

Going to Sea

Part IV ~ Home Waters

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

JIM FRANCIS

In 1960, now married with a young family it was decision time: whether to remain at sea and become a ship's captain or come ashore. It was an easy decision to make helped by the introduction of the 707 Boeing aircraft that were then beginning to remove the passenger trade off the Union Castle Line to and from South Africa, also fewer ships with diminished promotion for ships' officers. Under these circumstances I applied to become a London Trinity House Pilot.

Qualifications that a candidate required included a Foreign Going Master's Certificate, that he was a natural born British subject on his birth certificate, also that of his father and mother again, proof of their British nationality. "That he shall also possess qualifications of his previous conduct and his habits sober. That he has served five years as a watch keeping officer and does not exceed the age of 35 years by the time he is called. That he must also be physically fit for the duties of a pilot."

As I desired to make an application for the Cinque Ports Pilotage District based



Jim Francis 1946

in Dover, to ensure that I would know when this opening became available, which was only advertised briefly in Lloyds List and the Times, I provided and received a receipt from Trinity House for the sum of one shilling. This was signed by S Rawlings Smith, Principal, being the Fee for Notification when this List was advertised by the Corporation of Trinity House.

When Mary's telegram reached me, I was Chief Officer of the Roslin Castle off the west coast of Africa bound for Antwerp with a full cargo of oranges from South Africa for the European market. The telegram contained advice from Trinity House who advised that my recent application to be considered as a candidate for an appointment as a Cinque Ports Pilot would be.....and went on to provide details for an interview over a period of six weeks.

For candidates to be able to attend an interview over a restrict period was always a lottery, essentially in which part of the world you are. Japan, China or the America's could rule you out but

in my case, I would be in Antwerp for the best part of a week. The captain said he could spare me for twenty-four hours before the ship returned to South Africa, so I made the necessary arrangements and was able to attend.

Within a year I was advised that I had been approved for a Cinque Ports Pilot's vacancy and that I was to place myself at my expense under the supervision of the Ruler of Pilots, Dover, for five months in order that I might accompany licensed pilots throughout the Southern District of the River Thames. With no income this meant that Mary was the only "breadwinner" for the Francis family over this period in her capacity as a teacher with the Kent Education Authority.

On the 6th March 1962 I was finally licensed to act as a pilot for the purpose of conducting ships from Dungeness to Gravesend and all ports in between including the River Medway. A "pilot" was defined by the Merchant Shipping Act, 1894, as "any person not belonging to a ship who has the conduct thereof. And they are under an obligation to offer their services in all weathers, unless under circumstances of absolute danger to their lives". The captain of a ship once said to Mark Twain, who was a Mississippi pilot, "I suppose you know where every bank and shoal is on this river" Twain replied "No Captain, but I sure know where they ain't". On the 10th March 1962 I piloted my first ship, the Roerdomp gross tonnage 349 tons draught 6' 8" from Margate to Gravesend. Pilotage charged £15 9s 2p.

The winter of 1962/63 was the severest for many years with snow and ice persisting for three months. The early hours of the 1st February was no



London Pilotage Licence J Francis

exception when the duty pilot phoned and stood me off to pilot the Weserstrom out of Ramsgate and to sea when I would disembark into Bob Cannon's fishing boat Poppy and back ashore. The duty pilot added that there may be a "little problem". A career at sea had taught me that a large or difficult problem could be simply solved but a "little problem" prepared me for the worst.

On arrival in Ramsgate I found the Weserstrom enclosed in ice in the inner basin, there were numerous ice flows in the outer harbour and pack ice was piled high in the harbour entrance. The ship's captain was anxious to leave and with the Weserstrom fitted with ice breaker bows and a powerful engine, the ship would leave a path in the ice in which Poppy could follow, then, with the Weserstrom's helm hard over would provide a pool of clear water when outside the harbour, down the pilot ladder I would go into the waiting boat and back on dry land in half an hour.

I was still dubious and so was Bob Carmon who said that his Poppy didn't need ice breaker bows to pick up his lobster pots, and his engine wasn't all that powerful. However, providing no time was lost in getting off the ship he



could get back into the harbour. That was the theory, “any delay and Poppy got stuck in the ice we would have a little problem,” added Bob.

Clearing the outer harbour, I shook hands with the Captain, “the ladder is waiting for you on the port side”. The main deck was like a sheet of ice, where the pilot ladder had been rigged for the 15 foot descent into the boat. Bulwark steps with a pair of stanchions attached to it had been placed against the ship's side which I mounted, grasping the stanchions firmly and turned and felt for the first rung of the pilot ladder.

In a fleeting moment and too late, I realised my weight had levered the bulwark steps off the deck and I fell the fifteen feet backwards into a sea of ice with bulwark steps/stanchion

combination on top of me. Whether my concussion was caused by the bulwark steps, landing on an ice floe or Bob Cannon's Polly, but when I partly recovered I found myself lashed to the side of the boat, and my stiffening figure being towed half-submerged through the broken ice the half mile back to Ramsgate harbour. Seeing that my eyes were now open Bob asked me how I felt.

I learnt later that I had been swept clear of the harbour lights enmeshed in the ice and steps. Bob Cannon had quickly assessed the gravity of the situation and immediate action was essential, but it was several minutes before he could manoeuvre the boat and pass a rope under my arms and make it fast to a cleat while the Weserstrom proceeded on its way.

Fortunately, waiting on the quayside were willing hands of the mooring gang who were able to place my frozen and unbending body in the rear of a 5 ton truck and the journey to Ramsgate hospital achieved in record time, where I was placed in a warm bath and slowly brought up to body heat and my clothes cut from my body. The abrasions on my body from the broken ice were attended to before I was placed in a warm bed.

Following doctor's rounds it was suggested that I should remain in hospital for observation but after some persuasion I was pronounced fit enough to only travel back to Dover. As I was escorted off the premises by the Matron and following a paternal pat on the back she suggested that “I should try swimming off Ramsgate during the summer”. Arriving home by taxi, dressed in pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers and carrying a sodden, dripping bag of torn clothing, from the puzzled

look on Mary's face it was quite clear that I had a lot of explaining to do. "There was a little problem..." I began.

The cause of my accident had been because the stanchion uprights had been attached to the bulwark steps, if the stanchions were detached from the bulwark steps and only attached to the ship's structure and written into the Merchant Shipping (Pilot Ladder) Rules, such accidents would be avoided. I put this into a full written report to the Safety Division of the Ministry of Transport concerning my accident requesting their observations. The British Underwriters were also informed and agreed on a claim for damages and shock of £50, subject to findings.

This claim was subsequently withdrawn by the British Underwriters for, according to a report from the Ministry of Transport, the German Ministry had responded to my complaint by saying that the ship's pilot ladder construction conformed within British Regulations and the captain's excellent reputation suggested no further action should be taken. This argument was accepted by Mr R W Bullmore, Under Secretary to the Ministry of Transport on the 12th December 1963 and the file closed. Following my complaint for not being advised, I received a letter from Mr Bullmore which essentially said, "Sorry, we should have told you." However, on the threat of proceeding against the British Underwriters by the United Kingdom Pilots Association upon their refusal to settle, they finally agreed to pay me £73 10s including damages.

That may have been the end of the story, however, following consultations with my Cinque Ports Pilots Committee, a Pilot Ladder Sub Committee was

authorised comprising pilot Captain Gordon Greenham and me to negotiate with the Ministry of Transport to introduce new Rules on Pilot Ladder Safety. The remit required that, "bulwark ladder and stanchions must be independently secured to the ship as required by the International Organisation for Standardization (ISO) Pilot Ladders."

Following a meeting with Mr Rodger, President of the Ministry of Transport, my Pilot Ladder Sub-Committee found that he was unimpressed with our requests on pilot ladder safety which were met with a cool response.

Because giving up was not an option, we asked the Member of Parliament for Folkestone and Hythe, Mr Albert Costain, to raise a question in Parliament, essentially. "While the rest of the world's sea-faring nations provide safe pilot ladder rules, the British Government was the only nation that refused to accept them."

Mr Costain put this question in the House to Mr Rodgers, President of the Board of Trade. Who replied, "No, these are very difficult problems involving technical considerations."

Matters came to a head on 3rd August 1967 when the tragedy waiting to happen occurred off Dover almost exactly a year after another pilot Captain Leslie Hasset of The Gateway, Dover, fell to his death off the port.

The British vessel Afric had stopped off the port to land her Cinque Ports Pilot, Captain Jim Pearson. The inquest reported that he had mounted the bulwark steps using the side rails for support, as he turned with his back to

the sea to begin his descent down the ladder to the waiting pilot boat. Whereupon, the whole bulwark steps tipped under his weight, and crashed down onto the boat below. Pilot Jim Pearson landed in the sea and according to the boatman appeared to be swimming and raised an arm as the boat drew near him. That was the last movement that he was seen to make when he disappeared below the surface.

The Dover Express & East Kent News, report dated Friday 15th August 1967.

Sea Safety Regulations Were Broken - Coroner.

The Coroner, Mr James A. Johnson was enquiring into the circumstances that led to the death of Captain James H Pearson, of Garth, London Road, River, Dover to fall to his death outside Dover Harbour. During four hours of evidence, cross examined by Mr Maurice Sayers (for the Cinque Ports Pilots of Trinity House) the Captain of the Afric agreed "that it would have been safer if the stanchions of the bulwark steps had been part of the ship's structure rather than relying on someone to put their foot on the lower step to prevent it tipping up."

This statement was supported by the Jury Foreman, Councillor George Lock who said, "The steps and handrails should have been better secured." Dr. Marshall B King confirmed that the cause of death possibly resulted from the injuries to the back, or from falling into the sea.

Summing up the Coroner said that "the British Board of Trade had passed the bulwark steps and stanchion combination. They should be told of the recommendations of the International

Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) Pilot Ladders which led to the regulations that the stanchions should be independently attached to the ship."

"There was a good deal wrong here," said the Coroner. These faults he listed as "the inefficiency of the ladder which was twisted, the bulwark steps, and the supervision of the pilot's departure, his findings would be passed to the Board of Trade, and that the pilot's death was caused by shock."

I therefore reported to my Cinque Ports Pilots' Committee that with such a damning report to the Board of Trade, it was just a question of time before the President of the Board of Trade would accept defeat and introduce new rules stating "that the bulwark stanchions would be independently secured to the ship." However, I was soon to discover that a pilot who expected justice was expecting too much.

The Board of Trade refused to accept the Coroner's recommendations, that the stanchions should be detached from the



Cartoon Safety Ladder

steps and independently attached to the ships structure. The reason for their refusal was provided by the Board of Trade in a letter dated 19th February 1968 was that, "the Afric's bulwark steps/ladder combination provided by German builders had been used without accident for ten years and did not have to conform to any British statutory specification referred to."

Once again my Pilot Ladder Sub-Committee experienced failure to have the Safety Rules amended. However, failure is not falling down. Failure is falling down and not getting up again to continue and as we were not prepared to accept defeat, it was back to Mr Costain MP for guidance on how to obtain new rules on pilot ladder safety through a political solution.

It was therefore decided after much thought that initially, in order to obtain popular public support, that: - First, I should be filmed climbing a pilot ladder, grasping both stanchions attached to bulwark steps and then falling into the sea with the steps on top of me. The obvious danger was being struck on the head by the falling steps and being killed. However, this matter was solved by attaching a rope to the steps to stop them three feet short of my head when I hit the water. Final arrangements were then made with the Dover Harbour Board, Southern Television, the Dover Motor Boat Company and an agreeable ship's Captain in the Granville Dock. The film was then shown nationwide



L to R Interviewer, Captain Jim Francis, Captain Gordon Greenham, Mr Albert Costain MP © Southern Independent Television

with Mr Costain MP, myself, Pilot Gordon Greenham and the Presenter with always an empty chair for a Board of Trade official who as expected always declined invitations to attend.

And: - Secondly, Mr Costain MP would arrange with Parliament to present a 10 Minute Rule Bill, to ask Parliament to bring a Bill to assure the security of boarding ladders.

So it followed that at 3.35 pm on the 12th May 1970, Mr A.P. Costain MP (Folkestone and Hythe) rose and opened his address in front of a packed House, with the President of the Board of Trade sitting on the Front Bench. No Member was allowed to interfere with Mr Costain while he presented his Bill.

"I beg to move" began Mr Costain. "My Bill is designed to ensure that the legislation regarding the safety of pilot ladders in this country is equal if not better than that of all other maritime nations"...and finally, following a ten

minute speech.... Read a First time, to be read a Second time upon Friday, 10th July and to be printed (Bill 179) The Bill possibly receiving the Royal Assent.

Within days the Safety Division of the Board of Trade called a meeting of all responsible marine parties throughout the country connected with pilot ladder safety and chaired by Mr Service, Board of Trade Secretary who announced "that the Government had agreed to draft and introduce immediately, that bulwark ladder and stanchions must be independently secured to the ship". Mr Service continued "that it was not therefore necessary for the 10 Minute Rule Bill to be Introduced a Second time upon Friday, 10th July". Mr Service then closed the brief meeting by "complementing those who had played a dogged determination and sustained part in bringing in strict regulations that also included clothing, launches and other aspects of pilot safety."

On reflection, it was over seven years since my accident off Ramsgate and I was now able to appreciate the numerous supports that had been

received, to introduce new Safety Rules. These included the Dover Coroner, Mr Johnson, Registrar of the Cinque Ports, as being Town Clerk of Dover; Councillor George Lock with his gallant jury of four ladies and four men who acknowledged and passed judgement on the dangers of pilot/steps combination. Member of Parliament Mr Albert Costain and the numerous pilot authorities and committees who decided that one day, a ship leaving port would have a well lit access to the pilot ladder, in addition to stanchions secured to the ship's bulwark, a crewman standing by with a lifeline and buoy. The pilot himself wears a reflective inflatable fitted with a powerful strobe light. The high-powered launch would have a two-man crew, a mechanical hoist at the stern to lift a body out of the sea, powerful searchlights, survival kit and wireless communication between ship, launch and port control.

Consequently, no longer would a freezing body have to be lashed to the gunwale of a fishing boat and towed more dead than alive back to the harbour!



Jim Francis landing on a VLCC [Very Large Crude Carrier] Mid Channel 1993