

TO THE DISTANT SHORES OF THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

You may or may not be aware that for over 40 years a Danish Cargo ship transported most of the general cargo to The Falklands. There was a very specific reason for this, and that was the ongoing conflict with Argentina over many years and it was seen as being a safer route for the cargo to be transported on a neutral ship.

My ship, the M.S. A.E.S. was 2,200 tons and capable of carrying 18 passengers. Our normal port for loading would be Gravesend or Victoria docks, and we all assured that we had a jolly good night out before this long and lonely journey ahead of us, which would take us 3 months before returning to real civilisation again. Our 8032 mile journey to Port Stanley would take us approximately 30 days including a short 4-hour stop in Las Palmas to take on bunkers for the trip. When we arrived in Port Stanley we were always greatly welcomed by lots of the residents from Port Stanley who would be waiting on the jetty for their vital supplies. Many of the products we shipped were for the two main local stores; one was The West Store, owned by the Falkland Island Company, and the other the Speedwell Store in John Street.

On the map, the Falklands are mere specks in the chill South Atlantic. For the 2,379 who lived there then, it was spacious enough. Approximately, 1,800 of them dwelt in Port Stanley, and Goose Green, with approximately 100 islanders, was the only other real community. Most of the rest lived on lonely sheep stations scattered throughout the 'Camp' as the countryside beyond Port Stanley is called.

The countryside is a little like the Old West with the Stetson and it was rather entertaining when some of our passengers from UK, who had signed long term contract as shepherds, visited The West Store near the jetty. Here they were met with open arms by the manager who, with a unique sales talent, was well capable of convincing them to spend the next two years salary on top quality saddles and all the rest of the riding gear required for the life on the out stations, leaving them with little money and a slim hope for an early return back to the UK.

On several occasions we also had passengers who were former murderers/convicts and were released on probation, provided they served a certain specified time in the Falklands, a very safe place with nowhere to go. Some very interesting people; a real insight into why anyone could end up committing a murder when they were normally a genuine nice person and it indicated that almost every person, in given circumstances, could do the same, but fortunately most of us have the sense not to enter into such a situation which could lead to such a terrible crime.

I spent a considerable amount of my free time visiting the "Camp" and I was fascinated by the extent of the spectacular wildlife, in a place where nature is still in charge.

There are five species of penguin that breed in the Falkland Islands. As well as the King, Gentoo and Magellanic (locally known as Jackass), there are Macaroni and the Rockhopper, all attracted to the Islands by the rich waters of the South Atlantic

Over 200 species of birds have been recorded on the Island, ranging from the tiny Tussa bird to the large birds of prey such as the Striated and Crested Caracara, the majestic black-necked and Coscorot Swans and, of course, the Black Browed Albatross which would often be seen following us for a few days north bound after leaving Port Stanley.

Sharing the white sandy beaches with the penguins are the fascinating elephant seals, sea lions and fur seals, they all hide in the tussock grass that can be ten feet tall in places. The largest breeding site of elephant seal is found on Sea Lion Island where there could be more than 500 pairs.

The only entertainment in the evening was the Old Globe Tavern in Port Stanley, just like an old western type bar, or if you had the desire for a more upmarket establishment then you would visit the Upland Goose Hotel situated in the west side of the town and that would be your entertainment places, with the exception for a few of us who became friendly with some of the soldiers based on the outskirts of Port Stanley who had a night club where we were able to finish off the evening.

The only other regular visiting ship to The Falklands was their own ship M.S. Darwin which normally ran between Montevideo and Port Stanley with passengers, fresh food and vegetables. The Antarctic Ship HMS Endurance would also visit on occasions on her way to South Georgia and I had the pleasure of having a luxurious lunch onboard during one of her visits.

We would spend most of our time in Port Stanley, but would also visit Goose Green Farm, which had an approximate population of 100 residents and being the biggest farm on the Island at the time, with approximately 140,000 sheep. The farm had their own jetty where we were partly able to moor with our two anchors out. Fitzroy was another large farm that we visited with A.E.S. and at times Fox Bay. We would off-load general cargo and load wool for our return to UK. We would also load wool from S.S. Great Britain which was still in Port Stanley, deteriorating further day-by-day, and was used as a storage ship for coal and wool. The average annual wool clip at the time was approximately 2,500 tonnes. At times we were carrying wool back to UK at a value exceeding £250,000 (There were approximately 700,000 sheep on the Falklands).

Wool was always our main cargo for our return trip, but often we would call in to a small port on the River Sao Francisco called Sao Francisco Du Sul, located on Latitude 26° 14.0'S and Longitude 048° 25.0'W. The port is on an island in the river, which flows into Babitonga Bay. We would load Brazilian mahogany in any space left below deck and when all hatches was closed and made safe, we would then have a full load of mahogany on the deck, but only after careful stability calculations using all those dreadful formulas which I am sure some of you still remember and of course we also had to consider the time of year with reference to expected weather conditions. We have on one occasion lost 75 % of the deck cargo of mahogany in the Bay of Biscay and had to seek shelter in Lyme Bay.

On another return trip from Port Stanley our deck cargo was a small proportion of the wild life. It was rather sad to see elephant seals, sea lions, and penguins being taken away from their home and having to travel over 8,000 miles to Dudley Zoo in the UK.

We had a large refrigerated container on the deck full of fish to feed them with during the journey. The stress was very noticeable on the sea lions, they would refuse to eat after being captured and we were having to force feed them for several days before they would finally start to eat themselves, I can assure you that this was a very difficult task and we were at high risk of being bitten.

I did 3 round trips to the Falklands in 1965 (9 months in total) before I joined Lilli Tholstrup (Kosan Gas) chartered by the British Government to supply natural gas to the Americans in Saigon with another ship owned by Kosan Gas supplying Ammunition, rather a dangerous contract at that time, but that is a different story.

I did a further two trips on the A.E.S in 1971 as a 2nd officer after leaving Navigation School in Svendborg (Denmark). I had borrowed money from Maersk and A.E.SØRENSEN for my two years study for my Mates & Deep Sea Masters certificate. A.E.S did not have a 3rd officer and therefore gave me a short cut and I needed two trips (6 month) to repay my debt to A.E.SØRENSEN before joining MAERSK in 1971 as a 2nd officer on Leise Maersk (85,000 tonnes Bulk carrier).

So I had a total of 5 trips to the Falklands (15 months) with 5 months of them being based somewhere around the Falklands.

Sadly, the ties with Danish shipping over so many years for the supply of cargo to the Falklands came to an end last year, as the MOD have now taken over the contract, but up until early this year, the Falklands were still being served by Danish ships with the Port of Loading being Shoreham in Sussex.

It was a very interesting experience - now distant memories, but I hope you may all have enjoyed to learn a little more about these distant shores of the Falkland Islands?

Captain Flemming Nelleborg Pedersen

