

Last Voyage of the S. S. "CLAN ALPINE"



On 31st October 1960 while on voyage from Glasgow to Chittagong with general cargo, the vessel was caught in a cyclone while anchored off Chittagong. Driven from her moorings she was left high and dry in paddy fields at Skonai Chori, 11 miles N.N. W. of the entrance to the Kharnapuli River. The vessel was declared a constructive total loss, and the cargo was discharged into lorries. On February 14th 1961 she was sold to East Bengal Trading Corporation Ltd. and broken up as she lay.

John Morris, brother of Staff Captain Les, was 3rd Engineer on the eventful trip and has written this account of it. It will be concluded in the next edition..

S. S. "CLAN ALPINE" (1945-1957) and (1959-1960)

O.N. 169016. 7168 g. 4253 n. 3 Cylinder, Triple expansion Steam engine, 2510 nhp. Built by G. Clark Ltd. Sunderland.

Launched 17th January 1942 and completed April 1942 by J. L. Thompson & Sons Ltd., Sunderland (Yard No. 615) as "EMPIRE BARRIE" for the Ministry of War Transport. Allan, Black & Co., Sunderland, appointed managers.

In 1944 Cayzer Irvine & Co. Ltd. appointed managers.

Purchased in 1945 by Clan Line Steamers and renamed "CLAN ALPINE".

In 1952 underwent strain comparison tests with the welded "OCEAN VULCAN".

1957 registered under Bullard, King & Co. Ltd. and renamed "UMVOTI".

1959 registered under The Clan Line Steamers Ltd. and renamed "CLAN ALPINE" again.

In 1960 sold to Japanese breakers with delivery November 1960.

I had just been promoted to 3rd Engineer Officer, and after the usual stint of relieving duties around the coast, I was appointed to the "Clan Alpine" which was loading at Vittoria Dock in Birkenhead. I was 22 years old and had joined Clan Line in January 1957. My letter of appointment had said that the trip was to be with a full general cargo for India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) then on to be scrapped at a location to be determined later.

The company was often called the "Scottish Navy" due I believe to the fact that the Officers wore naval rather than merchant braid. The vessels were well built and much respected in the maritime world. Each ship flew a unique stem jack of its particular tartan with a lion rampant on a white diamond.

The "Alpine" was a 7,103 gross ton standard "Empire" class vessel. She was 424 ft. in length and had been built as the "Empire Borne" at Sunderland in 1942. She was purchased by Clan Line in 1945 from the Ministry of War Transport and renamed "Clan Alpine". (Coincidentally this was the name of both first and last vessels built by Clan Line). As with most Clan Line vessels she had been well maintained in seaworthy condition. However, as the company had a number of new vessels built and building she was no longer required. The 2,500 horsepower engine was reliable and economical but at a service speed 10.5 knots much too slow for the increasingly competitive cargo liner trade to India, Pakistan, Ceylon, South and East Africa and Australia that Clan Line engaged in.

The Engine Room was small but compact compared to modern vessels. The main propulsion unit was a 3-cylinder triple expansion steam engine, the steam provided by 3 Scotch Boilers. Two Bellis & Morcom steam driven generators provided lighting and heating.

The engine room compliment consisted of 5 Engineer Officers, the Chief and 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Engineers. While the vessel was at sea, the senior watch keepers in charge of their respective watches were the 2nd Engineer (4 to 8); 3rd Engineer (12 to 4); 4th Engineer (8 to 12). My watch (12 to 4) was known as the "Graveyard" watch, due to the fact that one took over his watch at 2400 hrs. until 0400 hrs., and again at 1200 hrs. until 1600 hrs. Although most Officers detested this particular watch, especially the midnight to 4 a.m., I for one enjoyed the so called "Graveyard" watch, as the majority of the ships compliment were asleep and there was little chance of the Chief Engineer arriving down the engine room and poking around.

There was a compatible and friendly group of 14 officers aboard plus the chief engineers wife and 59 lascars (Indian or Pakistani) crew who were returning to their homes in the Chittagong area after 18 months away serving on various Clan boats. The large number of lascars was partly as a result of this smaller vessel repatriating them from larger company vessels back to Pakistan. Clan Line maintained a boarding house in Glasgow, which was used as a pool of lascar crew. Routinely lascars were transferred from vessels arriving from India to vessels going to South Africa or Australia and vice versa.

We set sail from the Mersey on September 16th 1960 for a trip to the Suez Canal, Assab, Djibouti, Aden, Bombay, Cochin, Tuticorin and final discharge port of Chittagong. Arrival at the Chittagong anchorage was at 0130 hrs. on October 31st. While at anchor, anchor watches are maintained and main engines are on standby. The bridge phoned down to say that a delay was expected till a berth inside the harbour would be available.

While in Bombay, orders had been received that on completion of discharge of cargo in Chittagong, the vessel was to proceed to a scrapyard in Onomichi, Japan. All the officers and crew were looking forward to the trip to Japan as this area was not on Clan Line's normal run. While at anchor, last minute orders were received from the London head office to take a cargo from either Vizaghatnam or Rangoon, to Japan, no doubt to cover the cost of the delivery voyage.

Chittagong, situated at the mouth of the Kharnapuli River, was the principal port, for the then, East Pakistan and had been a regular port of call for the company's vessels for many years. Usually general cargo from the U.K. was unloaded and jute for Dundee and elsewhere was loaded for the return trip. The port was quite well equipped and had good docks and cranes. The population of about 365,000 people was for the most part extremely poor and many lived in bamboo shacks with tin roofs. They certainly didn't need the extra misery that was about to descend on them.

I had just taken over my noon watch (12 to 4), completed my engine room inspection, was chatting with my Pakistani fireman to ensure that all the burners had been cleaned and the correct burner tips installed ready for trip up river, when the engine room phone sounded. The call was from the bridge informing me that the Radio Officer had picked up a cyclone warning from Chittagong Radio. The information indicated that a cyclone was approaching from the south but heading closer to Calcutta than our anchored position. The 2nd mate however informed me that the barometer was falling quite quickly, but at that time the wind was not increasing in force very much. I was about to telephone the Chief Engineer and relate the information just received when the 2nd Engineer appeared alongside. He was already aware of the situation and I informed him that a full head of steam was maintained and main engine kept at the ready. He asked me to keep him informed of any further developments, then left the engine room as he would take over his watch at 1600 hrs. At around 1400 hours, down in the bowels of the engine room one could feel the change in the weather.

When I took over the watch at noon the ship was stable, now she was starting to roll a few degrees to port and starboard. I called up the bridge to find out the latest weather conditions, and was informed that the wind was rising, the barometer was falling rapidly, and that the sky was darkening. As I hung up the telephone, I sensed impending doom. I had just completed the engine room log and sat down to enjoy a hot mug of tea brought to me by my greaser, when the telephone rang once again. The bridge informed me that they had received another warning indicating centre of the cyclone would be over Chittagong at midnight. At this time, the wind was gusting to whole gale force 9 with very rough seas and the ship was rolling and pitching considerably. The barometer had also dropped 0.2" since noon.

At 1600 hrs. I handed over the watch to the 2nd Engineer, informing him that I would make myself available should things deteriorate. I bumped into the 2nd Mate who had also just come off watch and he informed me that the wind had veered to south at hurricane force 12 +. At 1835 hrs. the wind shifted very quickly to SSW. This shift of wind towards the land was to have dire consequences. It was later estimated that the wind force had peaked at over 130 knots and was the areas worst storm in 70 years. I had a quick shower, put on a clean pair of overalls and was eating a sandwich in my cabin, when there was a knock on my door. The door opened and a dark terrified face appeared; it was the greaser on watch informing me that the 2nd Engineer needed me down below.

The port and starboard heavy steel engine room doors had been secured in the fully open position for obvious reasons (quick exit if this became necessary). On me reaching the main engine manoeuvring platform, the 2nd Engineer asked me to stand by the controls while he went walk about checking the state of the engine room / boiler room bilge's and the bilge at the stern end of the ship known as the "tunnel well". The engine room telegraph was reading "Full Ahead", boiler pressure was just under the maximum prior to the safety valves lifting and the vessel was going astern up the Sandwip Channel at 35 knots dragging both anchors. No more could be done than was already being done. We were now in the hands of the Gods.

Shortly after this, all lights ashore disappeared. Unknown to us at the time, a huge tidal wave had passed over Kutubia Island lighthouse and had left a tide mark 35ft. above sea level. It then passed over the harbour and coastal area causing appalling loss of life, enormous property damage and a total power blackout.

We were later told that the anemometer at the Chittagong Meteorological Office had blown away while recording winds of 120 knots with the centre of the storm approaching us at 30 knots. The sea conditions were unimaginable at this point, completely white and like a boiling cauldron. The air was filled with foam and spray reducing the visibility on the bridge to near zero. The ferocity of the spray was incredible, almost like solid waves breaking over the vessel. At the height of the storm, the radar stopped functioning and it was later found that the scanner motor had burned out with the force of the wind. Unknown to the engine room personnel at the time, the hatch tarpaulins were starting to loosen and in those sea conditions, it seemed we would soon be shipping green seas down the cargo hatches. In that event, the vessel would quickly founder. The weather seemed to be about to completely overwhelm the vessel. Launching a boat or survival in the water seemed out of the question. The vessel was rolling and pitching to such an extent it was proving very difficult to keep on ones feet, without hanging on to a fixed object in the engine room. Although my life flashed before my eyes, I was fortunately too busy to feel any great fear. At around 1850 hrs., and without warning, the wind died completely and the ship lay perfectly still. The 2nd Engineer asked me to go up on deck and see what was happening. I was completely dumbfounded on reaching the main deck, the wind had died completely, the sea was relatively calm and one could see a well-defined circle in the sky overhead. At this point I realised that we were in the eye of the storm. The calm however only lasted about 30 seconds before it resumed its fury. At 1925 hrs. we felt a slight bump and immediately noticed that we were losing vacuum on the main engine. The cooling water to the main condenser has two suctions, a low suction on the ships bottom, and a high suction just below the ships waterline. We were on the low suction at the time and assuming that the suction inlet had become blocked with mud and silt, we changed over to the high suction in order to get flow of water back through the condenser as quickly as possible so that vacuum on the main engine would be reinstated. After a few more bumps and scrapes felt, the engine room telegraph rang to main engine "Stop". The 2nd Engineer, 5th Engineer and myself looked at each other in disbelief as the main engine came to a stop. Seconds later, the phone rang and the bridge informed us that the vessel was aground. At this news, a wonderful feeling of tremendous relief prevailed.

It was astounding how quickly the weather improved. The wind died right down to a gentle breeze and a beautiful tropic moon came out as the clouds rolled away. At this stage the ships Master, Captain F. Harris thought that the vessel was aground on a flat bottom somewhere north of the port and plans were made to maintain full steam to pull her off in the morning. Suddenly and without warning, the engine room telegraph rang asking for an engine movement. It appeared that the 2nd Mate on the bridge saw what he thought was rocks off the port quarter and rang the engine room telegraph in an attempt to get clear. But a further study at the "rocks" through binoculars revealed that they were in fact the tops of palm trees becoming visible as the water was receding. "Finished with Engines" was then rung on the engine room telegraph and this was to be the last time her main engines ever moved.

The account of the aftermath to this stranding will be included in the next edition. Ed

Last Voyage of the S. S. "CLAN ALPINE"

Concluding the account by her 3rd Engineer, John Morris.

THE AFTERMATH

After shutting down main engine and all non-essential auxiliaries, the boiler Stop valves were closed, two boilers were shut down and just one boiler left on line producing steam for essential auxiliaries and to run the steam driven generators.

The 2nd Engineer and myself went to Chief Engineer, Charlie Ross's cabin to make our report and to confirm the requirements for steam in the morning. Mrs Ross, who was sailing on this voyage prior to her husband's retirement, was sitting on the settee in a state of shock. Their cabin was covered in thick filthy mud from the paddy field. A non-return valve of an over the side discharge pipe wasn't functioning and the mud had blown up through the cabin sink drain.

At daybreak a strange sight of paddy fields and palm trees in all directions awaited us. Unbelievable the sea appeared to be at least a half-mile away. The 2nd Mate got a couple of compass bearings and fixed our position at Sonachara Beach, 11 miles NNW of the Chittagong and Kharnapuli River entrance.



The vessel had been dragged eight miles up the Sandwip Channel, The vessel was in a perfectly upright position and all was well with the exception of the lack of water. This was probably the first time in history that a deep-sea vessel had ever been anywhere near this location. Capt Harris dispatched a radio message to the London head office of our position and predicament. "Vessel driven ashore in position indicated (22 25'W, 91 44'E) during a cyclone, no casualties suffered among the crew. The response from our London office was immediate, "Please confirm position".

We just had breakfast and some of the ships officers were looking over the vessels side around mid-morning when a man in a pith helmet was seen walking out of the jungle and across the paddy field towards us. He turned out to be the District Commissioner who was assessing damage to the area. He seemed quite stunned at our predicament and called up to Capt. Harris, "How are you going to get off again?" The old man replied "I'm waiting for the next cyclone".

Later in the morning our company agent showed up to enquire of our welfare. There was a total telephone failure in the region and they had heard a rumour of our situation. Apparently a local fisherman, out looking for his fishing boat, had stumbled on this huge ship lying in a paddy field. He ran to the main Road, stopped a passing vehicle on its way to Chittagong, and the driver informed the local police. The message went round the ship like wildfire that the company agent had the crew mail in his possession, The dutiful 2nd Mate volunteered to go down the pilot ladder and on to the paddy field to collect this precious mail There were a number of large pools of filthy muddy water around and on the 2nd Mate's return, clutching the mail bag, he fell into one of them over his head, to the merriment of all on deck. As his head reappeared, shouts of "Don't you dare get those letters wet" came from those aboard ship.

Majority of us now felt that the cyclone and fate of the vessel would eventually reach the British Press, and that our families would be worried. The Radio Officer sent radiograms for us at night directly through Portishead Radio. I found out later that my wife had heard nothing about the cyclone and only started to worry when she got the supposedly reassuring telegram. I was fortunate at this time to have an uncle who also worked for Clan Line. He was Captain L.C. Higgins master of the S.S. Clan Shaw who was home on leave at the time. He contacted head office in London and confirmed that the "Clan Alpine" was aground, but that all the Officers and crew were safe.

The devastation in the region was terrible. Thousands of people were drowned or killed by sheets of corrugated metal etc. blowing along at over 120 knots. Two ships sank in the harbour and many more were badly damaged. Not one crane was left standing in the docks and power and telephone poles were down by the hundreds.

The President of Pakistan, General Mohammed Ayub Khan, paid us a surprise visit by helicopter. He asked Capt Harris how we would get the ship back to sea. The Captain jokingly replied that we would put rollers under it and roll it back to the sea. A number of reporters around at the time wrote this down and it was later stated as fact in a number of Indian and Pakistani newspapers. The President had all the officers made honorary members of the Chittagong Club which was exclusive for the local "Burra Sahibs" (Big Shots). This included the use of a few bungalows, which we used in rotation and proved to be a welcome break from staying on board in those conditions.

One could see that Dictatorships were not all bad! He had mobilised the bureaucrats to get food and medical supplies moving and to get the power, phones and the harbour operational. It's unlikely that recovery would have moved so quickly without the absolute power he wielded. There was a food shortage and merchants hoarding supplies were threatened with the most severe punishment.

Unfortunately, the most heartrending acts were to follow in the days to come. There were many human bodies and carcasses of cows around which in the tropical climate were quickly putrefying. The smell became sickening. Indeed carcasses were floating in many of the ponds that people drank from. As the tide came in, it brought further bodies of both humans and cattle washed out to sea during the cyclone. As there was great concern of a typhoid or cholera outbreak, a shallow grave was dug alongside the human remains and the bodies buried where

they lay. Later the army appeared and rounded up the local population in the villages nearby at gunpoint and vaccinated them with pneumatic injection equipment supplied by the United Nations. The army came on board ship and wanted to vaccinate the officers, but we managed to convince them that we had all been vaccinated prior to leaving the UK. The animal carcasses were burnt by the army using flame-throwers.

A few days after the grounding, the 2nd and 3rd Officers took a ten-minute walk from the ship to the waters edge. Using his sextant he fixed the distance as a half-mile. Although there was water within a half-mile, it was extremely shallow. It was in fact about three miles to where there was sufficient depth to float the ship. Later a number of salvage experts visited the ship, surveyed the situation and left shaking their heads. One however mentioned that salvage was feasible but not nearly economically practical. The Beaufort Scale was normally used to enter the winds force in the ship's log. This unfortunately only went to 12 for a hurricane of 66 knots. It was calculated later that the wind in fact reached more than double the scale at 135 knots!

Obtaining boiler feed-water was a problem that the engineers had to contend with. The boiler feed-water, kept in a double bottom tank, was reaching a dangerously low level. One main boiler had to be kept on line supplying steam to operate the steam driven generators and auxiliary pumps. As there was no sea water available to cool the auxiliary condenser, all the steam was exhausted to atmosphere. There was only one solution available, sea water had to be used as boiler feed-water. Sea lapped the ship's side at high tide and it was decided to dig a deep trench alongside the vessel. As the tide came in, the trench would fill up with sea water and this would then be pumped into the double-bottom tank and used as boiler-feed. How this was achieved was a feat of engineering.

The steering gear was situated aft in what's called, in naval terms, the "Steering Flat", this compartment also contained the diesel driven "Emergency Fire Pump". A 20' length of 6" diameter wire reinforced flexible pipe, flanged at one end, was located in the engine room. The flanged end of the pipe was positioned over the inlet to the emergency fire pump suction on the ships side, then drilled, tapped and bolted. The other end of this pipe now lay in the trench. The inspection cover was removed from No. 6 double-bottom fresh water tank and after rearranging pipework in the engine room, one end of a fire hose was connected to the fire main and the other end dropped into the double-bottom tank. At high tide the emergency diesel fire pump was started, drawing sea water from the trench and pumping it into the double-bottom tank. This muddy sea water was then used as boiler feed water. Pumping this contaminated water into the boiler was against all engineering practice and also against all that one was taught while studying for one's ticket. However, the boiler was blown down twice a day to keep down the salinity. But for a vessel to be scrapped, this was expedient. To conserve feed water, the generators were shut down during daylight hours, and ships power being restored as dusk fell. As the vessel had bare steel decks she cooked in the tropical heat. It's only when the ship is out of water that you realise how important this commodity is for the vessel's every need.

There was still 2,400 tons of general cargo to unload. Due to the devastation ashore, very little help was available from the shore authorities. Self preservation and motivation was therefore the order of the day. Dozens of "coolies" were employed to construct a roadway linking the ship to the main Chittagong highway, through a section of the jungle and across the paddy fields. A stockade was also constructed alongside the vessel and the cargo was unloaded over the side using the ships steam winches, then taken away by lorry. As one can imagine, this was a very slow process, and discharge was completed on January 4th 1961.

Many of the ships lascars came from Sandwip Island, close to where the vessel grounded. It was a very low lying and totally flat area and the tidal wave had swept right over it causing huge loss of life and property. A number of our crew had lost family members that night. You could hardly imagine a more dreadful homecoming to the crew after eighteen months away.

The vessel soon became something of a tourist attraction. We woke one morning to find that an enterprising local had built a teashop close to the ship, selling tea to the thousand who visited. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip later visited the vessel, but I never heard whether they bought any tea!

The ship was finally declared a constructive total loss and Clan Line did very well financially from it. Her insured value was a great deal more than scrap so the old ship made money for the company to the end. Soon after the cargo was discharged, the vessel was sold for scrap and broken up where she lay. However, the scrap merchants did not get everything as I acquired the ships engine room clock as a memento. I still have this in my possession and it still keeps perfect time.

The area between Calcutta and Chittagong is notorious for cyclones even to this day. Looking back, I feel privileged to have witnessed, but more important, to have survived the cyclone and lived to tell the tale. One of the world's greatest natural disasters occurred in this area in 1876 when a similar cyclone followed by a tidal wave killed over 100,000 people.

I never again met up with the Officers of the "Clan Alpine", but visiting the local newsagent in February 1998, the front cover of a nautical magazine caught my eye. It read- "SHIP IN A PADDY FIELD". Glancing through the magazine I was amazed to see photographs and an article on the final voyage of the S.S. Clan Alpine. The article was written by Capt. Andy Logan, who in 1969 was the "Clan Alpine's" Second Officer. I contacted the editor of "Sea Breezes", the nautical magazine in which the article appeared, explained who I was, and was informed that Capt. Logan now lived in Vancouver (Canada). On obtaining Andy's telephone number, I contacted him, much to his surprise, and promised to keep in touch. We now correspond on a regular basis using the "Internet", Charlie Ross, (now deceased), the Chief Engineer of the "Clan Alpine" retired and emigrated to Victoria (Canada). Capt. Andy Logan has informed me that at the time of the cyclone, had the wind not veered from south to south-west its quite likely that the vessel would have continued to drag her anchor for a few more miles up the Sandwip Channel till the storm passed. It would then have been possible to sail back to Chittagong and continue the voyage to Japan. However, that is water under, or in this case, water not under the bridge.

John Morris