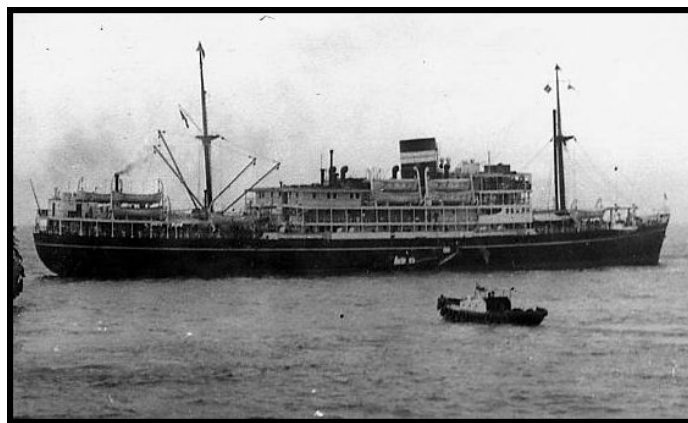


*An original story written for the 2003 British India Steam Navigation Company reunion in Auckland, New Zealand, by Barry Young.*

*Captain Barry Young, Extra Master, an ex BI officer, originally from South Africa, ex General Botha school and retired lecturer at the Maritime College in Auckland, has given me his permission for this delightful story to be reprinted here in The Cachalot.*



Mr Banerjee had been the mail wallah in Bombay since the end of the Second World War. His job was to meet each ship on arrival and take delivery of the Royal Mail which that ship was carrying. He also visited mail ships before departure to load outgoing mail. His trim, neatly dressed figure was a familiar sight on the water front in the nineteen fifties and sixties. He was always accompanied by a gang of six or so porters who carried the mail bags one at a time balanced on their heads, between the ship's mail room and the hatch square. Mr Banerjee and I had established a good working relationship. He was both friendly and efficient so I enjoyed his visits. I discovered he liked a glass of gin and tonic while completing the paperwork in my cabin. I always kept a bottle of Gordons in my locker for this purpose and made sure that some tonic and ice was handy on the days he was due to visit our ship.

In 1961 I was a newly promoted second mate on Dumra, one of the four Gulf D's running between Bombay and the Persian Gulf. My shipboard duties included being responsible for the loading and discharging of the mail bags and the security of the mail locker below decks. The Gulf D's averaged one port per day, so almost every day I would unlock the heavy steel door of the mail room deep within the bowels of the ship. Each mail bag would then be tallied in or out of the mail room. Special care was taken with the red labelled registered bags. They were stowed separately from the ordinary mail. On completion of the loading and discharging of mail at each port, the registered bags in the room were counted to make sure that none were missing. The loss of any mail was a serious matter but the loss of registered mail could, depending on the circumstances, result in demotion or even dismissal. At the very least the loss would trigger an avalanche of paperwork which would continue for months and which would include the inevitable "please explain" letter addressed to the ship's captain. This was bound to incur his wrath. Not the sort of thing a newly promoted second mate needs!

This story is really about the voyage on which I lost a registered mail bag. I discovered the loss while the ship was in the Persian Gulf when I routinely made a count of the registered bags in the mail room. I still don't know how the bag went missing. Each bag going in or out was counted by both myself and the mail wallah independently so a miss-count was out of the question. I suspect that the Bombay bag was stolen while my back was turned or my attention distracted. I shall never know what actually happened. To say that I was worried would be an understatement. When I first discovered the loss I spent hours counting and recounting all of the hundreds of bags in the mail room. I did not report the loss to the Captain as I should have done because I kept hoping the bag would turn up. It never did. By the time the ship berthed at Ballard Pier, Bombay, I was really worried.

Mr Banerjee greeted me with a friendly smile as he reached the top of the gangway. I led the way down to the mail room and on the way I tried to tell him that a registered bag was missing, but he cut me short saying, "No, no, don't worry Mr Young, I know you. You would never lose a registered mail bag." There seemed little point in arguing at that stage so we continued on to the mail room which I unlocked and we began the counting. One of us stood on each side of the door and with the porters passing between us, each with a bulky mail bag on his head and shoulders. As each one passed we would click our little chrome plated counters. It took about twenty minutes to discharge the ordinary mail, then we started on the registered mail.

The mail room was alongside the engine room bulkhead and it was always uncomfortably hot down there but on this day I was perspiring even more than usual. My white uniform was soaked. Crunch time was rapidly approaching! The pile of bags remaining in the room grew smaller until one remained. A porter hoisted it on to his shoulders and passed it between us. I clicked my counter, looked at it and then held it up towards Mr Banerjee for him to see the numbers. "There, you see Mr Banerjee, we are one bag short" Without hesitation he smiled back at me and said, "No, no Mr Young, don't worry, the tally is correct, Didn't you see the last man had two "bags" on his head! Without another word he turned away and headed up to the fresh air and my cabin for the signing of the paper work.

Nothing further was said about the missing registered mailbag. I can't imagine how it was accounted for at the post office. In India there are mysterious ways of dealing with situations of this sort. I "do" know that it was a very relieved and grateful young British India officer who poured the mail wallah a particularly large peg of gin to go with his tonic and ice.

As he sat on the edge of my settee sipping his drink and enjoying the cooling flow of air from the cabin fan, Mr Banerjee said, "I like coming aboard DUMRA. We never seem to have any problems on this ship".