

First Tripper

The account in the last issue, by our Staff Captain, Les Morris, of his first trip at sea, has stirred the memories of a few and this offering comes from Tony Ireland, also a cadet with British and Commonwealth at around the same time. The story, which details the temptations facing a young cadet, could have been called, "Confessions of", or perhaps, "Tally... Oh!"

After finishing my pre-sea training at the School of Navigation in December 1960, and been accepted into the British & Commonwealth Shipping Company, I joined my first ship in Vittoria Dock, Birkenhead on the 29.12.60.

It was no less than the tss 'Clan Davidson' – a training ship with 13 cadets. (As a point of interest and, as mentioned by Captain Morris, the vessel was seconded by the RN in WW2, named (HMS) Bonaventure, and was the mother ship for the human torpedoes that attempted to sink the 'Tirpitz' holed up in a Norwegian fiord).

On my Father's advice, I joined in my School of Navigation, blue reefer uniform. After introducing myself to the Chief Officer, who seemed to stifle a smile – he told me that, as I was in uniform, I should go and tally the incoming cargo of crated Guinness in No.2 lower hold.

As I left the centre accommodation I passed the Night Watchman who'd just come on duty, he remarked that on the previous ship he was on, (not B&C incidently) the Cadet that had tallied booze was too squiffed to climb out of the hold.! I naturally assured him that I was from the School of 'Nav', and had been properly trained !

After climbing down on a vertical fixed ladder, past upper and lower tween decks, I finally reached bottom. My life at sea had commenced in the lower hold !

The Gang Boss and Stevedores were already there, all Irish, and we are loading the 'Black Stuff'!! The cargo was 'unconditioned' and on it's way to Mauritius, by which time it should have finished its final fermentation in the bottle. The pint bottles were 12 to a wooden crate. These crates were stacked in slings and sent down by crane to land on a contraption that can only be described as a table with a wheel on each of the 4 legs. This loaded table would then be pushed to the after end of the hold, and the crates stacked with the aid of the Stevedore's hooks.

After several successful stowings, the Boss came to me and suggested opening a crate and enjoy a Festive sip! Again my S.o.N training kicked in, and I said 'No Way – I'm here to tally this stuff !' Of course, after a wink aloft from the Boss – the next sling came crashing down, and several crates started oozing 'black stuff !' I then agreed to just one crate, and was amazed at the expertise shown by the Gang Boss, prising out the securing nails on the crate lid with the point of his hook with such precision.

Ping, ping, ping and we all seemed to have an opened bottle of still fermenting dynamite ! I remember removing my cap, jacket and tie and working with the stevedores to finish the stowing of the cargo in record time. They had even given me a hook to use!

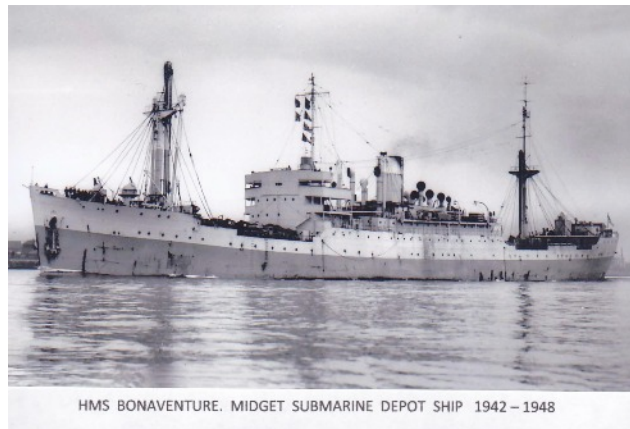
The high climb up out of the hold was now too daunting, let alone dangerous. So as the Gang of Stevedores with Tally Cadet were all lifted out by crane in a cargo sling – I remember coming over the hatch coaming to land on deck, and noticing the knowing and wistful expression on the Night Watchman's face !!!!B*****d !

Our next port was Glasgow at New Year to load Whisky!.....I've already admitted too much, but it was yet another episode in the 'real world of that time', that somehow didn't seem to have been covered in my 'pre-sea training !!!'

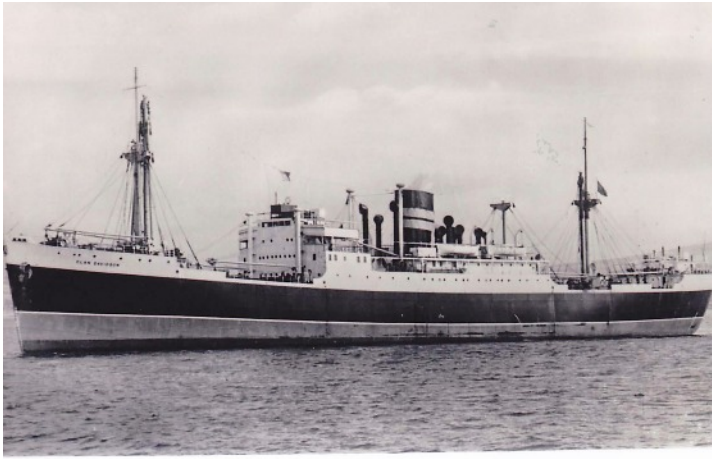
Anyway, although I was the only S.o.N. cadet amongst the 13 on board, we all got along famously and enjoyed some great times together. The cadets were responsible for everything forward of the midships bridge. We did wash down all the decks of that accommodation, but also chipped, painted decks, masts, derricks, side rails, greased running and standing rigging, in fact maintained the forepart.

The crew were Indian and the Serang (Bo'sun) and his team maintained everything aft of midships.

At Stations for entering and leaving port, the Serang and crew went aft with the Second Officer. The cadets went forward with the Chief Officer. We used to spice up the heaving lines by putting a steel nut or bolt in the monkeys fist. When entering Bombay, the C/O saw me with heaving line ready to throw to the forward tug, and ordered me to throw. The 'loaded' line was heaved heavenwards and landed down the tug's funnel ! As we were all staring agog, a door opened in the tug accommodation and a boiler-suited engineer came out scratching his head ! It was too much for us cadets, who collapsed with laughter ! The C/O also had to stifle his own laughter to restore order.



HMS BONAVENTURE. MIDGET SUBMARINE DEPOT SHIP 1942 – 1948



TSS CLAN DAVIDSON CAYZER, IRVINE & Co. 1948 - 1963

Our home port after this first trip was Avonmouth, and the Captain advised us that there was a Customs training school there, and that the 'Junior Blackgang' would turn the ship over upon arrival.

This became a mental challenge amongst us 'Men of the Sea' (after just 4 months no less !!) and the similarly aged Customs wallahs !

I don't want to give away how 'Cargo Brand' and contrabrand were moved along the top of vent shafts in the working alleyway to avoid the young tigers, but just mention that apart from the Senior Cadet, the rest of us had 2 berth cabins with upper and lower bunks.

We had to stand by in our cabins for inspection. Two of us awaited two of them. When it was our turn, they really

turned the cabin over – mattresses were upended, draws of clothes upended etc. etc., until one of them noticed some yarn under a screw in the drip tray of the porthole box. (some paint had been disturbed on the screw). Immediately the pair of us were ordered to stay put, and they went outside shouting to the rest of the Blackgang to come and witness their 'Discovery !'

With all present, and packing our little cabin, a screwdriver was presented, and the 'Discoverer' unscrewed all the screws around the drip tray, making sure he had hold of the yarn – which he pulled and pulled and pulled – until he finally brought up the whole bale of twine, to the end of which I had tied just one cigarette!!...Ha !

With his feet covered in masses of yarn, holding a solitary ciggy on the end, amid the loud sniggers and laughter from his own!.....I think it was a 'Coup for Cadets' and also realised my 'Pre Sea Training was NOT all in Vain!Yeh !