

My Life at Sea

9th August 1965 stands out very prominently in my sea career. I had been accepted by Bank Line to join her general cargo vessel, 'Rosebank'. On that day I met the Master at the Agent's Office and subsequently together with the Master we walked down to the Shipping Office to sign on the vessel. During this time the Master informed me that he had heard over the radio that Singapore had broken away from Malaysia. It was only after some time that I realized that Singapore had gained her 'Independence'.

A few days later, the 'Rosebank' set sail for Africa, her first port of call was Mauritius and the vessel dropped anchor in the bay. That evening all the Engineers including the electricians went ashore. I was on duty at the time, so the Senior Electrician on his way down to the service boat, stopped and casually said to me, "Don't worry lad, if there is a black-out, just shut down the generator and light a candle until we get back". Well I was on pins and needles until the Engineers returned to the vessel, I was a spanking brand new 'Junior Engineer' and did not have a clue as to how to start a generator, let alone put the generator on the switchboard.

The vessel subsequently sailed for South Africa, enroute my Irish Chief Engineer summoned me to his cabin, I was apprehensive as to what he had to say to me. He had a very serious demeanor and he proceeded to inform me about all the apartheid practices and regulations of South Africa. He highlighted that as I was considered 'Black' and that the rest of the Engineers and Officers were considered 'White', I would not be allowed to go ashore with them nor fraternize with any 'Whites' when ashore.

I religiously adhered to the Law of the land until my vessel called at Durban. Following completion of my port watch, I proceeded ashore alone, to take in the sights of the city. Just in the vicinity of the main gate I sighted a pub, located within the port, I decided to check it out. Upon entering the pub I strolled up to the bar counter and perched myself on a bar stool, whereupon the 'White' barman came up to me and in a loud voice asked 'Japanese', I answered 'Hai' (I had a short crew-cut; Japanese were considered to be 'White' and were granted all the privileges bestowed on a 'White-man'). The barman took my order and I had a few beers before I left. As I left the pub I chuckled to myself, 'One Up On The White Man'. There were several occasions when I tried to enter other 'White' bars but each time I was barred from entering...the 'Indian South African' door-man refused to let me in.

My vessel was a trumper so she had no definite route. From Africa she traveled to East Pakistan (Bangladesh), India, Papua New Guinea and then to England and Europe. Liverpool was the first port of call in England. I was rostered to do the 1200-0800 hrs port watch. On my first port watch, the 2nd Engineer handed me the task of overhauling a sanitary pump. At approximately 0200 hrs, upon completing the routine engine-room duties, I decided to start work on the pump. I then summoned the duty greaser (a East Pakistani) to give me a hand. We lifted the pump onto a vice, placing the end flange square on top of the vice: with the intention of securing the pump to the vice, using 2 bolts passed through the bolt holes of the end flange. I then instructed the greaser to support the pump whilst I attempted to clamp the pump to the vice. At this critical moment a stray bolt fell out of the pump. The greaser immediately released his grip of the pump and made a lunge for the fallen bolt. Of course the pump came crashing down and the end flange struck heavily on my 2nd & 3rd left hand fingers, making huge dents on each of them, the fingers were severely bent downwards. The pain was excruciating and I could only clutch my hand and groan without the energy to scream at the greaser. I tried to straighten my fingers and there was a loud crack. I left the engine-room to see the Duty Officer who temporarily bandaged my injury. The next morning I was whisked off to the nearest hospital, where I was examined by a doctor. There were scores of pretty Liverpoolian nurses hovering around and giving me the eye but I could do

nothing about it. X-rays were taken to locate the fractures in the injured fingers which were then wrapped in aluminum splints. I was declared unfit for work for 10 days. The vessel then coasted some European ports and I was free as a bird to go ashore at leisure. I popped into some of the night-clubs but whenever I went onto the floor to dance my splinted fingers stuck out like a beacon in the night. The 'Rosebank' circled the world several times before I signed off the vessel at Hongkong on 5 July 1967 and was flown back to Singapore. I had been away from home for 23 months and really missed my 'home sweet home'.

Upon completing my leave and running out of cold cash, I decided to return to sea. With the help of my cousin Robin Reynolds I managed to secure a position as a Junior Engineer onboard the M.V. "Australasia" of Austasia Line. This ship was an ideal training ground for 'Scavenge Fire Fighters'. The vessel was fitted with a double-acting opposed piston engine; fitted with 3 pistons per unit. The top and bottom pistons also acted as exhaust valves. Due to the tall structure and complicated design of the engine; the engine cylinders were susceptible to abnormal wear, culminating in exhaust gas blow-by and frequent scavenge fires. At Singapore it was the routine practice to change a cylinder liner and thoroughly clean the scavenge spaces. The vessel would then sail for Australia and without fail, scavenge fires would flare up after 4 days of steaming. The same routine was carried out during vessel's stay at Australia, the scavenge spaces would be cleaned out and 1 or 2 cylinder liners changed. On the vessel's return to Singapore, scavenge fires would again flare up after 4 days steaming. The Engineers on watch became very adept at fighting scavenge fires, to the extent that neither the Chief Engineer nor the 2nd Engineer would bother to go down to the engine-room during a scavenge fire. They were confident of our scavenge fire fighting skills. I subsequently signed off the vessel as 4th Engineer, with the intention of studying for the 2nd Class Engineer's Certificate of Competency.

However, there were too many distractions ashore, so I eventually decided to return to sea, without obtaining a Certificate. I reported to the Austasia Lines Office, whereupon the Boarding Officer informed me that they were recruiting Engineers for the cargo vessel, 'Renoir' (ex 'Malay'), which was docked at Liverpool and awaiting for delivery to Singapore. I was then ushered to see the Shipping Manager, Mr. Hornsby, who welcomed me with open arms and without any hesitation offered me the position of 3rd Engineer. Hesitantly I accepted the offer for I hardly had any experience serving as a Senior Engineer onboard a ship. Subsequently a squad of Engine and Deck personnel departed from Singapore for Liverpool. When we boarded the vessel, only the British firemen/greasers were onboard to carry out their port watches. They would be replaced by a completely new set of greasers before we leave port. All the Engineers had earlier departed from the vessel. In the course of our inspection of the Engine-room, we discovered that only the Main Engine and the life-boat engine were diesel driven, the rest of the engine room machinery were steam driven. The Scotch Boiler and the miscellaneous steam driven pumps appeared to be in operating condition. Whilst the British firemen/greasers were tending to the Boiler and steam auxiliaries, everything appeared to operate smoothly. The vessel subsequently departed Liverpool and bound for some ports in Africa. While at sea, we began to experience problems with the steam auxiliaries, especially the boiler water feed pumps. Quite often a pump would suddenly slide to a halt to which the Duty Engineer and greaser would then frantically attempt to restart. In the mean time the steam pressure would steadily drop to a precarious level causing the vessel's lighting to dim. There were several instances when the boiler feed pump broke down whilst the vessel was steaming up river. The Master would continue to steer the vessel on the intended passage, however, as soon as he sensed that the vessel was losing steerage, he would order for the vessel to be swung around and to head out to sea. As soon as he was notified that the engine-room had got everything under control, he would turn the vessel around and resume her journey up river.

One morning, whilst the vessel was off the Western coast of Africa, the Duty Engineer informed the Bridge that the Engineers were stopping the main engine to

investigate a suspected defect in the main engine piston cooling. Upon stopping the main engine, the 2nd Engineer then summoned me down to the engine-room; I was asleep at the time as I was on the 12-04 watch. When I got to the engine-room, the 2nd Engineer informed me that he suspected that the main engine piston cooling of a particular unit (can't remember which unit) was choked. He then instructed me to dismantle the piston cooling pipe connection of the subject unit, located at the back of the engine crankcase. The firemen had placed planking across the back of the crank case for me to climb onto to reach and loosen the pipe securing bolts. When I ascertained that the securing bolts were sufficiently slackened, I grabbed hold of the pipe section and firmly shook the pipe. No oil issued from the pipe connection. I therefore assumed that there was no oil in the pipe section. I then removed all the securing bolts and upon pulling away the pipe section, hot oil began spurting out and spraying on me. I immediately shouted out, 'stop the f---ing pump, stop the f---ing pump!' The 2nd Engineer immediately shouted back, 'the pump is stopped, come down'. I promptly clambered down the slippery engine and leaped onto the crankshaft webs, clinging onto the connecting rod for dear life. Even at this location hot oil kept splashing on my back. The 2nd Engineer got a firm hold on the back of my overalls to keep me from falling. All this time the splashing burning oil continued to inflict severe pain to my body. As soon as I had steadied myself, I brushed away the 2nd Engineer's hands and made a horizontal dive across the crankcase and through the small crankcase inspection door. The Chief Engineer and No.1 Fireman were on hand to heave me out of the crankcase. As soon as I was out of the crankcase, I flung off my oil soaked overalls and in my under-wear began to wander aimlessly around the engine-room. After awhile I decided to leave the engine-room and proceeded to the bath-room to stand under the cold shower for some time, I then proceeded to see the Chief Officer and asked him whether he had anything for burns. He asked, "Who's the patient?" and I answered, 'I am!' whereupon he promptly whisked me back into the shower and made me cool down for some time. The Master was informed of my accident and he personally attended to my injuries. I was burnt over my whole chest, back and both hands. Antiseptic cream and burns ointment were applied before I was thoroughly wrapped up with bandages. I looked like a person who had been involved in a major accident. Shortly after, burn blisters appeared, the size of small balloons, the Master subsequently pricked the blisters and pressed out the fluid (to prevent infection). He then applied more medication before re-bandaging my wounds. I was confined to bed for about 8 days.

Our vessel subsequently called at some ports at South Africa and East Africa. At Lorenzo Marques (Maputo), engine repairers were engaged to rectify the problems on the steam auxiliaries in the engine-room. Though they tried their best, they were unable to rectify the problems. Shortly after the vessel departed for Australia, we all had the ominous feeling that something was going to happen to the vessel. One evening at dinner time, when the vessel was approximately 600 miles from Fremantle, we received a frantic call from the engine-room. The boiler water feed pump had stopped and the 4th Engineer (on meal relief) was having a hard time re-starting the pump, we tried everything but neither of the feed pumps could be started, finally at around 11 pm when the boiler water level and steam pressure had dropped right down, we decided to shut down the engine-room and retire for the night. When the Engineers awoke at 10 am the next day, a lot of activity could be heard on deck as well in the engine-room; the Chief Officer had ordered his men to manually cart a whole lot of wooden dunnage and diesel oil to the engine-room. In the mean time the Engineers carried out inspection of the auxiliaries in an attempt to pin-point the fault leading to breakdown of the boiler water feed pump. The steam distribution block of the boiler water feed pump which had broken down was dismantled and closely inspected, the steam passages were probed through with a length of wire and we concluded that the distribution block had been mounted incorrectly, causing reduced/starvation of steam feed to the feed pump. After some discussion, we decided to install the distribution block, the way we thought that was correct. We were fortunate that a domestic fresh-water tank was located close to the Scotch boiler, complete with a hand pump, whereupon we removed the upper man-hole door and rigged up a hose from the pump to the Boiler man-hole. We then rounded up all

our engine ratings and got them to take turns to pump up water to the boiler. That night after dinner the Engineers took over from the engine ratings, we took turns with the pump and sang all the bawdy songs at the top of our voices, to keep our spirits up (the Chief steward and the catering staff were not too happy about that, grumbling that we were keeping them awake). We continued the pumping until about 1 am before we knocked off for the night. There was no sign of water in the Boiler water gauge-glass. The next day the engine ratings continued to pump up water to the boiler and at around 3 pm, water was sighted in the gauge glass, the water level was raised up a little more before the pumping exercise was stopped. The boiler and auxiliaries were then made ready in preparation for firing the Boiler. That evening after dinner at 6 pm we proceeded to the engine-room, the 5th Engineer teamed up with the 2nd Engineer and the 4th Engineer teamed up with me; each team was assigned to a furnace. With the aid of the wooden dunnage and diesel oil spray, we steadily fired up the Boiler. At approximately 2 am sufficient steam pressure had been raised. Subsequently the main steam stop valve was eased open and with 'all our fingers crossed' attempt was made to start up the Boiler water feed pump, the pump started with ease, All present in the engine-room gave a loud cheer and a big heave of relief. The Engineers then went about getting things ready for sailing and at 3 am vessel set sail for Fremantle. (The Office had ordered the Master to detour the vessel to Fremantle, to carry out proper repairs. Before the vessel lost power, the Radio Officer had sent a distress message to the Office, informing them of the vessel's plight, consequently a tug boat had been sent out to tow the vessel to port, we met the tug boat half way and she escorted us back to Fremantle).

I subsequently joined Neptune Orient Lines and was assigned to the 'Neptune Topaz' in May 1970 as 3rd Engineer and was later promoted to 2nd Engineer'. On one of her voyages the vessel loaded minimal cargo at the European and UK ports, all her cargo holds were empty. Only a dredger weighing approximately 300 tons (loaded at Europe) was loaded on the forward end of No.2 cargo hold hatch and a Singapore Navy Patrol Craft (loaded at Plymouth) was loaded astride No 2 and No 3 cargo hold hatches. At Plymouth the lashing crew were instructed to install minimum securing wire rope lashings on the Patrol Craft; to facilitate easy access for the Deck Officers to move to and fro from their forward accommodation to the aft accommodation. As the 'GM' of the vessel was very critical at this point, the engine-room was requested to fill up all ballast tanks, right up to the top and orders were issued to strictly adhere to the sequence of drawing fuel oil from the vessel's wing and double-bottom tanks, during the voyage, in a bid to control vessel's 'GM'. The vessel subsequently set sail for Singapore, via the western coast of Africa. One morning whilst the vessel was steaming off South Africa, the vessel suddenly rolled heavily to port, the Master who happened to be on the main deck at the time immediately noted that the Patrol craft had broken it's lashings and had swung around to port, causing the ship to list heavily to port. Without hesitation he sprinted forward up to the Bridge and rang the 'Engine Telegraph' to alert engine-room, before positioning the telegraph at 'Slow Ahead'. The deck crew and Officers were hastily summoned on deck and ordered to re-lash the Patrol Craft in the position where the Patrol Craft had come to rest. Upon completion of the lashing, all was made ready before the vessel, with a heavy list to port, proceeded on her voyage. The main engine speed was slowly brought up to 'Half Ahead', all seemed well, however, as soon as attempt was made to increase engine speed to 'Full Speed Ahead', the vessel began to take a heavy roll from port to starboard. The crew members were very alarmed and they went up to the Bridge to plead with the Master to slow the ship down. The vessel's speed was subsequently reduced to a level where the rolling of the vessel was less alarming. Topaz proceeded on her voyage without further incident. Upon arriving at Singapore, the Patrol craft was safely unloaded.

During my tenure with Neptune Orient Lines, I was assigned as Second Engineer to a chemical tanker, the 'Neptune Orion', plying on the Middle East/Karachi trade. Upon boarding the vessel and going through the normal exercise, I eventually ended up on the engine-room floor plates, on stand-by, as the vessel was departing port. As I stood

observing the activity going on, I noticed the engine cadets frequently carrying pails of lubricating oil and emptying the same back into the main engine sump. The next time I saw this happening, I got hold of the cadets and asked them where the oil was coming from, they answered that they were draining the oil from the scavenge spaces. The next time the vessel was in port, I ordered some engineers to remove the scavenge spaces inspection doors. Together with an Engineer, we crawled through the scavenge spaces, 'Low and Behold', we discovered that all the piston crown securing bolt nuts had worked loose, most of the securing nuts could be turned around by hand, some securing nuts were found to have spun loose over several threads. I thought to myself, 'Oh Gosh, looks like we'll have to draw out all the pistons to inspect the joint faces/jointing between the piston crown and the piston skirt, before reassembling the skirts and tightening the securing nuts correctly'. After some discussion, it was decided to tighten up the piston crown securing nuts from within the scavenge spaces. With the aid of spanners, sledge hammers, lengths of steel pipes and steel bars, we commenced to harden up the securing nuts. Whenever we had the opportunity, we would remove the scavenge inspection doors and proceeded to harden up the respective units piston crown securing nuts. We finally completed the task of hardening all piston crowns securing nuts. From then on, there was minimal piston cooling oil leakages when the piston cooling oil pump was started up. Prior to the rectification of the piston cooling oil leakage, the engine cadets were led to believe that leakage of piston cooling oil into the scavenge spaces was normal.

I finally was assigned as Chief Engineer onboard the general cargo vessel, 'Neptune lolite'. This was to be my last stint at sea. After sailing onboard the vessel for 9 months, I signed off the vessel at Singapore on 13 December 1979. I had been at sea for over 14 years and it was high time for this 'Old Sea Dog' to get shackled to dry land.

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