

## More Dredgings from the fast-failing memory of Electrical Superintendent Eddie Hunter

### The Fire Course

I won't describe all the circumstances - suffice to say that we had an electrical fire on a vessel. I was going to call it a serious fire, but then any fire on a vessel is serious. This particular event was an electrical fire which did a lot of damage to a generator and some large electric motors, principally because the crew did not fight it correctly.

I was in Oldham, I think it was, visiting the switchgear manufacturer Whipp and Bourne to witness proving tests on a replacement circuit breaker for a main generator for the mv "Suffolk Ferry;" our oldest train ferry. To my surprise, I was summoned over a "Tannoy" system to take an urgent telephone call. The caller was Peter Frost, the Superintendent Marine Engineer. "Eddie, there has been an electrical fire. Make your excuses there and hire a car if necessary ..."

Well, I had to deal with the matter very swiftly, arranging for the damaged generator to be unshipped along with a few other large electric motors for rewinding, and for an electrical contractor to renew several main cables and clear up the extensive water damage. For the next three nights, I think I snatched about three to four hours sleep a night stretched out on a settee in a saloon on the vessel as work went on round the clock. The vessel was back in service in three days.

Then came the difficult bit.

"Er, Chief, about the electrical fire .. ."

"Listen!" he snarled, " Don't *you* think you can lecture .. ."

I stood up. "Hold it! Hold it, Chief, not another word."

But he raved on. "I got my Ticket before your arse was the size of a shirt button!"

"I said, not another word." I tried to keep my voice even and my stare glacial. He turned and left, the crash of the closing door a resounding clap of thunder.

I telephoned the Engineering Superintendents' Secretary. "Annie, there will be fire fighting courses for Seagoing Officers in Portsmouth or Southampton, Liverpool and maybe Glasgow. I want you to check them out for me and book me in on the first available place. The very first available, please. Ring me here. Now, can I speak to the boss, please?"

Annie telephoned within minutes. There was a course starting at Speake, Liverpool, the very next day, and I had the last vacancy.

Well, what a course! Hands up those who know Liverpool or at least have worked with Liverpoolians. You will know what I mean when I say that the course should have been called "Fire Fighting Made Funny." Those Liverpool instructors were hilarious, but, unfortunately as most of the humour was very rude, like how to carry - no, no, I cannot, I dare not recount any instances here to spare the blushes of any sweethearts or wives who might read the Club Magazine.

But, despite the humour, we worked like blazes, too. Dressed in sooty protective clothing, we ran out heavy hoses, doused dunnage fires and fought oil fires with water. It was all very well, but we all knew that it was one thing to fight an oil fire with water when the blazing pan of oil was on the ground, but that trick might just be possible at sea only aboard an all-turbine ship in a dead calm. Even so, I got my eyebrows and hair singed and my knuckles burned when the hot oil ignited again behind my fan wall of water.

One very strong opinion I did bring away from Speake - if *I* were ever in the highly unlikely position of being in command of a vessel at sea, and a fire broke out, I think I would opt to row home in preference to fighting it! Yeah, yeah, yeah, I hear you - "the best lifeboat is the ship!" We have all had *that* drummed into us, but, faced with a raging fire, I'm not so sure I believe it any more.

The final exercise might be worth describing. I did find myself in command. ( Quite right, too. After all, I was the only one there who knew Ohm's Law - and there is no better qualification than that!) The Trainees were divided into five groups of five. The Chief Instructor assured us that the selection was random, but I'm sure he lied - the obvious senior men, by age and infirmity, were picked as Officers Commanding, and so I became a Captain for a short inglorious spell.

The Teams were led out in turn to our second home - the smoke-blackened, fire-buckled steel mock-up across the yard - and briefed, while a dunnage fire somewhere in the mock-up gained hold. My team was last.

I listened to the briefing, while the clouds of black smoke from "our" fire became thicker and thicker. Our water hydrant and the control station were on the upper deck. Our fire was on the lower deck and could be approached only from above, down a ladder then through a latched door which we would have to cool before we could open it. When we had put the fire out, we were to find a ladder leading upwards. We had to climb the ladder dragging the hose with us and cool the chamber above, then exit up another

vertical ladder. "Oh, and you may well encounter an emergency - deal with it. Do all that and you get your Fire Fighting Certificate. Fail to complete the exercise and well, you fail. OK?"

For equipment we had one fire hose with adjustable nozzle, two "recovery" harnesses complete with steel-cored recovery lines, two sets of breathing apparatus each complete with air cylinders giving twenty minutes of life support and heavy spanners for signalling for water on and water off by clouting the bulkhead., and our grubby Firemen's jackets, trousers, heavy helmets and reinforced rubber boots. And ourselves.

"Right, Captain, your gear's all up there on the deck. When you're ready."

Well, being as ready as we were ever going to be, I gave my preliminary order to move. "Up you go!"

I had already weighed up my team, two young Cadets from a shipping company, two overweight smoking and drinking "professional" Junior Engineers of indeterminate age being bullied by their company on a fire fighting refresher course, and me. And I certainly would make no Olympics team -Ieven get winded playing Chess. So my choice, the two Cadets, was far from ideal according to the psychology of firefighting that we had been taught -send in two 28 to 34 year olds. ( Discuss.)

"Right, lads. You two, get kitted up. You two help them. Two knocks repeated, water on, three knocks for water off. Okay?" I must have sounded the part, for they called me "Sir."

BA tested, and the two cadets kitted out, they descended the ladder, smoke billowing from the hatch. The first lad went down dragging the hose. Damn, I'd forgotten to test the hydrant before I committed the boys to the descent. Maybe the Instructor wouldn't notice. His withering look told me he had. I quickly cracked the valve open a touch.

"That's okay. Couple up."

The second Cadet reappeared out of the hatch. He tore off his face mask, gasping for air.

"What's wrong?" I demanded.

"I can't breath. I can't breath. There was this tight band round my chest," he gasped.

"You sure it's not a tight yellow band up yer back?" The Instructor snarled at the boy, before turning to me. "Well, Captain? What's to do?"

I thought, "This is the emergency, the lad's been put up to this." It did occur to me that the Instructor couldn't possibly know who I'd send in. Then again, it was obvious I did not have much choice. I thought, "If I send either of those other two buggers in, I'll have a least one corpse if not two on my conscience." Only one thing for it...

"Get the gear off him. I'll go in myself. Harry, you're in charge here."

Bang bang, pause, bang bang. I turned the water on while the other two practically ripped the BA gear off the boy.

By the time I reached him in the hot smoke-smelling inky blackness, the other Cadet had been struggling alone with the hose for some time. He had located the door. Although he had been directing the water jet on it, you could still fry eggs on the door. I had a bright idea - I knocked the two securing dogs off with my heavy spanner. The door opened with an intense rush of heat as, simultaneously, the water went off. So much for my bright idea.

But it was perhaps a fortunate mistake as it was much easier for me to change places with the Cadet with the hose dead. The Cadet banged the bulkhead and the water started again. I turned the nozzle anticlockwise to make a fan wail of water and the immediate relief from the intense heat was incredible. Of course all this time neither of us could see a damned thing. We advanced cautiously, the Cadet supporting the weight of the stiff hose. Presently, I could just make out the glow of the fire and reduced the wide angle of the water fan slowly and had the joy of seeing the glow diminish and die.

It was damned hard work and I was Garry Packard, but I twisted the nozzle to a jet and still managed to wave the hose about a bit. I remembered where the vertical steel ladder was from an earlier visit to this chamber and prudently played the hose on the rungs, although they were still very hot through our protective rags when we began to climb.

"Off!" I yelled, my voice deafening me inside the smoke helmet. But the Cadet obviously couldn't hear. Somehow I trapped the live hose in some variation of a bear hug, managed to reach the heavy spanner dangling from my belt and clout the bulkhead.

The Cadet and I changed places and he was half-way up the ladder dragging the hose, I was feeding the dead hose up to him, when a sudden glow behind me told me that the damned fire had started again!

"Fred, you're a rotten bugger!" I swore as the Cadet dropped the hose down to me. I grabbed it and he banged for water as smoke closed off the glow of the flames. ( Fred was the Chief Instructor. Nice man, but merciless.)

To this day I don't know where I found the reserves of energy, but I fought the fire a second time. As the flames went out, the side doors of the chamber crashed open and daylight flooded in.

"That's it! Enough!" I faintly heard Fred bellow as regular firemen outside directed two jets of water into the chamber.

"Oh, God! I've failed," I thought as I was led, exhausted, from the chamber.

As I was stripped of my smoke helmet, I saw the grinning face of Fred, the Chief Instructor.

"Fred, you're a rotten bugger," I told him. "That was a swine of a trick."

"I didn't do it," he said, and went on to explain that the fire had become more intense than it would have been had we not lost the time due to that Cadet who chickened out. Consequently, the heart of the fire was still hot enough to spontaneously reignite.

"I thought the Cadet was a set-up. I thought that might be our emergency," I said.

"No, no," said Fred. "Your emergency was a body lying on the deck above. The lad genuinely chickened, so he's failed."

"What about the rest of us? We didn't finish!"

"Nah, you did enough, more than enough." Fred punched my arm, his method of expressing congratulation. (I carry the bruise to this day.)

Well, as this has been an over-long account, and you're probably all bored to the back teeth by now, I shall gloss over the remainder of the affair and my subsequent "chat" with the aggrieved Chief Engineer, whose attitude had sparked ( Ha! Good word, under the circumstances ) had sparked off the necessity for my Fire Fighting Course in the first place. I will just say that I was not going to allow any bugger who does not understand Ohm's Law to tell me that I don't know what I'm talking about - even if he was able to multiply two by two on a slide rule and get approximately four. No, sir.

Oh, and in a fire at sea, I definitely just want to row home. Please, God, just let me row home.

