

William John Hayes **Recollections of a life at sea**

This contribution comes from Ron Antoney and concerns another small piece of the history of the Club and of the Merchant Navy.

Older hands may remember Bill Hayes as Steward of the Club when it was situated at Royal Mail House.

William John Hayes was born at Birkenhead on 14 June 1893. The family home, at one time, was in Menai Street, Birkenhead. He left school at 12 years of age to begin an apprenticeship as a lithographic printer -hated it - and left after half a day! He then joined a Birkenhead pawnbroker for 12 months before moving to the Co-op at Hoy lake. He eventually became Branch Manager.

Bill first went to sea at 22 years of age (1915) with the Pacific Steam Navigation Company - his only company during a life at sea - having previously amassed what was then a small fortune of £50 to cover his initial expenses (uniforms, train fares, etc.). He joined HM Hospital Ship 'Panama' at Newport (Mon) bound for Suvla Bay in the Dardanelles. The 'Panama' was a coastal steamer of some 4000 tons and before being requisitioned by the Navy plied between Chile and Peru with cargo, cattle, and a few passengers.

After signing on at £4-10 shillings (£4.50) per month his wage after one year's service was increased to £7 -10 shillings (£7.50) per month! His first job at sea was as a waiter, and he was allotted a bunk in the 'Glory Hole' - twenty men slept there. He suffered from seasickness!

The ship was painted white with a red cross and green border. At night the ship was lit-up to show that it was a hospital ship and to prevent attacks by submarines. The medical staff were from the Royal Army Medical Corps and the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps. At Suvla Bay they took on board war wounded. The next port of call was Malta where the patients were taken ashore and replaced with other military wounded bound for Southampton.

After many voyages in the Middle East the ship returned to home waters, sailing between Le Havre and Southampton. They only sailed at night, again with lights showing the red cross. Later the ship was painted grey and, because the Germans did not recognise the neutrality of hospital ships, a gun was installed aft, with two gunners to man it. The crew had to attend gun-drill. It was later decided to paint the ship in 'camouflage'. One incident prominent in his memory is the night the 'Salta' was torpedoed in Le Havre harbour. He recalls the sad sight of nurses, crew, and military staff struggling in the water. The 'Panama' was ordered to proceed into the inner harbour and was not allowed to provide assistance. The Navy rescued quite a large number from the sea before the 'Salta' sank - a total loss. (This is just one of the many incidents Bill could recall from his voyages during the 1914-18 war).

He remained with the 'Panama' until 1920 and shortly after she was renamed 'HMHS Maine' he left her, having held positions of steward and assistant storekeeper.

Then, in 1920, he joined three ships in quick succession: Ortega, Esiquibo (2nd Steward) and Orduna (2nd Steward).

In 1921 he joined the 'Lataro' (an ex-Glen Line cargo ship) as Chief Steward. At one time the American 'Grace Line' offered him a position operating from the USA. He was also offered a position with the Falkland Islands Company but his wife, Nora, was reluctant to leave England and both offers were declined. Prior to and during the second world war he served aboard the 'Orduna' on which he went to Murmansk. At the time he was not very enthusiastic about this(!) but as the war progressed he considered it to be no worse than some of the convoys in which he served for the relief of Malta. He was later engaged in trooping to the near- and far-east until the vessel was scrapped in 1948 when he joined his last (and favourite) ship, the 'Reina de! Pacifico', as barkeeper, immediately after her boiler room explosion in Bermuda. He remained with her until he retired from the sea in 1955 - after 40 years at sea - at the age of 62. His years on the 'Reina' enabled him to obtain an in-depth knowledge of the east and west coasts of South America - voyages from Liverpool were of 3 months duration - and he made many friends, ashore and afloat. He was a very popular barkeeper.

The only occasion his ship was at Southampton was the 'Ortega' in 1920. Always a keen member of the

Temperance Lodge in his native Birkenhead, he pursued this interest during his Southampton visit and at a Lodge meeting he met his future wife, Nora Ellen Gould. They subsequently married at St. Andrew's Church, Dorset Street, Southampton, on 1st July 1922.

During his 40 years at sea he visited most of the continents/sub-continents - with the notable exception of Australia and New Zealand. He was actually en-route there in 1945 when his ship was diverted to Kure, Japan, following the Japanese surrender. He had the unique experience of seeing the devastation caused by the atom bomb at Hiroshima, viewing the scene from the top of one of the only two large structures (made of reinforced concrete) remaining. D-Day was spent at Gourock, Scotland, having previously off-loaded American troops in the build-up to D-Day.

Soon they departed for the Mediterranean area for further trooping and POW duties.

Bill represented the Merchant Service at the Royal British Legion Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall, London, on 7th November 1981.

On retiring from the sea, after a short spell of comparative inactivity ashore, he became steward at the Master Mariners' Club, Royal Mail House, Terminus Terrace, Southampton, for twelve and a half years, (before handing over to his successor - 'Tom'), followed by a 1-year spell with Bramah Coffee (at Royal Mail House), and 1-year at the Solent Suite, Civic Centre, Southampton, before finally retiring from working life in 1969 to devote more time to his ailing wife, who died on 2nd December 1976.

During his 40 years seagoing-career he was awarded the following medals:

1914-1918	Victory
1914-1918	Merchant Service
1939-1945	Campaign Star
1939-1945	Atlantic
1939-1945	Africa Star
1939-1945	Italy Star
1939-1945	Victory

Bill passed away peacefully at the The Brookvale Nursing Home, Portswood, Southampton, on 22nd February 1990 - aged 96 years and 8 months

___and he never did learn to swim!!!

(Compiled by Michael Gould during conversations with 'Uncle Will' - April 1985)