

Leopards on the Loose

This account by Reg Kelso appeared in The Master Mariners of Southampton by Simon Daniels

At the outbreak of war the risk of animals escaping from zoos liable to damage by bombing was too great and many of them were put down but, in 1946, with life returning to normal the zoos set about the task of restocking,

At that time I was serving as a Cadet in the general cargo ship "GOOD HOPE CASTLE" a 10,000-ton "Empire" Class vessel with a crew of 68, engaged in the "triangular" trade UK/Canada/USA/West Indies/South Africa/East Africa/Mediterranean ports/UK. We carried 12 passengers from the UK and the USA but, for reasons that were never very clear, we often embarked an additional dozen in Trinidad for disembarkation in South and East Africa. Many of them were missionary families and they lived in varying degrees of discomfort in what had been D.E.M.S accommodation dependent on "punkah louvres" for ventilation. The passenger accommodation had been casually referred to as "Belsen" until such time as our employers heard of this and sent a "stern letter" forbidding the terminology. Thereafter, quite understandably, it was NEVER referred to as anything other than "Belsen"! The voyages were of about five months duration but if we did a "double header" by returning to the USA from South Africa and then returning there, it could stretch to seven months. As Cadets we were paid £4.7.6 per month but this was augmented by £5.0.0 "war risk money" giving a monthly total of £9.7.6. We were seldom short of money.

In February of 1947, in Durban, when the Mombasa "cargo booking list" arrived there was great excitement when we read "66 live animals in cages – weather deck stowage". We were supplied with reels of cheap wire rope, clamps, shackles and bottle-screws and, by the time we arrived in Mombasa everything was in readiness to secure the cages on the foredeck and afterdeck.

The discharge and loading of general cargo proceeded as normal and then, with hatches battened down for sea, we awaited the arrival of our "guests". The human ones came first – a small Scot from Glasgow Zoo and an even smaller Englishman from a zoo in Manchester – and the first day was spent loading and stowing foodstuff and bedding and the two Cadets and two Ordinary Seamen were allocated to assist with this. Next morning we awoke to the sight of a long freight train loaded with cages - big ones, little ones, rectangular ones, square ones, high ones, flat ones – but all with their occupants eying us with suspicion and distrust, in almost total silence. Loading proceeded apace and we helped the sailors with the lashing and securing of the cages. The "zoo" officials dictated what went where and we soon learnt to be very wide-awake when working close to the occupants of a cage. The leopards came first – a female and two cubs in one cage and a male and a cub in another – followed by cheetahs, hyenas, servals, civets, bush babies, aardvarks and monkeys of all shapes, sizes, and colour. Later, cages with two giant sand rats and three zebras appeared on the back of a lorry and during the day other lorries turned up with a variety of other animals including a baby hippo. Eventually, with every cage lashed and every animal fed and watered, "GOOD HOPE CASTLE" departed Mombasa bound for Suez, Genoa, Marseilles, and Hull.

As memories of the delights of Mombasa receded and seagoing routine was restored I found myself on the 12-4 Watch with the Second Officer, my fellow-Cadet stood the



Good Hope Castle

8-12 with the Third Officer and the Fourth Officer kept the 4-8 with the Chief Officer. In addition to our navigational watches Cadets usually worked on deck with the sailors from 8.30 to 11.30 daily but, on this voyage we were fully occupied with assisting the "zoo-keepers" with the cleaning out of cages and feeding and watering the animals. The monkeys were our favourites (kindred spirits?) and as they got to recognise us and associate us with food (and bananas smuggled out of the Saloon) they would stage incredible shows of gymnastics (and some rather vulgar antics) to attract our attention. If, en route to another cage, we ignored them they responded with a series of deafening screams before hurling their water containers in our general direction. Every monkey had a nickname – related to shipboard personalities – and the better we got to know them the more they seemed to resemble their namesake! I recall a distinctly difficult 12-4 watch explaining to the Second Officer exactly why we called one of the more amusing monkeys "David"!

As the ship voyaged north at 16.0 knots the weather got hotter and more sultry. The punkah louvre system recirculated hot air, sleep became difficult and the inhabitants of "Belsen" took to sleeping on deck. The needs of the animals were making vast demands on our supply of fresh water and everyone was asked to be as economical as possible. During the hours of darkness Cadets carried out "deck rounds" during and at the end of the watch. The 8-12 man did an inspection between 2200 and 2300, and again at 0015 and I did my rounds between 0200 and 0300 and again at 0415.

We left the Bridge, toured the Boat Deck and the Promenade Deck (stepping over sleeping passengers) and then descended the ladder from the fore end of the Promenade deck to the Main deck to inspect the cages. Generally the animals were asleep and we found that it was unwise to flash a torch as this tended to waken them – particularly the monkeys who assumed that more goodies were to hand – so as we made our way up the starboard side and back down the port side to the ladder to the Promenade Deck we were usually in darkness. Finally we inspected the after deck and returned to the Bridge to report to the OOW. The two giant sand rats were in a smallish cage perched on the mooring bollards outside the door of the afterdeck Lamp Room and I invariably gave them a wide berth. They always seemed to be awake and looking directly at me and I was convinced that they were planning something!

The deck and engine crew lived in the after accommodation and as the voyage progressed they became

more and more friendly with the animals. They, too, had their favourites and many a "blackpan" was shared with a zebra or a cheetah but, to a man, they detested the sand rats!

One of the passengers was an ex Chief of Colonial Police returning home after years in Africa. He talked incessantly and night after night he bored his fellow passengers with long stories of big game hunting, narrow escapes in the bush, his bravery in rescuing a child from the jaws of a leopard and overall knowledge of African fauna. When his fellow travellers sought refuge in deckhouses or the inferno of their cabins he took to collaring the Cadets – and we had no escape. Try as I might to avoid him, "The Major" would ambush me and "advise" on the best way to handle our charges. "Showing them who is in charge" was his favourite and I was never able to convince him that monkeys seldom seemed to respond to this approach.

The ship rounded Guardafui and made up for Aden where we bunkered and replenished fresh water. The heat was stifling and we took the opportunity to hose down many of the animals when the fresh water barge was still supplying us. We sailed in the late evening and shaped up for Suez – a distance of some 1300 miles. There was not a breath of wind but as we knew we could replenish fresh water at Suez and Port Said it was no longer necessary to economise and everybody and everything made the most of it. The first two days were uneventful although the animals were noticeably more restive than they had been previously. The zookeepers said this was because they could smell the land but "The Major" said it was because they were getting bored! Certainly, we were not bored and we spent many extra hours before and after our watches tending to the needs of our caged friends. We were due in Suez Bay in the late morning and about 0020 of that day I answered the engine room telephone to be told by the EOW that the 12-4 greaser had reported "seeing animals loose on the afterdeck" as he came on watch. I reported this to the Second Officer and was instructed to go the other end of the Boat Deck and "have a look". With some apprehension I made my way aft and shone my very bright torch over the two after cargo hatches and on the cages. All seemed to be in order and I reported accordingly. The greaser was adamant that he had seen something moving among

the cages and although it was earlier than usual I was instructed to do my rounds and to "be careful". We debated about calling the Chief Officer and decided against it – the 12-4 greaser was not the most reliable man in the ship and he had had several runs-in with "authority". I went down the ladder to the Promenade deck and threaded my way through the sleeping passengers narrowly avoiding treading on "The Major's" hand as I reached the forward end and started my descent to the foredeck. All was quiet as I worked my way forward but, on this occasion, I was using my torch more freely.



No, not an 'actual' photograph, but one that has been made up. Can you identify the ship, though?

I passed the cheetahs and the monkeys and shone my torch on the hyenas' cage – it was empty, the three hyenas had gone and the door was swinging gently. I had seen enough and turned to retrace my steps towards the ladder to the Promenade Deck. I shone my torch in the direction of the ladder and there, under the ladder, were two yellow eyes staring at me. Almost immediately I saw the two leopard cubs sheltering behind their mother. By this time I was within a few feet of the ladder and I continued very slowly with the torch shining full on the animals; the female leopard snarled and settled back on her haunches as I leapt for the ladder and almost immediately fell headlong over the prostrate form of "The Major". Slamming the gate behind me I shouted to the now wide-awake Major to get everyone inside and rushed back to the Bridge.

The Second Officer was sitting on the flag locker talking to the helmsman and I recall with clarity his response when I shouted "There are leopards loose on the foredeck". He said "God Almighty, man – are you off your head" It took ten seconds for him to realise that I was very sane and very scared before he said "Call the Captain". I went down the chartroom stairs to the Captain's Accommodation and, pulling aside the curtain on his bedroom door, I switched on the light and shouted "Sir, there is a leopard loose on the foredeck"

In later years when he was Commodore and I was his Staff Commander in "EDINBURGH CASTLE" he told the story to many a table of passengers and it never varied. "When the Cadet told me there was a leopard loose I said to him "No, Kelso, there must be more than one – they are not in single cages" This version – related to demonstrate that even when rudely awakened Captains get an immediate grasp of the crisis – contrasted sharply with my own reminiscence and I still swear that I saw three feet of daylight between his bunk and his bare bottom as I said "foredeck". Clad only in a towel, he made the Bridge before I did. The Second Officer had sent the helmsman to call the Chief Officer and very soon a discussion took place. Was I absolutely certain? Was I sure it was a leopard? Was I sure I was certain?

I was adamant that the female leopard and her cubs were hiding under the starboard companionway leading from the foredeck to the promenade deck. I reported that I had told "The Major" to clear the deck of passengers and with that the

Purser was called together with the boatswain and the "stand by" man. Now we remembered the lookout. He was posted on the forecandle head to watch for unlit dhows and was obviously blissfully unaware that he was sharing that area of the ship with three leopards. I phoned the forecandle head and told him, "Come to the Bridge, come down the port side as there are leopards loose on the starboard side". I heard the telephone drop and within a minute or two an ashen faced AB appeared on the Bridge and shouted "What did you say, Paddy?" After some discussion he was dispatched to the "monkey island" to resume his lookout but not before he had been reassured

about the climbing and jumping abilities of leopards.

The Captain rang the Chief Engineer who appeared in his dressing gown and after a few minutes it was decided to stop the ship. Almost simultaneously, everyone remembered that we had forgotten to call the "zoo keepers" and I was sent down to "Belsen" to rouse them. They, too, reacted with alacrity and the Scot started frantically to look through drawers and wardrobes swearing loudly as he did so. I returned to the Bridge and we decided to hoist the "Not Under Command" lights to ensure that passing traffic kept clear of us. By this time the bridge was almost full of people. The Glaswegian zoo-keeper appeared on the scene and announced "I cannot find my gun and ammunition – it must be in my trunk – where is it? It transpired that it was in No.3 hatch upper tween deck and was accessible only by crossing territory currently under the control of three leopards! The Boatswain appeared. A Southampton man he was one of the most senior Boatswains in the company but his tendency to express himself loudly and profanely had necessitated his removal from the large Passenger/Mail ships and every time we passed one of these leviathans he announced to all and sundry "I was an AB when that clown was a deck boy" referring, we assumed, to the mailship Boatswain. He was an excellent seaman and he kept a very "fatherly" eye on the cadets, deck boys and junior seamen.

Suddenly, a thought struck me – only the Second Officer knew about the empty hyena cage! I waited for a brief respite in the discussion and then said, "Oh, incidentally, I think there are some hyenas out as well - their cage is empty." You could have heard a pin drop. The Boatswain broke the silence "If them b's is out they'll make for the galley!" After more question and answer sessions – with me at the receiving end of both – we had established that the foredeck was under the control of three leopards and that the hyenas were probably the animals seen on the after deck by the 12-4 greaser. The Purser reported that the 19 terrified passengers were huddled in a stifling Lounge as a captive audience for "The Major" whose latest gem of advice was "Never turn your back on a wild animal" – a view not universally shared aboard "Good Hope Castle", least of all by me.

My watch was drawing to an end but sleep was out of the question. The "standby man" was adamant that he was not going along the after deck to call the 4-8 and the lookout emphatically said he was quite happy to stay where he was – on monkey island. The Chief Officer rang the Engine Room to be told that the 4-8 watches had not been called, nor would they be, and that the weather doors to the crew's quarters had been closed and "dogged down".

A scouting party was sent out and I carried the battery for the aldis signal lamp held by the Chief Officer. The Boatswain had taken the small axes out of the lifeboats and we armed ourselves with these. We scanned the after deck first but nothing was seen and we moved along the Promenade Deck to the forward end overlooking the fore deck. I pointed to the area under the ladder where I had seen the leopards and we shone the aldis lamp. The area was empty. After some discussion we went to the monkey island (atop the Bridge) and started to scan the foredeck. The pencil of bright light travelled slowly, lighting up the cages as it did so. The empty hyena cage was quite visible but the leopards' cage was hidden by the monkeys who were wide-awake and very excited about something.

I had a feeling that nobody believed me then, quite suddenly, the lookout man shouted "What's that by the masthouse?" and there they were – the mother facing the light

with her yellow eyes clearly visible and the two cubs pressed close to her body. Nobody spoke and as we watched the trio walked slowly forward towards the forecandle head. In preparation for a transit of the Suez Canal, and in order to reduce canal charges, the storage area under the forecandle had been emptied and its contents now occupied both sides of the foredeck abreast of No.1 Hatch. We watched in silence as the leopards – still illuminated by the aldis lamp – walked slowly and deliberately to the starboard entrance of the forecandle space and disappeared inside.

To meet the requirements of the tonnage regulations the entrance to the forecandle space was sealed by fitting heavy wooden slats into steel grooves – starting from the top and sliding them down to form a barrier atop the weather step. The wooden slats were piled neatly by the entrances.

Dawn was breaking over a hazy Red Sea and it was decided to wait for more daylight before taking further action. With the ship stopped there was not a breath of wind and the heat was intolerable. The Purser had opened the passenger bar and was serving coffee and brandy. Mercifully, "The Major" had fallen asleep in a chair and nobody woke him for refreshment. The hyenas were still missing and we pondered on their whereabouts. They could be in a mast house or in the forecandle space – or they could be lurking amongst the cages on the afterdeck.

Daylight came and with it a sinister sight – the dorsal fins of sharks were clearly visible on both sides of the ship and they seemed to be just cruising around with an air of expectancy.

It was agreed that the only course of action was to go forward and fit the weatherboards in the entrances to the forecandle and thus contain the leopards. The Chief Officer, the Boatswain, an Ordinary Seaman called Jerry and the two zoo men made their way forward armed with boat axes and a long boathook and, after a brief check of the area, they dropped the boards into place.

The leopards were now restrained, but how had they escaped? The zoo keepers said that it was probable that the hyenas had used their powerful jaws to break out first. There appeared to be teeth marks on the leopards' cage and large chunks of wood had been torn out in way of the door. Hyenas and leopards are natural enemies and the only reason they could give for this strange action was that the hyenas were trying to get at the cubs. But where were the hyenas? The next problem was to get the leopards' cage forward to try to fit it hard against an entrance to the forecandle head. If we could do that and then remove the slats the animals might just seek the familiar surroundings of their cage and we could close the door on them. It took three hours to get the cage in position and it was heavy work in searing heat – and with the constant worry about the whereabouts of the hyenas. The crew had been reassured about the leopards – we played down the hyena side – so they emerged from their cauldron and helped with rigging derricks and moving cages. About 10.00 all was in readiness. Chippy had repaired the cage and altered the door to a "drop down" one and, on the advice of the zoo men, the cage had been strengthened. We lifted out the slats on the port entrance, fitted the cage door hard against it – and waited. Nothing happened.

An hour passed and it was obvious that nothing WAS going to happen. Food and water had been placed by the cage door but the zoo men felt that the animals were unlikely to emerge into daylight. It was decided that we would have to try to force them out using a hose (we had nothing else) and the engine room was asked to give maximum pressure on the

fire and washdeck line. The Glaswegian zookeeper said he would direct the hose, supported by the Chief Officer and the Boatswain, Jerry, the Ordinary Seaman had the aldis lamp and I carried the battery –wishing that the electric lead was a great deal longer than it was! When all was in readiness we lifted out the slats in the starboard entrance and peered into the darkness. Jerry directed the bright light slowly along the shelves that usually housed the spare mooring ropes and – there they were! The mother snarled silently in our direction then, suddenly, the hose burst into action and a strong jet of water hit her full on the chest. She let out an angry roar and retreated forward. The hose party followed gingerly and slowly we drove the leopards to the port side. Now we had to get them aft and into the cage. Suddenly the mother leapt from the shelving and prostrated herself on the steel deck, snarling and tossing her head. She was very angry. The cubs seemed to be bewildered and they too were snarling. Now, the hose party had to turn aft to drive them into the cage and as they did so the hose "kinked" and the strong jet diminished to a trickle. The Boatswain shouted and Jerry kicked the hose but before the jet could be restored to full power the mother leopard lashed out and slashed the Glaswegian zookeeper's trouser leg to ribbons. The jet drove the mother back and then, quite suddenly, all three ran into the cage and the door was dropped. Immediately, they rushed around the cage desperately trying to break their way out and we gave thanks for Chippy's craftsmanship. It was just after noon.

Despite ruining his trousers the zookeeper did not sustain a single scratch but later he told us that had the animal been an inch closer he would have lost his kneecap.

The hyenas were never seen again and we decided that they had probably jumped overboard very shortly after the 12-4 greaser had seen them on the afterdeck. Later, it was agreed that this probably had some bearing on the close attention of the sharks that were seeking another meal.

We reached Hull some two weeks later and as the dockers were unloading a cage containing seven monkeys they crushed it and the monkeys escaped. Soon they were swarming over derricks and swinging from guy ropes and cargo working ceased. Despite the dire warning from the Boatswain "They'll never catch them b's" they did – three days later - but THAT is another story.

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