

Out of the Box

Further to the piece on 'Combatting Piracy' in the last edition, in which I included Allan McDowall's remembrances, Allan has since gently chided me for my description of his tales as 'lurid'. I grant that it was not the most appropriate term and will stick to 'out of the box'. Here is Allan's sequel to his previous offering.

What happened next –

In the last brief article, some aspects of the consequences of piracy were touched upon. I mentioned that I, personally, had, as it were, got away with it because I had been extremely fortunate in that I had been a listener to a nasty attack taking place not far from the ship of which I was master in the South China Sea, during which the other ship's money plus the radio officer's young wife were stolen. So we had turned the accommodation from a house into a fort. Nothing happened for 4 years, then we had had a warning letter, again very good fortune, and been attacked 35 miles north of Blanglangkang as warned. Due to our preparations, the attack was not successful.

On passing the Brothers, it was interesting to listen to the Norwegian master of a tanker at anchor off the Shell bunkering station complaining bitterly to the Singapore VTIS that during the night, armed thieves had boarded and used the ship's oxy-acetylene gas equipment, stored in an unsecured bayu on deck, to cut themselves a hole in the accommodation and enter, going from cabin to cabin, ending up in the masters bedroom forcing him to open the safe and give them the ship's money. Then they disappeared by the route they entered. Shortly afterwards, I received an instruction to pack up the ship's cash. The launch exchanging the ship's Chief Engineers would bring the Agent, name supplied, and I was to give him the ship's cash (\$ 8,000 US) and obtain a receipt for it, for carriage to the Singapore office for safe keeping " in case you get raided again." The new Chief Engineer duly boarded, followed by the Agent – I gave the Agent the anonymous package and obtained a receipt. The departing Chief boarded the launch, closely followed by the Agent – who was never seen or heard of again - he succeeded where the pirates had failed. Does this sound familiar ?!

Some years later, I was master of a slightly smaller but brand new tanker trading all around the Pacific Ocean – a wonderful run, on the spot market. I loved that form of trading – one only ever got one weeks notice of one's next port, such an adventure. I joined the ship at Singapore, and our first port was Dumai to load a full cargo for Hawaii, Barkers Point (Pearl Harbour).

Dumai Crude looks like black shoe polish, and has to be kept heated – no failure of the heating can happen because the oil solidifies around the steam heating coils, so once solid, the necessary convection currents cannot operate, and the oil burns on the coils. Sometimes such a situation can be rectified by proceeding to a really hot spot with a double hull, but that ship had a single hull, so failure of the heating would have been a disaster. I knew this because I was once sent to an OBO ship where this had happened after cracks had filled the entire ship's double bottom – it took me 6 months to clear it with boiling hot water and a pipe work alteration to extract it to the slop tanks. (another tale) So very careful testing of the heating was carried out.

On arrival in the late afternoon at Dumai, the Agent came up to the bridge when engines had been rung off, to tell me that the Chief Pilot wanted to see me, and that he had put him in my dayroom. I wondered what I had done wrong, could not think of anything, so hurried down to find a tall gentleman in the khaki fatigues of a naval officer – a full Admiral – he was not the Chief Pilot of Dumai, but the Chief Pilot of Indonesia.

So I greeted him as one does such august persons, and asked him what I could do for him.

He said: " About a year ago, I purchased from Japan a fleet of second-hand tugs equipped in the Dutch design of two Schottel thrusters aft." (The devices look like huge outboard motor shafts projecting under the hull, with the propellers mounted within cylindrical ducts. They azimuth independently, and are popular because although less versatile than Voight-Scheider vertical blade thrusters, they are relatively simple, and give more thrust – so their advocated claim.)

" Shortly after arrival, one of the tugs at Dumai dropped one of its thrusters into the middle of the creek. It just fell out of the bottom of the vessel." (If the thruster is not properly secured, and the bolts holding it in place not properly secured also, that will happen.)

I asked him if he know where it was, and how heavy.

He replied : " In the middle of the creek, about 200 metres from your bow. It weighs 7½ tonnes. I have asked 200 other captains, they have all replied that it is impossible, health and safety will not allow them to do it."

Health and Safety is there to keep people healthy and safe, not a magic chest of excuses – if you do something at sea, you have to use your seamanship to ensure it is safe – not use H & S Rules as an excuse not to do something which has to be done.

Old sailing ship saying: " Rules are for the guidance of wise men; and the blind obedience of fools ". But one takes the responsibility for things that go wrong onto ones own shoulders. Outside the box (divergent thinking) yes; but nasty things happen usually outside the box – inside the box is for those things that the devisors of the rules have considered (convergent thinking) – but one cannot consider everything – usually testing situations are unforeseen – in my experience. Operate the rules, but keep a careful eye outside the box in case something not right but not in the rules is going to bite you. The Japanese have a special phrase for it " Sweet as honey is the misfortune of others ...". The Germans call it Schadenfreude. We don't have a word for it

So I said we would do what we could, rang down to the Chief Officer, told him what the situation was and please could he spare the bosun and one seaman for about 45 minutes to 1 hour, to which he readily agreed.

The Chief Pilot and I went forward, where the bosun and seaman were waiting. I told the bosun to get out the new coil of 600 mm terylene messenger, with a UTS of 22 tonnes, plus a coil of tarred marline and all the big shackles, plus 2 x 15 tonne SWL wire strops.

Then I looked over the side. Under the bow was a tug and a dive support craft, and anchored in the middle of the creek was another dive support craft. Astonished, I turned to the Admiral and said: " Were you ready like this for the other 200 captains ?" " No." he said.

First we tightened up the breast ropes. Then we sent away 1 wire strop shackled to the end of the messenger, with a shackle attached to the free eye, with instructions to take a round turn around the shaft behind the propeller next to the leg and shackle it back onto the eye – so that it did not become jammed when the weight came onto the rope. When we received the signal that that was done – it only took about 5 minutes – we heaved away slowly until the messenger was as taut as a violin string – no movement.

Next, we had a spare head rope on the outboard windlass spool with a UTS of 110 tonnes. This was lead through the dolley fairlead close to the messenger with another strop and shackle attached, same as before. This was attached to the messenger in loops with the spare shackles and marlin to stop the loops slipping out of place, and the end of a heaving line attached to the end of the wire to tow it out to the boat on station.

Then we gave the same instruction to the dive boat, and waited for the word that it was ready – again, only about 5 minutes. Then we heaved up the wire very gently, and the weight came on, very tight - then very slowly the wire began to come aboard.

So we heaved wire and messenger together, letting go the shackles on the messenger as they came within reach; and after 20 minutes the rope and wire were vertical. Then the thruster broke surface, very muddy but apparently undamaged. The tug crew hosed it off, no apparent damage.

I asked the admiral to get the tug to come in under the thruster so that it was over the well deck – the thrusters housing is a raised deck right aft, for those not familiar with this tug design – he had blocks of timber ready – and we lowered the thruster onto the tug, the shackles were let go, and we recovered the rope, wire and remaining shackles. My crew hosed off the wire, messenger and the deck.

The Admiral and myself were left alone on the foc'stle in the setting sun. To my astonishment a tear rolled down his cheek – I said: " Its alright, Sir."

He replied: " You don't understand – ."

" No – but why were you all ready this time ? "

He said: " Because, when you were attacked in the north of the Malacca Straits all those years ago, the marines could not get in – I was the Admiral in charge. Your reputation goes before you, Captain."

Astounded, I said: " But there is no reason to be upset, Sir. You have your thrusters back now."

" No - you don't understand. When the thruster was lost, The President (Suharto, an Army General before he took power from President Sukarno) told me that he could not afford failures. If I failed to recover the thruster in one year, he would have me shot. Tomorrow was the last day. "

He said he would invite me to dinner the next time we called.

The next time, he was not there – he did not live in Dumai.

It can be a small world.

There are 5 other people who would have been dead had we not helped – but that is another story – as Kipling would have said - " Oh, best beloved. "