

# My First Trip

Leslie R Morris

As summer fades towards autumn, the press of this country go into overdrive and publish seemingly acres of script on young adults, having taken their A-level examinations, preparing to leave home and travel afar to University or even farther in order to lift their souls or enrich their minds by taking a “gap” year. If we are to believe everything that is published it seems that these young people often have individually, and/or collectively, a not-so-small army of helpers to ensure that they achieve their aims to the maximum extent. Parents – or a parent – are often heavily involved during these emotional days and can be seen in various stores, purchasing new equipment and clothes for their offspring, who in turn assure their loving parents that no respectable student could do without items.

It is surely a life-changing event.

Good for them – and their parents! But I cannot help but recall the same period in my life and in the lives of my seafaring friends and colleagues of similar age. Our life changing event, as future deck officers anyway, was likely to be our first voyage to sea. In most cases it was as a cadet (or apprentice), but others first went to sea as ordinary seamen and took their examinations later when they had accrued sufficient sea-time.

Most cadets attended a pre-sea training course. These varied from a few weeks to a couple of years. I had none of this. I applied to the British and Commonwealth Shipping Company whilst at grammar school and was invited to an interview at the Royal Liver Building in Liverpool. Another “hopeful” was interviewed at the same time as me and both of us were provisionally accepted, subject to our O-level results being satisfactory. They were satisfactory in both our cases I understand, although I never met the other cadet again.



## **Clan MacLean**

By kind permission of the artist, Lukman Sinclair,  
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A few weeks later I received a letter confirming my appointment as a cadet, and instructing me to join the MV “CLAN MACLEAN” in Liverpool about mid-September 1961, the date to be confirmed later. A list of clothing, uniforms and books was attached to the letter of appointment. There was time for a short holiday with my parents before departing – In Liverpool of all places - and I well remember the name of the steam locomotive hauling one of our trains: “CLAN FRASER”. Railway enthusiasts will remember that she was a “Merchant Navy” class locomotive, and was one of the last steam locomotives in British Rail. An omen of sorts?

My father drove me from our home in Llanberis to Bangor station on the morning of 20th September 1961. My mother decided to stay home. The goodbyes were of course emotional, but not prolonged. It was part of life in our family.

I took a taxi from Lime Street station to the ship in Alexandra Dock and went on board to introduce myself to the Chief Officer. His first words were to the effect that the best thing I could do was to go straight back to Lime Street and catch the first train home. That done with, he then suggested that I settle in to my cabin and get some rest, as were sailing that night for Manchester and sleep would be in short supply. He was right. My fellow cadet (he was also a “first tripper”, but ex HMS Conway training school, so he was well prepared for shipboard life) and I got by on cat-napping for the next 48 hours.

Sleep-wise, life did not improve much for the next few weeks. “CLAN MACLEAN” was newly arrived from the Indian sub-continent and was discharging around UK and continental ports, and for the sea passages the cadets were kept on four-on four-off watches. As Hamburg, Rotterdam and Bremen were the continental discharge ports, not much sleep was forthcoming there either!

I soon realised I was pretty useless as a member of the ship’s crew. I knew nothing about navigation or chartwork (I could not even measure distance off the chart!). I did not know the terms used and something like “*hold the backspring*” meant nothing to me, so I was a liability on the bridge telephone, the position for the junior cadet at harbour stations. However, I was a good lookout and could make very good tea, but it was not a very auspicious start to my career.

Eventually we reached Glasgow, completed discharging and started loading for India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). We changed Articles on 5th October 1961 thus commencing Voyage 33, and shortly thereafter sailed for Birkenhead, our final loading port.

We were at Vittoria Docks, Birkenhead long enough for some of us who had undertaken the coastal voyage to have a weekend’s leave. By now I was beginning to learn about shipboard life, so although it was good to see friends and family for a couple of days, I was looking forward to the deep sea voyage to my country of birth, India. It was therefore no great hardship to find myself back on board once more, helping in my limited way to prepare for the voyage.

We sailed from Birkenhead on 19th October 1961 and having disembarked the Mersey Bar Pilot we were on our way to the Suez Canal, and India.

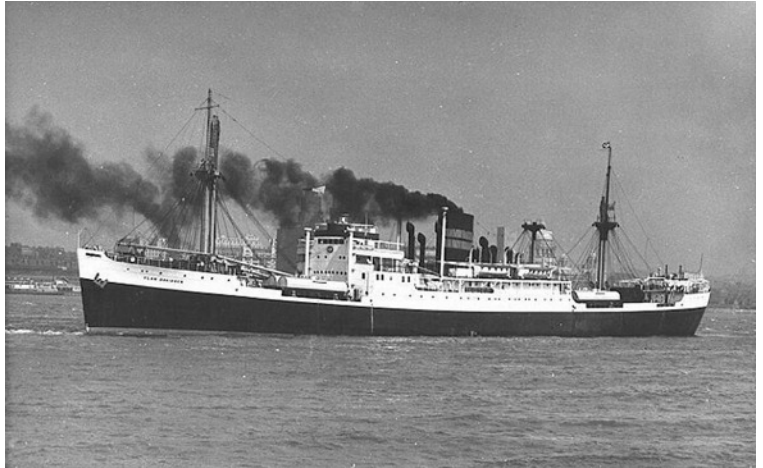
The weather was choppy until Cape Finisterre, but from then on I remember it was balmy. The Chief Officer made it clear that by the time we reached India he expected his two cadets to be useful members of the ship's company. In East Pakistan, cargo information was sent mainly by morse signal lamp, so he expected us to be reasonably proficient by then. For my fellow cadet it was a matter of brushing up on his signalling, but I had to learn from scratch. The Electrical Officer made up a small battery-powered signal lamp connected to a redundant morse key "borrowed" from the Radio Officer, and this enabled us to send morse letters to each other. The Third Officer was our trainer and we accompanied him to the bridge at 1800 every evening at sea when he relieved the Chief Officer for his meal break. Weather and traffic permitting, we then had a concentrated half-hour of morse signalling every evening until we reached Madras, our first port on the subcontinent.

Work at sea was the usual mix of chipping, painting and scraping, interspersed by cargo gear maintenance. My first job of the day, as junior cadet, was to take the hold temperatures. This was hardly the most onerous task as the crew cook (bandhary) was already at work and it would have been churlish of me to refuse a curry puff or two on my rounds!

While we were in the Mediterranean, we overtook a ship that was smoking profusely. It was the "CLAN DAVIDSON" and she was on her last trip to the breakers. During the war, she was renamed "HMS BONAVENTURE" and became the mother ship for the midget submarines that attacked the "TIRPITZ" in Norway, amongst other things.

We reached Port Said and anchored in allotted area to await our convoy for the Suez Canal transit. The cadets assisted the crew prepare the Suez Canal searchlight under the watchful eye of the ship's Carpenter.

Sadly the Chief Steward was taken ill just before arrival and was put ashore in Port Said and later sent home. The Third Officer took over much of the Chief Steward's duties and I was delegated to help him. The Goan Chief Cook was a wonderful character, and both the Third Officer and I learned a lot from him, especially on matters such as food preservation and economy, while still providing good meals. I remember this as being a real and pleasant learning curve that lasted for the remainder of the voyage; it stood me in good stead when I made my own shipboard inspections later in my career.



**Clan Davidson**  
*'Smoking profusely'*

Once the canal transit began in the evening, one cadet stayed with the Carpenter at the searchlight position, whilst the other remained on the bridge. Another long night!

Once we cleared Suez the weather became hot and we changed into white uniforms (or khaki work uniforms, in those days). The ship was not air-conditioned, so the open decks at the after end of the accommodation remained the most popular gathering space for the officers until we changed back into blues on our way home.

While we were in the Red Sea, in early November, we were all shaken by the news of the loss of the "CLAN KEITH" off the Tunisian coast with very heavy loss of life. There were only 6 survivors from a complement of 68, the large crew being due to the fact that there were two Asian crews on board, the extra crew being repatriated to Pakistan for leave at the end of their contract. Most of the officers and many of the crew knew somebody on the "CLAN KEITH" and the atmosphere on board was more than a little subdued for some time afterwards. The two cadets on the "CLAN KEITH" were both lost, one on his first trip. Some time later I was told that the cadet on his first trip was the one who was interviewed with me. There, but for the grace.....

The remainder of the voyage to India passed without further incident. We bunkered in Aden and a few days later dropped anchor outside Madras harbour and were told we had to wait about two weeks before a berth would be available. Eventually we berthed and discharged our Madras cargo. I was able to see a little of Madras while we were there. I was only 5 years old when my family left India, but I still remembered parts such as the railway station (of course, my father being an officer on the Madras and Southern Mahratta Railways!).

Our next port was Chittagong in East Pakistan. The port and surroundings still bore the marks of the cyclone that had hit the area almost exactly a year before. Most of the cranes were still inoperable so we used derricks to discharge. The remains of the "CLAN ALPINE" lay about 15 miles north, but I did not visit the site as road communications were still difficult after the recent monsoons.

While we were in Chittagong, we received a cyclone warning, even though it was late in the season. The warning was withdrawn soon afterwards, but for a while it concentrated our minds. My brother had been on the "CLAN ALPINE" when she had been blown ashore and for a while I thought: not again surely? (See 'Last Voyage of the Clan Alpine' *The Cachalot*, 26 & 27)

After Chittagong we moved to Chalna. This was an anchorage port (in fact I don't remember seeing a port at all, as the cargo was taken away on lighters, and when we started loading, jute bales came to us the same way. The cadets kept the anchor watches overnight, although an officer remained on call. We loaded much of our return cargo in Chalna and spent Christmas and New Year there. I well remember how quiet things were on Christmas Day. Most of the officers retired to their cabins in the afternoon and when I asked why, I was told that their thoughts were with their families. We cadets were allowed a couple of beers on Christmas Day, which we shared with some other junior officers (who had a little more than us!).

New Year: still at anchor at Chalna. At midnight things were livened up by our siren and those of other ships. As the youngest on board I was invited to “ring out the old, and ring in the new” – 16 bells on the fore-castle bell!

There was a good social life between the ships on this coast. Not only between company ships we might meet up with, but also ships from rival British companies such as British India, Brocklebank and Ellerman Line, and also German and Dutch ships, to mention just a few. The Missions to Seamen (as it was then) padre and staff in the various ports organised get-togethers, with football playing a large part in these. (We also tried cricket, but the Europeans were not interested and the locals would thrash us.)

Our next port was Calcutta, its sheer size being a shock after Chittagong and Chalna. If my memory serves me correctly, we were only there for a few days. Kidderpore Dock was a good place to paint the draught marks as it was calm. It also had the most filthy and polluted water, so it was a junior cadet’s job, of course. I was warned by the Chief Officer not to fall in, and to make sure the Roman numerals were painted correctly. Apparently it was not unusual for, say 20 feet (XX), to be painted twice! Thankfully, I managed to complete the task without error and avoided being rushed to hospital to have my stomach pumped and being injected with a course of antibiotics. The dead cow trapped under the pier nearby did nothing for my appetite at dinner, though.

After Calcutta, we were on our way home, although we stopped briefly at a couple of ports on the Malabar Coast to top up with local produce, including spices, both as cargo and for ourselves.

We had a brief stop at Port Sudan at the southern end of the Red Sea, and I think it was here that the Master’s wife and young daughter joined us. It appears that he had won a substantial prize on the Irish Sweeps lottery and decided to fly them out to join us for the remainder of the voyage. That’s the story we heard anyway.

The warm weather continued up to Suez, so by then the ship was looking rather trim, with well scraped decks and bulkheads, and gleaming fresh paint. We changed into “Medi-rig” (white tropical shirt and navy blue trousers) for the Mediterranean and gradually added more clothes after Gibraltar

One of my tasks was to distribute the heavy weather gear to the crew and they needed no urging to line up when the day arrived. Duffel-coats, socks pullovers etc were gratefully received and worn immediately, often in many layers.

The cadets went on to sea watches at Ushant, initially 4-on, 8-off, but 4-on, 4-off for the Dover Strait and the approaches to the Thames. These were the days before Traffic Separation Schemes and it was a bit of a free for all around Dungeness and South Foreland.

We arrived in Tilbury Docks at 2330 on 3rd February 1962 – a cold, wet and miserable night - the end of my first trip!

Post Script: I went home on leave and soon met up with some of my old school friends. It was a slightly sad meeting as it soon became obvious that we had little in common any more. My father realised the problem. He said: “Son, you have grown up”.