Going to Sea

Part II

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

JIM FRANCIS

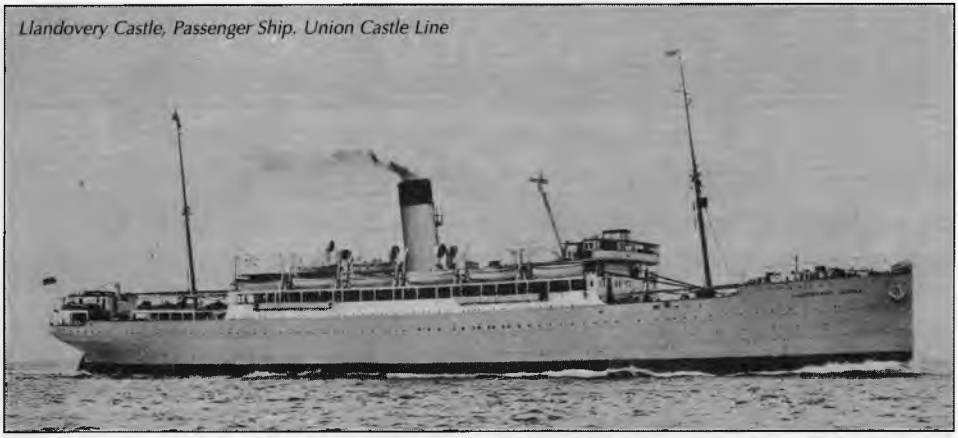
Marseilles was the first foreign port for me to go ashore. Then it was the second city of France and chief port. After seeing to the animals and the first day's surgery, the chief officer gave me half a day off. The ship was sailing at 5 p.m. and shore leave expired at 4 p.m.

Although putting me in debt, I drew a sub of 10/- worth of francs and went ashore bound for the Chateau D'If of Monte Cristo fame which is situated on a small island near the harbour entrance and once housed celebrated prisoners such as the Man-in-the-iron mask and Mirabeau.

Jim Francis 1946

The harbour was a mess. In 1944 during the days of the Liberation 7,000 Germans had been made prisoner, but just before surrendering, the Kriegsmarine had blown up the port causing severe damage, together with 251 ships and craft of all types destroyed.

I reached the Chateau D'If by a small ferry and in the prison actually climbed through the escape hole in the prison cell. Then back on shore with a few francs left and time to spare, treated myself to a bag of chips from a street stall. Arriving back on the quay my heart sank, the berth was empty and the time wasn't even 4 p.m. No ship - my legs went weak. What about the animals and patients? The whistle had not been polished. So much for a career at sea. Then from afar I could hear singing. From the tone and volume they had had a good lunch. It was the cook, who had by now forgiven me, a greaser and two seamen. Also approaching was a stranger, the ship's agent. We were to learn that the ship had finished cargo work early and was now anchored, thus saving port dues and awaiting our return. A small tug lay nearby and was soon pushing into a short deep swell, and the singing and jokes from the seamen had finally come to a stop. The challenge of climbing a rope pilot ladder alongside the Trevethoe was soon to


Llandovery Castle, Passenger Ship, Union Castle Line

commence. Little did I know then that in less than twenty years time this would be part of my profession as a Port of London Trinity House Pilot.

However, climbing a ladder off Marseilles with a ship pitching to a short deep swell was a different matter. While pushing the cook upwards his foot had already torn my brand new Van Huesen shirt and his lunch from above had covered me from head to toe. Reaching the main deck, their relief at still being alive meant hugging each other and rendering a final chorus which unfortunately had to include me within their clutches.

At nine the following morning four men and a boy stood in line outside the captain's cabin to be charged with drunk and disorderly behaviour and accordingly 'logged' - normally a day's pay, but more seriously went on your record. When my turn came, being last, the captain told the chief officer, chief engineer and chief steward that they could go. The captain commenced his speech, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do with you. Before you come on board you criticise the ship's cooking, make statements to the press on political matters and now a couple of hours ashore in your first port, you turn up after what looks like the worst part of a drunken fight."

For the first time, realising that my future was on the line, I gave a full account of joining the ship in Middlesbrough, going ashore in Marseilles, producing the entrance receipt to the Chateau D'If and finally the soiled chip bag that had provided me with my lunch. With conclusive evidence such as this the captain finally accepted that it was time to make a fresh start. I should commence once again with a clean sheet and tore up the charge sheet in front of him.

So it was goodbye to Europe and a new start little knowing that for close on two years life would be spent east of Port Said. Once through the Suez Canal, it was down the Red Sea and Aden for bunkers. The animals required my undivided attention, a careful diet, constant grooming and the two boxer dogs never left my side except when the steward rang the meal time bell which meant 'stations' for them outside the

galley. Sunburn amongst the crew required treatment, some with high temperatures were supplied with Dover tablets, little knowing that my wife Mary would come from that town and where I would eventually settle as a ship's pilot and finally in retirement.

While in Aden I went ashore to savour the sights and smells that would soon become familiar. I admired a Leica camera costing £45, which was three weeks pay for the captain. The memory of Aden would return when I became a London South Channel pilot. One of the London pilots had also been a ship's pilot in Aden when he had met his future wife who had been sailing round the world as the cook on a 40 foot yacht.

Soon we were once again leaving port with the now familiar gleaming brass whistle, off across the Indian Ocean - next port Penang to discharge the livestock which seemed to bear up well under my care. I had made a few rupees from selling the chicken's eggs in Port Said and Aden. The locals seemed to think that they could develop a flock of the same pedigree. Very likely I had said so on being questioned, pocketing my new found wealth.

When steaming across the Indian Ocean, having passed Ceylon and still several days off Penang I surveyed the present situation. I had the third officer sitting up in bed suffering from acute appendicitis, the Captain's Medical Guide stated that ice had to be permanently placed on his stomach and kept in place. The senior apprentice had been promoted to third officer which meant on paper that I had a three berth cabin to myself, but John and Janet, the two boxers who were my constant companions, decided that this was an open invitation and moved into my cabin, so the occupancy had gone from two up to three. However, my real concern was the bosun, Jose', who was developing withdrawal symptoms. He also, was off work 'sick', staying in his cabin. I collected his meals and listened to his stories about the war and life on Malta which seemed to calm him down.

All this went through my mind as I put the finishing touches to the windlass on the fo'c'sle, a large black piece of machinery used for mooring the ship and anchor work. To brighten it from being totally black I had painted all the nuts and bolts pillar box red and the alternate links on the anchor cable white "Well, what about that?" I asked the two dogs lying at my feet. They both wagged their stumpy tails which confirmed that they both agreed with my colour scheme.
There was then a roar from the bridge. Somebody else, the captain no less, also appeared to want to compliment me on my colour scheme. When the three of us arrived on the bridge it seemed the captain was upset about something. "What have you been feeding the bosun on, look." There sitting on the mainmast lamp bracket some sixty feet above the deck, completely naked was José telling the world that he was about to fly away like a bird and never come back. "As medical officer and responsible for this incident I demand that you do something about it immediately."

Knowing José's preference for Orangeboom beer and salami sandwiches I quickly collected four bottles from the chief steward and the rest from the cook, also a large shirt and blanket. Thus armed I quickly climbed the mainmast to the crosstrees after telling the carpenter to clear the

afterdeck of all the crew. From the bridge I could see three pairs of binoculars following my every movement. Still twenty feet above me but without a connecting ladder stood José who appeared more interested in my parcel of goodies than flying away to another land immediately. "You were going to tell me all about the collision between the Queen Mary and the Curacao". I shouted, "I've got your beer and sandwiches if you want them." José slid down the top mast like a monkey, partly clad, although appearing more like a pirate than bosun. We both settled down on the cross trees and I learnt from Jose' that until 1941 the Queen Mary only had one 4" gun and one anti-aircraft gun. Radar was fitted in 1942 together with some rockets. Because of her speed she travelled alone. On the 2nd October in 1942 whilst nearing the end of her passage to the Clyde she was met off Bloody Foreland by the old cruiser Curacao. There was an outside screen of destroyers seven miles away. For four hours the two ships zigzagged, then at two in the afternoon in bright sunlight there was a tragic mistake, the Queen Mary cut the cruiser in two. The destroyers saved 102 but 338 died. A court of inquiry divided the blame. José was on the bridge at the time of the accident and witnessed the disaster.

By the time this account had been related and discussed, the sun was getting low on the horizon, the horses were getting restless and I knew an ice pack needed replacing. I then asked José if he could do me a favour by sleeping in the hospital and replacing the ice on the third officer, for this payment he could have unlimited beer. This seemed a good idea. It helped that José liked the third officer who also liked listening to his accounts of the war. The proposition also sounded better than sleeping on a lamp bracket or flying away like a bird.

On arrival in Penang the nine horses were discharged and immediately rolled over onto their backs, jumped back onto their feet and looked extremely fit. The last I saw of Janet and John were two sad looking faces looking through the rear of an Austin car's window on their way to pastures new, the chickens were collected by an Indian trader and that was that.

The bosun and third officer were taken off to their different hospitals and after clearing up I was given the afternoon off for getting my cargo safely to their destination. Life at last looked like being more normal from now on.

This was not to be so. In the early hours of the following morning it appeared as if another war had broken out: Machine-gun fire, star shells lit up the sky, sirens screamed, there was also a lot of shouting. Pirates had come alongside the Trevethoe in two sampans and with the co-operation of an 'inside job' had loaded up with large crates out of no 4 hatch. The navy had been summoned hence - the disturbance. Bodies covered in blood lay on the ship's deck, some floating alongside, although none belonged to the ship's crew. I remained busy for the rest of the night.

The following morning it became clear that several of the crew had prepared to open the hatch and provide lookouts. One, Tommy, an ordinary seaman and a few months older than myself had owned up. He was arrested and taken off to the local prison several miles outside the town. The main ship's ringleaders remained silent and that was

Captain Cecil Foster (of the Trevassa) his Wife and J C Stewart his chief

the situation with the ship due to sail late that night.

When I knocked on the captain's door after breakfast, there was obviously a conference going on in his cabin attended by police, army and navy representatives including the ship's agent. "Well," said the captain. My suggestion, that someone from the ship should go out to the prison and see Tommy was met with a stony silence. I simply felt his legal rights should be supported by someone before we sailed. From the captain's response it appeared that the best result would be a hanging from the yardarm. However it was finally decided, with backing from the ship's agent, to make representations, possibly to safeguard the company's interest, also as I said it was my intention to write to his mother.

It was finally decided that I should go as an officer, I was accordingly provided with second mate epaulettes, 'two bands connected by a diamond', the chief engineer lent me his white shorts and stockings, the chief steward provided me with two bottles of whisky and two cartons of Players cigarettes. The agent provided a car and by 3 p.m. and armed with a letter of introduction I was driven to the prison outside George Town, kitted out as the youngest acting second officer in any merchant navy.

Providing gifts for the prison guards, I was taken to Tommy who was in a room with a dozen or so local prisoners. Sharing the cigarettes and a swig out of the bottle avoided any language difficulties; soon I was the centre of attraction, telling them about life at sea, mainly its adventures. I don't think it mattered that some couldn't understand

a word, but it was better than nothing. It cheered Tommy up too, even the guards came in and joined in the banter. Eventually I was introduced to the elderly governor who, over tea, thought that officers were getting younger and younger. Then it was finally back on board to clean the whistle and surgery.

Next port was Port Swetnham, up a long winding river. "No swimming here," said the pilot before he got off. Of course there is always somebody who knows better and was never seen again - crocodiles. The next port was Singapore where we anchored out in the 'roads' to wait for a berth. Everybody was feeling a bit down after the past few days. It didn't help me that when hoisting the house flag on the mainmast, the halyard slipped and the flag remained right at the top. "Sort it out or else," said the chief officer.

Getting to the crosstrees was simple, just climb the ladder. Getting to the lamp bracket a further twenty feet was less so if you weren't a monkey, just arm and leg stuff . This final bit was not so easy where the halyard was jammed in the sheave. Then a loud shout from down below "Get down you bloody idiot". It was the captain and nobody disobeyed him, particularly me at that moment. I slid down without any trouble, little realising that my indentures made clear that it was the captain's responsibility to see that I didn't go more than nine feet above the deck. As if he didn't have enough problems without me possibly breaking my neck.

The next day's mail brought a letter from home. In it I learnt that a close relative held an important position in a bank in Singapore. The letter told me that he would contact the local agent and arrange to take me out for lunch. It turned out that this was the day when the ship was at anchor several miles offshore. No matter, the relative knew the harbour master who offered the loan of his launch. Sure enough, at 10 a.m. a sleek thirty foot cabin cruiser lay alongside the Trevethoe, a coxswain at the wheel, uniformed sailors fore and aft and a neat steward waited in a cushioned cockpit ready to take an order for refreshments.

With the captain standing beside me at the top of the gangway also proceeding ashore, I noticed that his transport sent by the ship's agent consisted of an open sampan powered by a Seagull outboard and manned by one man. The captain readily accepted my invitation to join me in my waiting cutter and as we creamed over the wave-tops at 20 knots, settled back on the cushions and ordered a large whisky, while I happily drank my lemonade.

Several days later I was called to the captain's cabin. "The agent has a note from somebody called Graham Hughes, a 'writer' on H.M.S. Belfast, now being fitted out on a floating dry-dock on the other side of the island. "Do you know him?" Did I! Graham came from Tenby, went to the same junior school, shooting and fishing together until we went into different navies. Given the rest of the day off, I hitched a lift in an army truck to the causeway and within minutes stood on the quarterdeck of the cruiser and found Graham. As we stood on the fo'c'sle yarning away round the bend of the river came a small coaster, 'Empire Tenby'. That night we caught the naval transport into Singapore to celebrate. By two in the morning we had two dollars left, and with this had our photograph taken before returning to our ships.