

MV Indus, Voyage 13

Derric Webster's memories, in Cachalot 62, of losing a propeller blade from the British Holly have prompted me to relate a similar incident when I was a second tripper on the Indus, a Nourse Line vessel tramping for P&O. Space allows me to elaborate a bit and bring you the whole voyage, typical of those days.

I re-joined the Indus at the end of March, '62, in South Shields where I had paid off a few weeks earlier. There were three other apprentices, another re-joiner and two first trippers, so I was already a senior apprentice. As indentured apprentices we didn't sign articles.

We sailed light ship to Bordeaux and, over nine days, loaded a full cargo of fertiliser, calcium ammonium nitrate, in bags. We were bound for Whampoa, in China, via the Suez Canal and Aden for bunkers.

As we departed Aden there was a strange incident when the 3rd Engineer, a stocky scot, decided he didn't want to go any further and tried to jump over the side. He was dragged back inboard and locked in the 'hospital', a bare cabin so designated with a couple of rusting hospital beds in it. It was situated on the main deck just forward of no.4 hatch. No sooner was the door locked than Jock had undone the dogs on the port-hole and was half way out again before we could yank him back by the legs. Crashing to the deck knocked him out for a bit, giving us chance to bar the dogs up tight enough to prevent a repeat. I don't remember how or where we got rid of him but I don't think we would have taken him all the way to China, three weeks away. I do remember that the 4th and 5th engineers were promoted up one to fill his space.

Whampoa was up the Pearl River, towards Canton, and has now been consumed by Guangzhou (Canton). On arrival at the pilot station we were boarded and searched by Red Guards, two or three of whom stayed on board on our passage up stream, keeping a close watch on us. One of my fellow apprentices had bought on of those new-fangled transistor radios in Aden and was stood at the rail holding it in front of him, trying to get a signal. He was spotted by one of the Guards, who thought he was taking photos which was strictly forbidden. The four of us were rounded up and taken to our cabin where everybody and everything was searched and all cameras found were opened up and the film exposed. The paranoia and absurdity shown by those particular fanatical Chinese has stayed with me, even after sailing with Chinese crew later in my career. Once aroused, there was no reasoning with them.

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During our ten days discharging in Whampoa, we were able to go ashore unhindered but there was little to be seen in what was then still a relatively rural area. In fact, we were the attraction, people stopping and staring at us in a very unnerving manner. I have experienced similar in rural India but the Indians were generally a bit more animated.

From China we made our way, in ballast, nearly 6200 miles to Durban, stopping at Singapore for bunkers on the way. We berthed just along from the whaling berth, which was still in operation then, and in four days loaded a full cargo of coal and coke which we hauled back across the Indian Ocean to Rangoon in Burma.

Probably a tad more than a full cargo because when we arrived off the mouth of the Irrawaddy we were 'neaped' and had to anchor off for a few days, awaiting a fuller tide, during which time we just about ran out of fresh water. Less FW = more coal, that's if you have your sums and timings right. We had to resort to collecting our 'ration' of water in buckets from the galley pump. Perhaps we should have broken out a new hatch tarpaulin, hoisted it at the fore and sailed up to Rangoon in true sailing ship fashion. We were also obliged to break out more 'salt water soap', bars of hard yellow-brown soap, about 8" long, with the look and texture of well dried parmesan cheese, and about as effective in cleaning dirty work clothes.

When we finally made it up to Rangoon the coal was discharged, by hand, by an army of what were then known as coolies. Every dusty lump hauled away in a basket on top of the head, shoulders or back of each unfortunate barefooted labourer. A form of discharging which persists today in the unloading of barges along the Irrawaddy, although some of them now wear those universal safety shoes - flip-flops.

In just two weeks the ship was emptied, cleaned and prepared for our next venture, a general cargo run around the Far East. We took in Singapore, Hong Kong, Kobe, Osaka, Yokohama, back to Osaka and Kobe again, then Nagoya, Moji, Yawata, on to Shanghai and back to Hong Kong, Singapore and Penang, loading and discharging at each port. These exotic places were an eye-opening education for a young man. We finished that particular charter back in Rangoon, two and a half months after we had started out from there. Some months earlier the army had staged a military coup, the effects were beginning to show and there was an unpleasant and sinister atmosphere on our return. *(It happened that I was in Mandalay 53 years later, three days after the Generals capitulation to Madame Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy so I can claim to have been in Burma at both the beginning and the end of the Generals' rule.)*

On to Penang again, this time to load a full cargo of iron ore for Muroran, in Hokkaido, Northern Japan. We arrived at Muroran in a howling gale on a foul night late in November and, unable to board a Pilot, the Old Man was tasked with trying to anchor the vessel in a crowded anchorage. Captains on those ships didn't get much experience at ship handling, which was mostly done by the pilots, but Sammy (yes, he of the Cornish Pasty story, Cachalot 61) was nothing if not a trier. Unfortunately, after much backing and filling and umpteen engine movements, he found a space to drop the hook but as the weight came on it the anchor cable suddenly went slack and we left the anchor on the bottom. We retreated out to sea to await better conditions and the following day we made it back into port to discharge our cargo of iron ore.

That was completed in just a few days and we were off again, minus one anchor, this time to Nauru in the Pacific to load a cargo of phosphate.



MV INDUS

GRT: 7,094; LOA: 441 ft; Built in 1954 by Charles Connell & Co;
Engines: 4cy opposed piston Doxford, Barclay Curle;
Complement: ~68, 13 British officers, 2 Chinese motormen,
Chinese carpenter, 52 Indian crew;
this was her 13th voyage;

A couple of days out, in the middle of the night, the ship started to vibrate quite violently and when we stopped the 3rd mate was dangled over the stern on a pilot ladder while the engineers cranked the shaft round by hand. He reported that, as suspected, we had indeed lost a blade from the prop and we limped back to Yokohama at slow speed and the vessel was dry-docked.

The propeller was constructed of a central boss onto which the individual blades were bolted and we carried a full set of four spares secured upright in no.5 'tween deck, for just such an occasion. Had the missing blade been damaged in the hazardous anchoring attempts in Muroran? On close inspection of the boss, a hitherto undetected 'blow hole' in the casting was revealed and a relatively straight forward job turned into a much longer one. By the time the surrounding metal was cut back to a sound base, the hole was about the size of a football and it had to be filled painstakingly slowly and cooled just as slowly so as not to create any uneven stresses in the casting. The whole job took four weeks to complete and we on the deck side had a pleasant time of it. No cargo work and little maintenance (chip, scrape and paint) could be done in the dry dock. The downside was that, as an apprentice on around £13 per month, my 'subs' allowance was soon used up, even with an exchange rate then of about ¥1000 to the £1.

The dry dock people took pity on us and laid on an occasional limo with a uniformed chauffeur, white gloves and all, to take us sightseeing. I remember visiting the Great Buddha at Kamakura, where one could climb up inside and see the world through Buddha's eyes.

While we were in Yokohama, our missing anchor was retrieved from the anchorage at Muroran and returned to us.

Repairs completed, we sailed on Boxing Day to resume our journey to Nauru for that cargo of phosphate. Nauru is a steep-sided phosphate rock island which allowed for vessels to moor up close to the shore, the cargo being loaded via long reaching cantilevered elevator/conveyor belts. The mooring buoys were themselves moored in deep water and vulnerable to any swell. Staying on the moorings in force 4 or more was not permitted but luckily the weather was with us and we loaded in one day, bound homeward to Aberdeen.

Yes, Aberdeen, 12,747 nautical miles with a cargo of bird s—t! Add on the 4255 miles that we covered from Muroran → Yokohama → Nauru and that's over 17,000 miles and 94 days it took us to complete that particular part of our 11 month voyage. With four weeks in drydock and the cost of the salvage of the anchor it is no wonder that the British Merchant Navy was beginning to feel the pinch and shippers and ship-owners were looking for an alternative mode of operation.

To recap:

Cargo 1	South Shields/Bordeaux/Whampoa	10358 n.miles	CAN fertiliser
Cargo 2	Whampoa/Durban/Rangoon	10923	Coal
Cargo 3	Rangoon/Rangoon	9233	General
Cargo 4	Rangoon/Penang/Muroran	4369	Iron Ore
Cargo 5	Muroran/Yokohama/Nauru/Aberdeen	17002	Phosphate
	Total	51885	in 10months, 28 days

However, the total cost of the endeavour will have been offset somewhat with the carriage of one female passenger from Nauru to Aberdeen. An exclusive 50 day passage with all the luxury and attentive service that a post war tramp ship could provide!

So attentive that she ended up married to the Mate. but he was a very nice chap and I hope and believe that they lived happily ever after.

Terry Clark Ed