

Daddy's Coming Home

The British & Commonwealth Shipping Company Limited was formed, in 1956, by the merger of two great shipping companies – Clan Line Steamers Ltd. and The Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company. The fleet of conventional passenger vessels, dry cargo ships, tankers, bulk carriers, refrigerated carriers and newsprint carriers -109 ships in all - traded world-wide but, by the mid 70's it was obvious that the Union-Castle passenger vessels could no longer compete with the jumbo jet and, in October 1977 the Southampton arrival of the mailship "Southampton Castle" marked the end of the South African passenger and mail service. The introduction of containerisation saw the decline of the conventional cargo carrier and, by 1983, the "Castles" and the "Clans" had disappeared.

Since then, throughout the United Kingdom, reunions of the employees of "B&C" are convened annually in Liverpool, Glasgow, Southampton and, more recently, Eastbourne, and they invariably attract a wide cross-section of those who were employed ashore or afloat, in whatever capacity.

Some years ago, the Southampton reunion was attended by a young man whose name did not appear on the list of previous attendees and- after being made welcome – he confided that he was "here to find out about my Father – I really never knew him". His father had been Master of a cargo vessel and had died aboard his ship in a foreign port when the man was a teenager and he was hoping to meet someone who had served with his father and who could tell him "what sort of a man he was". Fortunately, there were several present who had sailed with his father and they were able to assure him that he had been a well respected and popular shipmaster. Later, the young man told me that, as a child, his memories of his father centred around an injunction, to him and his younger brother, from his mother to the effect that "Now – Daddy will be home tomorrow and he will not have had much sleep so you must be very quiet and allow him to get some rest". Understandably, this put a bit of a "damper" on Daddy's homecoming and their relationship was never as warm as it might have been. At the reunion he was overjoyed to learn that his father had been well liked and respected and, he and his brother have attended every reunion since to enjoy the opportunity to talk about the man of whom they knew so little.

More recently, another man appeared and he too was seeking news of his father who was a well-known Master in Union-Castle. He told us that his attendance at boarding school meant that he seldom saw his father during his short leaves and that these leaves seldom coincided with his school holidays. Again, he was overjoyed to learn that his father had enjoyed the affection and respect of those who served with him but it was sad to hear that, on retirement, his father "sat in a chair and seldom spoke of his life at sea"

Undoubtedly, the periods of long separation created by seafaring, impose strains on the relationship between the seafarer and his close family and instances like those above are by no means uncommon. Long voyages dictate that wives are forced to make their "own" lives and many build up a social life (often with the wives of other seafarers) based on the realisation that they are almost a "single parent." Understandably, when their husband comes home they resent having to depart from their social routine and fall-in with his every suggestion. Equally understandably, the husband is unwilling to join in his wife's social round – unless he has the good fortune to meet another seafarer with whom he can exchange reminiscences!

Children too may find it difficult to bond with the infrequent visitor who walks through the door, disrupts their routine, monopolises the television – and sits on "pussy's chair"!

Frequently, on retirement, the long service seafarer may find that he has very few friends and is entirely dependent on the comradeship afforded by seafarers clubs and associations.

Life at sea – particularly on ships undertaking long voyages –"makes seafarers reliant on their own skills and resources when faced with problems" and they are often reluctant to seek help from others –other than in extreme circumstances of danger to their ship and those who serve in it. Few people ashore can appreciate or understand the demands and sacrifices created by today's trading patterns in the often hostile environment of the oceans of the world and the seafarer finds it difficult to talk to those who have never experienced them.

Today, few ships stay in port long enough to allow crew members to enjoy a run ashore – provided that the harsh dictates of the International Ship and Port Security Regulations do not preclude them from setting a foot ashore – and periods of shipboard engagement for those serving afloat tend to get longer and longer. Smaller crews (giving rise to fatigue), a wide range of nationalities and cultures, commercial pressure and uncertainty of employment are but a few of the other factors detracting from the quality of a seafarers life and the current trend to make ships "dry" means that the onboard social life created by the lounge is being replaced by the closed cabin door and a DVD player. The feeling of isolation and loneliness can be greatly overcome when crew members have access to satellite communication systems enabling them to speak to family members on a regular basis and to keep up-to-date with their news- and to receive photographs of family events. Recently, on a cruise ship a young man proudly displayed photographs of his seven months old daughter: He had never actually seen her but he regularly received photographs showing her development –and she had "spoken" to him twice on the telephone! Unfortunately, not every ship is fitted with the communication equipment but it IS becoming more and more available and many Seafarers' Centres throughout the UK and elsewhere, are fitting up-to-date computers incorporating video cameras.