

The Story of Bruce Lilley 1928 - 2014

Part 2

Bruce and Merrill Lilley

CHAPTER THREE

Galley Boy

In the following two years, 1945-47, I served as a galley boy on several different British ships and many times wished for the favourable conditions I had known on the Dalfonn. Having said that, all ships were not the same and some had much better conditions than others. On the Dalfonn I had been signed on as a cabin boy and was a general dogsbody, doing any jobs assigned to me, including making the coffee and making sure the men on watch always had a cup when they wanted one. There was always an urn ready for them at all times. As a galley boy I was mainly confined to the galley, doing all the jobs associated with it, peeling potatoes, washing up and generally obeying the orders of the cook. Of course, as time went on and depending on the amount of time spent on a ship, I might be allowed to undertake tasks of cooking some of the food for the crew. It depended on the temperament of the cook, the length of the voyage and many other factors.

The next ship I served on, out of the Pool, was the Empire Reynolds, a modern tanker. At least I shared a two-berth cabin again. We sailed to the U.S. to pick up a cargo and returned to Antwerp, where the ship was ordered into dry dock to prepare for a trip to the Far East. The war in Europe had finished and I think they did not quite



know what to do with us when we disembarked. We ended up in a kind of transit camp, which might once have been a prison camp, waiting for a passage back to England. Antwerp had the feeling of a military garrison town with soldiers everywhere. You could buy a German Luger there for a carton of 200 American cigarettes. Eventually we were sent back to Tilbury on a landing craft.

I was unlucky with my next posting. It was on the Nianza, an old pre-war tramp ship, owned by McClay and McIntyre of Glasgow. The conditions on board were

diabolical, especially in the galley. There was no refrigerator, only an ice box which did not last long. It was impossible to keep food fresh. We were existing on dried food, mainly peas and beans to go with our dubious portions of meat. We sailed from Plymouth to Montreal where we loaded grain for Bone. While we were in Montreal, anchored out, we celebrated VJ Day. The crew did not go ashore that day but did get shore leave one day later.

When we got to Bone, in French Algeria, it was still occupied by Allied troops. There were many ships sunk in the vicinity of the port and we could see their masts and funnels sticking out eerily above the water. We were there about ten days while we unloaded. Ashore there was a French flavour to the town. I do not have many memories of Bone, but one I was bound to remember, for here I had my first experience of a brothel, which was not at all as I had imagined one to be. Far from a sleazy image it was a classy place, luxuriously furnished and, I remember, with velvet curtains, which can be drawn across further revelations.

From Bone we went light to Takoradi, in West Africa, where we loaded timber for the voyage home. Again I remember little of the stop except that the policemen wore fezzes.

My next ship was an improvement. I was sent to the pool at Leith, which needed galley boys, and I sailed on the Coombe Hill to Buenos Aires. The Coombe Hill was a Doxford motor ship, owned by the Counties Ship Management. When we set off I did not know I would be away for a year. Well, they say you join the navy to see the world! As soon as the crew heard that our destination was Buenos Aires they went mad with delight, shouting "We're going to B.A. We're going to B.A."

Apparently this was one of the most popular runs and every crew member rejoiced when they heard where we were bound. Novices, like myself, wondered what to expect. We soon found out. THE place to go in B.A. was called 'The arches', a glittering arcade with countless bars, shops and restaurants, night clubs and, of course, girls. The food and drink was amazingly cheap and plentiful. From the renowned American cattle ranches they had the most succulent, thick steaks I have ever tasted, before or since. We were reluctant to leave, enjoying our last juicy steaks at the 'First and Last', the pub nearest to the dock gates, calling, for the last time, "Dos beefa de loma. Dos cerverca".

In Buenos Aires we loaded grain for Karachi. When we got there we had to stay outside the port until it was safe for us to be allowed in. Apparently the Indian navy had mutinied and there was a lot of unrest ashore. We were there for three weeks, with guns sounding around us. One of the Indian navy ships was sunk. Although we were used to standing off at a port before being allowed in this seemed a longer wait than usual. The agent could come aboard and we could send ashore to a ship's chandlers for fresh supplies, but we were confined to the ship. When we finally got alongside we did go ashore but we were taken in police vans to the seaman's mission so we did not see much of the town.

Eventually we managed to unload our cargo and left, light, for Lourenco Marques in East Africa, where we picked up a cargo of coal for Hong Kong, which was yet another totally new experience. In Hong Kong the cargo was unloaded by a chain of women each carrying a small basket of coal at a time. As there were 10,000 tons to unload this took at least two weeks during

which I had a great time as I had no work to do. As soon as the ship had tied up on came Mama San with her daughters, asking for a ship's flag and willing to work for the duration of our time in port. They did the cooking, cleaning and washing. The crew members were free to go ashore as they pleased to explore the town, visit the China Fleet Club and be propositioned by a 'Susy Wong' at every street corner. I had never seen such bustling, hustling crowds of humanity. The streets seemed to be busy, busy, busy, crowded at any time of the day or night; the shops, bars and restaurants always open, under a blaze of coloured awnings and banners and incomprehensible Chinese signs. The British navy was in port, with many battleships and the town was full of matelots in uniform. It was a heady introduction to the Far East.

From there we went, once more light, to Canada where we took on a full load of timber from Vancouver, Vancouver Island and several other ports before setting off to make the long haul back to Hull.

I loved Vancouver. The people were very friendly, many of them inviting us to their homes for a meal. Their way of life seemed far superior to anything I had seen in England and I thought it must be a great place to live. I was sorry to leave when the ship was finally loaded to the top with timber, the holds full and the decks piled with planks, tied with wire ropes. As I watched the last of these secured I thought, "I don't want to leave here".

But it was time for the next new experience, passage through the Panama Canal the first time for me. I was subjected

7 CERTIFICATES Completed from Lists of Crew and Official and state of Report on Character				8 OF DISCHARGE Last Notice or from other Official Records if desired by the Seaman.			
No.	Name of ship and official rank, and position	Date and place of discharge	Remarks	No.	Signature of Master	Signature of Seaman	Signature of Officer
1	MAKING ON 16/9/50	10-9-50 FOONIE	11-10-50 12/10/50	1	VERY GOOD	VERY GOOD	
2		11-10-50 12/10/50		2			
3	ALYNSOCK 12/10/50	12/10/50 12/10/50	12/10/50 12/10/50	3			
4	TUG "DAVIDE" VI O.M. 1645/G, LONDON	12/10/50 12/10/50	12/10/50 12/10/50	4	VERY GOOD	VERY GOOD	
5	M/S "SCUNIC" 12/10/50	12/10/50 12/10/50	12/10/50 12/10/50	5			
6		12/10/50 12/10/50	12/10/50 12/10/50	6	VERY GOOD	VERY GOOD	
7		12/10/50 12/10/50	12/10/50 12/10/50	7			
8		12/10/50 12/10/50	12/10/50 12/10/50	8	VERY GOOD	VERY GOOD	

Discharge Certificates

to the usual joke played on all 'first-timers'. "Save your bread for the donkeys," we were told, "You'll need it when they pull us through the locks". Of course the donkeys were the machines that did the pulling, so the joke was on us!

From Vancouver to Hull we were seven or eight weeks at sea, plodding along at a steady 9 or 10 knots. The Coombe Hill arrived in Hull on the 3rd November 1946. I had been away from home for nearly a year and I had circumnavigated the globe. Looking back on it now it seems strange that in all that time we had handled only three cargoes.

It was on this year-long trip that I became an avid reader. It was the best pastime to combat the boredom of weeks at sea. At every port we had books delivered by the Seaman's Mission, all kinds of fiction and non-fiction and always piles of Reader's Digests. This habit of wide reading, especially non-fiction, has stayed with me through life. In future years Merchant Navy crews benefited from the ship's lending library, which delivered boxes of books which could later be exchanged with other ships.