

# A Good Life



by John Wallace

After four years as a Blacksmith, I was ready for a change of pace.

A good friend of mine, Arnold Piddington, was a cook and asked "why don't you join the Navy?"

Well! I had only ever been a blacksmith and knew nothing about the sea, nor of the Merchant Navy, but undeterred, I took myself down to London Docks and into the New Zealand shipping office, to see if there was any chance I could get a job on the ships.

I was asked if I had done any catering, "No" I answered. Had I ever washed up for my mother? "Well, of course," I said, and with that, I was told that I was now in the Merchant Navy as an Assistant Steward! I had absolutely no idea what in the world an Assistant Steward was, or did!

I had to go down to the Uniform Outfitters to purchase some white jackets and blue trousers before I went to the dock to find my first ship, the old "Rangitata"

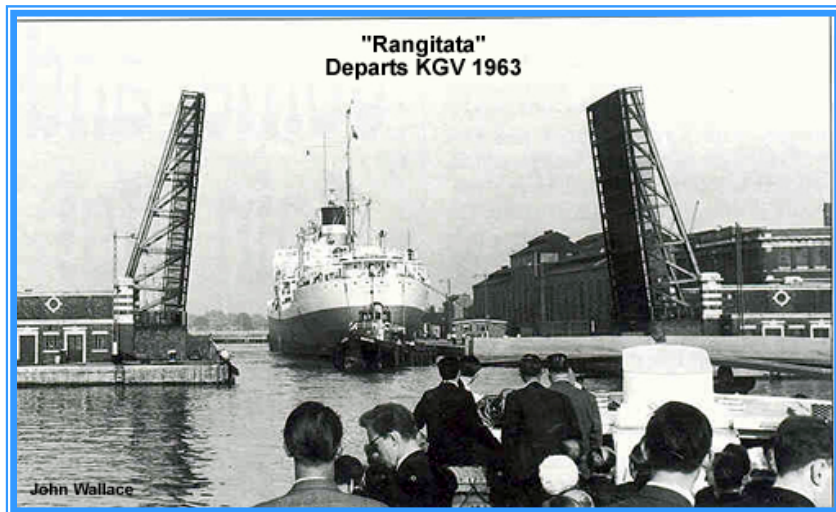
I had never seen a ship as big as "Rangitata" in my life, which on reflection wasn't too surprising, as I'd never been to the docks before!

I climbed the gangway and up into the bowels of the ship, through the Gun-port doors. My first impression was of the strong smell of fuel oil. I was met by the 2<sup>nd</sup> steward, whose name, from memory was Donovan. Donovan told me to go find a cabin. Here

was I, on the first ship of my life, with no idea which way was up, nor of any of the rules, niceties or etiquette of this life I had so boldly walked into. I wandered about until finally finding the Stewards cabins. Finding an available cabin was like trying to find Rocking Horse Shit! They were full of sleeping dockside "workers".

Eventually, I met up with an old time steward who told some of the Dockers to clean up their mess and get out as he was going to bunk down in there, so realising that this bloke knew the score, I dumped my kit in No 6 cabin too.

Next step was up to the lounge to find out what I had let myself in for, I was told that I was to be a waiter, and that I had three weeks to learn my trade, while practising on the officers and shore side office staff. Talk about being thrown in at the deep end, I was all fingers and thumbs and my white jacket didn't stay white for very long!



I must have learned something in that three weeks, either that or they were so short of staff that they decided that anything was better than nothing, and I was assigned a table in the Tourist Class restaurant.

I don't know if I was a quick learner or if they were still desperate for waiters, but the following trip I was promoted to the First Class restaurant, with Chief Officer Hood at the head of the table. He was a hard man but always fair to me.

For my third trip I thought I would have a change and went for the dry store and linen locker storeman's job.

The Rangitata was an old ship but she was like an old house she had character, I was sorry when she was gone. I wonder if anyone knows anything about the rumour that when she was scraped, they found a cabin next to the night watchman's that no one knew of? (believe it or not).

My next ship was the "Remuera" as a topsider. That was a great job, I was working with two of the best guys, Alec and Terry. We had some real good times on and off the ship.

My father was taken ill and I had a break from the sea for a short time, driving prison vans for the Metropolitan Police. They were long hours but good money, and I even got to sleep down in Dartmoor Prison, but as soon as I was able, I returned to the sea, this time on the "Rangitoto" for two trips. The first trip was as a Bathroom Steward, and the second as a Bedroom Steward. Boy, I certainly have a few 'interesting' stories to tell about that, but perhaps I'd better let sleeping dogs lie!



I thought I'd have a change and my next job was on Union Castle line's "Braemar Castle" as a `Silver King.` I felt like a magpie with all that nice shining silver! I did three trips on the Braemar, the food was good, and best of all we called into Mombasa where I met my wife Sandra some 42 years ago. I must have told her I was in the Silver trade (Joke) as now I am in the copper trade, and that brings me to the point of this story.

Five years ago I was diagnosed as having an Acoustic Neuroma which if untreated would most certainly kill me. I was told that there was an 85% chance I would not come out of the operation, but without it, I would have a maximum four months to live. I didn't feel that the options were all that great, but as I would die anyway, felt that there was nothing for it but to take a chance on the operation. Obviously I was one of the lucky 15% who survive, but not without cost. I lost the hearing in my left ear as the tumour was around the inner ear. That all had to be removed in order to get at the tumour, and I was left with very bad face palsy.

I was given some exercises to try to return my face back as near to normal as possible, but was also informed that I wouldn't be able to work again.

I embraced the facial exercises with a passion, and now have 95% normality. During this time, I needed to be doing something. I took myself down to my workshop and began tinkering with some of the old scrap copper, making small bits of artwork. My self imposed therapy helped me to return to work as a Service Technician within six months!

I still do the copper work as a hobby and have no regrets. I've had a good life both at sea and ashore and am now, a happy young mature man.