

A SHIPBOARD CHRISTMAS.

In "A Christmas Carol", Charles Dickens describes the atmosphere aboard ship on Christmas Day:

"They sped on, above the black and heaving sea --on, on --until, being far away from any shore, they lighted on a ship. They stood beside the helmsman at the wheel, the look-out in the bow, the officers who had the watch; dark, ghostly figures in their several stations: but every man among them hummed a Christmas tune, or had a Christmas thought, or spoke below his breath to his companion of some bygone Christmas Day, with homeward hopes belonging to it. And every man on board, waking or sleeping, good or bad, had had a kinder word for another on that day than on any other day in the year; and had shared to some extent in its festivities; and had remembered those he cared for at a distance, and had known that they delighted to remember him."

My first seafaring Christmas was spent on a 10,000 ton general cargo vessel with an all UK domiciled crew, on passage from Barcelona to Middlesbrough. We had been "out" for some five months and as we voyaged through the Mediterranean there was a slight chance that we might be in port for Christmas but - it was not to be. The dockworkers in Barcelona - intent on starting their own festivities at the earliest possible moment - discharged their cargo with indecent haste and, by the early afternoon of Christmas Eve we were on our way homeward.

As we cleared the port the weather conditions steadily declined. The Chief Steward had made a valiant effort to arrange a Christmas Eve party for our 12 passengers - and off-duty Officers - but there was little enthusiasm for singing carols, the decorations on the tree fell off every time the ship pitched, the bottles in the bar crashed together when she rolled and, one by one, we had given up the unequal struggle and retired to bed - but not before wishing everyone a "Happy Christmas".

The Captain made a brief appearance at the party and had, with great diplomacy, managed to avoid answering any queries about the weather ahead of us.

Mail had arrived in Barcelona and as I sat in an empty cabin (the other cadet was on watch) I re-read my letters and Christmas cards - and steadily became more miserable. I had not yet become a "good sailor" and I could feel sea-sickness coming on. I lay down on the settee, fully clothed, and it seemed that I had only just fallen asleep when there was a knock on the cabin door and a voice said "One bell, Paddy - and Happy Christmas - it's bucketing down out there."

By now it was blowing a full gale and as I made my way along the Boat Deck to the Bridge, the cold rain quickly washed away any semblance of sleepiness. I felt VERY unwell and I knew that the bridge bucket would, yet again, play an important part in my life. In the dimly lit chartroom the Second and Third Officers were busy handing over the Watch and in the darkened wheelhouse I found my fellow cadet with his nose pinned to a forward window. He, too, was prone to sea-sickness and he did not linger - "the bucket is there, Reg - there are a couple of echoes on the radar -going the same way, I think - haven't seen a thing all night - God, I'm going to be sick again - Happy Christmas, I'm off"- and with that, I put my nose too close to the rotating "clear view" screen and suffered yet another friction burn. It was Christmas Day.

Many years later my ship berthed in a small port on the Mississippi River on the morning of Christmas Eve. Now I was the Captain and the ship was a 70,000 ton bulk carrier preparing to load a grain cargo for the UK. Once the Customs and Immigration formalities were over the agent arrived - bringing the mail and the good news that although preparations for loading would be made today there would be no cargo working until the 27th.

The port was little other than a grain elevator with a small town within easy walking distance and, once the dockers had finished their loading preparations, the crew closed the cargo hatches and, by the early evening of Christmas Eve the ship settled down to a very relaxed routine. The crew - again a happy mix of UK nationals - was one of the best I had ever experienced and she was undoubtedly a happy ship. In the afternoon we had had visits from a Presbyterian minister and a Catholic priest inviting us to services on Christmas Day AND to a "Community Christmas Party" Almost to a man we attended the party and we were made very welcome. Beer was plentiful (but nobody let the side down), the food was abundant and glorious, the dancing was fast and furious and invitations to family homes on Christmas Day were freely issued. Both deck boys fell in love (and were inconsolable until they met more girls in Tilbury). On a quiet and sunny Christmas Day we joined our American friends in church or chapel and many Officers and crew members returned to family homes to join in their festivities.

Next day - Boxing Day - the Officers served the crew with luncheon, the Petty Officers and senior hands were entertained in the Officers' Lounge and many then spent a happy evening ashore with their new-found friends. Throughout, the ship functioned normally with Deck and Engineer Officers and ratings maintaining watches, the gangway watchman doing his rounds of an almost empty ship and the galley staff wishing they could be in a small American port every day.

At 7.0 a.m. on the 27th. the elevator started its relentless pour, the ship was soon covered in grain dust with the crew busy warping her up and down the quay to allow loading in the various hatches. Early on the 28th. of December we sailed out into a tranquil Gulf - with happy memories of a very enjoyable Christmas and our American hosts.

Today, with small in number mixed-nationality crews, short stays in port governed by a commercial pressure that pays scant respect to any religious or national holiday, the abolition, in many ships, of the bars in officer and crew lounges and the harsh dictates of Port Security, Christmas festivities for seafarers can be almost a "non event". Although improved means of communication will, perhaps, allow many to be in contact with friends and family, for shipboard routine it is likely to be "business as usual". Undoubtedly, those crew members from countries that do not celebrate Christmas will respect the beliefs and celebrations of their Christian shipmates (as the latter will respect theirs) but - for a ship at sea - many will simply "hum a Christmas tune or have a Christmas thought or speak below his breath to his companion of some bygone Christmas day".

Globally, the Sailors' Society (and kindred organisations) endeavour to spread some Christmas cheer to the crews of the ships berthed in their area - and, through the good offices and hard work of the Southampton Guild of the Sailors' Society many in-port crews (and many that had recently visited the Solent area) will have a small gift to open on Christmas morning - a tiny token to tell them that they are not forgotten. Seafarers' Centres remain open throughout the Christmas period and a Padre is always on hand to share the seafarers concerns and to lead them in worship.

But, at sea or in port, in my experience "every man on board, waking or sleeping, good or bad, had a kinder word for another on that day than on any other day of the year and had shared to some extent in its festivities: and had remembered those he cared for at a distance, and had known that they delighted to remember him."

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