

## TROOPING

The Orient Line managed one Troopship, The EMPIRE ORWELL on behalf of the Ministry of Transport, however on one occasion the ORMONDE was chartered to take New Zealand troops from Wellington to Pusan early in the Korean war.



The ship, as usual, took UK emigrants out as far as Sydney but after they disembarked sailed, empty, across to Wellington where the 'New Zealand K Force' embarked and sailed for Brisbane, arriving on Christmas eve 1950 for bunkers, then onward to Pusan.

Before arrival the O.C. Troops mustered all his men and warned them that although shore leave would be given, the ship would sail at noon the following (Christmas) day and that, as the next port was Pusan, any man who was not on board on sailing would be deemed to have deserted in the face of the enemy and would be punished accordingly.

The city was 'open house' to the troops who had a tremendous welcome and on Christmas morning the wharf was heaving with residents waiting, cheering, singing and generally working up to an enormous 'send off'. As Noon drew closer the Colonel and ship's Sergeant Major could be seen on the bridge wing looking very worried as two men were 'adrift'. The last gangway had been lifted off the pedestal and was 'on the swing' and the ship singled up fore and aft, when, at 2 minutes to noon, tremendous cheers broke up at the end of the wharf quickly spreading along to the ship and 2 kiwi squadies could be seen running flat out carrying between them a large, ancient cannon ball which they had 'liberated' from the local Australian army barracks. The brow was put back in and they were hauled aboard by their mates as the ship moved off.

The following morning they were paraded in front of the Colonel and their punishment was that for the rest of the voyage they would burnish the cannon ball until it shone and they could see their faces in the reflection. The night before Pusan the ship was in full farewell party mode, the Kiwi Officers entertaining the ship's officers to much beer!. The one person on board who the Colonel could not stand at any price was the Staff Commander who was a most pedantic man with no sense of humour and a thorough bore so when the Colonel got on his feet and made a speech, thanking the ship for all the help they had had and wishing her well for the future he called the S/Cdr up and presented him with the 'gleaming' cannon ball saying ' If anything, perish the thought, should happen to Ormonde in the future he hoped that the first thing the Commander would grab as he jumped overboard on abandoning ship, would be this momento of the K Force !

## THE FOOLISH YOUNG

Before arrival on the Australian Coast every member of the ship's company was required to sign a massive customs form known as the 'form 5' when any goods they had, and intended landing to family or friends in Oz had to be declared and placed in bond. Getting this form completed usually landed on the plate of one of the most junior of the Pursers Officers. I was engaged in this happy task on one occasion, accompanied by the Crew Canteen Manager, a Petty Officer, when a first trip Bellboy (about 16 years old) appeared at the hatch snuffling and snivelling. The PO said "What's your trouble son" and the lad's reply was "Second Steward belted me sir".

PO, "I expect you deserved it, what have you done?" The Bellboy pulled up the sleeve of his uniform jacket revealing a very nasty, new, suppurating tattoo obviously done ashore in Colombo a few days earlier. It comprised a lurid red tombstone on a green mound and below it the words "In loving memory of my mother".

PO, "You're a bloody young fool, that looks as if it was done with a dirty needle, you better go and see the Surgeon, I'm not surprised the 2<sup>nd</sup> Steward belted you".

Boy, "Its not the Second Steward I'm worried about Sir, it's me mam, she ain't dead yet!"

## DEFAULTERS

In the days of all white crews, Defaulters was one of the major 'entertainments' on board and, depending on the Captain could be pure theatre. After a popular port there could easily be 100 defaulters, or more, on the bridge at noon the next day.

On one memorable occasion an Ordinary Seaman had requested to see the Captain to state a complaint about the Chief Officer and so was brought up to the Bridge to be available at the end of the Loggings.

At this time the Chief Officer was a very extroverted, erudite and somewhat terrifying figure known throughout the ship as 'Hangman', being reputed to have acted as such during the Spanish Civil War.

The Captain, in a manner very friendly, for him, said, 'Now my Boy, I understand that you wish to make a complaint about the Chief Officer - tell me about it'.

OS: "Chief Officer swore at me sir and I don't like that".

Captain: "What did the Chief Officer say?"

OS: "He called me a F\*\*\*ing doormat sir".

Captain: "What do you have to say that, Chief Officer?"

Chief Officer: "I didn't swear at him, he's a bit slow sir, and I told him that his faculties were dormant"

It was very hard for the assembled officers to keep the solemn mien required on such occasions!

## UNUSUAL PASSENGERS

On one homeward voyage in ORMONDE we received a message to divert to the Cocos Islands, a group of Islands between Fremantle and Colombo, and embark Mr John Clunies Ross (who's family had 'owned' the islands for many generations), who was coming to the UK to get married and a seaplane sent from Singapore to collect him had been unable to land on the lagoon because of gale force wind and rain.

The word went round the ship that 'The King of the Cocos Islands would be joining us at 0530 the next morning at which there were a dozen or so passengers waiting to see what they could, amongst these was a lad about 5 or 6 years old with his mum, both very cockney and so presumably returning emigrants.

The 'F' deck gunport door was opened and, although the lee door, it was most unpleasant outside, a small motor launch passed by quite close and a travel bag was heaved in, the launch came round again, closer this time and a very wet man, dressed only in a shirt and shorts hurled himself in though the door on all fours, the cockney lad saying 'E ain't a king, he ain't got a crarn on, he ain't even got any shoes on'

## PASSENGERS SITTING AT OFFICER'S TABLES.

I was serving as an Assistant Purser in ORION on one occasion when, on leaving Sydney homeward bound, I was told by the Staff Commander that he instructed the Head Waiter to seat two young ladies on my table. This was somewhat of a surprise as he did not, as a rule, plan my love life for me, rather the opposite in fact!

The two sisters turned out to be delightful company and were the grand daughters of Field Marshal Lord Birdwood, the Australian Commander in Chief in WWI. The only problem was that they were such good company that I was frequently 'on the mat' in the morning for the noise coming from my table at dinner. One time being on their recounting of the following story:

On an occasion during the 1<sup>st</sup> war grandfather was in his open staff car going to inspect a rather remote army unit, dressed in all his finery, including cocked hat with feathers, when they approached the unit the gate was seen to be open, there was a rifle leaning up against the sentry box and there was no sign of life. As the staff car slowed down an Aussie soldier appeared from behind the sentry box adjusting his dress, took one look at all the top brass and started to roll a fag. The Field Marshall, almost purple in the face, said 'Do you know who I am?' The soldier lit his fag and said 'No, oo'r yer?' Answer ' I am Field Marshall Lord Birdwood, your Commander in Chief. The soldier was not the least impressed, lit his fag and took a puff, and said 'Why don't you stuff those feathers up yer bum and f.. f.. fly off like any other bird-would'. - yet another meeting with the Staff Commander for me the following morning !

## TROPICAL NIGHTS

On one very old ship (laid down 1913) we had no punkah system except on the 2 lowest decks (known respectively as 'H' for Hell Deck and 'G' for Godam near it), the cabins each had 10 bunks, 10 coat hooks and nothing else. The higher deck cabins were a little better but the only ventilation was by (very) ancient fans that must have been a part of the ship's maiden voyage outfit.

In the very hot weather, Red Sea in August, stretcher beds were issued for sleeping on deck. On one voyage the Purser, who incidentally had recently spent 5 years in a German POW camp, took it upon himself to produce the announcement of this momentous happening instead of leaving it to one of his minions.

The resulting allocation of sleeping spaces gave ladies C Deck port side, Gentlemen C Deck starboard side and married couples the poop.

Result: 2 empty decks and the Poop heaving with enthusiasm.

The Staff Commander was not amused.

## THE JOYS OF AN ASIAN ENGINE ROOM CREW:

On one occasion IBERIA arrived at SUVA pilot at 0600 as usual and went alongside Kings Wharf where there were 2 berths that could, at a pinch, take large ships. The usual berth, (the seaward one) was occupied by the regular Union Co. mail ship loading bananas and so IBERIA went ahead of her to the inner berth. All was secured, gangways in place and the Captain took the Pilot down to his cabin for a cup of 'coffee'.

About 20 minutes later there was the heck of a disturbance, the sound of moorings parting, pedestal gangways collapsing, shouting, screaming etc. etc.

The Captain and the Pilot shot out on deck and saw the wharf slowly but steadily moving astern!

At the same time as the Captain and Pilot moved rather more quickly than usual the Chief and Second Engineers moved to the Engine Room at a speed that was worthy of an Olympic gold medal only to find a dozy looking ag-wallah sitting at his ease polishing the port engine manoeuvring wheel but, having done one side, instead of walking to the other side to complete the job, he just moved the wheel half a turn thus putting steam into the port engine and going "ahead".

As the Captain said later the only good thing was that they were not at the usual berth and so the 'TOFUA' was spared having 30,000 tons boarding by the stern!

## PILOT'S PERKS

In the days when the Colombo Pilots were nearly all ex-pat Brits, there was one who was a particular mate of our Captain and who was always on the scrounge, it was usually the Purser who had to provide the likes of smoked salmon, English bacon etc. etc. On one occasion I recall the Chief Officer was the fall guy when the pilot required some gloss white paint to tiddly up his bungalow, The Chief Officer and the Bo'sun headed for the paint locker where they opened up a new five gallon drum, took out a third of the content and replaced it with paraffin!, stirred it up and delivered it to the gunport door for the Pilot's launch. We never heard any more of the incident but no way, even after 30 years, would that paint ever have dried !

## IT'S A HARD LIFE:

In the 1960's I sailed with a Second Engineer who always dripped about the Company owing him a weeks pay. After several voyages I eventually told him to tell me details and I would try to sort something out.

In 1942 the ship in which he was serving was off West Africa when it was hit by 4 torpedoes, they took to the boats and were eventually picked up by a British warship and landed at Freetown thence back to the UK.

Being a keen young Officer who lived near Tilbury when he got home he headed for the Engineer Supt's Office in Tilbury Dock and reported himself.

The conversation went something like this:-

E/Supt.: 'I'm pleased to see you Mr.... I require you to join in ORONTES in Liverpool on Monday morning.'

Officer : 'But sir, I'm due for 10 days survivors leave.'

E/Supt.: 'Aye, you had 10 days sitting in that lifeboat doing nothing, you can have the week-end off and join the ORONTES on Monday morning' !

## BE CERTAIN THAT YOUR SINS WILL FIND YOU OUT:

The Chief Steward is often a much maligned member of the ship's company but sometimes with good reason.

When the Oronsay was fitting out at Barrow (about 1951) one of the new Hoovers went missing, this was reported by the checkers and the suppliers certainly did not quibble as the order was for hundreds of pieces and the manufactures replaced it without delay. About seven or eight years later the Hoover 'rep' put his head round the Stores Managers door in Leadenhall St. and said 'good morning sir, I thought that you might like to know that that Hoover that went missing from Oronsay at Barrow has just shown up, it has come in with a claim for repair, under warranty, from an address in Blackpool'. The same Chief Steward was still in the ship, his wife ran a B&B in Blackpool, he was shortly to retire and he did!

When senior, long serving, Officers retired it was the company's policy for some of the management and superintendents to entertain them to lunch. On this occasion the senior Manager present said a few brief words about the guests service and made a small presentation on this occasion the short speech included ' and Mr ...., we don't really know how you will spend your retirement, we know that you are not a golfer, we know that you don't drive a car and wonder if perhaps your wife might allow you to do the hoovering on occasions!!

## DANGEROUS CARGO

As all learned Master Mariners will know the carriage of dangerous cargo in passenger ships is heavily frowned on if not downright forbidden.

On the final homeward voyage of the Orion, going to the Captains morning conference the morning after leaving Bombay (not Mumbai until some years later) the Senior Officers found the Captain and the Cargo Officer in deep and serious conversation.

On going through the manifests after departure the 1<sup>st</sup> Officer had found '1 c/s SA Ammunition' consigned to London. After a brief discussion during which it was confirmed that the agents had not mentioned this to anybody either verbally or in writing and so the Chief Officer was told to muster a deck gang, open No 3 hatch and turn over the cargo until the case in question was found.

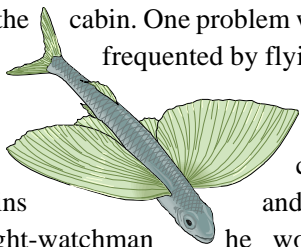
The treasure hunt ended successfully about noon, the rogue case taken to the bridge wing and, with due ceremony, chucked overboard and a report to advise London of the occurrence prepared!

On reaching Tilbury the ship paid off and de-stored as we were going on charter for 4 months as a floating hotel in Hamburg, operated by a German hotel chain. We had on board a small care and maintenance part of deck and engine ratings and a few officers to assist the operators in any way that might be needed.

After about a week in Hamburg the Captain (Staff Captain during the voyage) received a letter thanking the ship for its report on the jettisoning of one case of SAA and, of course, endorsed the Captains discretion in taking the action. They thought however that he might like to know that the ammunition had been in India for 10 years as a part of a trial to establish how well the ammo and packaging stood up to monsoon and other various climatic states experienced in the sub-continent and how it would react. The tests were now going to be repeated!!

## Flying Fish

In the days before air-conditioning, apart from those sleeping on deck on stretcher beds (see Cachalot 18), in attempt to make some sleep possible, all the ports were open and fitted with 'wind scoops' a metal device that fitted into the porthole and hopefully diverted a limited amount of air into the cabin. One problem was when we were in waters frequented by flying fish there were occasions when during the night hysterical screams could be heard coming from usually, ladies cabins and when investigated by the Night-watchman he would find a scantily clad passenger, pointing to her bunk, where a cold, slimy, wriggling (but with very pretty coloured wings) fish was flapping its last - If the night watchman was feeling frivolous he might ask the passenger if she would like it cooked for her breakfast!



## THE LIFE OF A LIFT BOY

In the ORION there was only one passenger lift which went from F deck up 5 decks to B deck (the original 1st class restaurant/lounge) and was manned by one bell-boy.

I had a routine of meeting the Chief Steward about 1800 and we would have a wander round some of the less used public rooms, just to see what was going on. On one occasion my phone rang and the Chief Steward said, 'come along to the forward square, sir (we were on E deck), be as quick as you can. I shot along and found him standing by the lift, looking downwards through the window, he stood aside and when I squinted down, I could see that the lift was stopped halfway between decks E and F. It was occupied by the lift boy and a female passenger of about the same age, (about 16 or 17) and they were apparently about to engage in an the advanced course on 'birds and bees therapy' The C/Stwd banged on the door with his fist, and shouted through the crack 'bring this lift up to 'E' deck at once' which the lad did and we got the pair of them. If he had only shot up to B deck we would have had the boy but the girl could have got clear away ! The motto should have been 'when in doubt always plan the escape route'.

## THE SUEZ CANAL DURING THE VIET- NAM WAR.

During the Viet-Nam war we frequently seemed to transit the Canal astern of a French troop ship (usually MM).

Frequently young soldiers would jump over the side, swim or walk to the bank and wait to be picked up by a military jeep and taken to Port Said where they were handed over to their Consul.

These lads were of all nationalities who had signed on for the French Foreign Legion but, while they didn't mind chasing arabs in north Africa, they did not think very highly of the far east!

On the homeward voyage after we left Port Said we called at Naples, Marseilles, Gibraltar and Tilbury. On arrival at Port Said the Agent would board with several European Consuls in tow all asking if the Captain would carry these lads to Naples, for which they would pay full fare. The answer was usually 'yes' but even so the consuls were always worried that, for some reason, we might miss the Naples call. We said that had never happened and was most improbable. On arrival at Naples we handed the chaps over to their local representative and, on one occasion, asked why their colleague in Egypt was so worried that we might miss the Naples call. They explained that if any of them went to a French port they would be arrested by the French military, taken ashore and shot! (desertion in the face of the enemy).