

# Going to Sea

## Part I

### Apprentice, Deck Officer and 'Inwards' Marine Trinity House Pilot for London Based in Dover

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In 1945 aged 15, I asked the career master at Taunton School, Somerset, for advice on how to enter the Merchant Navy as an apprentice with the intention of becoming a deck officer/navigator. A week later news from various enquiries was not good. The General Register of Shipping and Seamen advised that due to shipping losses from enemy action, vacancies were far and few between and, further, most navigation apprentices/cadets employed came from approved Nautical Schools such as the Conway and HMS Worcester, all shipping companies apparently had long waiting lists. However, the letter advised that there could be a slight chance of obtaining a

posting with a company that were generally steered clear of such as tramp companies that owned slow ships, provided poor food and living conditions, long voyages and gave a few other relevant reasons. The General Register of Shipping suggested ten such companies of which one replied to an application for an interview. This was the Hain Steamship Company of Cardiff.

The career master had obviously discussed the situation with the headmaster who must also have realised that I could be a difficult problem to solve. It therefore arose that I found myself standing in front of Doctor D Crichton-Millers, headmaster: also a Magistrate, churchwarden and known internationally as a fast, marauding international wing-forward in the modern mould for Scotland and the Barbarians.

Coming straight to the point the headmaster summarised my situation by declaring that I was no academic. This was true for in 1943 the school had set up a form called Shell into which pupils of a certain age including myself, were placed who were unable to stand the normal pace of school work. By a coincidence I had been the first into it, apart from my efforts on the playing fields there was not a lot that could be said in my favour. Ending on a sombre note the headmaster reminded me that at this time I was one of four pupils that resided off the school grounds, in his house,



*Jim Francis 1946 Before embarkation on MV Trevethoe (Middlesbrough to China).*

*Jim Francis 1st ship MV Trevethoe Hain Line 1946.*



so that we could be under his personal supervision. Coming to a quick decision the headmaster said, "right, the company is prepared to give you an interview in a weeks time at their Cardiff office, they will want to know why on earth you want to go to sea on one of their ships which I have discovered is known as 'Hungry Hains'. Satisfy the answer to that question and this will determine your future. Finish with your studies until you can report back to me with a sound reason."

After spending the rest of the day in the library and no nearer the answer to my problem I finally made a phone call to the administration department of the Hain Line requesting the name of a retired ships captain who would be prepared to provide information concerning life at sea on a Hain cargo ship in order that I could complete a thesis on this subject for an examination.

Two days later I was having tea with a Captain Jones in Swansea, South Wales. The gentleman was well into his eighties, extremely articulate and able to explain in detail all aspects of life at sea, finally producing documents that I knew would solve my problem. The following day I explained to the headmaster why I wanted to join the Hain Line and no other shipping

company ... "I think that will do," said Dr. Crichton-Miller.

The following Wednesday at 10 a.m. I sat in the waiting room of a Cardiff dock office. I rehearsed my speech until I think I could have repeated it backwards. Shortly before 4 p.m. Polly, the typist who by now I was on good terms with, having shared her sandwich at lunch said that I would now be interviewed. Two gentlemen in soiled rain coats with bowler hats on the desk in front of them invited me to sit and immediately enquired why I had written to apply for a career with the Hain Line when there was such a wide choice. They were both clearly puzzled and interested.

"Because of the Steamship Trevesa" I replied. As there was complete silence I continued and gave a graphic account of how officers and crew of the Hain Line steamship Trevesa survived a shipwreck in the middle of the Indian Ocean in 1923 when 44 men took to two lifeboats 1700 miles into their voyage eventually reaching Mauritius after 23 days, with the loss of fewer than a dozen lives, making headline news following their rescue. I gave a vivid account of how the men endured starvation, thirst, scorching sun, biting cold in the cramped boats and how the loss of life was minimised by the skills and

indomitable courage of Captain Foster, who had twice been torpedoed during the recent world war, and his Chief Officer Stewart Smith.

From the newspaper cutting that I had borrowed from Captain Jones I went on to describe fully what had happened before one boat reached Rodriguez Island and the other Mauritius. They were both interested to learn that there was a memorial to the Trevesa crew at Bel Ombre Point. "Did I know what the wording was?" I certainly did.

Finally I explained that I wished to sail and be trained by a company that provided such high quality officers. That was the reason that I had applied to join the Hain Steamship Company and no other.

"Do we have a vacancy for this young man" asked the older man. The Treveshoe sails from Middlesbrough for Hong Kong and Kobe at the end of the month, if he can make it in time," said the second man.

On the way out, nearly sick with excitement I asked Polly who the two men were. "The older man is Mr George Christopher, the Chairman and the second one Captain John Christopher, Marine Superintendent."

As the train pulled into Middlesbrough Central Station, late evening, I studied the telegram. Reference apprentice appointment to Treveshoe at Middlesbrough for joining Monday next indentures being forwarded tonight acknowledge: Hain Steamship. Today was Monday. The past two weeks had been extremely hectic. Apart from signing the indentures that would last four years and allow me to sit for the Second Mates Certificate in navigation and seamanship, the first step to getting command of a

foreign going vessel. The company would also provide me with accommodation, food and water and instruct me in required studies. My first year's wages would come from the £10 cheque that my father was required to send, I would also receive 1/3d per hour overtime. Providing I completed the four years and the vessel was still at sea, I would receive the wages of an AB plus a £5 bonus on return to a home port.

My uniform had been purchased with special coupons, further eyesight and health references, then finally, this morning, waving goodbye to family and friends. See you soon we had all shouted, little knowing that it would be nearly two years and that my attitude to life and appearance would have changed.

The taxi driver was the first to see the dark hull of the ship in the dock. It was then that I noticed that round the foot of the gangway about twenty men were gathered, some held placards indicating a protest concerning a war bonus. It was made quite clear that I would not be their friend if I went on board the ship, particularly as I was the only uniform in sight. Within minutes I was munching away at a large sandwich plus a mug of soup that had been thrust into my hands by a jovial lady. Then a camera lamp flashed and somebody asked my views on the proposed suggestion by ship-owners and some politicians to take away the £10 'war bonus' that had been introduced to the Merchant Navy during the war, also my view on the 'soup kitchen' that had been provided by Mrs Mc Donald and her ladies during the day. I then made my first public speech, "very nice" I said.

Within thirty minutes it started to rain which proved a signal that we could all go on board the Treveshoe. Within minutes uniformed staff appeared from nowhere, including an apprentice of two years

seniority who was to be my cabin mate. Halfway through my unpacking the second officer materialised with a very important enquiry. "Did either of us have any medical knowledge?" Surprised that Don, the senior apprentice didn't say anything, I proudly explained that I had passed an examination in first aid while a 'runner' in the ARP. and when pressed I produced a certificate that showed I could treat burns from incendiary bombs which was stamped and signed by the Area Officer of Tenby in South Wales.

Within five minutes the officer was back confirming that amongst other duties I was now the ships medical officer and was handed the Ship Masters Medical Guide, a large tome showing vivid photographs of various types of venereal I disease, what action to take in the event of peritonitis, how to draw teeth and to stitch up gaping wounds...at that moment I felt that in some way, my education at Taunton School had slightly let me down. I well remember that at my first surgery the following day the only patient, an able seaman who happened to be in a highly emotional state told me that after sending all his overtime pay to his wife. On returning home he discovered that she had spent it on a leopard skin coat, I found the matter extremely distressing and finally wrote carefully in my medical log, date, name of patient, place, then under prescription, "gave advice not to kill wife." I then set to scrubbing out the hospital on my hands and knees, stowed away the boxes of medical stores that were waiting unopened and prepared for the next challenge.

While I was admiring my work, the chief officer came along and enquired whether I had any experience with animals, "yes" was my answer, "at home we have a dog and a cat, I go shooting duck and rabbits, when I was younger I used to enjoy a trot along the beach on a donkey." "That's brilliant, I have

just the job for you, tomorrow morning an ex jockey is arriving at seven with nine race horses, two boxer dogs and fifteen chickens for Malaya, you will receive full instructions from this man who will stay on board until the vessel sails in two days time, the animals then become your full responsibility to arrive at their destination in good health.

A messenger then arrived and said, "The captain wants to see you, now." This was my first meeting with the captain, he obviously wished to welcome me on board and confirm my extra responsibilities. Stepping into his cabin I saw immediately that he was not a happy man. On the desk in front of him was a newspaper that showed a picture of a young officer munching a sandwich and holding a mug, it looked remarkably like me. "It says here that you are against the withdrawal of the £10 bonus and you think that Mrs McDonald's food is better than the ships cook, well?" It wasn't a good first meeting, I was advised that in future I was not to talk to the press and give personal political views concerning the government, I was also to apologise to 'Bunny' Warren the cook.

The following day was a busy one, apart from seeing to the securing of the horse boxes, stowing away the straw, hay, corn, dog food and other items to benefit the welfare of animals on a long sea voyage. After breakfast outside the surgery stood several patients, cuts and bruises were the norm although one seaman required to go to the clinic after referring to photographs in the 'Guide'. Following careful instructions, the animals were fed and watered, then an hour instruction on grooming, several manuals to study and the ex jockey said he would be off the following day after the first feed. He also wished me the best of luck.

Another important duty concerned the ships whistle which the captain claimed should be shining like a beacon on entering or leaving port, the whistle in question was brass, about four feet tall by several inches round and situated on the fore, top side of the funnel, reached by climbing thirty feet up a narrow metal ladder. This I was told was my responsibility and its importance came before that of anything else; a dirty whistle at the wrong time would be very bad news. Once the animals had their final feed and the days last surgery, I climbed the narrow ladder and an hour later left the whistle gleaming. It was then time, I felt that I should phone home and tell Mum and Dad how life was treating me.

The day of departure had been busy, livestock, surgery, a final polish on the whistle, my station for letting go was on the forecandle under the watchful eye of the chief officer, the tugs had finally nudged the ship into the main river and finally, after clearing the estuary, the pilot left and we going down the North Sea towards our first port of call, Marseilles, the three cylinder Doxford engines pounding away and driving the ship foreword at her top speed of 9 knots.

Having been on the go since six that morning I was ready to drop, the senior apprentice was already snoring away when there was a urgent knock on the door, it was the radio officer no less, "the chief engineer requires the keelson key urgently, it was last seen with the bosun, be a good lad and get it for him will you?" Little did I know then that the keelson key was part of the ships hull and weighed over a hundred tons.

The bosun who knew immediately that this was a joke to get the 'new boy' settled in, invited me into his cabin and said "not to worry about this key", then offered me a

lemonade and a bar of chocolate. The bosun explained that the idea was to get the new boy to run all round the ship asking for this 'key'. Jose' the bosun came from Malta and felt that I had done enough for one day and decided to pass the time relating a few of his experiences. I was to learn that during the war he had spent most of the time on the Queen Mary. I would hear spellbinding stories that had not been made known to the public. For example in 1942, while the ship was in New York, General Marshal had asked the Captain if the Queen Mary could take 15,000 men. Apparently yes but the ships draft would be 44ft 6in, well below the Plimsoll Line showing the maximum draught allowed. If the ship were to list leaving port she would barely scrape over the Hudson Tunnel, the shallowest part. Because a list could be caused by thousands of soldiers crossing from side to side to wave goodbye, perhaps for the last time to their loved ones, this danger was averted by positioning the soldiers on departure then bringing them to attention and the ship cleared safely.

Finally I was told to go to the chief engineers room by Jose' and tell the chief engineer that "no luck, nobody has seen the keelson key," "that's alright laddie, take this bottle of lemonade and bar of chocolate and get your head down."



*Apprentice Jim Francis [left] Writer Graham Hughes [right] at Singapore 2am Wednesday 11th December 1946.*