knots. She was a heavy lift ship capable of lifting 250 tons using two derricks in tandem. She had a modern bulbous bow, but no bow thrust and a VHF radio on the bridge was another new novelty to me.

On the one hand she was a modern ship and ought to have been sophisticated, she had steel Macgregor hatches plus folding sections in the tween decks, had they been hydraulic it would have been marvellous. Cost cutting meant that everything was opened and closed using a complicated system of wires and snatch blocks that was operated by means of elaborate winches with all manner of side drums.

Being a Cadet, I became familiar with the system, but time and again I would be called out because something could not open or close due to having been rigged incorrectly. As years went by I served on this ship as Cadet, Third Mate and Second Mate. I suspect that had I stayed with the company, I would have fulfilled the higher ranks on her as well. Because I knew the ship from stem to stern, I simply couldn't get away from her.

### A Very Impressive Deck Cargo

I joined the *SA van der Stel* on 15 July 1966 and we sailed for Antwerp on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, our cargo included a 100+ ton item and in Hull we loaded four Buccaneer aircraft on deck for the South African Airforce.

At the time the British Labour Government had implemented sanctions against South Africa, but because of the money involved, the aircraft order was allowed to be completed. They were built at Brough just outside Hull. We were told that this was a hush-hush cargo. Now how does one keep this a secret when each Buccaneer was towed along the road from Brough to Hull docks under police escort?

Special steel frames were positioned over the hatches and welded to the deck and there sat each aircraft for the entire world to see, but don't tell anyone that they are actually there!

Not only was it one of the most spectacular deck cargoes we carried, it was a big plus for the company and I was informed that in freight it paid for the cost of the ship. As may be anticipated, for insurance purposes, a representative from the aircraft factory made the trip to Cape Town. He was a dower man without humour and each day at breakfast someone would ask *Have you counted them, are they all still there?*



December 1966 *SA van der Stel* on the River Mersey





#### **SA van der Stel continued**

The arrival on her maiden voyage in Cape Town was greeted with much pomp and celebration. The Airforce was zooming around the ship in low flying aircraft, all our bunting was up and we were escorted into the port by two tugs spraying their water cannons into the air.

#### **To America and back to Europe**

The next voyage was to America, into Mobile, Alabama on my birthday, 22 September 1966. Another large reception awaited us and our entrance into port was similar to the Cape Town arrival. Next to New Orleans and again a tug escorted the ship with her water cannons going up the Mississippi river - See photo at left.

After discharging at Houston we returned to New Orleans to start loading our Southbound cargo, working up the coast to Savannah, Charleston, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York.

On 16 October we sailed from America for a 6850 mile voyage back to South Africa arriving in Cape Town on the 31<sup>st</sup>. Ports along the coast included Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Lourenco Marques, Beira and back down the coast to load. We also called at Luderitz and Walvis Bay. We sailed on 6 December 1966 for the UK/Continent.



*December 1966 SA van der Stel on the River Mersey*

### **A Mini salvage**

En route we stopped off the West coast of Africa to assist a broken down fishing boat with its engine kaput and towed her to safety of Dakar and dropped her off on 13 December 1966.

Bill Storm, the Captain, expressed the wish to simply lift the boat out of the water with our Heavy Lift derricks. Many months later I received an extra payment, being my share of *Salvage Money*, it appeared on my October 1967 payslip as ZAR 5.95 - Less than £3!!



**December 1966 SA van der Stel - Preparing to tow the fishing Vessel *Le Labou* to Dakar**

We arrived at Avonmouth on 18 December, continued to Liverpool where we had Christmas and the ship then docked in Birkenhead.

Dublin followed on 4 January 1967 and then called at Glasgow and Swansea. We went up the East Coast to Newcastle to pick up a heavy lift and arrived on Sunday 15 January. We loaded a 180 ton stator motor with our two heavy lift derricks working in tandem. We employed a large riveted lifting beam which appeared more impressive than the actual lift.



*January 1967 Heavy Lift at Newcastle*



The ship then sailed 714 miles North about over the top of Scotland to complete three weeks of loading in Birkenhead and Liverpool. We sailed South on 10 February, bunkered at Las Palmas on the 14<sup>th</sup> and returned to Cape Town on the 24<sup>th</sup>.

### Last Voyages as a Cadet

On the return to Cape town I transferred on 27 February 1967 to join a Reefer ship the m.v. SA *Drakenstein*. We carried boxes of fruit to the UK/Continent, from February it was grapes and apples and by midyear oranges, grapefruit and lemons. The vessel did 19 knots and due to the nature of her cargo she was much cleaner than the cargo ships I had been on.

The Chief Officer was a Scotsman called Andy Duncan and he was a very experienced Mate from Clan Line who always called me *Laddie*. Andy had joined Safmarine with the promise of rapid promotion and he only did one trip before transferring to another ship as Master.

I got on very well with him and he taught me a great deal, he used to puff away on a pipe and apologized for the smell and said he smoked old socks! Before he left he gave me his star identifier and his Bridge coat. That jacket was an ex WWII US Navy P-Jacket and was the warmest coat I ever had, no wind chill ever passed through it. In 1982 I saw Andy Duncan on a ship in Durban for the last time.

On my third voyage north we discharged at Le Havre and Southampton where I paid off to proceed to Liverpool to go back to college for my first certificate called Second Mate's.

### 1967 Second Mate's Certificate

To qualify for the first exam meant a basic 48 month apprenticeship, less 6 months remission for the year at nautical college plus a further 9 months for superior school qualifications, the equivalent of A levels = 2 years & 9 months sea time.

I paid off on 14 July 1967 and the reason I wanted to do my *Ticket* in England was because I was engaged to a Liverpool nurse named Ann. The nature of my career meant that we had only spent a limited time together, so this was the opportunity to get to know each other a bit better. I had made up my mind to spend at least six months ashore. During the mid 1960's conditions of service were not good, the company only paid two months study leave and you only got half of it. The second half only payable if you passed your exams. So the upstart was one month's pay to cover a three and a half month syllabus.

On arrival in Liverpool I stayed with my future In laws and as they only had a two bedroom house I slept on the floor in the lounge. Being summertime, the college was closed but I was able to complete a two week radar course at Liverpool docks. The instructor was a Captain Bole who is a *General Botha* old boy and I passed the Radar course on 28 July 1967.

Prior to starting at college, my fiancée I went on a week's coach tour to Scotland with Smith's Tours in August. In those days one didn't co-habit, so we had separate bedrooms. I recall going as far as Aberdeen which was then a thriving fishing port prior to the arrival of North sea oil and in Edinburgh we went to the *Tattoo*.

When college was due to start I found myself a bedsit near Sefton Park at 33 Croxteth Road and went into Liverpool daily by bus. There were several other nautical students staying at the same place as me.

Although the Second Mate's course was three months I decided to do it in two and worked hard to achieve that.

Each day on the bus I studied the *Rule of the Road*. One must pass that, so by the time I was ready for my exams, I could recite all the rules word perfect. In the annexe to these rules it states

*Assumptions made on scanty information may be dangerous and should be avoided.* That statement applies to many things in one's life and I still quote it to individuals when necessary.

During my time at the bedsit in Liverpool I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday on 22 September 1967. I had a party at the flat with several of my fellow students and quite appropriately ended upside down in a corner. I recall a few names, there was Andy Guthrie and Dave Wharton, also doing 2<sup>nd</sup> Mates and John Morris who worked for Bibby line, was doing First mate's and also lived at the same place as me.



*My Croxteth Road Bedsit - Washing up  
Left to right - Andy Guthrie, Otto and John Morris*

The system for qualification has probably changed, but at the time the exam was in three parts. Written and oral exams plus a signals test (Morse code, semaphore and flags). One of the Board of Trade examiner's in Liverpool was Captain Fletcher who had a fearsome reputation of flying off the handle with incompetent students and was known to send certain unfortunates back to do more seetime. He was referred to as *Fletch* and I did my orals with him, personally I felt, if you had studied well and knew your stuff there was no need to fear the infamous *Fletch*!

### What was expected from a Navigation Deck Officer

As I mentioned in my introduction to this volume, I would like to give the readers some idea of what we did at sea during the 1960's and 1970's. With today's modernisation of the mercantile fleets, many of our skills and practises are effectively either outmoded or obsolete.

Many of the big shipping companies resisted change and their so called new ships reminded one of the vessels they had built twenty or thirty years previously.

Captains and senior officers were quick to reprimand juniors with new ideas and told that they had successfully used the same methods for the last umpteen years and saw no reason for change. I got myself into some hot water when I retorted that if the same method had been in use for twenty years, it meant that no progress had been made during that time.

### Expectations continued

Conventional ships had conventional equipment and carried conventional cargoes. The stowage, lashing and securing and care of general cargo was a skill that took years to refine. We often employed running gear using ropes, wires, blocks and tackle and winches and most general cargo officers became good riggers. In comparison tankers, bulk cargo and refrigerated ship were much easier to deal with than general cargo. We carried anything and everything, all deck space was taken up by freight and it was an obstacle course to walk from stem to stern.

General cargo ships usually had deep tanks in their lower holds along with heating coils and were designed for small parcels of specialized liquids and these could vary from some refined oil product to tallow or worse still molasses.

If none of the foregoing was carried, space was money and the tanks filled with general cargo.

Whenever there was a liquid to be loaded much time and effort had to be put into the deep tanks to clean, repair and test them. They were surveyed by the shipper to ensure that the tanks were suitable and sound.

To remind myself of the array of things our brains were expected to absorb I recently hauled an old suitcase out of our loft that is filled with my nautical text books and also includes an array of paperwork I have not set eyes on for some thirty years.

I appear to have kept everything starting with my November 1963 letter of acceptance at the General Botha.

I also kept letters of appointment, company correspondence and every single payslip for my entire seagoing career. It certainly helps with the accuracy of this manuscript.

### My Nautical Library

It consists of some twenty books which include from one hundred to over six hundred pages per publication.

My wife Gill picked up one of my text books and after looking through it asked me if we were expected to know everything in that particular book and seemed amazed when I said yes.

For a Second Mate Foreign Going it recommended:

#### For Navigational Instruction

*Nicholls's Concise Guide Volume I* (630 pages) plus *Principles for Second Mates*, *Practical Navigation for Second Mates*, *Modern Chartwork*, *The Book of the Sextant* and *Mathematical Notes and Examples for Second Mates*.

The Navigator's bibles were of course *The Annual Nautical Almanac* and *Burton's Tables*. The latter is the most dog-eared book I have and was in constant daily use.

#### For Seamanship

*Nicholls's Seamanship and Nautical Knowledge* (Included Signals), *The Boatswain's Manual*, *Cargo Work*, *Ships and Their Cargoes*.

#### Other subjects were

*General Science*, *Radar Observer's Handbook*, *The Principles of Ship Stability*, *Engineering for Nautical Students*, *Rule of the Road Manual*, *Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea* and *Ship's Lifeboats*.

### Navigating

My job at sea was a navigation officer who understood charts, practical navigation, compasses, wind, sea and currents. Celestial navigation using the sun and the stars, taking sights with a sextant and calculating each sight using Spherical Trigonometry.

The most accurate method is to ascertain a position using six to eight stars. The Moon and Planets are to be avoided as they are too near the earth and even sun sights can be dodgy especially if it is very hot as the heat creates refraction of the horizon.

For the layman it might be difficult to grasp that in navigational terms the sun is about 93 million miles away from earth yet not quite far enough. Compare that to the nearest star of *Alpha Centauri* which is 4.37 light years away and light travels at 186,000 miles per second!

For Navigation purposes one used the brightest stars available, the brightness of a star is measured by its magnitude and the smaller it is the brighter the star.

For instance the most powerful stars are *Sirius* and *Canopus* with magnitudes of -1.5 and -0.7 others with a negative number is *Rigel Kent* and *Arcturus*. Star sights are difficult and require a lot of practise to be good at. Compare the size of a star to the sun and the latter effectively gave one a huge disk to play with.

Early forms of electronic navigation were to take bearings of radio beacons. In the North sea there was a system called *Decca* which was very good. The North Atlantic suffers from constant cloud cover and officers on such runs tended to be inefficient with a sextant as they didn't use it often enough.

On the North Atlantic they used radio beacons and *Loran* was in place to start with and that was replaced with another system called *Omega*. The latter gave very good results and I used it constantly when I was on a container run during 1973.

Satellite navigation was still in its infancy and very expensive and only a few merchant ships were fitted with it.

All the above is more or less obsolete and today even motorcars are fitted with a GPS.

One important point that was always rammmed home, all methods, including radar; GPS etc are merely Aids to Navigation. Ships run aground because the GPS said it was OK. The *Annexe to the Rules* said it all *Assumptions made on scanty information may be dangerous and should be avoided!*

#### Other Duties

As Third Mate I was the safety officer and responsible for the Life boats, life saving equipment, breathing apparatus, pyrotechnics and fire fighting equipment.

As Second Mate I was the Navigation, Medical and Cargo officer.

The Chief officer ran the crew and the ship and the Captain carried the can. If anything went wrong or anyone made a mistake it was considered to be due to the negligence of the Master.

I have no idea what it is like at sea today, but in my time we were taught to be Officers and gentlemen, how to behave and to understand the necessary etiquette required.

After all is said and done someone will still ask you what it is like to be a *Sailor!*

### First Job as a Certified Second Mate

On 20 November 1967 Certificate of Competency No 104871 as Second Mate was issued in my name. I had completed another hurdle in the right direction.

By the end of November all my funds were finished and I wished to remain in Liverpool for Christmas. My fiancée did advance me some money, but in order to keep head above water I would look for short term employment.

Off I went with my brand new certificate to the Liverpool Shipping Pool and got a job as Second Mate on a 560 ton coaster called the m.v. *Fallowfield* - She was running containers between Preston docks, on the river Ribble to Portrush in Northern Ireland.

I joined on Saturday 2 December 1967 and we set off into the Irish sea in a gale. I had never been seasick and on a large ship that movement is predictable. This is not so on a little 500 ton tub, on my first watch I suddenly thought that I don't feel too good and soon it was heave-ho me hearty sailor. It was a one off and I was never ever sick again.

Portrush dock was a hole in the ground and the job itself mundane, the people on the ship had no ambition or interest. I did three trips on her and paid off on 14 December to return to my cold and miserable unheated bedsit in Croxteth road. I advised Safmarine that I was ready to return, had Christmas and New year in Liverpool and the time had arrived to earn a few shackles again.

### 1968 Third Mate on the SA Victory

On 1 January I was notified to fly to Saudi Arabia the following day to join a tanker, the *Lanmar*. Arriving at Liverpool airport there was a message to phone the ship's agent. I was instructed not to leave as I could face problems entering an Arab country using a South African Passport, in those days several countries were anti South Africa. I was to join the s.s. *SA Victory* in Liverpool the following day as a supernumerary third mate.

On 3 January 1968 I joined the *Victory* and two previous shipmates, who I had sailed with on the *SA van der Stel*, were onboard. Mike Barnes was third mate and Dave Thompson, previously a Chief Officer, was the master of the ship. This ship had been built at Sparrows Point in Baltimore in 1945 and was an all welded steamship.

Originally intended for transatlantic convoys during WWII. Length 455 feet, 7605 tons with a speed of 14 knots. All in all a bit of an ancient tub, but manned by a nice crowd of people. The ship was still discharging so my stay in Britain was extended to almost six weeks and proceeded to Glasgow, Swansea and back to Liverpool, sailing deep sea on 10 February.

My salary as a senior cadet was £52 per month and as third mate it became R180 per month (£90) - the pound had just been devalued and that increased it to £105. I was also due the other half of my study leave money.

On the 19<sup>th</sup>, when the ship arrived in Glasgow I purchased a second hand sextant for £20 plus a pair of war surplus Canadian binoculars (7x50) for £24 from a firm called Charles Frank - I still own both these instruments.

Being a supernumerary on the ship meant the Chief Officer went onto day work and I stood his watch on the bridge, this elevated me to the 4 to 8 watch and thus I enjoyed a premature introduction of taking star sights twice a day.

On the night of 12 February, in heavy weather in the Bay of Biscay, a wave struck and flattened the bulwarks on the bow, lifted the pontoons off hatch one and wrapped one of them around the mast. We hove to and had to wait until daybreak to secure the damage.

En route to Cape Town there was a certain amount of speculation as to my immediate future. The Captain, Dave Thompson assured me that I would be retained on the *Victory* and Mike Barnes was adamant that I would be transferred to another ship. I stayed and Mike moved and that was that.

On arrival in Durban my parents paid a visit and were rather annoyed that I had gone to study in England, but after a heated exchange, peace was made and they accepted my motive. Ann and I had fixed a date for our wedding in October as it allowed us time to save up for setting up home.

We sailed from Durban for Beira, anchoring off the port on 20 March and from 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> completed discharging. On 25 March the ship went on charter to the German company D.O.A.L. and the ship's funnel was painted in their colours. It was the only time I experienced this sort of thing, we had a German Super Cargo onboard and could that man drink.

We loaded for the continent, arrived in Rotterdam on 7 April and terminated the charter in Hamburg on 16 April. I received DM 100 from D.O.A.L. as a gratuity.

We then sailed via the Pentland Firth to Glasgow and Liverpool.

### Transatlantic and getting hitched

On arrival in South Africa there was a rumour that we might load a bulk cargo for Canada.

I requested a transfer as such a trip would not allow me time to get back to England in time for my wedding. The Company assured me that from Canada we would cross the Atlantic in ballast and load in Europe. I had no choice but to accept and remained sceptical of my immediate future.

In Durban we took on a full load of sugar, bunkered at St Vincent in the Azores and anchored in the Bay of Fundy on 18 August 1968. Alongside at St John's by the 21<sup>st</sup> - the bay experiences one of the largest rise and fall of tide in the world. At low tide the funnel was almost level with the quay and at high tide the waterline was almost in line with the wharf.



*SA Victory in the Bay of Fundy*

We sailed on Sunday 25 August and with a sign of relief we were to make a trip to Antwerp. It was my first transit of the North Atlantic and saw several large passenger liners including the Queen Elizabeth. A magnificent sight to experience at sea. In Rotterdam my relief joined and I paid off in London on 11 September 1968.

My replacement was a young Dutch lad called Rob who seemed a little unsure of himself. In London at lunch time we would have a few drinks in someone's cabin before eating. On a particular day it was the turn of Wally, the chief electrician, an Austrian with a mischievous sense of humour. Wally offered Rob a beer, which he declined, asked if he might like some liqueur, yes that would be nice and was handed a pint mug of crème de menthe. Every few minutes Wally asked if he would like a top up, Rob was too shy to say anything and needless to say, except for a mouthful did not finish his drink.

Once in Liverpool Ann and I found a flat on the other side of the Mersey and rented for a year at Montpellier Crescent in New Brighton. We got married on 5 October and a former ship mate, Ron Hutchings was my best man.



5 October 1968 - Ron Hutchings and Otto

He was in Liverpool doing his Masters certificate and also married a Liverpool girl called Wendy.

On the train to Newquay for a honeymoon at the *Cedars Hotel* from 6 to 12 October 1968 and back to the flat until leave was up when I had to join a tanker in Whitegate, near Cork in Ireland.

### 1969 On an Oil drum for seven months

My wife was allowed to come with on this voyage and spent six months onboard. I signed on the s.t. *Koberg* on Tuesday 3 December 1968. Registered in Panama, 775 feet long and 63,000DWT. She was an ex-Norwegian Tanker belonging to Anders Jahre and was the *Jalinga*. As a matter of interest I worked on her sister ship ten years later.

Our Captain Kerr was from Northern Ireland, the finest example of a complete alcoholic, whose nerves were shot and probably the worst man I had the displeasure to sail with. On Christmas day at lunchtime I watched the Captain pouring himself a large tumbler of neat gin. He sensed my presence, turned to me and said: *I'm only having one!*



The Koberg from the bow

This was my first trip on a tanker and a note from my friend Hamish Matheson read *Have fun on your oil drum*.

She carried crude oil and we loaded twice in Libya at Marsa el Brega for Augusta in Sicily and Fawley on the Solent. Sailed in ballast on 6 January 1969 to Cape Town for drydock followed by a voyage to the Gulf. Loaded at Umm Said and Ras Tannura. Then a long monotonous thirty two day soul destroying voyage around the Cape to Rotterdam. The Second Mate Archie, an experienced tankerman, on arrival showed how things were done by opening too many valves and promptly caused a massive oil spill.

Two days in port and we sailed on 28 March 1969 back to the Gulf in ballast and then via the Singapore Strait to Japan. Discharged at Sakai and Kawasaki and finally managed to put my feet ashore for the first time in months.

Another ballast trip to the Gulf, arrived Ras Tannura 10 June, my wife flew home plus there was a *fond farewell* to Captain Kerr. Another voyage to Japan discharged at Sakai and Mutsure, the latter in the south of Japan.

I paid off on 3 July 1969 and undertook one of the longest flights I ever made. Two internal flights from Kokura to Osaka & Tokyo - over the Pole via Anchorage to Copenhagen, after hours of waiting onto London, more waiting and into Liverpool airport arriving home on 4 July.



10 June 1969 Ras Tannura - Ralph and Otto on the Quay

### Liverpool College back to sea and my First Mates saga

During my leave we went for a family reunion to Bergen in Holland, stayed with my Granddad and met up with my mother, father, Uncle, two Aunts and various cousins.

The required one year sea time for First Mates had been fulfilled and I went back to college in Liverpool to study. During my leave we looked at buying a terraced house for £1950 but decided we could not afford it given that the rent at the flat was only £5 per week.

We moved from New Brighton to another flat in Liverpool in Wavertree on Langdale Road off Smithdown road. Living in grotty flats was unfortunately becoming a habit. We were no nearer buying a house; as soon as we felt ready the house prices had gone up and stayed out of reach.

Studying for First Mates in England was all very well, but without British citizenship I was not allowed to take the exam. I had to return to South Africa - where the syllabus and rules were word for word identical. What the foregoing meant was that after studying and preparing for an exam I had to return to sea. Pay off in South Africa and then take the exams. Breaking the continuity of studying did not work as I was to realize a few months later.

On 15 December 1969 I joined the *SA van der Stel* for a second time in London and Dave Thompson was the Captain. We loaded at the Continental ports of Bremen, Hamburg, Antwerp and Rotterdam and sailed for South Africa on 11 January 1970. I paid off on 31 January 1970 in Durban, completed two parts of the exam and because the Principle Examiner in Durban was sick I had to find my way to Cape Town for signals. The entire scenario became a disaster and I failed two parts of the examination.

The company flew me back to Durban to rejoin the *SA van der Stel* on 19 February and a new Chief officer called Jack Frost had joined. In the afternoon I was on cargo duty and continuously consumed cans of lager. About 6pm the Mate had a word with me and said he is not very pleased with me seeing as I had just rejoined.



Christmas 1969 Onboard the *SA van der Stel* in Antwerp

I explained that most people on their first day attempted to impress, because - New brooms sweep clean! Trouble was, they could not keep it up, thus my idea was to create the worst possible impression of myself on day one and after that could only improve. The mate fell down laughing and we became the best of friends and worked well together.



Above - 11 January 1970 in Rotterdam - Loaded a 177 ton single point buoy for use off the Bluff in Durban, discharged into the harbour in Durban using the ship's heavy lift derricks.

Then, the sensible thing was to do another voyage, pay off in Cape Town and spend a month or so at college to thoroughly revise before having another go at my First Mates certificate. Thus another round trip was made to London and the Continent and I paid off in Cape Town on 9 May 1970.

I got board and lodging at the college in Granger Bay, the daily cost being one Rand (85 pence). Clive (Dog fight) Gibson and Andrew Judge, two of my colleagues who I went to sea school with in 1964, were there as well.

Whilst it is great to see both of them, it soon becomes clear that neither party could care less whether or not they did any studying. Clive disappeared most evenings to night clubs in his clapped out Austin Healey. Andrew was desperately in love with an English nurse but had a small problem as she was in Durban.

While Clive and Andrew went to Durban, I did battle with signals and worked my way through a self examiner. Once I was satisfied that I was up to speed I took the exams and passed without any problem.

When I signed off I took all my gear with me hoping to be appointed to a different ship, but to no avail as the office sent me back to the *SA van der Stel*.

On Saturday 13 June 1970 I'm back onboard at Cape Town, onto Walvisbay for tinned fish and fish meal. The latter being a dreadful cargo with an appalling odour.

I was promoted to Second Mate on 27 August 1970. I made a further three voyages on her and paid off in Le Havre on 3 December 1970.

## “Any Ship Will Do”..... 1971 - 74

### 1971 Farewell Safmarine, quit smoking

Talk of starting a family was on the agenda; my wife did not wish to go through pregnancy while I was far away.

To compromise I would resign from Safmarine and seek employment in the British Merchant Navy as a coastal relief Officer.

I had been a smoker since I was a teenager, whilst at sea I gave it up for six months and started again. Problem was I liked smoking but was unable to do so in moderation. The rule was simple, smoke 20 on a four hour watch twice a day and go thru another 20 in between. I gave up again, only to start once more. When I signed off the *Van der Stel* I took home my 200 duty free and decided that once they were finished I would pack in for good.

I finished the last cigarette on 1 January 1971 and quit the following day. The first week was hell and after that it improved gradually and I never smoked another cigarette. Many years later I asked Dave MacDonnell, an Irish friend, who had stopped smoking if he had found the first week the worst? He said: *No, it was the first half hour!*



1970 - 74  
*My British  
Merchant Navy  
cap badge*

### Rock dodging and new horizons

The system of manning ships during the 1970's in the British Merchant Navy was that, on arrival at the first home port, everyone paid off and a relief crew took over. The permanent crew rejoined the same ship at the last port prior to going deep sea again.

Whilst in port no one was signed on the articles and this allowed for skeleton crews, for instance there may be only one or two deck officers on a ship. When the ship moved to another port, a full crew signed on, did the run job to the next place and then everyone was signed off again.

Relief crews called themselves *Rock Dodgers* as we only went around the coast or across to the Continent. I became a relief officer for two years, worked for several different companies and was on twenty four ships during that time. Often I didn't leave port at all and time onboard ranged from a few days to several weeks. In London the companies used their ships as sailor's hostels. Ratings waiting to join a new ship, who were on pay, were sent to ships in port and on several occasions I had to telephone the office to inform them that there were no beds left and not to send any more people.

It was a rather strange situation at times, me the only deck officer on the ship with around two dozen men to find work for on a daily basis.

On frequent occasions I would arrive on a ship with everyone gone, no one to take over from and dock workers making requests such, as a key for a lock or switching on lights when I had no idea where to find either. Trial and error produced results; it was a steep learning curve that I enjoyed as it often stretched my initiative to the limit.

In my two years as a *Rock Dodger* I learnt a great deal, I took charge of situations that were generally the job of my superiors. I did the crew's weekly wages, I loaded and unloaded ships, did dry-docking and surveys. Checked stores, supervised repairs put deckhands in charge of jobs that were usually done by the officers. There was no-one to tell me what to do, a Marine Superintendent would show his face around lunch time, drink some of the Captains booze and clear off with the parting words. *If you need anything, you have my number.*

Yet it was quite strange that the deep sea people looked down their noses at the *Rock Dodgers*, they felt that they were far superior to their reliefs who were regarded as lazy beer swilling layabouts who ought to have their certificates cancelled by the Board of Trade. I found the exact reverse, steaming across oceans was soul destroying, required little imagination and during the early 1970's required the minimum of effort as many British ships were grossly overmanned. The hard work began when a ship reached port and easy street started when the ship lost sight of land.

I suppose that some old Seafarers may disagree with my sentiments, but then my first question to them would be: *Have you ever done 24 ships in 24 months?*

### 1971 - 72 Initial years in the British Merchant Navy

In early 1971 British and Commonwealth Shipping employed me (often referred to as B&C) - This was the Cayzer Irvine group and comprised of Union Castle, Clan Line, Scottish Shire Line, King Line and Moss Tankers. My terms of employment were as a coastal relief officer who may be asked to do the *occasional deep sea trip*.

This last clause was a joke as the first ship they wanted me to go on was an overseas trip. I politely declined and was sent to join the *Clan Macinnes* in Barry on 4 February 1971, Belfast and up the Manchester ship canal, Glasgow, Swansea & back to Birkenhead. Paid off on 17 March. Decimal currency arrived in Britain on 14 February and our family planning was on target with my wife confirmed as being pregnant.

Next the *occasional trip* reared its head again and I was persuaded to join the *Rowallan Castle*, a reefer and a rust bucket built in 1943, on one of its last voyages. I joined her on Saturday 10 April in Southampton and wrote a comment in my diary: *What a Terrible Ship!*

My cabin was the smallest one I ever had and when I swung my feet out of my bunk, they almost landed in the outside passage.





*The Rowallan Castle*  
Joined 10.4.71 and signed off 7.6.71

In ballast to Cape Town, loading grapes and apples, sailed 5 May and arrived in Gothenburg on 27<sup>th</sup>. Almost a week discharging sailed on 2 June for Southampton and went home on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

My ex wife Ann and I went on holiday to the Isle of Man from 10 to 19 June and watched some of the TT motorcycle races.

That, as far as I was concerned, put paid to the *occasional deep sea trip*. Another attempt was made to send me beyond the horizon but I declined. Two port reliefs followed, one in Birkenhead, the other in London on the *King Malcolm* and the *Clan Sutherland*. The latter was an old cargo liner that used to carry 12 passengers, had impressive heavy lift gear and was quite a delightful vessel.

An even nicer ship followed being a Scottish Shire line ship the s.s. *Argyllshire*. A solid heavy steamship that would've been the pride of the fleet when she was new. I joined her in Cardiff on Friday 2 July 1971 and recall watching the Wimbledon finals with the Third Mate. Up to Glasgow we went and leaving the Clyde on the 14<sup>th</sup>, I steamed past *Ailsa Craig* within a few hundred metres and could see the white of the eyes of the light house keeper.

The final port was Birkenhead, we had a ships party and behind the bar was a large bottle of cheap Spanish Brandy. Someone had pasted a dangerous cargo label, with a skull & crossbones, on it - available free to anyone wishing to drink the stuff.

A young first trip lad got stuck into this bottle and informed all present that it wasn't bad at all. After the party he was so sick that we didn't see him for three days.

### **The decline in conventional shipping in the early 1970's**

Containerisation was in progress, shipping companies needed to streamline costs. Most general cargo ships were old and getting past their sell by date. The days of job security and Company loyalty was soon to become history. In a way I was fortunate that I had already broken away from my initial employers and was rapidly adopting a new attitude to the Marine Industry.

Within a few years several companies who owned 80 to 100 ships disposed of almost half their fleets by either selling or scrapping them. British and Commonwealth shipping was among such statistics.

When I signed off the *Argyllshire* on 26 July 1971 I was told that they could not guarantee further employment. Being a relief Officer meant I was essentially - Last in, first out. A few phone calls and I was offered a relief job with Strick Line, their area of operation being the Persian Gulf, India and Pakistan.

Joined the *Karaghistan* 7.8.71 in Birkenhead to Cork and Manchester and left on 31 August. A grubby inefficient second rate company that I was glad to see the back of.

Time to move on yet again, our first child was due in early October and it was in my interest to find local work should it be available. In Liverpool the big British shipping companies had exclusive use of their own dock, thus I approached Port Line. I got an interview, explained my domestic circumstance and asked could they offer me work exclusively in Liverpool for a period of time. I got an affirmative and became a Port relief Officer who wasn't even expected to get his feet wet!

Before I took up with Port Line, B&C offered me a run job on the *Rothsay Castle*. Joined in Cardiff and took her to Southampton to be laid up, it provided another two weeks work. As I signed off they sent me to the *King Henry* in Liverpool. Suddenly B&C had work again and wished to use my services, but I had a date with Port line.

On 4 October 1971 I went down the gangway of the *King Henry*, walked around the back of a cargo shed and up the gangway of the *Port Auckland*. Two ships and two Companies on the same day plus two days pay.

At the time of being employed by Port Line, there was a management arrangement with Blue Star and the Companies were referred to as Blue Star/Port line. The ruling was that depending on the first ship one worked on, that Company paid your wages and it was therefore more than likely that you would continue on that company's ships. All Port line ships were meat boats with refrigeration facilities.

On 11 October my son Simon was born and I remember walking down hill from the hospital to a post office in order to send my parents a telegram with the news. A thought went thru my head that said *Bloody hell I'm a Dad!*

Between 4 October 1971 and 8 January 1972 all my employment was centred in Liverpool docks, on the *Port Auckland*, *Port Alfred*, *Port Lyttelton* and *Port Launceston*. Onboard the latter we stood on the bridge on 31 December and blew the ship's whistle at midnight to welcome the New year accompanied by all the other ship's whistles in the port of Liverpool.

### **1972 A deep sea trip with Blue Star Line**

The honeymoon in Liverpool ended when I sailed to Cardiff from Liverpool on the *Port St Lawrence* on Saturday 8 January 1972 and terminated in London on 26 January.

Blue Star line had the reputation that the owner of the Company did not believe in providing comfortable accommodation for officers and crew. As a consequence their older ships were terrible in that department.

Mrs Waugh, the Port Line personnel officer, asked me would I consider doing an overseas trip on a Blue Star ship to which I enquired the name of the ship in question. When she told me I said she couldn't seriously expect me to go to sea in such a rust bucket. A few days later I was offered a voyage on the *New York Star* which was a relatively modern vessel and I accepted.

When I joined her on 15 February in North Shields I learned that the Second Mate had been transferred to the ship I refused. For the first time I sailed with a crew from Barbados and they were excellent.



*The New York Star alongside in Cape Town*



*21 March 1972 New York Star - Otto on the Bridge wing at anchor off Cape Town with Table Mountain in the background*

#### **Blue Star** continued

If one had a problem with any particular crew member, it was best to have a quiet word with the Bosun who soon set the matter right.

The voyage was to Cape Town for apples and grapes and on our return docked in Hamburg. I was supposed to sign off on arrival as the next port was Gothenburg which is outside the home trade limits. As there was no relief crew we were all faced with being forced to do another voyage.

An appeal to the Captain drew no result, so we telephoned the Officer's Union in London and home I went on 11 April 1972.

#### **Relieving and a 360° Degree Round Turn**

For the next four months during 1972 I hardly left port, I did a four day run job on the *Port Auckland* from Liverpool to London. Then port reliefs on the *Port St Lawrence* in Southampton, the *Port Burnie* in Tilbury, *Port Townsville* in London followed by the *Port Brisbane* in Liverpool.

The Blue Star/Port Line management had broken up and Port Line became part of the Cunard group. Several ships had been disposed of and it was suggested that I ought to accept a relief on a Brocklebank ship (also part of Cunard).

I flew from Manchester to Amsterdam and joined the *Mahsud* on 3 August 1972. She was a lovely modern ship and the first I had been on with bridge control of the engines, a variable pitch propeller and a bow thrust. The captain was Brian O'Brien, a delightful man fondly known as *Captain Birds Eye* on account of his long sideburns. He had been master on several Cunard passenger ships, told great stories and always had an eye for the ladies. I was to sail with him on several other occasions. I heard many years later that Brian O'Brien took a job on a Foreign flag ship that sank and took his life.



*The Mahsud at sea*

Many Dutch people smoke *roll your own cigarettes* using a brand of tobacco called Shag. My cousin paid a visit with his fiancée and her sister. Whilst having a drink in the officer's bar. The sister picked up her tobacco pouch, looked around and asked *Does anybody want a shag?*

The *Mahsud* did Antwerp, Hamburg, Bremen and Tilbury. En route to Tilbury on the 12 to 4 midnight watch I encountered another ship that was not behaving as it should. For first and only time in my life I took a complete 360° degree round turn away from her in order to avoid a possible collision. The foregoing is a text book manoeuvre that is taught in the class room but was seldom resorted to. One would anticipate a bleary eyed captain in his pyjamas rushing up to the bridge demanding *What the hell do you think you are doing?*

I joined the *Port Brisbane* on 23 August in Liverpool and did a Continental trip. Then a four week relief on the *Port Auckland* in Liverpool followed by joining the *Port Nicholson* in Hull on 16 October which ended in London on 5 December.

#### **An end of year decision**

The required sea time for my Master's certificate was approaching. A repeat of study and exams between England and South Africa was once again an issue to be addressed. I held a British Second Mates and a South African First Mates. If I took on British citizenship where would I stand?

Several letters were exchanged with the Board of Trade and while in London on the *Port Nicholson* I made an appointment with the Principal Examiner's office. In some way the outcome was a bit vague but the gist was that no definitive decision could be made until I became British. I would have to retake the exam for First Mates again and after that I might have to do additional sea time before being allowed to do a British Master's certificate.

I was then between the devil and the deep blue sea, should I become British I would not be allowed to take a South African Master's exam either.

My options with a South African Masters were that I either went back to their shipping industry or I could go for Foreign flag. I spent December 1972 in Liverpool juggling with my dilemma. My wife had point blank told me she was not prepared to live overseas, so what next?

I have always been a positive person who does not take long to make up his mind. It took blood, sweat and tears to obtain my First Mate's certificate, so no one had the right to say it is no good and I wasn't going to put myself through the mill to do it all over again. I would finish my time, go to college in Liverpool and once I got that far, decide what to do next.

#### **1973 End of Rock dodging and back deep sea**



*My Port Line Cap Badge*

**To New Zealand and back on the *Port New Plymouth***

I joined the *Port New Plymouth* on 9 January 1973 in Liverpool; I required more Foreign going sea time and requested to be appointed to an ACL container/ro-ro ship on the basis that I wanted experience on such a vessel. It was suggested I do a trip to New Zealand on my present ship with the promise of an Atlantic Container Line ship later in the year.

I agreed and my *Rock Dodging* was at an end. We sailed in ballast from Glasgow on 31 January for Panama. I was put onto my favourite 4 to 8 bridge watch, the Chief Officer called Roger from Hull was a leading expert on being miserable. I received a lot of flak about Relief Officers and as Second Mate I was the cargo officer.

Port line officers talked more work than they ever performed and Roger kept telling me of doom and gloom loading frozen meat. He had derricks crashing down on deck, hatches catching fire and dreamed of every mishap that a ship might encounter. Somehow Roger was not going to make it onto my Christmas card list. Port line ships were overmanned and had at least three officers per department when one was enough.

Even on deck we had far more crewmen than is normal. The chief electrician informed me that he outranked me and as he was head of his department he regarded himself as a senior officer. I informed him that in many shipping companies there would be only one of his kind simply called *the electrician*. A person that changed light bulbs and was a feeler of electric motors.

We bunkered at Cristobal, had a few interesting hours ashore avoiding arrest when the bar in which we were in exploded. One of our guys pushed a prostitute away as she was trying to interfere with his jewels. She slapped his face, he returned the compliment and all hell broke loose. Previous experience taught me that one does not enter into debates with Latin policemen. We dived into the first taxi and headed for home. The nine hour Panama canal transit was great, it was my first trip through it and then the mighty Pacific Ocean lay ahead. Day upon day slogging steadily southwest.

Weather was great, swimming pool full and the Third Mate's wife small bikini disturbed many of my hormones. Deck tennis and other games were being played and the Captain enquired why I did not join in. I told him that most cargo ships I had sailed on had the available space covered with deck cargo, thus there was no chance of prancing around with girly games.

My watch mates in the engine room were younger than me; the Third Engineer had an eight track tape recorder. Between watches we surveyed the Officer's bar and I had to get used to listening to *Black Sabbath* and *Deep Purple*, by the end of the voyage it had grown on me and I quite liked that music.

On 1 March we crossed the International dateline and skipped that day and arrived the following day at the top of the South Island in the port of Picton, a beautiful spot in a fjord, called a Sound in New Zealand. I recall standing on deck looking up to a road along the side of a mountain and wondered what it would be like to go along it. Twenty years later I travelled that very road.

Next stop was Lyttelton followed by Timaru, loading frozen carcasses and boxed meat was a piece of cake and none of Roger's predicted disasters had unfolded.

We had almost a week in Timaru and parties and going ashore every night cheered everyone up, except Roger of course. Our last port was at the bottom of the South Island called Bluff and fondly referred to as the *Arsehole of New Zealand*.

Completed loading and it was one of the easiest cargoes I had done, so much for Roger's predictions. The long haul home started on 22 March, by repeating a day after crossing the date line and as it warmed up, the bikini on the Third Mate's wife appeared to have shrunk.

Our Great Circle course took the ship along the South coast of Easter Island on 31 March; I could clearly see the infamous statues through my binoculars. Thru Panama on 8 April and into the Atlantic and on 16<sup>th</sup> received notification that there would be no berth available on our scheduled return.

On 22 April we anchored off Sheerness for almost a week and finally docked and paid off on 28 April.



**Beautiful  
Picton harbour  
in Queen  
Charlotte Sound**

### A Ro-Ro Containership across the North Atlantic

On my return my appointment to the s.s. *Atlantic Conveyor* was confirmed. Conditions and pay were better. Three week round trips, leave arrangement - two on and one off. Per rank, she was the highest paid ship in the British Merchant Navy and my wages soared from about a basic £120 to £180 per month.

I joined in Gothenburg on 11 May 1973; she was by far the most modern and well equipped ship I had been on. Almost 1000 feet long, five stacks of accommodation placing the bridge 100 feet above the water. Two steam turbines driving twin screws at 24½ knots, burning 180 tons of fuel a day.

She was also fitted with Stabilizers to reduce rolling at sea and the ship had a bow thrust.

The ship had a regular schedule leaving Liverpool, 4½ days across the Atlantic to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Dock in the morning, sail in the afternoon, 30 hours to New York and 30 hours loading. Then 7 days to Gothenburg, 30 hours in port, over the top of Scotland to Greenock, 4 hours there and back to Liverpool, 30 hours loading and do it all over again.

On the bridge there was a host of modern equipment and combined with her speed, it was a pleasure to go on watch. From Gothenburg we sailed over the top of Scotland via the Pentland Firth and down the West coast with a favourable tide the ship could attain 30 knots. Being a steam ship she silently glided through the water. The North Atlantic is an unforgiving stretch of ocean and on certain trips, on departure from England; we dived into a fog bank and would not gain sight of the ship's bow until we reached the other side.

Another peculiarity of the North Atlantic is long deep swells and when the ship is in a trough, the water is level with the top of the funnel. If another large ship was steaming towards us, she disappeared from sight each time either of us went into a trough.

Besides containers she had two trailer decks plus car decks. In 1973 we took 1000 TR7 sports cars per trip to the USA. In ports like Gothenburg and New York, we worked some 30,000 tons of cargo in thirty hours and on a conventional ship it took some six weeks to do 10,000 tons of cargo.

I once again sailed with Brian O'Brien and also with Captain North; they were both excellent people to work with. The crew were all from Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis and although I had worked with many different people from the United Kingdom, it took me a month before I understood them. Once I mastered their accent I became their interpreter. Our course across the Atlantic always took into account the Southernmost tip of the ice fields and recall on one trip admiring several large icebergs fairly close to us.

The *Conveyor* was requisitioned during the Falklands war and had the assault helicopters onboard; on 25 May 1982 she was struck by two Argentinean Exocet missiles that caused a fire. Listing heavily she was towed for two days and sank; Captain North was one of the casualties. I knew an engineer who was on the tug that towed the ship and I was informed that Captain North had gone into the sea and succumbed to hyperthermia.

When the ship sank, still with the helicopters onboard, the forces on the ground knew that they would be walking from Goose Green to Port Stanley for the final assault.



*The Atlantic Conveyor at Sea*

### Study leave and deep freeze Canada

After several trips on the *Atlantic Conveyor*, I left her in Drydock in Newcastle on 2 October 1973. I enrolled for Masters at Liverpool polytechnic and spent about two months there whilst figuring out how best to get to South Africa.

Cunard had previously intimated they would lend assistance and as I was going to be away for sometime it seemed logical to take my wife and son with. Once I made my request the Company promises went into reverse and it became obvious that the only option was to go it alone.

Wife and child would go by Union Castle passenger ship at our own expense, so some extra money would help. Through Silver Marine, an employment agency in Liverpool, I secured a short term job on 29 November at a rate of £20 per day. A Liberian bulk carrier that was a converted WWII T2 tanker was in danger of being trapped in the Great Lakes for the winter.

The ship owners were Greeks and I was given specific instructions to ignore anyone onboard and to do whatever it took to get the ship to Montreal. I was officially the Chief Officer and was given phone numbers should the Captain disagree with any of my measures.

The ship s.s. *Marathonian* was in the furthest corner of the Lakes, right at the bottom of lake Superior in Duluth, Minnesota.

Initially she would load grain for the Mediterranean, but that soon went by the board. I got a USA visa on 30 November, flew out the next day and joined the ship on the 3 December.

On 4 December the boiler packed up, the temperature plummeted way below zero and all the water pipes froze. The deck machinery was steam driven and also out of action. The steel of the ship contracted that much that the paint was splintering off the bulkheads. No power, no heat and no food, I had to arrange for the entire crew to go into hotels in the city. TV camera crews came down and wanted to interview us, after several phone calls the owner sent his New York representative to Duluth.

After the boiler was fixed, by the 11<sup>th</sup> a new plan was, forget loading cargo and get the ship on its 1200 mile journey to Montreal. We sailed the next day, cleared Lake Superior on the 14<sup>th</sup> and through the Sault Ste Marie locks and bunkered at Sarnia the following day, passed Detroit at 1830. Into Lake Erie by Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> reaching Port Colborne by 1430 entering the first lock to the Welland canal an hour later.

The delays encountered at the locks were simply - cold and ice. The ropes froze to the deck and had to be freed with sledge hammers. The rope went out horizontally and had to be hammered to make it point down towards the quay, once attached on shore more hammering to force the rope around the drum of the windlass.

When you got to the next lock the same procedure was repeated. Having dropped 336 feet, by midnight we came through the 8<sup>th</sup> and final lock, reached Port Weller and into Lake Ontario. Anchored at St Vincent at 1330 on Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> at the start of the St Lawrence Seaway.

Three more locks had to be negotiated before we could reach Montreal - Iroquois and Eisenhower Locks were fine until we reached Snell Lock at Massena at midnight.

As the ship moved into the lock it was compacting the ice in front of the bow and came to a stop when half way in. Then the ship had to be reversed, lock closed and ice encouraged to filter out the other end, this process had to be repeated time and again. Eventually we were simply stuck and finally cleared Snell at 1000 the next day and docked in Montreal at 2040 on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup>.

I paid off on 20 December and the *Marathonian* was almost the last ship to clear the lakes before winter shut the system down. Going home for Christmas, was the next ordeal, after leaving the ship the airport was closed due to ice and snow, I spent the next three days in a Motel with snow higher than the outside doors, finally took off at 1630 on 22<sup>nd</sup> Heathrow the next day. Planes and trains to Liverpool were out of the question so I got onto a coach at 2330 on Sunday 23 December, arriving home the following morning at 8am.



*The Marathonian as seen in the Welland canal in December 1973 when I was onboard her*



*The Dredger Delta Bay 1974*

The *Marathonian* earned me £500 on the most bizarre job I ever undertook in my sea going career. The money was a large chunk towards getting wife and son onto a passenger ship to Cape Town and the next hurdle to South Africa also makes interesting reading.

**1974 England to South Africa  
Via Brazil, Mauritius, Singapore and Australia**

By 27 December 1973 I was phoning various organizations looking for a one way run job or ship delivery service. This type of work included repatriation which I intended to modify. By 7 January 1974 I had an interview with Costain in London. It entailed flying to Brazil and taking a large dredger from Vitoria, bunkering in Mauritius and to drydock in Singapore. Instead of flying me home to Britain the Company agreed to fly me to Cape Town. I was employed as Second Mate at £325 per month. The indirect route would take time, but I had achieved what I set out to do.

On 11 January I flew from Liverpool via London, Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro to Vitoria, arriving on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> and into the *Sao Jose* hotel.

The ship was the m.v. *Delta Bay* jointly operated by Costain, a British Civil Engineering Company and Blankevoort, a Dutch dredging concern.

The ship was described as being a trailing suction hopper dredger, 8000 gross tons and could dredge to 35m. She had just completed a contract turning the iron ore port at Tubarao into a deep water port. The ship's crew were Dutch dredging men who did not have Foreign going certificates, but several remained as crew and being fluent in Dutch myself certainly helped communication.

Our one way team consisted of two mates, chief and second engineer plus a radio officer. Maurice Mawhinney, Chief Engineer was from Northern Ireland and we have kept in touch.

We sailed from Vitoria on 22 January, did around 12+ knots average and bunkered at Mauritius 12/13 February completing an 8950 mile voyage by docking at Sembawang dockyard in Singapore at 0945 on Tuesday 26 February.

We had a pleasant surprise when the Company awarded us a 15% completion bonus.

Usually on a job such as this one was immediately flown out on arrival. I had not been to Singapore before and requested a few days grace at my own expense. Maurice did the same and the Agent arranged a stay at the *Negara* hotel, just off Orchard road. The Captain John Munro also remained in Singapore as he was a fulltime employee of Costain.

We rented a car for the day and explored the Island.



*Chief Engineer Maurice Mawhinney and Captain John Munro from the Delta Bay in Singapore*

The *Negara* hotel was a sort of transit hotel full of marine and offshore people. One evening in the bar I got talking to a Scotsman called Charlie Duncan. He was a supply boat captain and described the work, company and conditions he enjoyed. It was just the sort of thing that appealed to me.

During my time in the Merchant Navy the Captains often intimated that they knew how to handle a ship, but reality dictated that Pilots did that and not the Master of a vessel. Once I obtained my Master's certificate, it was my ambition to learn how to drive boats. I took down the details of Charlie's company and our paths would cross again.

### The final leg of the journey to South Africa and college

The route was via Australia; on 2 March I flew on BOAC out of Singapore to Perth arriving at 2230 and into a hotel. A friend of Maurice, Tony Gilmore, picked me up the next day and showed me around Perth and Fremantle. In the evening I flew out and got to see Mauritius again as we landed there the following morning.

Arrival Johannesburg 0830 spent the day with family and flew to Capetown late afternoon arriving at 1900.

It took me 53 days from England to Cape Town by air, sea and air. I was met by Gordon and Jeanette Rennie. I was best man at their wedding on 9 May 1970. I started at college on 7 March and encountered Clive Gibson plus Robert Farren-Handford. Rob had sailed with me as cadet on the *SA van der Stel*.

On 21 March my wife and son Simon arrived onboard the *SA Vaal*. We initially stayed in hotels and managed to rent a cottage in Seapoint at 13 Hatfield road and moved in on 7 April. On the 11<sup>th</sup> college closed for the Easter Holidays and we enjoyed going to various places, either by bus or taken by friends, such as the Rennie's or Hamish Matheson and I also befriended one of the lecturers Huup Stohr.

I was having a conversation with one of the Lecturers who asked how well I had prepared for my final examinations. He enquired how many of the questions I had worked through in the *Self Examiner* and I told him I had done each and everyone three times. He seemed amazed and felt I would have no problem in passing.

6 - 10 May Master's exams, starting on Monday - Practical Navigation and compass work (Magnetism and Gyroscope). Tuesday Ship's Stability, ship construction and ship's business. Wednesday - Engineering, Navigation aids, electronics and Meteorology. Thursday - Signals and Deviascope and finally on Friday orals. Wednesday 15 May - Passed master's and threw a party on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> at the cottage, did not feel too good the next day. We vacated the Hatfield cottage on 24<sup>th</sup> and took the train to Johannesburg the next day. Stayed with my parents, then my sister and her family.

### Time with the family and back to England finding a job

My sister's husband, Maurice was addressed as Captain Doris by my three year old son. Caught up with friends' relations and sundry. Placed an advert in Lloyds List in an attempt to get a run back to the UK and offered a job with Whitco Marine on the m.v. *Almansour*, a Banana boat, which I declined as I did not fancy the pay and conditions.

I wished to get home, sit down and review my options. We said our farewells and boarded the train for Cape Town, arrived 14 June and stayed with friends. I was tempted to return with my wife and son onboard Union Castle, but in the time onboard I could be back home finding a job. Starting in January, the entire trip had taken its toll and the pennies were running out.

In Cape Town I went to Cunard's agents to request they arrange a one way airline seaman's reduction ticket at my expense, such a ticket enjoyed a 30% discount on normal fares. They telexed London who replied that I ought to join the *Port Brisbane* in Beira enroute to Australia and New Zealand and back via the Pacific.

Nice and handy for them to have me in the right location, now they wanted a favour - I don't think so! I declined on the basis that I had no seagoing gear with me and repeated my request for an airline ticket which was approved.

On Tuesday 18 June I saw wife and son off onboard the *Windsor Castle* and I flew to London the following day. The next mission was a trip to the Netherlands Embassy as I had applied for and was granted a Dutch Passport which would lift the restrictions I had with a South African document.

Home in Liverpool on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> and job hunting started in earnest on the Monday. Although I followed various leads, I applied to Charlie Duncan's company, Borneo Straits Offshore in Singapore.

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> away to Southampton to meet my wife off the *Windsor Castle*, that docked the following morning and back to Liverpool by train. Arriving home there was an offer of a job with Borneo Straits Offshore.



Port St Lawrence - Her sister ship was the Port Alfred



# In the Offshore Oil Industry

## 1974 - 75 With Borneo Straits Offshore

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Wednesday 3 July 1974, I had an interview with *World Wide Shipping*, their voyages were six month duration whereas the offshore job offered three months away and six weeks off. The latter appealed and I accepted. Signed a two year contract, had a medical, on a plane to Singapore on 5<sup>th</sup> and into the *Negara* hotel - Deja vue? Chief Engineer Alec Rose was at the hotel as well and introduced himself and explained the Company system. Alec hailed from Cork in Ireland and we worked together on several occasions.

I was informed that the moment your leave finished you were flown back to Singapore, but it could be days before joining a ship as visas were usually required and arranged. The Company only had four tug/supply boats of which one was on a contract in Japan.

There was the *Borneo Gold*, *Gulf Gold*, *Java Gold* and *Straits Gold*. Twin screw with bow thrust, 3000hp with Kort nozzles instead of rudders.

Kort nozzles deliver more power/thrust when towing. Designed for supply, towing and anchor handling and in my time with the Company I did all that. The company was part of Straits Shipping and a subsidiary of Ocean Inchcape Ltd. (OIL).

We were paid in Singapore\$ and my initial salary was around £400 per month. At the time the Union in Britain was negotiating a pay rise for the North Sea and because of our OIL connection, we would enjoy the same terms.

Around the time I completed my first trip; the pay rise was settled and backdated. My wages increased to about £460 which was amazing seeing as I had been on £180 the previous year.

On the Sunday we went to the *Tanglin* that was run by an eighty year old Geordie woman. Whoever happened to be in town, this place was always the first stop on a Sunday and that remained so during all my time out East. On the Monday I visited the office at 84 Palmer road and advised that I would be joining the *Borneo Gold*, working off Java and required an Indonesian visa.

Received visa on 10<sup>th</sup> and flew to Jakarta the next day and went to the Pertamina Seaman's Club. Indonesia was (and still is) bureaucratic and corrupt, nothing happened very fast and more paperwork needed to be processed before I was allowed to join the ship. I met all sorts of Nationalities involved in the oil and shipping industry. On Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> a three hour car journey took me to a supply base at Merak, situated on the Sunda Strait and close to the extinct volcano *Krakatoa*, to join the ship.

### Java - The ARCO field in Indonesia

During my first trip we worked in the ARCO oilfield north of Jakarta, with five Jack Up rigs, they frequently changed position and were towed either by us or by others. We ran supplies to the rigs that included drilling mud and cement. This was carried in three large hoppers; we also supplied fresh water and fuel to the rigs. Distances were short and trips to Merak included going to the club and socialising with other supply boat people, several being Americans.

We had a crew of ten; Jeff Francis was Captain, me as Mate and Jack Mitchell Chief Engineer. The Second Engineer and Cook were Singapore Chinese and the crew Indonesian, a greaser and four deck hands. When Jeff went on leave, Charlie Duncan took over.

On 18 September we were sent to Singapore, arrived 20<sup>th</sup>, left 27<sup>th</sup> and back in Java by 29 September.

My relief turned up on 14 October and I departed on a crew boat to Jakarta. Flew to Singapore the next day.

It was company policy that you went to the office at the end of each trip and received all outstanding wages plus leave pay in Singapore dollars, you then converted to pounds and went home with a bundle of cash. At the time sterling was getting weaker and that was to our advantage.

I arrived home on 16 October, had Christmas in England and flew back to Singapore on 26 December 1974.



10 to 14 October 1974 - The *Borneo Gold* towing the jack-up rig *Teledyne 17* for sixty miles to a new location in tandem with an American rig boat the *Challenge*

### 1975 Working in Borneo

My second and third trip took me to Kalimantan on the East coast of Borneo which is part of Indonesia; all told I spent some five months there. A land rig was set up in the rain forest and initially gangs with chainsaws went on foot to clear an area in the jungle.

Helicopters flew in sections of a bulldozer and after being assembled, enlarged the space on the ground.

The heli-pad was a series of logs laid next to each other. Everything piece by piece, including the rig, was flown in and assembled.

A purpose built barge, called the *Seamarsakan*, with its own helicopter pad was used as the base for the rig and had to be positioned as close to the site as possible. The first location was 36 miles up a river (Sungei Berau) in the rain forest; I noted the name of the place as Manacang Hulu. This would be in the vicinity of the barge which was essentially in the middle of nowhere, shoved into the bank of the river.

In the Pilot book for this region it recommends Mariners not to approach the river mouth within twenty miles from seaward as there maybe uncharted dangers. All very well, we happened to work 36 miles up this river.

There was no chart available; it was initially sketched using a helicopter to fly along the course of the river. Then, one of our supply boats followed a zodiac using a portable echo sounder. With a muddy bottom, the boat got stuck now and again, so pencil notes on the homemade chart suggested one should avoid such areas. Two of our boats dragged this barge up the river and probably did a bit of dredging on the way in as they ran aground every now and again.



**Up the Sungei Berau at the barge with both ships alongside**

I arrived in Singapore on 27 December and stayed at the *Ambassador* hotel. To the *Tanglin* on Sunday as usual and met with Charlie Duncan and Danish engineer Arne who was married to a local Chinese. Saw the New Year in at Arne's house and into a taxi at 4.30am on 1 January to the old military air base at Seletar West Camp. I flew in an old Dakota to an island called Tarakan. Stopped enroute at Kuching and landed at 1200 on a muddy airstrip and that was followed by a 2+ hour flight in a helicopter to the barge.

Whilst we were in the rain forest, it classifies as one of remotest parts I've worked in. It was fascinating and years later I had a chat to someone who had been on holiday to that region, he was describing the things he saw. He seemed somewhat crest fallen when I replied:

*Yes I know, I spent five months there!*

Our job was to supply the barge and most of the cargo consisted of 44 gallon drums of Avtur aviation fuel. Our supply base was Balikpapan in SE Borneo. Flying operations in daylight only and usually started around 10am after the sun had burnt off the morning mist over the jungle.

The majority of the Helicopter Pilots were all ex Vietnam Vets and often came onboard at night for a beer and a chat. One of them asked *Did we know that a helicopter can fly upside down?*

None of us was sure about that, so the pilot invited me to accompany him the following morning as he was dropping some personnel at the rig.

After dropping the people at the rig and before we took off, I took a seat next to the Pilot and strapped in. We lifted off, then dropped the nose forward and did a complete loop. I have this sequence somewhere on a cine film.

Going out on deck at night was not a good idea as giant 747 type insects were attracted to our lights and would attempt to fly through our steel bulkheads. Next morning one often found such monsters lying on deck.

The weekly flight into Tarakan frequently included airfreight for the rig and we went up the river anchoring close to the airstrip and goods were deposited on the back deck by helicopter.



***Gulf Gold in the River at Tarakan Island***

When in Tarakan we went to the jetty early in the morning in our zodiac and bought up several mountains of fresh river prawns. Our Chinese cook produced some brilliant prawn curries, every day we would ask him *What's for sweet cookie? Fairs, featchus, apple fly or ice cleem* (Pears, peaches, apple pie or ice cream)



***Loading a heavy mud pump from the airport at Tarakan, Note helicopter doors stripped off to lighten the weight of it***

On the first trip in Borneo I was on the *Gulf Gold* and the *Java Gold* was on the same contract - On 17 January we left Tarakan for Singapore and went into drydock arriving on 23<sup>rd</sup> and anchored off Clifford Pier the next morning.

Jack Mitchell joined the ship and into the shipyard from 26<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup>, departed Singapore 5 February and arriving at Tarakan 10<sup>th</sup>. Usual delays with customs and clearance.

Back up the river to the barge by 15 February and the rest of that trip involved running between Balikpapan and Tarakan. On 14 March it was back to Singapore, arrived 19<sup>th</sup>, paid off and flew home on the 21<sup>st</sup>, arriving in Liverpool the next day.



*Drums of aviation fuel being discharged by helicopter*



### **A Second trip to Borneo**

Flew out on 22 April and arrived on a Wednesday which meant I had a full week in Singapore as the next flight to Tarakan was the following Wednesday. I was now a Mate/Master and would join the *Borneo Gold* as Captain. George Boothby one of our First Mates was also in town and we went water ski-ing to pass the time of day.

Flew to Borneo on 30 April, the barge was out the river, 65 miles South of Tarakan near Tanjung Tigua about 2° 30'N 118°E. Another trip of running between Tarakan and Balikpapan mostly transporting aviation fuel and not as interesting as it was going up the river. We left Borneo for the last time and sailed for Singapore on 9 June 1975 and arrived on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

### **Singapore Company head quarters**

Whenever a ship was without a charter it anchored in the inner roads near Clifford Pier and you went ashore by Sampan. There was a bar on the pier and everyone always stopped for a beer before carrying on. The hotels the company used started with the *Negara*, off Orchard Road, changed to the *Ambassador* for a short time and then drifted to the *Peninsula*. Always on a bed and breakfast basis, as the company gave us a daily allowance in cash to cover other meals.

Because all of us flew in and out of Singapore, there was usually someone in town and over time one met everyone even if you never worked together. It was often the case that two of our ships would be on the same charter, thus there was a good atmosphere even though some individuals were not well liked. A favourite eating place was an area used as a car park by day and at night hawkers set up portable kitchens and one could eat any eastern ethnic food you could think of. Clifford Pier and the food car park are no longer as they were then.

After midnight one always ended up at *Boogie Street*. (Bugis) was renowned internationally from the 1950s to the 1980s for its nightly gathering of trans women, a phenomenon which made it one of Singapore's top tourist destinations during that period. The *Trannies* as we called them were notorious pick pockets. Young local boys would play you noughts and crosses for a \$1, they were very good and you needed to be an outstanding player yourself not to lose.

Sunday's in Singapore were heavy days starting with the *Tanglin*, we would then drift to various other haunts and end up at a favourite restaurant, such as *Jack's Place*. We met many people working for other offshore companies or bumped into supply boat men whom you had worked with. The good thing about the offshore was that you were well paid and earned amounts that the Merchant Navy boys only dreamed of. It came at a cost, long hours, often dirty and dangerous work, but that is why the pay was good. Although we were on good money, Singapore was expensive, then and still is.

If a ship was without work, casual work came along, perhaps towing a few barges, on another occasion we dragged a new Japanese rig around the Singapore Strait as a training exercise for those on the rig - See Photo on the next page.

### **A change of name**

During 1975 the name of the company was changed from Borneo Straits Offshore to OIL (Asia) and the livery on the funnels was repainted to reflect the new name.

### **Dumping Explosives at Sea from the *Straits Gold***

A large quantity of explosives had been manufactured incorrectly. A team of experts was flown from Scotland who had to treat the material, placed it in hessian sacks and then loaded into containers on our deck.

We would steam around fifty miles into the South China sea and dump all the sacks overboard. After that we needed to check that all the sacks had sunk. We made four trips in total from 28 September to 24 October 1975.

The Scots team informed us that the sum total of explosives dumped was sufficient to blow the entire island of Singapore off the map.

### Private Enterprise

During our sorties dumping explosives we had to load in a specified area and nearby an old cargo liner (*Lucky Two*) had been laid up for some time. She had been moored with both anchors and over a period of time, swinging around with the tide her anchor chains were well and truly twisted together. She was formerly part of the South American Saint Line and had a very distinctive shaped funnel (Built 1948 as *St Essylt* and renamed *Yunnan* in 1965)

On 15 October we were at No 1 Explosive buoy and noticed activity onboard the ship and by early evening they were attempting to weigh anchor. We watched with amusement and it became obvious they were not going to succeed unless someone towed them around in circles to untwist the anchor chains.

We started our engines and offered to do the job for \$500, after a bit of hesitation they accepted and everyone received a share of some beer money.



24 -25 June 1975 Towing a Japanese Rig in circles  
In the Singapore Straits

### Combating boredom with Canasta

Besides myself there was George Boothby and Alec Rose and being laid up at anchor off Singapore with little or nothing to do created boredom. We only went ashore a few days a week, had various games that the three of us played and even those had reached saturation. I mentioned a card game Canasta which I had played often as a teenager but could not quite recall all the rules. George went ashore the following day and returned with the game and a rule book.

To say we got hooked on the game is an understatement. We played time and again and all three of us joined Swire's of Hong Kong in 1976 and ended up on the same ship, we taught others to play.

When new personnel joined, the only question was, *Can you play Canasta?* If the response was negative he was told: *You better learn, otherwise you are no good to us!*

I was to spend 1976 with Swire's and virtually every person on their supply boats ended up playing Canasta.

### My first trip to Burma

Returning from Tarakan on the *Borneo Gold* we arrived in Singapore on 14 June 1975 and went into drydock from 17 to 21<sup>st</sup>. The *Borneo* and *Java Gold* were dispatched with rig equipment to Rangoon in Burma.

Departed Singapore 28 June, up the Straits of Malacca and into the Bay of Bengal, anchored off the Rangoon river on 2 July and up to the port with a Pilot the following day. Once in Burma nothing much happened and we lay alongside with little or no idea what might occur next. Burma is a depressing place and the reason is because none of the people smile and walk about with long faces.

My wife was pregnant and expecting in early August and Burma was not the place to be in should I need to go home. *Java Gold* was returning to Singapore and I arranged a switch to her and left Rangoon on 8 July, Singapore 12<sup>th</sup> and back in UK 15 July. My second son Duncan was born on 4 August and on 31<sup>st</sup> I headed back to Singapore.

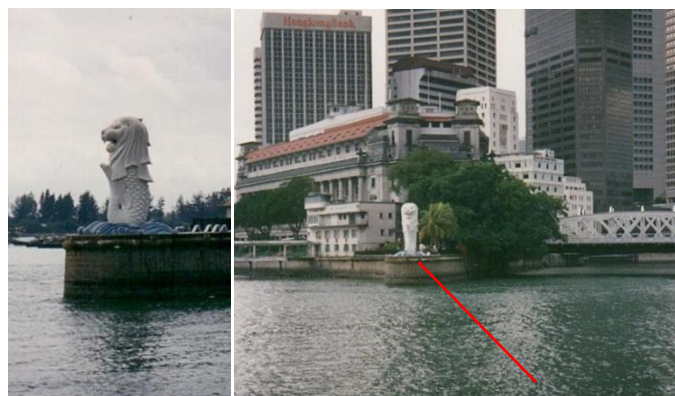
### My last trip to the East - Japan, Singapore and Burma

Arrived Singapore 1 September 1975, obtained visa and flew via Hong Kong to Tokyo 5/6 September and then onto Fukuoka in the South and joined the *Straits Gold*. The ship had been in Japan for several years working with a semi-submersible rig, but the charter had come to a close and the rig was leaving that area. The crew were British A.B.'s because Chinese crew do not work well in rough seas. Several of them had worked for the company for years, but their immediate future was uncertain. There was a farewell dinner ashore at a restaurant that served only raw food and I still have no idea what I actually ate. On 9 September we sailed from Japan for Singapore and arrived on the 19<sup>th</sup>.

Discharged our cargo and went to anchor at the inner roads off Clifford pier. Our zodiac was in the water hitched up to the ship and suddenly became aware that someone had stolen our boat and was heading to the Singapore river with her. I raised anchor and gave chase and ended about 50 feet off the Lion statue on the bridge.

Two of the crew went onto the jetty to recover our boat, in the meantime the water police arrived to inform me that we were not allowed to be in that area and had to move immediately. I explained the situation, stood my ground and did not leave until the boat was recovered.

Anyone who is familiar with Singapore will appreciate that I virtually parked the supply boat in the city.



Singapore Inner Roads - The Lion's Statue

Our British AB's were made redundant and on 24 September the company paid for a farewell dinner before they left Singapore. Jimmy Nailen from Newcastle was among them. We kept in touch and a few years later I employed him on the *Onabi/Unicorn Michael*.

Our time in Singapore has already been related re - dumping explosives and playing Canasta.

At the time, Charlie Duncan worked ashore and informed me that Swire's of Hong Kong were entering into the offshore business and building new supply boats. As Swire's would not have personnel with offshore experience, he suggested I drop them a line and enquire what their terms and conditions of employment might be.

Charlie also advised to keep this information to myself, but I did divulge it to the other two onboard, Alec Rose and George Boothby.

The three of us were all offered work at a salary that was vastly superior to our present wage. I was scheduled for an interview in London on my return home.

**Burma Charter** - On 3 November the *Gulf* and *Straits Gold* were chartered to Conoco to lay the anchors for a drill ship *Discoverer III* off the Arakan coast in Burma. That company had purpose built boats to lay anchors, but both of them were in drydock. I met with one of their captains who explained the procedure as none of us had done that type of work before. It was to prove a far more difficult task than we had at first imagined. The size and weight of anchor, chain, wire, shackles and ancillary equipment was intimidating. I recall each anchor weighed 30 tons and we had to lay eight of them.

The Conoco boats had special gypsies and chain lockers to handle the gear and each anchor took around six hours to lay into position. We only had a conventional *Smatco* towing winch with two large drums plus smaller winches at the stern to drag heavy equipment around.

I ordered a set of charts for the trip and we proceed to the base at Loyang to load anchors and chain. The back deck was about 100 feet in length and each length of chain was 800 feet long and had to be neatly laid up and down the deck. Using two wires we would have to payout the anchor chain, as one does hand over hand with rope. Once on location with everything in place, the other ship had to drag the anchor off the deck so that it hung over the stern.

By 6 November we are back at anchor when the office instructed both ships to depart for Rangoon immediately. My charts had not been delivered and I refused to sail as I was not endangering the ship and crew and it was unacceptable that it was anticipated that I guess myself to Burma. I went ashore the following morning to pick up the charts in person and departed at 1315.

### A Green flash at sunset

Travelling North in the Bay of Bengal, towards evening George and I were sat on the bridge front. I asked if he had ever seen the green flash at sunset. I had heard of it since I went to sea, but neither of us had seen that phenomena. As we watched the setting sun, there was a clear horizon and no clouds.

As the last crescent of the sun was on the horizon, it turned green. Blow me down; we both saw it for the first time in our lives. On the following evening we saw it again.

During 1998 while in California my wife and I sat with friends at a restaurant overlooking the sea. The conditions seemed right and I related the Bay of Bengal green flash experience. Our friends thought I was pulling their leg, but as the sun went down, there was a green flash and I have not seen it since.

### Arrival Rangoon and away to the anchor location

11 November - Docked in the evening, ship cleared for work the next day and away to the coast of Arakan. We anchored off Unguan Island for the night. We had Sat-navigation onboard and on the 14<sup>th</sup> we set out to lay eight marker buoys, being the required position for the anchors of the *Discoverer III*. We laid the first anchor; the wire pendant at the end of the chain parted and damaged the brake on one of the winch drums.

We had two problems, we could not lay an anchor with only one winch drum and we needed to recover the first anchor in order to attach a new wire pendant. Unless I came up with an answer we would go off charter - oil companies paid for results and not excuses.

Another supply ship on location offered the use of two large senhouse slips (quick release devices) that were designed for large anchor chain. If it worked, I was home and dry.

### How to lay an anchor in 20 minutes instead of 6 hours

An anchor was hung over the stern and held in place by a senhouse slip, the end of the chain secured to a ringbolt at the base of the winch platform and was strong enough to receive a considerable shock. Everyone cleared the deck and George Boothby with a sledge hammer hit the quick release on the device and dived for cover. Anchor and 800 feet of chain rushed over the stern, on the way sections of chain leapt into the air. There was a tremendous jolt as the chain ran out, the entire ship shuddered and it had worked! Attached a wire pendant and by using the full power of the engines the chain was stretched along the sea bottom in its correct direction. Imagine suggesting this method to today's *Health and Safety* boys? Using a three way plate (about a ton in weight) it was attached to the chain, plus a wire with a buoy at the other end.



*Discoverer III on location in Burma*

Including the anchor we had to recover and lay again, we laid six anchors in total against only three by our sister ship. With all anchors in place, the drill ship moved in, then one had to take a wire from the ship, pull it at full power to the marker buoy, swing the stern onto it, snatch the buoy, pull up the end of the anchor chain and connect. This sounds easy on paper, the shackles were the height of a man and it required two people to lift the pin of the shackle.

The wires were thick and heavy and to hook these up took considerable ability in ship handling. Finally, with little sleep in 48 hours, job done, to anchor and a few hours rest. On 19 November we left the location, took some supplies to a jack-up rig and returned to Rangoon on 22<sup>nd</sup>.

We sailed on the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup> and with heavy seas in the Bay we had the prospect of rough trip, so we headed for the coast and transited through the calm waters of the Mergui Archipelago. With its fantastic scenery, it was like being on one's own private cruise.

Arrived Singapore 29 November, I was relieved by Captain John Stewart, quite a coincidence, as I sailed with him in 1965 as a first trip cadet when he was Chief Officer. I left the ship, collected my wages and flew home on Monday 1 December 1975. My Singapore experience was over!

### Personalities in the Company

**Charlie Duncan** - He hailed from the Shetland Islands, I met him in late February 1974 after I paid off the dredger and this led to my decision to join the Company. I worked with him during my first trip and we became good friends. He took up employment with a Singapore Company as Marine Superintendent, thus we met every time I was in Singapore and I thoroughly enjoyed his company.

Charlie had a Singapore Chinese girlfriend and they had a somewhat stormy relationship, he told me he kept his passport in the top drawer at his office. He intimated that if things got out of hand he might just take a taxi to the airport and fly back to the Shetlands.

One Sunday we had our usual jaunt around the town and later that week someone asked had I seen or heard from Charlie? Charlie did as he said and disappeared from Singapore without saying goodbye. I telephoned him years later; he was then a Pilot at Lerwick.

**George Boothby (Chief Officer)** Another person I worked with in three companies, a very intelligent man who ended up with a good job in the North Sea. George recently sent in a comment on this manuscript and wrote:

*Thanks for a preview of your memoirs at sea, I found it very readable and enjoyable - it jogged my memory about the work in Indonesia, Borneo, Burma and West Africa. I hadn't realised (or maybe had forgotten) how varied your sea career had been up to the Oil Asia days.*

*I very much view that time in Singapore, when I moved across from Jardines to the offshore world as a key point in my career, as it probably was for others too; better pay, more leave & hooking myself up to the oil industry that was going from strength to strength. That led me to West Africa (thanks to you), the North Sea, then a Marine Surveyors job in Sharjah with my family for over 6 years, then back to W. Africa & then the Offshore Safety Division I retired from full time work at the HSE last September, but still do a bit of work for them part time*

**Arne Svenson (Chief Engineer)** Another great character, a Dane who loved a beer, whatever I was doing, Arne would appear with two cans and intimated the air was very dry and he had the solution with him. Although he was an engineer he wanted to get a Masters certificate as he felt a Captain always had the edge on having the highest salary and he wanted to end up in his native land with a good pension.

**Jack Mitchell (Chief Engineer)** - Jack was from Glasgow and lived in Sydney; he was a tremendous character, a great story teller and a really friendly and helpful sort. I worked with/or encountered Jack often and visited him many years later at his home in Sydney when he was in his eighties.



*Jack Mitchell doing his Captain's impression on the Bridge*

**Alec Rose (Chief Engineer)**

We nicknamed him *The Rosebush*, from Cork, he was single and we worked together in three different companies. He was saving up to buy a pub and I last saw him on an Irish Sea ferry. We got to know each other well.

**Odd Larson (Chief Engineer)** - A typical Norwegian, took everything in his stride, they don't make characters like him anymore. We arrived in Singapore and one of our ships was at anchor, I went across in the zodiac to see Larson, who suggested we go ashore. First we would have a few beers on our ship, I told him we had run out and he would take a case of beer with.

He was in the Zodiac when I passed the beer over and the boat started drifting away - I could see the look in his eyes, save the beer or himself? Over the side he went clutching onto the precious beer. I was howling with laughter and told him to nip back into the accommodation for dry clothes which he refused to do. Why I enquired, he said the crew would laugh at him, why would they do that - coming back from shore on a sampan he had already fallen into the water twice that week.

As usual we sat outside in the sun at Clifford pier having a beer, Larson chatting away, not a care in the world. There was a small pool of water around his chair as he was drip-drying.

Then the tropical sun took over and water vapour was rising from his clothes. Puzzled pedestrians looked with wonder at the man who appeared to be on fire with smoke rising from his clothes whilst Larson never batted an eyelid.

**Jack O'Shea and Ian Buckley (Captains)** both from Southern Ireland, they didn't like each other, but I got on fine with both. Jack had a close resemblance to a little Leprechaun and had a good sense of humour.

**Jeff Francis (Captain)** - From Bristol, was very tight with money and would make a Yorkshire man look like an amateur when it came to being mean. Jeff took more interest in the virtualing of the ship than being a Supply boat Captain and nicknamed *The Grocer!* Often negative, whenever there was a complicated job or difficult manoeuvre his stock answer was: *There is no way you are going to do that!* I made a point of proving him wrong.

### A Summary of my Activities during 1974 - 75

During my time in the East I worked on all four ships

#### *Borneo Gold*

14 July to 14 October 1974 Mainly around Java  
and 30 April to 7 July 1975 In Borneo, Singapore and Burma

*Gulf Gold* - 1 January to 19 March 1975 Mainly in Borneo and two trips to Singapore

*Java Gold* - 8 to 12 July 1975 Rangoon to Singapore  
Transferred from *Borneo Gold* to get back to Singapore and go home on leave.

*Straits Gold* - 6 September to 29 November 1975 Joined in Japan, back to Singapore, laid up for some time, dumped explosives offshore up to Burma to lay anchors for a drill ship.

Resigned at the end of 1975 to take up a contract with Swire Northern Offshore to work in the Persian Gulf.

### Reflections on Offshore supply work

I fulfilled the wish on how to handle ships; I enjoyed it even more because I soon found that I had a natural ability for that sort of thing. Some individuals were not that lucky and every time they took the controls they made a hash of it.

Supply boats using two engines and a bow thrust meant docking a ship alongside was easy. Mooring to a rig required absolute precision. The anchor had to be dropped in exactly the right place - The aim was to end up with eight shackles of chain (720 feet). Drop it in the wrong place or drop it too soon, there is not enough chain to reach the rig or drop it too late, the anchor won't hold. Either way a mistake would cost an extra hour and the minimum time to tie up was eight minutes with ropes secured to two legs of a rig.

During the above operation one needed to position the stern a few feet away from the leg of the rig, thus it required a man on the stern who continuously used hand signals to indicate how close you were, two way radios were not supplied.

The offshore was totally different to the Merchant navy; it often tested your initiative to the limit. There was no pomp and the delusions of grandeur encountered in the Merchant Navy had no place in offshore. You were expected and paid to work hard, if you didn't, you got fired.

I worked on the other side of the world and was flown there and back. I did not have to spend monotonous weeks at sea to get there. I worked in out of the way places that most people hadn't even heard of.

We worked with people on rigs that had no marine background, so one had to adapt. It became left and right instead of port and starboard. We worked on boats instead of vessels and employed American jargon which ensured you were understood.

The wages changed my life from a hand to mouth existence. It meant that the family could move out of the dreadful flat in Wavertree and into a five bedroom house in Aughton near Ormskirk. My four year old son could not say supply boat and told others that his Dad worked on a *Ply-se Boat!*

### Communicating American Style

When using the radio, at the end of a transmission you did not say the traditional word *Over* (i.e. Over to you) but said *Come Back!* Conversations were ended with a *Roger, roger, mighty fine, this is the Borneo Gold standing by!*

Americans love abbreviations and if they did not understand what they meant, would never say so. For instance most American supply boats were fitted with Caterpillar engines whereas we had a twin set of 1500 BHP Deutz Diesels. On one occasion an American Skipper asked me what sort of engines we had on our boat and I replied *A couple of 625's* and without batting an eye he replied *Shit, them Baby's can go!*

Whenever one approached a rig, it was standard practise to call on the radio and give them an ETA. Often the Radio operator would ask *What you got for us Cap?* Initially I made the mistake of laboriously reading the entire manifest out over the radio, to which he replied. *OK Cap, that sounds mighty fine, why don't you come alongside and we'll take a look at you.*

Realizing that it was a complete waste of time, on the next trip I gave him the first letter of each word only which meant he had no idea whatsoever what we had on the boat. It did not faze our man who replied with the exact same words as above.

We had a lot of fun with our American counter parts and their first words were always *Where you from?* It didn't matter what Nationality you were, they always claimed that they had someone in their family who came from the same country and could therefore relate to you. I often told them they didn't know how to use English properly. When they insisted they could I would ask them to either spell *conscientious* or *phenomenal*.

### 1976 A Year with Swire Northern Offshore

Swire's of Hong Kong were a long established shipping company and with the decline of their conventional ships entered the offshore industry in partnership with an American firm Northern Offshore. Swire's had four new ships built in the USA on similar patterns to those used in the Gulf of Mexico and two boats had two squat funnels on the after deck. Swire names were prefixed *Pacific* and the USA boats prefixed *Northern*. Thus the partnership had a *Pacific Builder* and a *Northern Builder*. During 1976 all the company's charters were in the Persian Gulf, working out of Dubai.

Swire's idea of manning their supply boats was to transfer younger personnel to the offshore division, thus there was a bunch of men, still with a Merchant Navy mentality, who had never been aboard a supply boat and was not quite sure which end to begin with. The boys in the office had spent two weeks on a boat, bestowed the title of Captain and were to direct offshore operations of which they had little or no idea.

After an interview in London, a one year contract was confirmed, I would be paid in Hong Kong \$ and with an exchange rate of £1 = H\$12, I was on almost £1000 per month and my employment started on 1 February 1976.

I had several weeks at home and on 4 March flew to New Orleans to proceed to a new build at a little hick town called Lockport in the Louisiana Bayous.

On arrival I was met by none other than Alec Rose, spent two days in New Orleans and drove to Thibodaux some 60 miles east of the city and 20+ miles from Lockport.

Checked into a hotel and went to look over the ship on Monday 8 March and the rest of the crew arrived the following day. The ship's trials took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> and then to New Orleans on the 24<sup>th</sup> to register the ship at the Panamanian Embassy.

On 26 March the *Pacific Builder* sailed from Lockport for a 52 mile journey down the river system to the sea buoy. Overnight at Dulac for last minute stores and into the Gulf of Mexico to cross the Atlantic to Gibraltar. We had a rough crossing and had to reduce speed at times to combat excessive pitching and rolling. Little ships are not pleasant to be on in the North Atlantic.

The weather did not let up until 10 April and reached Gibraltar on 12<sup>th</sup>. We spent a week there doing various repairs, adjustments, etc and sailed for Suez on 18 April. Port Said 24/25 and made a transit of the Suez canal and the last occasion I had done that was as a child in 1948 onboard the *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt* bound for Sumatra.



*The Pacific Builder on arrival Dubai in May 1976*



*On the approach to the Hole in the Wall*

To enter the Persian Gulf, virtually all the traffic goes through the Straits of Hormuz. I remembered being told that there is a deep water channel between the top of Oman and Musandam Island, known as the *Hole in the Wall*. I navigated through it and believe it is fair to say that very few seafarers will have ever taken this route into the Gulf – See page 46.

Arrived at the main port in Dubai 7 May 1976, as it was the ship's maiden voyage I put all the bunting up, but alas no one seemed to notice the gesture.

After engine repairs we moved to the shell jetty in the Deira creek. This was the supply base for loading and discharging.



*On the Northern Builder with 30 inch casing on deck, in the background a rig is being shifted by an 8000hp tug*

The charter was straight forward supply work between Dubai and the Umm Shaif oil fields. About 100 miles west of Dubai and approximately twenty miles from Das Island.

I made five round trips and flew home on 7 June. We had a two week holiday in Corfu, 1976 was one of Britain's hottest summers on record and people acquired good suntans by simply staying at home.

On 18 August I returned to the Gulf and joined the *Northern Builder*, registered in Chicago Illinois, I never thought I would be a Captain of an American ship. I did fifteen round trips on her between Dubai and the oil fields. Fishing near the rigs was good and on my second trip I brought an expensive fishing rod with me. One afternoon while taking a nap the mate took my rod, cast in, put it down and moments later a large fish took the bait and bounced the rod along the deck and over the side it went. Having taking the rod without permission, the mate had an expensive day reimbursing me for the loss.

I paid off on 27 October, had a week ashore and took over the *Pacific Ranger*; we were moored alongside the wharf opposite the Intercontinental hotel. We were waiting to start a new charter, towing an oil rig out of the Gulf down to Masirah Island off the east coast of Oman.

I laid out and checked all the towing equipment, one of the office boys tried to impress me by asking trick questions about towing. I replied that I knew which book he had extracted his info from, was aware that he knew nothing about towing and if he had adopted a more humble approach I might have talked him through my preparations. Under the circumstance I would tell him nothing and he may as well take a hike.

Delays meant I never undertook the task of towing and left Dubai and the employment of Swire's on 24 November 1976. I was once again in the job market.



## The Last Two Years 1977 – 78

### 1977 An Acid Tanker, the North Sea and the Bahamas

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A minor Danish company called *Terkol*, with a small fleet of acid tankers, had an office in England operating as Bulk Acid Shipping and they advertised good terms being two months on and two off. On Wednesday 16 February I had an interview in New Milton, accepted and went on pay the following day. After a bit of a wait I joined the 565 ton *Onabi*, registered in Bermuda, at Old Trafford near Manchester and took a cargo of Sulphuric acid to Cork, followed by a trip from Rotterdam to Grangemouth with Latex. Back to Rotterdam with Phosphoric acid to Brunsbuttel on the river Elbe.

Then a surprise, no more carrying acid around the North Sea, two of the company's ships had a charter in the Bahamas to carry drinking water from one island to another. We were to proceed to Poole harbour for stores and then undertake a journey across the Atlantic. Since joining I heard a rumour that the ship was in inadequate condition and some were of the opinion she might not succeed in her journey across the ocean. On arrival in Poole, most of the crew paid off and the office crowd turned up with several people in tow. It transpired that they anticipated that the rest of us, including myself, would walk off the ship and in anticipation had brought a replacement crew with them.

The three of us had no intention to leave, the Mate was big Terry Hann from the Tyne and I had employed Jimmy Nailen an ex AB from the *Straits Gold*.

The ship was renamed the *Unicorn Michael* and registered in Monrovia. Being an acid tanker, the ship had stainless steel centre tanks and the wing tanks were epoxy coated.

On the voyage we cleaned the tanks to such a high degree I would quite happily have eaten my food off the deck. We sailed on 3 April and docked in Nassau on the 20<sup>th</sup>. The Danish owner was there to meet the ship and after a long conversation I was clear on what I could do.

Being a small company, it was run on a shoe string and that meant as Captain you did things usually reserved for others. No ship's agent, I undertook clearing personnel and freight. I bought the ship's provisions, docked the ship in Nassau at Arawak Cay and had a harbour pilot exemption. As long as I complied with the terms of the Charter I was my own boss.

**The Fresh water crises in Nassau** -The town and island thrive on tourism, there is a large casino and cruise ships are in and out of the port. Drinking water came from a borehole that had been over exploited and there was a crisis.

The World Bank had funded the project and besides our two tankers there was an American barge and a tug plus another tanker. Water would come from Andros Island, the largest in the Bahamas group with a small population. It was four hours across, an hour to load, back and four hours to discharge. It was supposed to be an around the clock operation, but that was not possible because of the situation at Andros. There was a disused logging jetty and a channel through the reef. With a full load it was too shallow at low water, thus after a few trips we had to skip one to catch up with the time of the tides. There was a shallow spot in the channel and when loaded we touched bottom every time. The owner was aware of this hiccup and approved that we ought to continue as best we can.



*The Onabi*  
Registered in  
Bermuda

Joined  
15 March 1977

Renamed at Poole  
On 2 April 1977  
As the  
*Unicorn Michael*  
Registered in  
Monrovia, Liberia

Left for the last time  
in Setubal, Portugal  
on 19 April 1978

Most of the people on the dock at Andros were not used to employment and when they got paid on a Friday, it was firewater on the reservation. Everyone was getting drunk in nearby Nicholstown and had no intention of returning to work until money ran out and they were sober enough to come to the dock. We got wind of this procedure, ensured we arrived in Andros on Friday afternoon, put a man ashore to take the ropes, tied up, got picked up by a local friend and we too ended up in Nicholstown on Friday night. Loading generally resumed on Sunday evening or Monday morning.

We soon got into a back and forth rhythm - did 31 round trips and went on leave on 20 May, returning on 6 July. I did a deal with the owner and I would do an extended trip in exchange for return fares for my wife and two sons.

I had a bank account in Nassau and the Government paid a monthly allowance into it. I borrowed money from the bank and bought a second hand car. When school resumed I rented an apartment and my eldest boy Simon went to school in Nassau.

Loading was easy and when a tank overflowed, it was full. We bought snorkelling gear and enjoyed the Andros reefs. The wharf superintendent at Andros was Henk Pinder and he took me spear fishing.



*On the Unicorn Michael - Three good fish for the pot  
My son Duncan in the foreground*

I put a work rota in place that provided ample time off. I taught the Mate Terry Hann and Jimmy Nailen how to ship handle and dock, both became very proficient at it.

### **Our own Ferry Service**

Andros and Nassau did not enjoy a regular commute and many people, especially on weekends, wanted a trip across. This resulted in an unofficial ferry service; we charged \$10 per crossing and freight at a \$1 apiece. The money was for the benefit of everyone onboard and paid for petrol, all the equipment we bought - meals, drinks and nights ashore.

A local Andros trader came to see me, he needed to go across once a week to buy produce for his business and wanted to do a deal. His son was a lobster fisherman, so we were paid in that commodity. After each trip his son would appear with a basket full of lobsters. On another occasion a Nassau school teacher was taking a group of Boy Scouts over to Andros to camp during the school holidays. He had a budget of \$500 to get them there and back, so to ensure he travelled with us in both directions, I charged him \$450 for the outward journey and \$50 for the return.

On another occasion a young guy only had \$5 to get across, I took his shirt off him, put it in the safe and told him he would get it back when I got the other \$5. He duly returned, thought it hilarious and told the story to all and sundry. We were often taken to pubs and clubs by the black Bahamians in Nassau to an area they call *Over the Hill*. As a European you were not welcome there, but as a guest, that was different, whatever you drank, you got a full bottle put in front of you and we weren't allowed to pay. On one occasion the mate went for a dance and lost his wallet to a pick pocket. As soon as he realized, word went out and five minutes later that wallet was put on our table, with a - *Sorry it was a mistake!*

### **Hitting the bottom in the Andros Channel and the consequences**

The colour of the water pinpointed the spot and on our approach I stopped the engine, hit the bottom which caused the ship to shudder. Whenever someone new joined no one told him and on his first time across everyone gathered on the bridge. After hitting the bump the newcomer would race to the bridge with eyes like saucers wanting to know what's going on. This constant toll on the ship did have an effect and after completing a further 118 round trips to Andros this happened:-

Leaving the jetty at Andros required a 90° turn to starboard, followed by another 90° degree turn to port to swing her into the channel. On the afternoon of Wednesday 5 October 1977, I completed turn one and although the rudder indicator was hard to port the ship kept going and we were doing some serious bottom bouncing. I knew the underwater area as I had snorkelled it extensively. Using engines and anchors I dragged the ship back into the channel and eventually got her back alongside. The rudder stock had sheared with the rudder stuck at hard to starboard. The party in the Bahamas was over.

### **Back to Nassau and to Drydock in Fort Lauderdale**

On the 7 October the tug for the barge towed us out of the channel and our sister ship took us to Nassau. The owners right hand man Reidl arrived on the 11<sup>th</sup>. We did a deal with the same tug, the *Tracy D* to tow the ship to Port Everglades. The *Unicorn Michael* left Nassau on 20 October and arrived in Florida the next day. I remained as owner's representative plus a few of the others and including Jimmy Nailen. At *Tracor Marine Shipyard* the ship was taken out of the water, put on chocks and the entire bottom was to be replaced.

We were provided with a hire car and stayed at the Marina Motor Inn at Fort Lauderdale. Wife and two boys were still with me, each weekend we went somewhere different, to Disney World, across Alligator Alley and to Key West via the Florida keys. We all flew home on 6 December for Christmas and New year.

### 1978 My last year in the Marine Industry

I returned on 9 January 1978 to Fort Lauderdale - Monday to Friday at the ship yard. Our co-ordinator Archie often took us to lunch and on one particular day Jimmy Nailen apologised to Archie that he would not be able to come to lunch again.

Archie replied *Gee, I'm sorry, why is that?* With a straight face Jimmy replied *I've run out of anti-American jokes!*

Each day after work we went ten-pin bowling, we were rubbish at the beginning, but as time went by a marked improvement made it an enjoyable daily pastime. Eventually the ship went back into the water and lay alongside.

The ship's owner was notorious for not paying his bills; the shipyard paid our motel account and as the owner had not settled any of the required progressive invoices, they stopped the motel account. The first I heard of this was when the Manager called me into his office and presented me with a bill for several thousand dollars. USA law was straight forward, if you can't pay a hotel account, they put you in jail.

I handed the manager my American Express and to my relief the transaction was approved. I also had to pay for our hire car.

To avoid further expense the three of us moved onto the ship, I phoned the office, requested a cook and more funds. The cook arrived, the money didn't.

Cash flow became critical and when I was down to the last few hundred dollars, I phoned the owner in Denmark and informed him to arrange for all personnel to be taken off the ship as I could no longer feed them. I would remain as he owed me a tidy sum of money, I told him I had a good sense of humour, but now he had to put his hand in his pocket. I had an American bank account and within 24 hours the funds I had requested were in my account.

We remained at Port Everglades well into March and finally got orders to load at Aruba for Lisbon and return to Europe.

We sailed on 22 March, Aruba 28/29 and across the Atlantic. As this voyage was unexpected, I had left my sextant at home and scoured Miami for one and I was only able to acquire a plastic sextant intended for amateur yachties.

I was the only one onboard who knew how to do celestial navigation and singlehanded plotted a route across the ocean to Setubal in Portugal, arrived 18 April 1978. I paid off and flew home the following day - It was time to move on again.

I contacted Silver Marine services in Liverpool and looked at the daily advertisements in Lloyds' List. Silver Marine hit the jackpot for me, subject to an interview, I was to join a tanker in Spain which was being converted in a Cadiz shipyard and intended to be used as an offshore oil terminal off Ghana in West Africa. I had to supervise the work in Spain, sail her under her own power and moor on location off Saltpond and that was the end of the contract.

### American Farmers with their own Personal Oilfield

During a previous oil embargo, a bunch of Tulsa farmers from America's bible belt were aggrieved that they could not obtain adequate supplies of fuel for their operations.

They solved their problem by collectively buying a small production oilfield in Ghana that would insure the foregoing could not happen again.

They formed *Agri Petco Ghana Inc.* With Bill St John as President of the Company and hired Dave Keister who called himself *Keister International*. He in turn hired a Geordie consultant called Dick Spellacy who had to find a suitable second hand tanker.

During my association with these two I gained the impression that they weren't entirely sure which course to follow and made it up as they went along. The Tulsa farmers had plenty of cash, so the odd mistake could be swept under the carpet.



*The Farmer leaving Cadiz in August 1978*



Dick Spellacy bought a Norwegian 65,000 ton tanker from a Larvik ship owner, renamed her the *Farmer* and registered it in Panama. This was a similar ship to the *Koberg* I had sailed on in 1969. He employed three Norwegians engineers from the Larvik company that included Svein Foss an Engineering Superintendent. Dick set himself up as Master of the ship and hired a British mate, who soon got fed up with antics he didn't understand and resigned.

### **The *Farmer* at a Cadiz Shipyard**

Once the ship was in Cadiz, teams of tradesmen from the Tyne were hired to do all sorts of work. There were welders, plumbers, pipefitters etc.

Spellacy required a Master with tanker experience and offshore knowledge. As I had both, it got me an interview and the job as Mooring Master. The wages were out of this world, after 70 days work with leave pay and a completion bonus I came home with £8000.

At the time I earned more than the Prime Minister of Britain.

I joined the *Farmer* in Cadiz on 11 July 1978 with Captain Spellacy in charge and I moved into the owner's cabin. To start with it was an awkward situation as everyone looked to Dick for direction and no one seemed sure who I was. I have never been slow in coming forward and had a serious word with Dick and the next day he moved ashore to a hotel. Now we had a Captain and a Consultant relationship and I could get on with what was expected from me.

We needed more officers and I recommended people I had worked with who I knew were good reliable men.

The new Chief officer was Roy Russell ex Singapore days. Spellacy also bought a supply boat and I got George Boothby the Captain's job. I also hired two Chief engineers, one being Alec Rose. Some people intimated I was getting all my friend's jobs, but I pointed out it was their ability, reliability and experience we needed. They all had an offshore oil mentality which was important.

A helicopter deck was put behind the accommodation. I had the ship's spare anchor and propeller removed and the main issue was perhaps over ambitious.

At first they thought of removing the boiler and unwanted propulsion, installing generators and towing the ship to its location. Then to retain everything but to convert the boilers so that they could burn the crude oil produced by the field in Ghana. This complicated boiler conversion created much delay and whether it worked in the long term I don't know.

I pointed out that the ship's two derricks were operated by a single winch that was designed to bring a pipeline or the odd pallet of stores onboard. I recommended that we should really have a deck crane, being an offshore oil terminal meant that we would often use it, loading and unloading supply boats.

The suggestion fell on deaf ears, but a mishap in Ghana, resulted in winches being installed on each side of the ship.

I also proposed we had a foam fire fighting system with water cannons that should be able to reach an export tanker alongside. This idea found favour, was approved and implemented.

### **Chief Engineer - Svein Foss**

Svein had been an Engineering Superintendent in his Larvik shipping company. He was quite a bit older than me and we hit it off from day one. He was an experienced and intelligent man who was a huge asset to have onboard. We spent many hours exchanging ideas and stories. He paid careful attention to what the general concept and mentality in the offshore oil industry was.

Although Spellacy presented himself as a notable offshore consultant, Svein was of the opinion that the reason Dick had set himself up initially as the Captain onboard the *Farmer* was because he had not previously filled such a position.

Whenever I questioned Dick about his past history, the answers always seemed somewhat vague. I shouldn't be too critical as it was his decision to employ me.

### Spellacy the whirlwind Offshore Consultant

I am not sure who Dick was trying to impress or whether he was attempting to justify his film star £300 daily rate to Dave Keister.

Every three days or so he would turn up to check on progress and he would race around the ships decks at a hundred miles per hour, waving his arms and pointing at things with me behind him. It would be: Do this, do that, sort that out, why hasn't that been done, who is on that job, what's happening here, that needs attention, who's in charge of that and so he would rant on.

I had around twenty men who were still trying to do the things he came up with on his previous visit and his latest tour of - *Do this and that* created enough work for another 100 men.

At some point during this comedy act I would stop him and enquire who he had in mind to perform all the tasks he had just invented. Once I steered Spellacy back to reality most of the instructions were either cancelled or postponed.

All the foregoing was irrelevant because I knew that in three days time his next charade would be another repeat of the one we just had. As I mentioned earlier it often appeared that everything was made up as we went along.

Another bright idea was to take onboard a portable compressor plus the relevant equipment plus 100 tons of shot blasting grit. This would be unloaded at sea onto a supply boat in Ghana and transferred to the rig using our inadequate one winch set up for two derricks. The intention was to be shot blast the entire rig and then repaint it.

The shot blast was delivered Spanish style; several trucks turned up on the wharf, tipped their bulk cargo into a large pile and cleared off. There's your grit now work out how to get it onboard. This event also turned into a three ring circus act, the details of which I will not bore the reader with.

### A Year's Victuals and Steak Olè

Another issue was victualling the ship for a year as supplies in Ghana were limited. Spellacy wanted quality for price and there were three chandlers tendering for a US\$1 million order. I became involved in this and spent a week with the Chief Steward looking at what was on offer in the respective warehouses. My final recommendation was to split the order between two of them, unbeknown at the time, it led to me being presented with the biggest thank you I could ever have imagined.

During our time in Cadiz we frequented a steak house that served excellent meat. During our bulk purchasing of supplies I had a word with the restaurant owner indicating we were interested in buying a substantial amount of meat of the quality he served. No problem, it was arranged that our order would be delivered to the ship. After it arrived I was called to inspect our purchase. The supplier had dumped four large dead black steers on the wharf and left. Perhaps it was the same people who delivered the shot blast? We had to employ a team of butchers to cut up our meat. Remember, if you ever order a jumbo steak in Spain, be prepared to eat it horns, hooves and all!

Finally all trial and tribulations were sorted and after several more sailing deadlines were extended we left the port of Cadiz on 24 August and made the 2880 mile journey to West Africa in 13 days at an average speed of 9½ knots.

### Away from Cadiz to Ghana with a Scouse Crew and a \$60 dollar can of beer

Before sailing from Cadiz we required AB's and engine room crew. Silver Marine employed a bunch of Liverpool Scousers at US\$60 per day, which was effectively film star wages for any rating. They duly arrived drunk off the plane, onboard around 8pm and running around the ship looking for the F\*\*\*# Mate or Captain as they wanted more F\*\*\*# money to go back ashore.

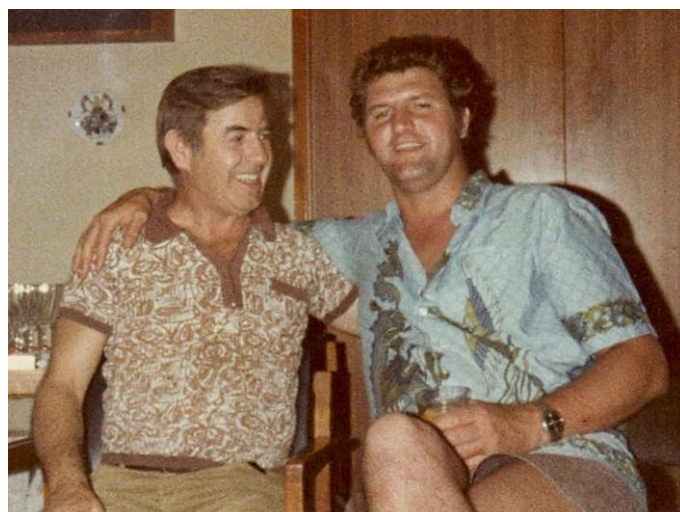
No one wore uniforms and the mate and I were both in boiler suits. I stopped one of them in an alleyway and enquired what he was looking for, they needed to find the F\*\*\*# Captain for a sub.

I informed him that I was the F\*\*\*# Captain and told him to gather all his F\*\*\*# pals and to direct them to my F\*\*\*# office.

Once they were all gathered, I closed the office door and read them the riot act. At \$60 per day I could hire the whole of Liverpool, they were here to work, seven days a week, 12 hours per day. If I decided to fire any of them, they also had the privilege of paying for their F\*\*\*# airfare home. I directed them to see the Chief Steward who would show them their F\*\*\*# cabins and suggested they get an early night. Anyone not at work at 6am would be going home, thank you gentleman and now you may all F\*\*\*# go.

Quietly they filed out of my office like a kiddies caught with a hand in the cookie jar. I heard afterwards that no Captain had ever before delivered a similar dressing down than the one they received in my office.

They almost behaved themselves for the entire trip except for one incident. The Mate and I were on the bridge and saw two AB's heading for the accommodation; we gave them a few minutes, went down to the crew quarters, knocked and opened the door. Both had a can of beer in their hands and I said: *You best finish those beers as they will be the most expensive ones you ever had, I am logging you both a day's pay.* At \$60 dollars a beer, no one else sneaked off for one during working hours. When they paid off in Ghana, the two offenders were looking at their accounts and I told them that I had not deducted the \$60 off their pay, but the threat to do so had certainly worked.



Chief Engineer Svein Foss and Captain Otto Pectoom



*A fish called a Cobia landed onboard the Farmer made good eating*



*On the Farmer with two Smit Lloyd supply boats behind me*



*Ghana 1978 - The Farmer Offshore - On the left is a Jackup rig that acted as the production platform*



**Everybody's favourite view**

Looking through the windscreen in the Chopper on the helicopter deck. Going home on leave.

Several people would've got off to rejoin and most of the crew would turn up whenever the helicopter called.

If you were one of the ones on deck waving, you knew that you were a week closer to your own leave and soon you would be sat in the chopper on the way home.



### **My last months on the *Farmer***

Once we arrived Keister's contract was finished and the operators of the production field, the French based Flopetrol company, wished to retain most of those aboard the *Farmer*. Their terms were six weeks on and six weeks off, with a decent salary of US\$2400 per month and that was too good to pass up. I took on what was to be my final job in the Marine Industry. In Ghana various mishaps included the mooring buoy breaking its under water attachment, the winch for the derricks being damaged and hauling a new diesel generator up the side of the ship and manhandling it into the engine room.

I went home on 18 September, on my return, Ghana's Accra airport was closed for runway repairs. I flew to Lome in Togo and then by company helicopter to the ship, arriving 2 November. On my return oil production was in progress and daily routine included fishing, but many fish got off the hook while attempting to haul them up the steep side of the ship.

The chap in charge of the rig had appointed himself as field superintendant and started being troublesome. He would call on the radio and issue various instructions. I told him to go and get lost as his knowledge of ships was zero. I lodged a complaint about his unacceptable behaviour. I paid off on 21 December 1978 and it was clear that one of us must go - I did not return.

### **Postscript**

#### **Prospects of becoming a Captain**

When I first went to sea, any person who obtained their Masters' had the prospect of *dead man's shoes* by taking on a position as Chief Officer for 15 to 20 years. If they were lucky they might be promoted to Captain at around the age of 55 plus.

Whilst conventional shipping went into decline during the 1970's, there was also a shipping boon in the making. Certain countries were assembling large foreign flag fleets building new container ships, oil tankers including LPG and LNG (Liquid Petroleum and Natural Gas), bulk and OBO's (Oil, Bulk, Ore) carriers. The companies required qualified and experienced personnel and attracted them with higher wages.

The British Merchant Navy boys were sceptical, gave foreign flags the thumbs down with rumours of dogs on bridge watch. The reality was different and once the British fleets collapsed the same people streamed to foreign flag companies as they no longer had a job.

The increase of World shipping meant the age of becoming a Captain began to tumble. Everyone was amazed when a progressive company made a man a Captain at forty and it didn't stop there as it was soon mid then early thirties. When I started at sea the target of becoming Captain was fifty and when my turn came I made it at the age of 28. The prospect of being Master for the next 35 plus years was not an option. I changed my direction and ultimate goal by moving from the Merchant Navy to the Offshore Oil Industry. By 1978 I considered it marvellous to earn £100 per day, yet the offshore consultants were on £300 to £350.

With my fifteen years of diverse experience my aim was to become an independent trouble shooting Consultant. I ought to be a man who flew, at a moment's notice, to any part of the world to sort out any marine disaster or man-made shambles.

Once I turned things around I would proceed to the next emergency.

At the end of 1978 I returned from West Africa to seek another contract. I had an interview with Land and Marine to supervise the laying of a pipeline across the Straits of Magellan at the bottom of South America.

I declined as the wages were unrealistic, explaining that I did not take on difficult and dangerous work in winter near Cape Horn at the same money a supermarket manager might earn.

Having achieved the pinnacle of success during my fifteen years in the marine industry, I changed hats and took on a trade that couldn't be further away from my chosen profession.

From Captain, ship handler and Mooring Master I was going to buy and sell bits of paper known as stamps.

I consider my time, experiences and things I got up to in the Marine Industry was of a nature that most people could not replicate in three life times.

The next chapter in my life was to be quite different yet the teaching and experiences gained in the Marine Industry stood me in good stead when I became a self employed businessman.

#### **My thoughts on Self Employment**

It may not suit everyone and some who attempt it are often, from the outset, doomed to failure.

It requires rigid self discipline, enormous self sacrifice and an unwavering determination with a will and conviction to succeed whatever the odds.

The rewards offer a freedom of choice and the right to self determination.

It can provide a quality lifestyle that far outweighs any salaried employment

It may sound easy but it is not!

Should you succeed others will say that you are lucky!

#### **A change of direction - How it came about**

One day at home over lunch everything changed and during a conversation with my then wife-it went like this:-

Wife: Why don't you work for yourself?

Reply: That is my intention at some moment in time.

Wife: Why don't you work for yourself now?

Reply: Doing what?

Wife: Open a stamp shop in Ormskirk.

Reply: Don't be ridiculous!

Wife: I'm surprised, you are usually very positive.

Reply: Okay I'll open a stamp shop, give it one year and if it does not promise a future, I will return to the Marine Industry.

Effectively I would have a gap year and set up a business on a shoe string. An advertisement in a local paper offered premises. I viewed said premises at the bottom of St. Helens road in Ormskirk and situated on the first floor above a furniture store. At a rent of £50 per month I took it on, painted the place myself, laid lino on the floor, a friend built a counter, bought an old safe for £100 and obtained second hand furniture from a local source.

**I opened for business in April 1979 with a trading name of *Ormskirk Stamps*.**

## Appendix 1

# Shipping Companies and Employers

### **South African Marine Corporation**

1965 to 1967 - As a **Cadet**

ss South African Merchant Renamed SA Merchant

mv SA van der Stel

mv SA Drakenstein

### **Coast Lines Liverpool**

December 1967 - As **Second mate**

mv Fallowfield

### **South African Marine Corporation**

1968 to 1969 - As **Third Mate**

ss SA Victory

st Koberg

1970 - Three appointments as **Third Mate**

Promoted to **Second Mate** on 27 August 1970

mv SA van der Stel

### **British Commonwealth Shipping**

1971 - All as **Second Mate**

mv Clan Macinnes - *Clan Line*

mv Rowallan Castle - *Union Castle Line*

mv King Malcolm - *King Line*

ss Clan Sutherland - *Clan Line*

ss Argyllshire - *Scottish Shire Line*

### **Strick Line**

mv Karaghistan

### **British Commonwealth Shipping**

mv Rothesay Castle - *Union Castle Line*

mv King Henry - *King Line*

### **Port Line - All motor ships**

Port Auckland

Port Alfred

Port Lyttleton

Port Launceston

1972 - All as **Second Mate**

Port St Lawrence

### **Blue Star**

mv New York Star

### **Port Line - All motor ships**

Port Auckland

Port St Lawrence

Port Burnie

Port Townsville

Port Brisbane

1972 Continued - All as **Second Mate**

### **Brocklebank**

mv Mahsud

### **Port Line - All motor ships**

Port Brisbane

Port Auckland

Port Nicholson

1973 - As **Second Mate**

Port New Plymouth

### **Cunard Shipping**

ss Atlantic Conveyor

### **Europa Shipping**

December 1973 - As **Chief Officer**

ss Marathonian

### **Costain Blankevoort**

1974 - As **Second Mate**

mv Delta Bay (Dredger)

### **Borneo Straits Offshore - OIL (Asia)**

Rig Supply boats

1974 - As **Mate**

Borneo Gold

Gulf Gold

1975 - As **Captain**

Borneo Gold

Java Gold

Straits Gold

### **Swire Northern Offshore**

Rig Supply boats

1976 - As **Captain**

Pacific Builder

Northern Builder

Pacific Ranger

### **Bulk Acid Shipping**

1977 & 1978 - As **Captain**

mv Onabi Renamed Unicorn Michael

1978 - As **Captain**

### **Kiester International**

st Farmer

### **Flopetrol (France)**

st Farmer



## Appendix 2

### 1966 to 1978 Flights during my Seagoing days

**1966** - 14 July From Johannesburg via Luanda, Las Palmas, Paris, London to Amsterdam and by coach to Rotterdam to join the *SA van der Stel*.



*An Impressive Heavy Lift being discharged at Durban off the SA van der Stel*

**1968** - 3 December Manchester to Cork to join the tanker *Koberg* at Whitehaven in Southern Ireland.

**1969** - 3 & 4 July Paid off *Koberg* in Southern Japan. A ferry from Mutsure to Moji and taxi to Kokura two internal flights to Osaka and Tokyo. By Lufthansa to Anchorage in Alaska. Then via the North Pole, Greenland and Norway to Copenhagen arriving 05.35 am. Four hours in the airport, to London arriving 1115, followed by another three hour wait, then to Liverpool arriving 1520 and a Taxi to New Brighton. This was one of the longest and most tiring trips I undertook.



**13 April 1969** - On the *Koberg* off Cape Town

**1970** February - First Mates exams in Durban, then had to go to Cape Town for the Signals exam and back to Durban to rejoin the *SA van der Stel*.

I flew from Durban to Johannesburg, spent a few days with my parents, then took the train to Cape Town and after the exam flew back to Durban on 18 February.

**1972** - 3 August Flew from Manchester to Amsterdam to join the *Mahsud*.

**1973** - 11 May Flew Liverpool to London and onto Gothenburg to join the *Atlantic Conveyor*.

1973 - 25 June Paid off *Atlantic Conveyor* and flew from Gothenburg to London and then by car to Liverpool.

1973 - 1 December Four flights starting from Liverpool to London, onto Chicago, then to St Paul in Minneapolis and finally to Duluth in Minnesota. Into the Radisson hotel on arrival and joined the *Marathonian* on Monday 3 December.

1973 -20 December Paid off the *Marathonian*, three days in motel due to weather and closure of the airport, flew Montreal to London 22<sup>nd</sup>/23<sup>rd</sup> and back to Liverpool on a coach arriving Monday 24 December.

**1974** - 11/12 January Flew London to Liverpool and onto Lisbon arriving at midnight. Then by Varig airways to Rio de Janeiro landing at 7am. Into a hotel and an afternoon flight to Vitoria arriving Saturday 4.30pm.

There was no one to meet us, so the Radio Officer and I took a taxi and checked into the Sao Jose hotel. I joined the Dredger *Delta Bay* on 16 January for a voyage to Singapore.

1974 February - Arrived in Singapore on the *Delta Bay* on 26<sup>th</sup> and stayed a few days at my own expense at the Negara hotel along with the Chief Engineer Maurice Mawhinney.

2 March flew with BOAC from Singapore to Perth in Western Australia and had a night in a hotel. Departed Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup>, transit stop at Mauritius the following morning at 0530, arriving Johannesburg at 0830. Spent the day with my family and flew to Cape Town at 1700, arriving 1900.

It completed a 53 day journey from England to Cape Town in order to go to college in Granger Bay to do my Masters certificate.

1974 - 19 & 20 June returned to England at my own expense. Left Cape Town on Wednesday 1500 for Johannesburg. Departed 1800 to London via Salisbury and Luanda, arriving London the following Thursday morning.

1974 - 5 & 6 July Started a new job with Borneo Straits Offshore.

Flew Liverpool to London and took off at 2045 for Singapore with transits at Kuwait, Bahrain and Colombo, landed at destination at 2130 on 6<sup>th</sup>.

**Flights during my Seagoing days - continued**

1974 - 11 July Flew from Singapore to Jakarta, on *Borneo Gold*, flew back to Singapore 15 October. Next day by Qantas via Bahrain and Vienna to London, arriving 1000 on 17<sup>th</sup> and onto Liverpool.

1974 - 26 December Flew from Liverpool to London via Amsterdam and Bahrain to Singapore arriving 1900 on 27<sup>th</sup>.



*1975 The Singapore skyline from the Straits Gold*

**1975** - 1 January From Seletar Airport in Singapore by Borag Airways via Kuching to Tarakan in Borneo, then by helicopter to a barge in the rain forest to join the *Gulf Gold*. Paid off in Singapore 19 March. Saw my Aunt Ida and Mart and Olga who were on holiday there.

1975 - 21 March Flew with Qantas via Bahrain and Frankfurt to London, arriving the following day and onto Liverpool.

1975 - 22 April Liverpool to London, then via Amsterdam, Bahrain and Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> flew to Tarakan to join the *Borneo Gold*. Transferred to *Java Gold* in Rangoon on 7 July, paid off in Singapore 12<sup>th</sup>.

1975 - 14 July flew Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bahrain, Amsterdam to London arriving 15<sup>th</sup> and onto Liverpool.

1975 - 31 August by train to Gatwick via Bahrain and Dubai, arrived Singapore on 1 September.

1975 - 5/6 September Flew from Singapore via Hong Kong and Tokyo to Fukuoka to join *Straits Gold*.

Paid off at Singapore on 1 December, left employment of OIL (Asia) and flew home that night, arriving in London on 2 December and then to Liverpool.

**1976 Joined Swire Northern Offshore**

Remained at home for several weeks. 1976 - 4 March Flew Liverpool to London, then to Washington, changed planes to Atlanta, then another to New Orleans arriving 2045.

Drove to Thibodaux, joined *Pacific Builder* in Lockport on 25 March. Took her to Dubai to work offshore.

1976 7/8 June Flew from Dubai via Abu Dhabi, Dhahran and Paris to London and onto Manchester.

1976 - 18 August Flew Liverpool to London, onto Dubai via Dhahran. Joined *Northern Builder* on 22<sup>nd</sup>. Took over on *Pacific Ranger* on 4 November, paid off 24.11.76.

1976 - 25 November Flew Dubai, Dhahran to London and drove back to Liverpool.

**1977** Joined *Onabi/ Unicorn Michael* in UK 15.3.77 Arrived Nassau in the Bahamas 20 April. Flew home on leave 20 May, Arrived Heathrow 21 May.

1977 - 6 July Flew UK to Nassau to rejoin *Unicorn Michael*

1977 - 6/7 December Left Fort Lauderdale, Flew Miami, London to Liverpool.

**1978** - 9 January Flew from Liverpool via London to Miami and back to Fort Lauderdale.

1978 - 19 April Arrived in Setubal on 18<sup>th</sup>, flew from Lisbon to London the next day. Left the employment of Bulk Acid Shipping.

1978 - 11 July Flew Liverpool via London to Barcelona, by car to Cadiz to join the *Farmer*. To Ghana by sea, anchored off Saltpond 6 September.

1978 - 18 September Flew to from Accra to Gatwick, by taxi to Heathrow and then to Liverpool.

1978 - 2/3 November From Manchester via Paris to Lome in Togo. Then by Company helicopter to offshore Saltpond.

1978 - 20/21 December From Accra via Paris to Manchester. Last flight as a Seafarer. Came ashore to open a business in Ormskirk, starting in April 1979.



**6 May 1976 Entering the Persian Gulf via the Hole in the Wall on the Northern Builder - Photograph of the top of mainland Oman**





*Above the Borneo Gold - Below the Port Auckland*

