

# The Lure of Long Voyages



BY ALAN RAWLINSON (AUTHOR OF *MERCHANT NAVY APPRENTICE 1951-55*) (ENGLAND)

## BANK LINE IN THE 1950S

There you are... all the home comforts. Television, fireside, steak puddings, warmth, and an attractive girlfriend - when a three-line telegram arrives out of the blue by courier, the narrow-printed strips pasted onto the form, and tucked inside an orange-coloured envelope.

**"Report McAndrews Liver Building Liverpool with all kit readiness join ANYBANK 1st June Stop Rail voucher follows Stop Acknowledge."**

That's it - short and sweet, and your life is about to be seriously challenged. The passport to another, possibly magical world has arrived, and you already begin to feel like a seagoing gypsy.

It is the 1950s, and Britain is still coming out of post-war austerity. The merchant navy is recovering from its battering in WW2. Rationing is ending and life is good, the first televisions are appearing in the shops, and a noticeable buzz is starting - but not for you, who are about to enter a completely different, alternative, surreal world.

Harsh and grim, with no frills, but exhilarating at the same time due to high expectations of sailing to strange new places, with new horizons, and the unknown. You are about to be locked away on a 2-year commitment with people you have never met, and may not like, and what's more, in close confinement. It's a huge gamble. This then was the life offered at sea, particularly in the Bank Line, and for some, it was strangely addictive. A life a million miles from the settled shore life enjoyed by most people, and only a place for adventurers, or as some might say with justification, loners or even masochists. Time spent away might easily run well beyond the stipulated 2 years, given the difficulty of arranging a home cargo, but such is the lure of the life, some Masters have to be gently prized out of their commands after repeatedly declining to be relieved. Something surprising you might have learned much later is that you were in the footsteps of a proud band of seafarers.

It seems no time before you are in a taxi, kitbags and suitcases filling the luggage space, and the driver crawling the cab around rain-soaked and bleak dockside sheds. It could hardly look more depressing. In the back seat, you are miserable and excited all at once. Peering out of the blurred window and craning your neck upwards at slab-



AUTHOR STEERING A LIBERTY SHIP ON A LONG VOYAGE.

sided vessels, cold and foreboding, you feel anxious. As the taxi winds its way forlornly from berth to berth, sounds of crashing and banging with shrill scraping noises make it difficult to talk, as steel grabs fly in and out of a ship.

Is this the one, you ask rhetorically? Oh, no, then, "keep going driver". You are looking desperately for that all-important ship name with a 'Bank' suffix, or maybe even the familiar buff and black funnel. Upsetting thoughts race through your mind at this point like, "Am I doing the right thing?"

Suddenly, the taxi rounds a shed corner, and, eureka! There is the big bluff bow of your ship looming high above and with the name proud. There is no mistake. It is winter, and ice puddles lay around the quay, but in no time, you are at the foot of a long, high gangway. The hand ropes look dangerously slack and looking at slippery steps leading upwards at a ridiculous angle. Health and safety are dirty words. The taxi is fast disappearing around the shed, the driver muttering to himself, your bags are piled up in the puddles and a curious Asian face is peering down from the top platform. Smells and strange noises are all around as you tentatively start the long climb. Your mind is in overdrive, and your past experience tells you that the loud sounds of clattering, banging and sudden racing and chugging that you hear signals that old-fashioned steam winches are in use. You are joining a veteran ship then, a gallant survivor of WW2. For hopeless addicts of the life, this is the moment your heart races and there is a rush of pure euphoria. For better or for worse, you are a 'Bank Line Man', committed to the 50-ship fleet endlessly circling the globe.

At this stage, you are not to know that decades later, it will be a sort of "Badge of Honour", revered by many. Here you are, setting foot physically, and metaphorically, on a life and a career path where the sky is the limit, and the world is out there to conquer.

You reach the deck and are greeted by a startling sight of crazily stacked hatch boards, beams, wires, piles of rubbish, tarpaulins, and pieces of dunnage. Pipes snake in and out of the mess, steam is rising, and a welding machine is groaning away among the pile.



You calmly survey the scene. It's a sort of nautical collage, and a feeling of being home overwhelms you. Overhead, grabs flail in and out of the nearest hold demanding immediate respect from anyone in the vicinity. It is a first lesson in how to duck out of danger, and in the art of vital situation awareness, survival even. Wisps of steam are snaking up from the winches and pipes, and a grim-faced winch driver is pulling levers madly. It is mesmerising. You look for an entrance to the accommodation and then gingerly step forward over a foot-high cill into the darkened alleyway.

Your cabin, when you find it, is small with white panelled tongue and groove boarding. A weird-looking tall wooden contraption takes up a corner, which turns out to be an all-in-one washing stand. It has a tip-up bowl on hinges and a dirty water tank below. It shouts out '1930s vintage'. The bunks are narrow. A distinctive crisp blue and white cover stretches tight over them with a company motive woven into the design. A small settee and a writing desk make up the other sides, and a porthole with a heavy brass surround and butterfly nuts lets in some light. On the bulkhead is a dilapidated fan with a wire cover. The whole effect is gloomy, as you start to meet up with some of your new shipmates and settle the all-important bunk allocation.



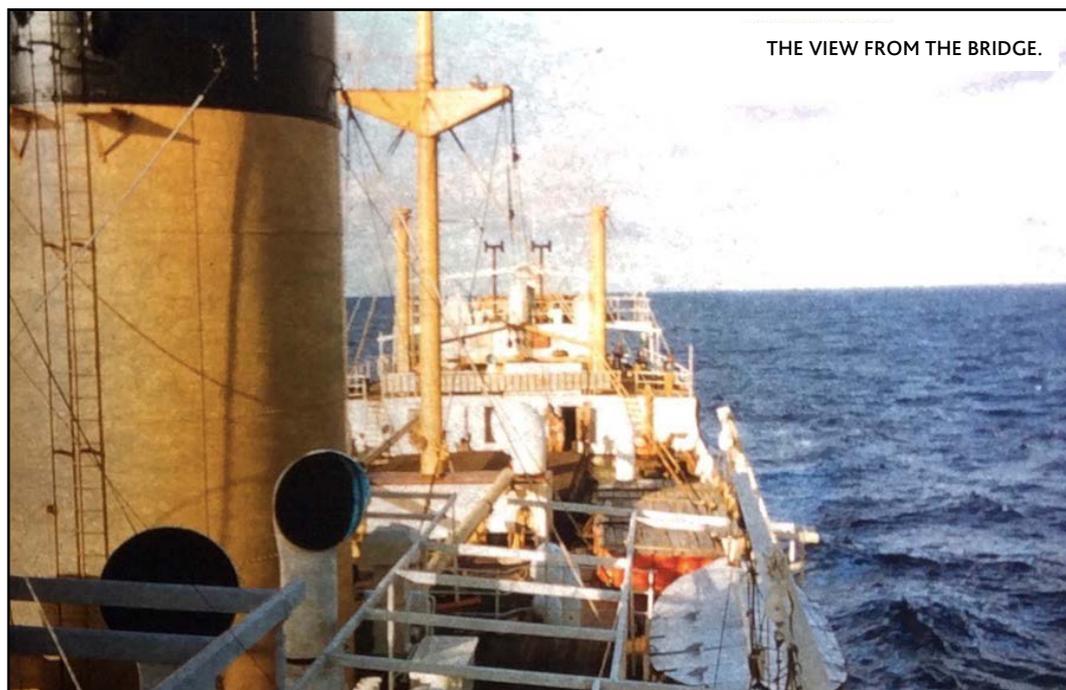
The company that you have committed to, and your acceptance by that company seals a unique deal. Shunned by many on account of the long voyages, the appointment, nevertheless, is to become recognised much later as a unique experience denied to many of your fellow seasoned mariners. You meet them at examination times. They often spent a career sailing between two ports or countries, or at best two continents. It was a great life, enjoyed by all, but there is no denying that Bank Line tramped the whole world.

In no time, you become forcibly acquainted with an array of spanners, Stillson wrenches, and tank sounding lines. Not for you the finer mysteries of the 'Marc St Hillair' intercept method of navigation, but in its place, familiarity with cement boxes, strum boxes, deep tank lids, packing, sounding lines, and chipping hammers. There would be much catching up to do on the study front later, but, meanwhile, it's into the brand-new dungarees. They won't be like that for long.

Life slowly takes on an aura of reluctant acceptance and a routine. The meals are signalled by a distinctive clattering of a handbell vigorously swung outside of the accommodation by an Indian steward. The sound reaches everywhere. The now grubby dungarees have to be replaced by clean white clothes if you are to eat with the others. Plus epaulettes, if the Master is a stickler for discipline. The eerie saloon protocol is watched over by a solemn portrait of the owner staring expressionless down, and the silent respect for the Captain seated at the head of the table all becomes boringly familiar. Conversation is stilted, and seems pregnant with hidden meaning. It's an autocratic regime with 'him' as God. The prongs of a fork act as a makeshift menu holder, and the food is strange.

Bowls of glutinous curry are offered, sometimes at breakfast. Halves of hard-boiled egg float in a sea of coloured effervescent, shimmering liquid, and create a picture hard to forget. It's popular with some, but you beg for something nearer an English breakfast. Out on deck, the cacophony of noise continues in a muted fashion, accompanied by the occasional thump as contact is made with the bridge front. No one comments.

Within days, the voyage finally begins. The twice-daily routine of fetching water from locked pumps, primitive and antiquated, starts. A ritual sets in which includes heating cold water for washing by using a crude steam underwater jet in the bathroom, and fetching buckets of cold water for the Officers. Ahead lies days, weeks, and months of monotonous routine punctuated by highlights and occasionally, some rather special moments. The first occurs when the drab, cold, and wet surroundings of a UK winter are replaced by blazing sunshine and dancing, racing dolphins. Flying Fish and breaching whales appear, and suddenly life is not so bad after all. There is the anticipation of the first run ashore in the USA or maybe a Caribbean port. Stories abound from the old hands, some of the tales sounding lurid and unlikely. As the destination nears, the excitement mounts.





Up on the bridge, the wheelhouse is small. At sea, an Indian Seacunny helmsman stands silently behind a creaking wheel. The heavy sliding doors are jammed open with small wooden wedges. A chalkboard shows the course to be steered, and there is little else of interest, other than an Aldis lamp in its box, and a small table with a green shaded light. Radar is yet to arrive, but in the chartroom behind the helmsman, a DF (direction finding) set is prominent and is given due respect. Below the chart-table and in drawers, is an impressive array of thousands of Admiralty charts that cover the world. Chart corrections are a nightmare, and the stack of 'Notices to Mariners' containing them are piled high to one side. Soon, only the charts showing the immediate route ahead will be corrected, while the rest await shoreside help. A wooden rack holds pilot books for most places, and on the bulkhead, next to the hinged mercury barometer, is a new echo sounder utilising a roll of special wet chemical paper and a stylus which whizzes round when switched on. It is relatively new and novel and replaces the need for the ancient manual wire and the lead-sounding machine still in position on the deck below, known as the 'Captain's deck'. The chartroom settee is occupied by sextants in their boxes, all personally owned by the officers. Celestial navigation is the order of the day, and the hinged flap beside the chart-table hides the chronometer worshipped like some strange God. "Eight turns to the left" is the mantra drilled into the second mate's head, whose duty it is to wind it carefully each morning. A small notebook records the error, which is checked daily by Sparky, seated in the radio room, and with a link to the Portishead time signal.

Soon, the various port calls begin. The regular US Gulf loading ports of this company offer much in addition to the hectic schedule loading oil, bulk sulphur, and general cargo. It is also a chance to top up personal supplies of beautiful 'sea island' cotton shirts and pants, and more mundane items like fishing hooks and line, used when meandering around the Pacific Islands. The challenges of navigating among the island atolls loading copra have resulted in ship losses and strandings over the years, especially where

anchoring is out of the question. Some lucky vessels have wriggled free, but others have broken up in situ, the crews repatriated.

For the discerning few, and in mid-ocean, the canopy of stars on a dark night is another special moment. It is breathtakingly beautiful and wondrous, with shooting stars, nebula clusters, steady planets, and a myriad of fixed and twinkling coloured features.

## **"THE CHALLENGES OF NAVIGATING AMONG THE ISLAND ATOLLS LOADING COPRA HAVE RESULTED IN SHIP LOSSES AND STRANDINGS OVER THE YEARS"**

A few months later, and with the ship in the antipodes ready for the next leg, questions about the new employment and where it could possibly be will concentrate the minds of shipmates, all hoping for somewhere special. A few will fervently wish for a cargo home. In this shipping company, there is always a small chance that a run home with coconut oil and copra (dried coconut) will materialise, cutting short the long trip. More often than not, the news is disappointing when it comes; a trip to the phosphate islands being the booby prize! High on the preferred list are Japanese ports, and the magic of South American ports on both the East and West coasts and the news is awaited eagerly.

After the second traipse around the world and a tedious passage of around 18 months, the thoughts turn to when a home run will come. The clock is winding down, and either a cargo to Europe or the UK, or possibly repatriation is on the cards. Excitement mounts, as the news must be soon. Back home, the girlfriend has long gone, and things have moved on, making an extended leave period less attractive than it might have been.

Given the vagaries of world trade, glitches over shore strikes, charter party clauses, and weather-induced delays, a long voyage may well include an unintended stay somewhere. Months stuck at anchor, or maybe in port, are not unknown, and then money will run out, and patience is stretched. Being young and inexperienced, no thought will be spared for the potential loss to the owners.

You may not know it at this time, but you are a tiny cog in a mammoth and largely silent organisation spanning the world in a web of agents and business partners. It sometimes throws up organisational hiccups, but year-on-year it will operate smoothly and efficiently. The gifted owner, Lord Inverforth, has built up his large empire privately, and without fanfare, and you are one of the lucky recipients of his largesse. His achievements include the distinction of having built up the largest ever fleet of British flagged sailing vessels, a fleet which included the famous Olivebank. Some will tell you later that you have been used as 'cheap labour' during your apprenticeship, and to be fair, it is debatable. However, when the time comes to evaluate your past life and career, you most likely will vehemently disagree, cherishing these days as a priceless experience.

You are also unaware that this unpretentious company is set on a path of massive expansion with 50 new British-built vessels due to be delivered over the next 10 years. This means, among other things, that rapid promotion to Master is a near certainty for the able and successful deck officer, and while still on the right side of 30 years of age. It also means that conditions will vastly improve, with air-conditioning, running hot and cold water, a bar and a pool, and a handy runabout boat which will all be standard.

Wives will accompany their husbands. Gone will be the much-loved wartime Liberty ships, the ex-Fort vessels, the last steamers and coal burners, the old twin screw veterans, and the passenger ships from the India/Calcutta service.

Out of sight and still unknown, there is an existential and monumental threat. A tsunami of containers and a worldwide movement to container consortia will spell the end of the glory years and the decline and end of the company. Painful and ugly corporate death throes commence, as the board tried desperately and unsuccessfully to match the tonnage available to the ever-changing demands.

The brilliant shipping entrepreneur who founded the company dies in 1955 at the age of 90, while still working. With him goes the genius and hard work behind his unique creation. New generations of family members continue the tradition, but all their efforts are in vain.

The long voyages are gone forever, but the memory lingers! ●

THE **SOUTHBANK** - ONE OF SEVERAL CASUALTIES IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS.

