

*A Vindi Boy's First Voyage.*

*By  
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*S.S. Hororata arriving at Wellington, August 1950*

**Dedicated to the memory of  
"My auld Flower" John "Paddy" Nolan  
died July 5<sup>th</sup> 2000.**

## **A Vindi Boy's First Voyage.**

The fifth of May 1950, five weeks before my seventeenth birthday, was my last day at the Vindi. (TS Vindicatrix) The National Sea Training School beside the River Severn at Sharpness. Thus armed with the knowledge of seamanship instilled over the previous three months and fortified by a barely adequate fare of 'sea-pie,' 'burgoo' and bromide laced cocoa I was ready and eager to see the world. The journey by train from Sharpness to my home in Essex was a return to freedom and civilization.

I suppose, I was one of the lucky ones as most lads leaving the Vindi would be thrown into the uncertainties of the 'pool' whereas I had the guarantee of a job with the New Zealand Shipping Company, one of the top shipping lines.

Mr. Ernie Lagden who worked for the Port of London Authority had introduced me to the crew manager of the company. His office was conveniently situated next to the N.Z.S.Co's at the Royal Albert Dock. Mr. Lagden was the 1<sup>st</sup>. Lt. of the Brentwood Sea Cadet Corps where I had been an enthusiastic member.

I duly presented myself at the dock office the following day and was put in the 'care' of the renowned 'Ginger' Moxley who's main joy appeared to derive from wielding his powers over company seamen. At this stage of my association with him I was ignorant of his reputation, though I did notice his superior air which I found somewhat annoying. Having already been issued with my Discharge Book and Seaman's Identity Card at the Vindi and Union Book at the Mercantile Marine Office at Victoria Dock I was ready for any adventure that lay ahead. Unfortunately there was nothing available at that time but I was put on the Companies books and told to report weekly. A few days later a letter arrived telling me to go urgently to the dock office. I did so immediately (it was less than an hour by train and bus)

Moxley told me to report to the Hororata at Cardiff the following day and gave me a railway pass with instructions on where the ship was to be found. She was to load at West Coast ports for New Zealand, a voyage expecting to take about six months.

My feelings were a mixture of excitement and apprehension as the train sped west from Paddington. It seemed strange retracing in reverse my journey of just a week before and recognising familiar landmarks like the great white horse etched into the hillside east of Swindon. Beyond Bristol it was a new 'frontier' and after passing under the Severn I was in darkest 'Welsh Wales'!

I knew little of Cardiff other than it was the capital of Wales and had a football team that was the only non-English club to win the F.A. Cup. I felt slightly out of place as I stood at the entrance to the Railway Station and wondered if I would be understood if I asked directions to the docks. "Under the Railway Bridge and straight down Bute Street boyo, you can't miss them!" As I strode down that long depressing street with my Vindi kitbag on my shoulder I was struck by the abject poverty of the area. I didn't know it then but this was the notorious 'Tiger Bay.' Small groups of people stood around aimlessly while scruffy kids watched me in silence as I passed. Everybody was either black or dark skinned, black Welshmen? I didn't feel threatened in any way, after all this was no different to the East End. I was a strapping six-footer, done some boxing and could run fast too!

I had a reasonable knowledge of the various shipping companies and their ships especially the New Zealand and Federal Lines. The passenger ships particularly were well known to me but the name Hororata was completely unknown. It was therefore a surprise to see her for the first time as I approached her berth in Cardiff docks. I was expecting to find an ordinary cargo ship, but this 'tub' was huge! She was, of course fully discharged and well out of the water, even so I was impressed with her sheer bulk! In spite of her size, the sharp stem towering above and her great length, emphasized by a flush deck line gave her (to my young eyes) a racy look. I was to find out later that built by John Brown & Co. on the Clyde during the war she was the largest refrigerated cargo ship in the world. At 12,090 g.r.t. and 551 feet long by 70 feet beam she was a big bastard! Single reduction twin turbines drove twin screws at 16 knots. Legend had it that she could go much faster but her economical speed was usually about 14. Hororata was lucky to survive the war. Homeward bound from New Zealand on only her second voyage she was torpedoed off the Azores and her ordeal and rescue by her own crew is one of the epic tales of that conflict. An event that was to happen during this, my first voyage had some coincidences with that near disaster.

To those who think going to sea is a glamorous occupation have not endured the start of their career as a deck boy and given the traditional first trippers job as seamen's 'peggy.' To those lads who went to sea for the first time and weren't aware of what they were in for, it must have been a severe shock to the system. The peggy's duties were menial in the extreme. His chores consisted of keeping the mess-rooms, bathrooms and crew's alleyways clean. Washing the dishes (scrap up) for more than twenty men of varying tempers and habits. His day started at 0700 and if he was lucky finish by 1900, seven days a week. In 1950 the pay was seven pounds a month!

I should explain where the term *peggy* comes from. Legend tells that in the days of wooden ships and iron men, old or disabled seamen were employed for mess room duties. Often they were men with a wooden or peg leg! Pull the other one!

On most ships there was a Captain's inspection at least once a week, sometimes twice. At sea this was a formal event with the 'Old Man' accompanied by the Chief Officer, Chief Engineer, Chief Steward, Second Steward and Bosun doing the rounds. It was customary for the captain to wear white gloves and woe-betide the peggy if a hand slid under a ledge came up with the merest of smudges!

Hororata's Skipper was Capt. E.H. Hopkins. A tall elegant man whose 'bete noire' was cockroaches! During his first inspection (outward bound) of my mess-room a solitary cockroach had the temerity to scuttle up the bulkhead above the sink. With a loud cry and crushing the offending insect with the palm of his gloved hand he exclaimed "Mister Mate! The battle's on!" and ordered the bosun to break out the 'Flit'

Captain Hopkins had had an interesting experience during the war. He was Chief Officer of the liner Rangitane in November 1940 which shortly after leaving Wellington was shelled, torpedoed and sunk by the German Armed Merchant Cruisers Orion and Komet. Sixteen people were killed and the survivors taken prisoner. Most of these including C/O Hopkins were landed on Emirau Island in the Solomon's three weeks later. They were eventually rescued and taken to Australia.

Our bosun was the renowned Frank Newell, well into his seventies and a legend throughout the company. He had been bosun of the Hororata since its second voyage and took a leading

part in the struggle to save the ship and its cargo in 1942. He was awarded the B.E.M. for his efforts. He was also a survivor of the Wiltshire disaster of 1922. There were many tales about him some rather far fetched. For instance, "he could guess correctly the colour of paint by its taste!" He would walk around the scuppers each morning in the tropics looking for flying fish. If he found one he would bite off its head then take it to the galley to be fried for his breakfast! He was a wonderful seaman and a great character. I did two long voyages with him and have many fond memories of a man who was 'one of a kind'

Not having very much money, my spare time in Cardiff was confined to strolls around the city and the occasional night at the pictures or an evening in a local pub. The 'Ship and Pilot' was a memorable introduction to dockside pubs. Not far from the dock gates it was usually full of seamen most evenings. It was an ordinary pub but made notable by a well-endowed lady named Phyllis. Every night Phyllis sat at an old upright piano belting out anything you wanted her to play. ('um it darlin' and I'll play it!) During the course of the evening the top of the piano would become covered with pint glasses of beer that had been put there by those making a request. I never saw her touch a drop so I guess they all got poured back in the barrel after closing time.

Hororata had started to load cargo in Cardiff at the time that I joined her and after a period of 'working by,' articles were signed on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May. Signing on as a deck boy at seven pounds a month I made out an allotment to be remitted to my mother of two pounds a month. It was slave wages really but I was off to see the world!

All the crew was accommodated amidships with the deck crowd, engine room and stewards on the main deck. Officers and Engineers above in single cabins and above them, the boat deck, the Captain's quarters being for'rad under the bridge. I was berthed in the boy's cabin at the after end of the accommodation, sharing this with three Ordinary Seamen. We had a single porthole facing aft over-looking number four hatch. The deck hands, Bosun, Lamp-trimmer and 'Chippy's' (Carpenter) cabins plus their mess-rooms were situated on the starboard side abaft the galley. Each had a porthole, or scuttle facing on to the main gangway. The A.Bs. shared two-berth rooms. The greasers, firemen and trimmers were on the port side. Amidships, ahead of the engine room casing was the bathroom and heads (toilets). The officers dining saloon was forward of the galley looking out onto number three hatch.

The day after signing on we sailed the short distance to Swansea where bales of tin-plate, each weighing about a ton, were loaded. Swansea was a nice enough town but acres of railway lines had to be crossed when going ashore. One Saturday afternoon Arthur (one of the boys) and I were crossing the lines when we were confronted by a wild looking bloke, tall and skinny, his eyes staring beyond us as if in a trance. Planting himself in our path and throwing his arms out wide he cried. "Have you seen Christ?" "No" said Arthur "Where did you lose him?" With that the apparition staggered past us, eyes still popping, arms still outstretched!

Later that night we experienced a more magical example of Welshness that I would never forget. In the course of our wanderings through the town we happened to come across a pub called The Bunch of Grapes. From within came the sound of singing. Not the usual pub bellowing as would emanate from the 'Ship and Pilot' but the glorious soaring sounds of a Welsh choir. Pushing our way into the large but crowded bar we found that it was chock full of miners come down from the valleys for a convention. There was not a woman in sight. At the conclusion of each beautifully rendered number a single voice would start another. Every man in the crowd would join in like a well-rehearsed choir but it was completely spontaneous. From the street we'd been attracted by the majestic 'Cym Rhonda' it was followed by the hauntingly beautiful 'A Hid a Nos' (All through the Night) Now and again an aspiring Caruso would climb onto a chair to give a solo rendition of a popular aria or Neapolitan ballad. I was completely captivated by the sheer beauty and feeling of the sounds produced by these tough working men.

Leaving Swansea we sailed around the coast of Wales through the Irish Sea to Glasgow. There we spent a couple of weeks and I gained my first experiences of the 'delights' of this Scottish city. Dances at the Barrowland Ballroom and the Locarno, struggling with the Glaswegian 'lingo' and trying to chat up lassies under the 'Heelandmon's umbrella.' Harry Lauder's pub was also paid a visit, only because it was there! I was appalled by the dreary tenements in the Gorbals area and along Paisley Road and Govan where we were berthed. I don't think I would have chanced walking around there on my own but the green double decker trams provided safe transport to and from the city. As in Wales, pubs closed on Sundays but there were lots of little 'working men's clubs' where one could get a pint of the strong local brew.

Liverpool was our last port of loading and the beginning of my 'love affair' with that wonderful city with its Overhead Railway, seven miles of docks and all the atmosphere of a flourishing port. (Alas now lost forever.) The incomparable views from the Overhead Railway were worth many times the cheap fare. The ride from St James station near the Pier-head to Gladstone Dock (where we were berthed) covered all the northern and busiest docks. Each dock had its own station. Names like Waterloo, Clarence, Nelson, Sandon, Huskisson, Langton, Alexandra, Hornby and Seaforth. All the docks busy with ships belonging to dozens of famous shipping companies. From the railway a seaman could recognize and name most of the various funnel colours. One such company was Harrison's. Or *Hungry Harrisons* recognized by their black funnels with one red and two white bands. Commonly dubbed 'two of fat and one of lean.' Usually to the fore were the handsome ships of the Blue Funnel Line. Based in Liverpool they all carried names from Greek Mythology. The various docks handled ships and exotic cargoes from all around the world; myriad aromas filled the air. Spices, tobacco, sugar, oils and tar.

In those days many famous passenger liners were to be seen. The *Reina Del Pacifica*, flagship of Pacific Steam and Cunard White Star's *Britannic* to name just two. My favourites were the Empress liners of Canadian Pacific. Empress of France, Empress of Canada and the three funneled Empress of Scotland. It was a fantastic sight to see one of these white painted beauties sailing majestically down the Mersey. It was also one of the saddest sights to see the Empress of Canada lying on its side, a burnt out wreck three years later.

Liverpool was a tough city then and still is but the humour of the locals and the unmistakable 'scouse' accent seems to add warmth to the grimy surroundings. It was a sailor's town and the many dockside pubs echoed to the accents of all the seafaring nations.

It was the beginning of July before we finally sailed from the 'pool. The last few days saw some deck cargo loaded and secured. This included five electric rail units for N.Z. Railways. Made by English Electric at Preston, they were loaded on board by the huge floating crane 'Mammoth.' Two were secured across number three hold and three across number four. (Limiting the view from my cabin) Their bogies were stowed in number two's 'tween decks. Several stalls holding Aberdeen Angus stud bulls were situated on the port side of number five and six hatches. A stockman sailed with us.

A ship in Port is an untidy sight, cluttered and dirty, a scene of chaos with all the clatter and clamour of cargo handling. To the uninitiated, bedlam, a trap for the unwary. The deck crew has little part to play in cargo working but once the ship is under weigh a transformation takes place. Under the direction of the Bosun all mooring ropes are stowed and derricks secured. Any rubbish is quickly deposited over the “wall” and then the hoses are brought into use washing the last traces of muck from the decks. The ship has a different feeling, as if it has come alive. The sea routines are quickly established, watches are set and the peggy has to cope with a steady roster of drudgery. Some boys have to put up with the additional horrors of mal de mere! Not for me though, I had gone through that torture two years before when I had the good fortune to make some trips on a small coaster. An arrangement made through the Sea Cadets. School holidays spent visiting various North Sea Ports was an opportunity not to be missed. It almost ended prematurely on my first voyage to the Schelde estuary, seasickness had me prostrate. It was bloody rough but I still had to stand my trick at the wheel. I was never seasick again! In fact to be at sea in a heaving sea had become quite exhilarating. As it happened, our passage across the Atlantic was fairly smooth and trouble free.

The majority of the ‘crowd’ was English but there were also a few ‘Stornowegians’ men from the Outer Hebrides like Angus McLeod, and Archie MacKinnon. They were good seamen but tended to stick together, often conversing in Gaelic, though generally friendly. There was Johnny Smithy who looked like a Gypsy, Jack Fisher, a quiet but very intelligent guy. Ted Kendall, in his mid-twenties I would guess, was very tall, blonde and bronzed, quite a lad! He liked to show off his sense of balance and bravado by standing upright on the truck at the masthead or on any of the Samson-posts, until the mate spotted him! Liam Courtney was Irish of course, with a beautiful accent.

Mike “Duke” Telfer was an interesting character although one of the youngest of the A.B.s. His Public School education was obvious when he spoke but he had the dubious reputation of having fallen overboard from the liner Rimutaka in the Gulf of Panama and lived to tell the tale! Several of the older A.Bs. had been through the war; some spending long periods in lifeboats after being torpedoed. It was difficult to get them talking about their experiences. One also had to sort out the truth from the ‘salty tales’ Old Frank Newell, the Bosun was always good for a yarn but you had to get him in the mood. One way was to offer him a fag. He usually smoked plug tobacco, sliced finely with a sharp knife and stuffed into a smelly pipe. He always wore a navy blue bib-overall and a paint-splayed black beret. I never saw him

dressed any other way and never did he go ashore, except onto the wharf. It was rumoured that he was married to a woman who owned a pub at Gravesend and was scared to go home to her. Who knows? I did discover from him that he went to an Industrial school in Brentwood (where I lived) A school for orphans from the East End of London. I was somewhat taken aback when he first declared that he had gone to *Brentwood School*. Rough Frank didn't seem to fit into my image of the upper class types that attended that ancient seat of learning. His hoarse rendition of a crude ditty that began with the words "Brentwood School, long may they suffer!" which he said was the School Song reinforced my belief that *his* school was not the one I had in mind.

I must mention my cabin mates, two of whom were ordinary seamen. Dennis Miles from Surrey, a junior on his second trip and Alec Nicholson a Senior O.S. from Stornaway. I never found out why Alec was only rated an S.O.S. as he was well into his thirties. Our fourth cabin mate was a last minute arrival. 'Paddy' Nolan was his name and he had signed on as a supernumerary A.B. for a one way trip to N.Z. Paddy had been with the Company for some time and had applied for a shore job with the Company in Auckland. His sister had settled out there and so Paddy wanted to be near her. He was a bit of a character; we all got on pretty well together.

Paddy who was about thirty years old, was thoroughly self-conscious and concerned about his thinning hair. One day he was persuaded that the cure for baldness was simple. He was advised to shave off all of his hair then rub his head regularly with raw onion and Guinness! He fell for this and it became a big joke, but not for us who had to share his cabin! Paddy had a great sense of humour and took it all in good part. Originally from Kilrush, Co. Clare, as a lad he had joined the Royal Navy; consequently we were regaled with stories of his experiences during the Spanish Civil War. At that time he was serving on the light cruiser H.M.S. Aurora which was engaged in patrolling Spanish waters. He had also sailed on the Liberty Ship Samkey, luckily leaving it before its final voyage when it disappeared without trace whilst outward bound in ballast. Paddy's association with the Hororata was to take an extraordinary twist, but that was later.

Dennis (Denny) Miles was a bit of a lad. As I was the only member of the crew junior to him I was subject to some attempted 'stand over' tactics by him. This inevitably resulted in a physical showdown, not I must add in fisticuffs but in a contest of 'strength'. We got on fine

after that! His previous trip had been to New Zealand and I listened to lurid stories of his sexual exploits. From him I heard about all the wonderful opportunities for female favours to be found at such places as 'The Rat Race' and the Empress (two dance halls in Wellington.) The Civic, Orange Hall and Polynesian Club in Auckland. I was assured that there were no prostitutes in Kiwiland just enthusiastic amateurs!

The days at sea seemed endless, but soon the sounds of the Caribbean were issuing from a radio in one of the AB's cabins, the only one on our deck. The warmth of the tropics was soon joined by the stench of oil as we approached our re-fuelling stop at Caracas Bay on the island of Curacao. This isolated bay with its oil jetty has no facilities other than a small cove protected from such nasties as sharks and barracudas by a wire netting fence. Many of us took the opportunity to have a dip. The water was warm and clear, wonderfully relaxing until someone discovered a gap in the fence the size of a car. Another feature of Caracas Bay was the ruins of an old fort reputed to have been the infamous pirate, Henry Morgan's base. Close by there is a ramp shaped hill terminating in a sheer cliff, 'Virgin's Leap'!

A few hours later and with our oil tanks replenished we sailed for Panama. I was getting quite excited with the prospect of seeing the canal for the first time. One of the engineering wonders of the modern world, an embodiment of man's achievement. To all seamen known, simply, as the 'Hole in the Wall!' The usual tricks were attempted on any of us who had not transited before. "Save all your gash (food scraps) for the mules!" and "Feel the bump when we go over the hump." The mules being the railed tractors that control vessels in the locks.

Our arrival at Cristobal was timed to enable us to enter the canal about 0800. The huge locking system at the Atlantic end is called the Gatun Locks and leads into Gatun Lake, a flooded area of jungle created by damming the Chagres river. The lake is about 85 feet above sea level and being fresh water the ship floated noticeably lower in the water. For 23 miles we steamed (literally) through jungle scenery, deafened by millions of Cicadas until the waterway narrowed to pass through the Galliard Cut, the biggest hurdle for the engineers. Many lives were lost in its construction. A memorial plaque is set into the wall of the cutting at the point where the construction gangs met. The locks at Pedro Miguel lowered us down to another small lake, which brought us to the final lock, Miraflores. We were now at the level of the Pacific Ocean with the port of Balboa just a short distance away. Transit time was roughly nine hours and we tied up alongside at Balboa shortly after 1700hrs. The hot and humid air in

the canal had made us very thirsty so those of us who could get ashore headed for the only place that was close to being civilized, the U.S.O. The American services equivalent of the N.A.A.F.I. A one pound note could be changed into U.S. Dollars (if you were lucky to have one or two) but the beer was awful; names like 'onion juice' and 'panther piss' came to mind. It was a welcome break though and the only one during that long voyage. Next morning we cleared the canal entrance escorted by a pair of large Martin Mars flying boats of the U.S. Navy. Next stop Wellington!

The blue Pacific lived up to its name and we were soon back into the sea routine. The day-men and those off-watch were kept busy painting all the white deckhouses and superstructure, then the winches and mast followed finally by a coat of red oxide for the decks. Before Panama it had been mostly soogie (washing paintwork) and chipping decks, blacking down the shrouds and stays with Stockholm tar and over-hauling the running gear on the derricks. The lamptrimmer was kept busy mixing paints and cleaning brushes. The messroom chatter was about banjo fleets, white lead, dog's cocks and Turk's-head brushes, fish oil and red oxide and how many Sundays at sea have we had? (A Sunday at sea was worth an extra day's paid leave)

One of my duties, once a week, was to polish all the brass in the wheelhouse. There seemed to be acres of it! Apart from the obvious items, Binnacle, Telegraphs and Scuttles (portholes) there were dozens of small fittings and pipes. The most difficult and usually very discoloured was the bell on the forepart of the Bridge. I had to hang out of the window to get at it. In some ways it was a satisfying task. The wheelhouse looked great when it was done. Occasionally one would get a favourable comment from the Officer on watch.

Everybody was getting a good tan but there was talk of bad weather ahead. Each day brought the ship further south and closer to the Southern Hemisphere winter. The Equator had been crossed a few days after leaving Panama. I had wondered, apprehensively, if I would be subject to the traditional embarrassing indignities. "All that bullshit only goes on in Passenger liners and Royal Tours!" I was told when quietly asking one of the old hands (several days later.) My routine was broken occasionally by being allowed to do a trick at the wheel, usually during the afternoon watch. I enjoyed this as the old girl was easy to steer and it made a pleasant break. It was not a job where one could relax though, as the mate on duty would often stroll to the wing of the bridge. Suddenly there would be a roar. "Watch your head!

You're all over the bloody ocean!" It was a great feeling to know that you were steering such a huge ship, at least until the novelty wore off!

My job as peggy brought me into contact with the galley staff and some of the catering guys, especially the second steward whose job it was to issue rations to the mess-rooms. Each man was issued with a can of condensed milk per week (there being no cow on board.) At the beginning of the trip, men would be seen carving little wooden plugs. These were used to fill the two holes punched in the top of the can, a necessary precaution if you didn't want to find the tin filled with cockroaches!

The galley was the sanctum of the chief cook who kept his beady eye on anyone who entered it. Under him was the second cook (and baker) who apart from making bread and 'tabnabs' (cakes) also produced the 'duffs.' (Desserts) Then came the third cook (and butcher) who always seemed to be waving a vicious cleaver around. There was also the galley boy, a cockney lad who had a lot to say and "did all the f-----g work!" The stove was a huge oil-burning lump of iron with shiny fiddles around it. (To stop the pots sliding off) At the back of the stove was an enormous stockpot into which went all sorts of unspeakable things. It was always amusing to watch the cook, who was short and fat (Aren't they all?) step onto a box, lift his gut onto the fiddle and reach over to dip a ladle into the stockpot. The second cook was a friendly little South Welshman, an ardent rugby fan and (so he claimed) a cousin of Bleddyn Williams who was touring New Zealand with the British Lions. Generally speaking the grub was pretty good especially when compared with what was dished up on the Vindi. No sea pie; even at sea!

An unpleasant incident occurred about this time. It concerned one of the stewards; a bad tempered character named Weston. He was a Liverpool Irishman, surly and always trying to pick an argument with all and sundry. One afternoon while I was cleaning the lunch dishes Weston put his head through the galley hatch and made some derogatory remark to me. To which I made a suitable but impulsive reply. He completely 'lost his rag' and stormed through the galley door with the obvious intention of tearing me apart. By now I was 'shit scared' but grabbing a dish, into which I had scraped all the leftovers of prunes and custard, let him have it full in the face as he rushed through the doorway. This momentarily stopped him in his tracks but I was still unable to get past him to safety. Fortunately, John Smithy, one of the A.Bs and a hard case himself came into the messroom to get a drink before going on the

wheel. Grabbing Weston by the scruff of the neck he tossed him back into the galley with a threat of what might happen to him if he stepped out of line again. Some time later, on the coast, Weston, during a drunken session ashore ran into his boss, the Chief Steward. He assaulted the Chief and was convicted and imprisoned. We never saw him again. He was a nasty piece of work!

Two weeks after leaving the canal, the gradually cooling temperatures and rising sea brought our first taste of bad weather. Hororata, unlike some ships in the company had rails instead of bulwarks on the main deck alongside the accommodation. This made her very wet and dangerous on the weather-side. Her long foredeck was also very exposed without the protection of a foc'sle. The rolling motion at times was quite severe, almost dipping her deck, but never uncomfortable. Playing darts was a bit awkward, one second the board was below you the next it was above you! A few plates flew off the table but although it meant I didn't have to wash them, I had to clear up the mess. Bugger! The storm didn't last long but the remaining days of the run into Wellington was under threatening skies and rainsqualls. So after thirty three days at sea we entered the harbour of New Zealand's capital city to a damp cold welcome but then had to drop the "hook" to await a berth. Within an hour two busy little tugs, with Union Steam Ship funnel colours came out and assisted us to our berth. It was Sunday the 18<sup>th</sup> of August.

I guess I must have had preconceived pictures in my mind of this antipodean outpost but my first day in Wellington was not quite what I had expected. New Zealand, of course, featured in geography lessons at school, after all it was *British*; and I had taken the trouble to read a little about it. My most abiding image though was created by a large picture displayed on a wall in the Norwich G.P.O. It was one of several, depicting scenes from around the 'Empire.' It showed a landscape of tussock and mountains, dotted with sheep being mustered by men on horseback. But it is the way the men were clothed that stuck in my memory. Each wore a 'Lemon-squeezer' type hat and heavy 'great-coat.' Imagine my surprise, as we docked at Pipitea wharf on that miserable, wet day to see that the men securing our lines to the bollards were wearing, - you guessed it! Lemon squeezers and navy blue greatcoats! This must be New Zealand!

During the voyage I had heard so much about the attractions of the 'Land of the Long White Cloud' but this damp introduction did not give a very good first impression. My first sortie

ashore did nothing to alter that. Robert Morley, the actor was once asked if he had ever been to New Zealand and he replied “Yes, but it was closed!” Like me he must have arrived on a Sunday!

Denny Miles, that intrepid ladies man and font of knowledge of all things Kiwi couldn't wait to introduce me to the wonders of Wellington. So it was, early that afternoon, he and I went ashore. We were quite wet by the time we reached cover at the station end of Lambton Quay and started along the almost deserted street. I was surprised to see the verandahs above the shopfronts and was struck by the run-down appearance of most of the buildings. Peeling paintwork, rusty iron and dripping gutters. The only establishment that was open and I'm sure must have been the liveliest spot in town was the 'Florida Milk-Bar' I'd never seen a real milk bar before except in American films and this looked very American! It was a long narrow shop with fixed tables and seats along one wall, booths, I think they were called. Each table had a jukebox selector on the wall next to it. Frankie Lane was blaring out. I was amazed at the selection of 'treats' available at the bar. Milk shakes, Ice Cream Sodas! Sundaes, Knickerbocker Glories! Banana splits! And on a rack the largest bars of chocolate I'd ever seen! But the place was almost empty, where was everybody? What few people we saw on the street looked rather strange to me. I said to Denny. “There seems to be a lot of Chinese people about” He laughed and said “ Yer bloody idiot! They're Maoris!”

What little traffic there was on the streets was mainly clattering trams and old cars. The feeling of depression about the town was hard to shake off so we made our way to the Seamen's Mission where at least we were given a cup of tea and an invitation to use the library. I asked the padre if any cinemas were open today. None apparently! “O yes, the Tivoli in Molesworth Street shows pictures on a Sunday evening.” It turned out to be run by the Sally Army and there was a prayer session at 'half time!'

Paddy had departed by the time we returned. The overnight train to Auckland had left about six. We hadn't had a chance to say goodbye to our erstwhile cabin-mate but at least there was now an empty bunk in the room, which gave us more space. As it happened we would be seeing more of 'our old flower!' He was to make a dramatic re-appearance, but that would be many weeks later.

I had been told that as soon as we hit the coast my duties as peggy would be taken over by the junior ordinary seamen and that I would be allocated to one of the watches. In port, this meant that I would do gangway watches in turn with the other lads. The gangway had to be guarded at all times, the job also meant keeping an eye on the moorings and knowing which of the officers were ashore or on duty. We had to wear the company uniform. A jersey with the crossed flags and clean jeans plus sailor's cap. I didn't mind. No more washing dishes and scrubbing decks for a while.

The morning after our arrival saw much more activity as wharfies made their way up the gangway and started to remove the hatches. The bulls were unloaded onto a lighter, then the floating crane 'Hikatea' came alongside to unload the railway units that had cluttered our deck for so long. All too soon the decks of the ship that had looked so smart and clean when we arrived reverted to the clamour and disorder of unloading. Not that the pace of unloading was hectic, antipodean watersiders were not renowned for their efficacy. The dull weather of the previous day had given way to a brighter aspect, affording a more pleasant view of Wellington's harbour. When entering, low clouds and rain had shrouded the hills. These had now lifted and the unique sight of little wooden houses perched precariously on steep slopes, multi-coloured against the green background with bright winter sunshine glinting from corrugated-iron roofs. Across the bay the monastery building of St. Gerard overlooks the city. The Port seemed to be crowded with ships of all types including several at anchor in the stream. It was amazing to realise that we had steamed all the way across the vast Pacific without sighting another vessel yet here was this harbour full of them including one or two Company vessels, last seen during our loading around the west coast (UK.)

Once the deck cargo had been discharged numbers three and four holds were uncovered. It was interesting to see in the 'tween decks, twelve beautiful Alvis 'Grey Lady' saloon cars. They were carefully landed on the wharf where they drew a lot of admiring attention. Before any more unloading took place we shifted berth to King's Wharf, much closer to town.

My introduction to the 'Rat Race' took place the following Saturday. Because all the pubs shut at six any serious drinking had to be done before then. The popular watering holes in town for seamen were the Royal Oak, the Regent, where the private bar was called the 'Snake Pit' and the Waterloo, handily placed opposite the wharf gates. An evening meal was to be had on board but if you had a quid in your pocket, Garlands on Manners Street was the place!

Five 'bob' (shillings) got you a roast dinner with all the trimmings plus 'duff' (afters if you like) The Green Parrot had the best steak in town for the same price. Then it was off to the Rat Race. This dance hall on Cuba Street was so named (presumably) because to enter, you had to climb a flight of stairs which brought you into the centre of the floor, then make a dash through the dancing couples to the supper room. Every Kiwi dance hall had a supper room! Apparently the establishment made its name during the war when the yanks were "over paid, over sexed and over here!" The girls certainly seemed enthusiastic as well as friendly but being a poverty stricken deckboy I had to watch (and learn) the technique of my more experienced ship mates. We did get an invitation to a party for the next day and accepted! I think the fact that one of the boys mentioned that we had a record of Johnny Ray's song "CRY." That did it! The local girls had heard all about the latest heartthrob but none of his recordings had yet arrived in New Zealand. It was evident that parties were the preferable weekend pastime, entrance fee one 'Flagon!' (Sometimes called a jigger) containing half a gallon of draught beer. There was a pub on Grey Street, opposite Queens Wharf called the 'Post Office' where after knocking three times on the door one could purchase a full flagon. Known as a sly grog joint it was one of several establishments that must have done quite well out of after hours drinking. The police tried to keep a tight rein on the practice but they were easily thwarted. To us from Britain it seemed rather ludicrous, as did the law restricting drinking on licensed premises to those over twenty-one. We ignored it.

During the nearly three weeks spent in Wellington we began to feel at home. It is not a large city but its attractions were all within walking distance of the wharf, its people (especially the girls) very friendly. Although poorly paid by New Zealand standards we were able to supplement the cash flow by 'seagulling.' i.e. working the evening shift on the wharves, frequently on our own ship but occasionally on others. Five shillings an hour was good money to us. No wonder this was one of the most popular destinations for seamen.

The next port of call was Lyttleton, the Port for Christchurch in the South Island and only twelve hours away. I was now watch keeping and had a trick at the wheel on the way down. Lyttleton is separated from the city by the port hills and its streets climb steeply from the waterfront. It was also the southern terminus for the steamer express service from Wellington. The ships on this route were very handsome indeed. Their dark green hulls and Cunard like funnels gave them the appearance of ocean-going liners. The oldest vessel, the Rangitira

(6,152 tons) reminded me of a miniature Queen Elizabeth. The latest, Hinemoa (6911 tons) was very modern looking.

A rail-tunnel connected the port with Christchurch and it was only a short journey to the city by train. Christchurch was considered to be the most English of New Zealand cities. The geometric layout of its streets and the spacious square with its cathedral were most pleasant. One part that was very pretty was Hagley Park. Close to the centre, it had the lovely river Avon flowing through it, reminiscent of Cambridge. On the first Saturday morning after arriving we played a game of football there, against another of the Company's ships.

A surprise awaited us on our return to the Horarata that afternoon. It was to find a queue of crewmembers, (mostly firemen and greasers from the engine room) lined up outside my cabin right out to the deck! In our absence, Dennis had arranged for an 'acquaintance' from his previous visit to come and give 'comfort' to the crowd. Best described as a lady with a generous nature she duly obliged a very large proportion of the crew. Finding myself barred from my own cabin, I joined up with a couple of the lads and found solace in the bar of the 'British Hotel.' Returning to the ship later that night I found Alec flat out on his bunk looking as if he'd lost his eyeballs! The stench of Dettol lingered in our cabin for days. She was clean if nothing else!

An amusing incident occurred in the pub that evening. While several of us plus locals (all men) were drinking in the British, after hours of course, the phone behind the bar rang. It was answered by the barman who then said "Grab your drinks and out the back." We filed out to an alleyway lined with empty beer crates. "Just be quiet for a minute fellas," he said, disappearing back to the bar. Five minutes later he returned. "It's OK, only the sergeant doing his rounds." The funny part was that the barroom was full of cigarette smoke. The fact also that some of us were underage amused us.

The only other noteworthy event to happen in Lyttleton, if it can be considered that was a climb to the top of the Port Hills. From there we had a superb view across to Governor's Bay and beyond. A few day's later we sailed for Port Chalmers.

Because of the weather, our arrival into Wellington Harbour had been far from memorable. First impressions do count. When Horarata steamed past Taiaroa Head and into Otago

Harbour just after dawn it was a magical experience. We seemed to be the only moving thing on a sea so calm and still. Our bow-wave gently cleaving the molten-lead like surface. Hardly a sound, even that of our engines, broke the mystical silence. On each side rose low hills on which the rising sun bathed their green mantle with a golden glow, dispersing the last ethereal vestiges of morning mist. Black cormorants stood motionless on rocky outcrops, their wings outstretched as if to welcome the new day.

Shortly Port Chalmers came into view and the spell was broken. We were at our mooring stations and a tug came to assist us with all the hustle and bustle that is their fashion. The thought had entered my mind that I was as far away from England as it was possible to get, the end of the earth! It was from here that Captain Robert Falcon Scott had departed on his ill-fated expedition to Antarctica less than forty years before.

Otago Harbour is about fourteen miles long. At its head is Dunedin, the 'Edinburgh of the South.' It is a port itself but Port Chalmers, about halfway down the harbour, can cope with the largest ships. It is connected to Dunedin by both road and railway and like Lyttleton, is a town in its own right.

The unloading of our outward cargo was almost completed and consequently we were riding high out of the water. As the ship was moored 'starboard side too' the port side of the hull was painted. Most of the starboard topsides had been done in Lyttleton using stages rigged from the deck. Now punts were used to paint the boot topping from the water up to and including the white line. Another job that had been tackled was the painting of the funnel. Lowering themselves from the top in bosun's chairs the men soon washed away the ugly black soot that had marred its appearance. Then applied the Companies well-known buff colour. By now the 'old girl' was looking great. Most seamen moan about their ship but there is always great pride in her looks.

As the discharging of cargo from each hold was completed, preparations were made for the loading of thousands of carcasses of frozen lamb plus cases of butter and cheese. The insulated holds were first cleaned, and then shore 'chippies' lined them with dunnage. Lengths of 2''x 2'' timber fastened to the ceilings (floors) and spaced to allow cold air to circulate around the meat. We managed to get work assisting the chippies, at shore rates of course. The ship's refrigeration engineers had to reduce the temperature of the sealed holds

ready to receive the lamb. Hororata's six holds were cavernous, especially number three. A game of football could easily be played in it. Her total capacity was 570,283 cubic feet of refrigeration space plus 162,093 cu.ft. Un-insulated. Above the lower holds were a 'tween deck and a shelter deck. The hatchways on each deck were sealed with heavily insulated and interlocking covers called plugs.

Our stay at Port Chalmers was not all work in fact opportunity was taken to sample the attractions of Dunedin. The seven mile, harbour hugging, journey by train did not take long, but the service was very infrequent. The city was founded on the back of the Otago gold rush during the eighteen hundreds. It has a strong Scottish connection, which is evident in the many solid Victorian buildings lining the main streets. Even its inhabitants speak with a distinctive burr. We didn't find any 'Calvinistic' traits among the lassies; they were as friendly as anywhere else in this fair land. The most popular dance was held at the Town Hall, an ornate building overlooking the Octagon, the central point of the city. An interesting fact about this building is that it houses a concert organ that had been used at the great exhibition at Wembley in 1924.

Picking up a 'Sheila' was the main attraction for us lads at these dances but the inconveniences of the rail link to Port Chalmers forced its restrictions upon us. Usually after making the right impression on the young lady the offer was made to escort her home, thus began the long walk. (Often to an outer suburb.) If the signs were favourable, a fumbling 'snog' would be snatched under a tree or an alleyway. Later claims would be heard of the ultimate, a 'knee-trembler' in a darkened shop doorway! Then came the long lonely walk through strange streets to the main Railway Station only to find that the last train had long gone. The cost of a taxi was out of reach so all that one could do was to curl up on a bench in the freezing station to wait for the first train in the morning then furtively attempt to get on board without being seen by the Bosun if the hands had been 'turned too.'

It was during the first week of October that we sailed for our next Port of call, New Plymouth on the West Coast of the North Island, a voyage of about thirty-six hours. During this trip we passed through Cook Strait and shortly after clearing the strait I happened to be at the wheel. Soon after taking over at noon the Second Mate checked the course then said to me. "Steer for the white triangle dead ahead!" "What triangle? I asked, mystified, as the only land to be seen was way off to starboard. "That triangle!" pointing towards the horizon. Suddenly I spotted it.

The blue sky ahead seemed to merge into the sea but there it was a distinct shape, a perfect triangle, then the penny dropped. "Is that Mount Egmont?" I asked. "Yes" he replied "over a hundred miles away!" Fantastic! At the end of my trick it had grown only a little larger and my relief was as surprised as I had been when I gave him the course.

The volcanic cone of Mount Egmont (8260') dominates New Plymouth and the province of Taranaki. The pleasant spring weather afforded us spectacular views of its symmetrical outline. Taranaki is one of the richest dairying regions of the world and close to the Port is one of the largest cheese factories in New Zealand.

The Port lies about a mile west of the town. Transport into town was by tram, a wonderfully venerable but delightful system. The immediate area of the Port is notable for the string of sugarloaf islands and the pinnacle called Paritutu. This rises almost vertically from the shore to a height of over five hundred feet. On the landward side it overlooks the Maori village of Ngamuto. It was to prove an attraction and a challenge to some of us.

The local Seaman's mission proved to be a popular drop-in spot. It was managed by a dear old lady who made everybody feel at home. She had a nice little sideline in knitted hats, the kind with a pom-pom on top. Ten Bob each! She would take your order then have it ready the next day. I bought one in the colours of Norwich City F.C. Green and Yellow! This remarkable lady also organized bus-trips for ship's crews. One of the most memorable events of the whole trip (for me) was the outing she arranged to Mount Egmont. The only other ship in the harbour at this time was a Norwegian freighter, one of Willemsen's. Consequently our party was equally divided in numbers between the two ships. We got on well with the 'Norskies' most of who spoke English.

Leaving the Mission at around ten o'clock, the bus took us first to Pukakura Park near the town centre. This is a beautiful area of native bush and gardens surrounding an attractive lake. From there we headed south along a main road then turned toward the mountain. Farmland eventually gave way to forest and the road, which was quite narrow, started to climb. The dense bush on either side blocked out any distant views except occasionally one caught a glimpse of the far off coastline and blue sea. In due time we arrived at a mountain lodge. This appeared to be a derelict building, which at some time must have been quite grand. Our charming Mission lady had provided for a coach-load of hungry mariners and produced a

hamper full of sandwiches, tabnabs (cakes) and soft drinks. I don't know at what altitude we were but the crisp mountain air certainly made us quite ravenous.

The place where the bus had parked was very close to the top of the treeline and just a short distance upwards the terrain altered drastically. Beyond a stone cairn, was a steep ridge barely wide enough to support a footpath. The sides of this ridge dropped away to wooded gullies hundreds of feet below. Daring each other to attempt it, We crossed this dizzy hazard and gathering our wits started an upward scramble. Shortly we were among patches of snow that steadily became icier underfoot. At this point any view of the summit was obscured by cloud so we turned back and returned to the rest of our party. We got a bollicking from some of the others as we had been gone for almost two hours.

It was late in the afternoon when the bus headed back but instead of going directly to New Plymouth we found ourselves at the village of Urenui and there met by a welcoming group of Maoris. Some of us were new to this experience and found it very moving. Eventually we were led into a large carved building where a feast was spread out on long tables. Groups of Maoris, both male and female entertained us with singing and stick and poi dances. This was followed by speeches, mostly in Maori. It was indicated that one of our number should reply and after an embarrassing silence Freddie Veal said thank you on our behalf. (Public speaking is not an attribute of the average seafarer.) The greatest embarrassment came when we were invited to sing! The Norskies went first and sang, beautifully, what sounded like a folk-song. All we could muster was "For they are jolly good fellows." It was a disaster but our hosts graciously applauded the effort.

This was my first real contact with Maori people but we were to get closely acquainted to some local girls at the Palladium, a dance hall on the beach near the port. They lived in the nearby village of Ngamotu. The Palladium was a super dance hall with a good band and very friendly atmosphere, we enjoyed it!

Dennis and I were taken to the village a couple of times, on one occasion to a party. I spent most of the evening talking to an old Maori gentleman who told me some of the history of the area and despaired at the behavior of the young men of the village. All of the houses were built of wood with rusty corrugated iron roofs but each in its own plot of land. The only gardens evident were some vegetable plots.

Dominating the scene was Paritutu! Some of us had attempted to scale it from the rocks on the seaward side but it was impossible. From the landward side it was fairly easy as there was a path and rough steps cut into the hillside. Also of great help was a line of stanchions with a wire rope leading to the top. The view from the top was magnificent, especially that of Mount Egmont. Several of us climbed Paritutu one evening to witness a fantastic sunset. I vowed I would climb to this place whenever I was at New Plymouth.

It was interesting to find in the beach area several working oil wells. Apparently it was the first commercial oilfield in the Commonwealth. There was even a small refinery producing petrol, among other oil products and sold locally as 'Peak Brand'

During our stay thousands of crates of cheese from the local factory had been crammed into Hororata's holds. The familiar round crates holding two large round cheeses. Cartons of butter were also loaded into the 'tween deck lockers but we were far from full in fact the white line on the hull was still way above the water.

Ten days after arriving at New Plymouth we sailed back through Cook Strait and thirty hours later docked alongside at Napier on the East Coast. Napier had been recently elevated to the status of a city and deservedly so. A conversation struck up with any one of its friendly citizens usually gravitated to the great earthquake of 1931. This disaster devastated the town resulting in huge loss of life and uplifting the land many feet. A new town was to arise from the rubble of the old, every building designed in the Art Deco style creating an imaginative and unique aspect

We were never sure how long the vessel would be in any Port as there were usually many unforeseen delays. Apart from the weather there had been several small holdups caused by labour disputes, not uncommon around this coast! Surprisingly the stay at Napier was trouble-free and only a week was spent at this very attractive place. More frozen meat and bales of wool were loaded here. Because the weather was so fine the whole forepart of the superstructure was painted.

The beginning of the last week of October saw us heading for our final loading port, Auckland. There had been so much mess-room discussion about the countries largest city and

port that I felt I knew the place intimately long before arriving there. Threading our way through the Islands of the Hauraki Gulf was a pleasant introduction to this maritime city as was the unique experience of docking so close to the city centre. So close in fact that it was joked among the lads that we tied our head-ropes to the pumps of the Waverly Hotel!

Shortly after standing down from mooring stations, we were surprised by the appearance of our old 'flower!' Paddy Nolan. He seemed greatly disturbed and wanted to see the Mate, urgently! It transpired that life ashore had been a disaster for him and he begged to be allowed to rejoin us. Fortunately for Paddy one of our A.Bs. had paid off sick so he rejoined us. (Luck of the Irish!)

There were several institutions in Auckland that were internationally famous among seafarers. One of them was 'Ma Gleason's' on Fanshawe Street, a stone's throw from the wharves. Although a house of ill repute it was not a bordello but a pub! Its reputation was not just in the fact that it was a great waterfront boozier but that for the payment of a small sum and signing your name (or any name) in the register you became a 'bona fide' guest and could drink quite legally on the premises. It seemed to be the only establishment in the country in which this happened on such a large scale. Indeed if all the people drinking in the bar on any evening had to sleep there they would have had to doss down on the deck! The notoriety of Gleason's was such that some of Auckland's notorious hard-nosed women frequented it. It was not unusual to see an old tart, drunk and waving a beer bottle around ready to smash it on an unsuspecting head! It was always a great place to go for a laugh!

A landmark at the Port was the Ferry Building. From there, ferries served many of the harbour-side suburbs and these attractive double-ended steamers were a feature of the Waitamata. (The Maori name for Auckland Harbour) Almost directly opposite the Ferry Building's entrance was the beginning of the city's main street, Queen Street. It was a bustling thoroughfare lined with shops, offices, hotels and cinemas. Trams rattled up and down its length from the waterfront and out to the furthestmost suburbs. Halfway up Queen Street, was one of Auckland's best known and loved buildings, The Civic Theatre and Winter-Garden Ballroom. I had heard it described as the place where it never rained. Outwardly an elaborate Art Deco building, its interior was designed as a Moorish Palace with turrets and minarets crowning its walls. The ceiling was painted to represent the tropical sky complete with twinkling stars. The total effect was fabulous. At one end of the auditorium

was an ornate proscenium and stage blessed with a superb Wurlitzer organ. Two levels of stalls contained rows of seats, used when a film was shown, which was daily as the Civic's main function was as a cinema. The ground floor was the part known as the Winter Garden. Laid out Cabaret style, regular dances were held after the movies ended.

Some of New Zealand's best singers and bands performed there. Naturally it was a magnet for all young seamen. It was easily the finest venue of its type around the coast. The Orange Hall on Symonds Street and the Polynesian Club, which held dances on Sundays, were also very popular. There were several Milk Bars on Queen Street; some frequented by the local 'Milk Bar Cowboys' Although this was the era of the 'Teddy Boys' in the U.K. Here they were called 'Bodgies!' and their 'Sheilas' were called 'Widgies!' Only seen in Auckland's Milk Bars, was an ice cream sundae named a 'Rangitoto Special,' so called because of its likeness in appearance to the triple coned volcanic island of the same name, visible from the city.

From Hororata's stern one could look across the harbour to the north shore suburbs. Prominent in the view was the ships of the Royal New Zealand Navy at their base at Devonport. Most recognizable were the two Dido class light cruisers, Bellona and Black Prince. They brought back memories of the cadet gunnery course I had done at Whale Island Portsmouth the previous year. A sister ship H.M.S. Royalist was our accommodation and training ship. I did manage to get an invitation to visit the base and was impressed with the marvelous living conditions that the 'Kiwi matelots' enjoyed. I was even invited to join up, but by now I was appreciating the freedom of life under the 'Red Duster'

The Port was full of ships including some large passenger liners such as the Dominion Monarch, Rangitane and the old Akaroa of Shaw Savill. Then there were many cargo ships like ours including the elderly Tekoa and the nearly new Cumberland. The Port Vindex, (originally built as an escort carrier during the war) besides numerous coasters and sailing scows. The streets and pubs were crowded with seamen, generally well dressed as we took a pride in our appearance. I met up with an old pal of mine from Brentwood cadet days, 'Flour' Collins. He was a steward on the Rangitane and I found myself invited to some wild parties in the Rangitane's 'glory hole.' Even though she was a new passenger ship, the crowded conditions of her steward's quarters made me thankful that I was 'on deck.' Living so deep in the bowels of the ship did not appeal to me either. Many of the stewards were queens but they knew how to party! 'Flour' was welcome to it.

The remoteness of New Zealand tended to give the locals an old fashioned look sartorially; drab suits were the normal wear with many Kiwi men. One thing that most of the boys admitted to though was that Litchfield shirts, Argyle socks and underwear were better and cheaper here than anywhere else! Stocking up on these items was one gainful use to which our 'sea-gulling' earnings were spent.

Another use for these earnings was to buy various items of foodstuffs to take home, remembering that rationing and post-war austerities were still in force in Britain. And, we were all conscious of the fact that, all being well, we should be home for Christmas. Several providers left lists of their goods and prices in the mess-room and we were soon studying them. Those who had done this before gave advice as to the best buys. A local meat-works, Westfield Freezing Co. sold us legs of ham and carcasses of lamb, which we sewed up in mutton cloth, and burlap and deposited in the ship's freezer. Strangely, there were restrictions on the amount of butter that we were allowed to take but we each bought the maximum. Five-pound boxes of tea and sugar went into storage and I filled a large cardboard carton with tin foods of various kinds, fruit and corned meat etc.

Meanwhile there had been rumblings on the waterfront. The 'on-and-orfies' (wharfies) who would strike at the drop of a cargo hook, were in a belligerent mood. (Legend had it that work had ceased on a ship that carried a consignment of toilet-bowls. The gang working it demanded 'embarrassment' money!) The current dispute had arisen concerning a cargo of 'lamp-black' being discharged from a British tramp, the Liberty ship, 'Asuncion de Larranaga.' This was a dirty cargo and being carried in sacks probably gave reasonable cause to their claim for extra payment. Unfortunately the whole Port was dragged into the argument and cargo handling was reduced to a dribble. Eventually everything came to a standstill. A week went by with no end in sight to the impasse, a most frustrating situation for us. Normally we would have appreciated the prolonged stopover in this demi-paradise but loading was almost completed and the thought of Christmas at home was too strong a pull. Only a small amount of cargo was still to be loaded into our holds but more important was several tons of U.K. mail, much of it scheduled for Christmas delivery. To ensure an early arrival, we should have sailed no later than the sixteenth of November. By the twenty-first things were looking desperate so much so that Captain 'Hoppy' came into the mess-room and suggested to us that "If we wanted to be home for Christmas all that was holding us up was

the mail laying in the shed along-side. Would we care to do something about it?" The response was immediate. Hatch covers removed, derricks swung out and the mail stowed in quick time! Mooring lines were let go and without the aid of tugs we were away! Haere Mai, Kiwi!

Two additions to our happy band had joined us prior to sailing. Both New Zealanders working their passage to Britain. One, a chap named Carlsberg was a medical student on his way to complete his studies in London. The other was an odd little chap also heading for further education but as a musician. The former took the spare bunk in our cabin and the musician was berthed in the other Ordinary Seaman's room. They worked alongside the day-men. Painting, chipping, etc. I believe they were paid a nominal one shilling per month. I said that the musical chap was odd, as indeed he was, particularly in appearance. He was quite short and stocky but what caused some astonishment and amusement was his hairiness. His body was completely covered in thick hair; that is apart from the top of his head, which was as bald as a billiard ball! He was however a superb violinist although his habit of practicing in his cabin when the watch below was trying to sleep got beyond a joke. He was therefore banished to the winch house between numbers five and six! He did give us some impromptu performances from time to time, which most of us appreciated. Everybody called him 'Hairy'

Hororata would have to exceed her economical speed by quite a margin if we were to make it home in time and the 'old girl' performed well. Some exceptional day's runs were recorded across the Pacific. I was back into pegging once more with all that entailed, but what the hell! We were homeward bound! The boys soon settled into their four on, eight off watches, Frankie Newell was patrolling the scuppers again. Soogie wads and chipping hammers were working flat out; all was right with the world. A swimming pool built of timber and canvas was erected abreast of number five. It was well utilized in the hot tropical weather. The blue Pacific was again living up to its name and we were making good time. Shoals of flying fish glinted in the sun. A wonderful sight was the occasional wandering Albatross that would follow us for days on end, its huge wings hardly moving as it skimmed the wave-tops. Dolphins too would form an escort at our bow. They would appear distantly abeam, then like a swarm of torpedoes speed directly towards the bow-wave, turn gracefully and effortlessly keep pace with us. Sometimes ten or more would be with us but as quickly as they appeared they'd peel off and be gone.

After the evening meal some of the day-men lingered in the mess-room, playing cards or darts. Others preferred their own company; perhaps writing letters to wives or girlfriends to be posted at Panama. (Using such romantic endearments as “every turn of the screw brings me nearer to you!”) Or indulging in various hobbies. Putting ships into bottles or light bulbs was one pastime that was popular. The watch keepers would turn in early and there was always dhobying (laundry) to catch up on. An ingenious method of cleaning jeans was to tie them securely to a length of heaving-line and tow them astern for a while. This had the added advantage of also bleaching them to a favoured light colour.

In those long Pacific swells Hororata’s pedigree came to the fore. The brass plate on the fore part of the bridge announced that she was built by John Brown of Clydebank! From whose yard had come the famous Cunarders. Her turbines, even at this speed were free of vibration and practically silent. In a seaway one could hear and feel the riveted hull moving and flexing, a most comfortable sensation. This strength had been tested before and would do so again, shortly!

Panama at last, and once more we had crossed the vast Pacific without catching sight of another vessel, nor land, except for a distant glimpse of the Galapagos Islands. It was stiflingly hot again through the Canal and the brief stop at Colon gave no respite. Every spare minute was spent in our makeshift pool but even the temperature in that had risen to a level that was not much below air temperature. The blowers in the cabins forced warm air around and were useless. Every porthole had a wind scoop extended, designed to capture the draught created by the forward movement of the ship but this didn’t help things in our room. In fact the scoops were of no use at all in a following wind!

Two days out from Colon found us re-fuelling again at Caracas Bay, Curacao, and the final stop on the homeward voyage. Soon our bows were ploughing through masses of seaweed; an area known as the Sargasso Sea. Within days the mood on the ship changed noticeably, as did the weather. We were in the Atlantic and starting to suffer from that psychological condition, common to all British seafarers ‘The Channels.’ The longer the voyage, the deeper the feeling of euphoria and the closer one gets to ‘Blighty’ the madder one becomes! Practical jokes abounded and men who for weeks had looked glum and become short tempered suddenly discovered the joys of life. Frank Newell called it “Full of the oh be joyfulls” Our paying passengers were completely nonplussed by this behaviour, especially the ‘hairy one’ as he

was the recipient of many practical jokes. For example a concert was organised to be presented in the Saloon and a list of performers posted on the notice board. The Mates name was there, being Welsh he was to sing several songs. Lampy would play the tin whistle etc. 'Hairy' was down to give a recital and he took off to the after winch house every night to practise. When the appointed day came nobody (except Hairy) turned up!

In spite of the worsening weather there was an atmosphere of anticipation aboard! Steepening seas were not affecting our speed. The wind and waves were bursting across the port bow with heavy spray sweeping the foredeck, but the Hora' seemed to ignore them! She must have had the 'channels' too! Lookouts were by now being kept on the monkey-island above the wheelhouse.

Our course was taking us through the area of the Azores and soon we expected to be in the Western Approaches and thence to landfall in the Irish Sea. Unfortunately the Atlantic had a trick up its sleeve. Early one morning, not long into the four to eight watch and before speed could be reduced, Hororata put her head into a huge sea. Archie was at the wheel and he described it later as awesome. "She put her head into it but before the bows were able to rise, another one kept her down. It seemed to sweep right over the bridge!" Apparently, the fourth mate was alone on the bridge at the time but the first awareness I had of it was when all hands were called. When I 'came too' the changed movement of the ship was noticeable. I thought she had stopped as we were wallowing in the seaway, something was obviously wrong! It was scary at first, not knowing what had happened especially when I was told to stay 'below'. It was still dark outside and most of the lads were struggling into their oilskins and sea-boots before hurrying forward.

The damage caused by that wave was astounding. A McGregor hatch cover protected number one hold. This comprised three heavy steel sections sitting on rollers and designed to roll back overlapping each other, then to tilt upright at the after end of the hatch. When closed they were locked and secured by steel pins. Each of these sections weighed about three tons. Immediately abaft of number one hold was a winch-house surmounted by a pair of samson posts, which like a set of goal posts had a crossbar linking their tops. This carried the for'rad steaming light in its centre. (The Hororata being single masted.) When the wave struck, it tore off the sections of the hatch top, neatly depositing them onto number two hatch without apparently hitting the samson posts or the crossbar. At the same time the forepart of the hatch

coaming was stove in, ripping open the deck at that point and allowing water to pour into the hold. The bolts holding down the windlass 'sprang', making it unusable for anchoring. Seemingly to emphasize the incredible power of the sea, the ship's bell was ripped from its davit and struck the forepart of the saloon nearly two hundred feet away! Leaving a large dent in the steelwork!

For thirteen hours, we hove too while all hands under the direction of the Chief Officer and the Bosun slaved to make the ship seaworthy. 'Chippy' built timber boxing across the forepart of the damaged coaming and this was filled with concrete. The three sections of the hatchtop then had to be winched carefully back over the winchhouse and secured with chains, a fine example of seamanship on that tossing exposed foredeck. The men had no break for a meal or even a 'smoko' until the job was done. I had managed to get an occasional glimpse of the activity forward by making my way up to the officer's deck, below the bridge. It was bitterly cold and even though I was sheltering behind the bulwark I had to hold on against the gale that was battering us. By 1900 we were underway at last and the ship rolled heavily as she turned back to her original course at reduced speed.

This incident occurred on or about the Thirteenth of December in the area of the Azores. It was later that I realized that it coincided with an event in the life of the Hororata that resulted in one of the great feats of seamanship and heroism during W.W.II.

Hororata, was homeward bound on her second voyage, having sailed from Lyttleton on the Sixteenth of November 1942. On the Thirteenth of December, in the area of the Azores, she was struck by a torpedo on the port side between numbers four and five bulkheads. Hororata was sailing independently at the time but had been slowed by heavy weather. With a gaping hole in her side her skipper, Captain F. S. Hamilton, made course for Flores which she reached the following morning in a waterlogged condition. Most of the crew was put ashore but that evening the gale worsened and it was decided to evacuate the anchored ship for the night. At daybreak the next day the captain and some of the crewmembers re-boarded her and attempted to improve the stability of the ship as her condition had deteriorated overnight. During the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> the gale caused the ship to drag her anchors and she was blown twenty miles to seaward. Large quantities of her cargo of butter and meat were washed from the hole in her side.

With great difficulty the Hororata was brought back to the anchorage and it was decided that she would have to be taken to a safe port if repairs were to be carried out. With a volunteer crew she sailed for Fayal where she arrived on the 18<sup>th</sup> and was secured to the breakwater. Four of her six lifeboats had been smashed on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> so only thirty-six out of the complement of ninety-eight made that perilous voyage

For many weeks the crew aided by friendly locals built a wood and concrete patch over the damaged part of the hull and on the Seventeenth of March she sailed from Fayal escorted by H.M.S. Burwell. Liverpool was reached on the twenty-third of March where the rest of her cargo, that had been kept refrigerated was unloaded after which she was repaired at Cammel Laird's yard.

This epic salvage operation resulted in several members of the crew, including Frank Newell, receiving awards and saving thousands of tons of much needed food for war torn Britain.

Our little episode pales in comparison with Hororata's brush with danger in 1942, but the time and place was significant. The remainder of our voyage proceeded at a more circumspect speed and we arrived at Liverpool on the nineteenth of December, paying off the same day.

Thus ended my first trip. After a voyage of six months and twenty days, paying off with the princely sum of twenty-five Pounds! Returning to my home in Essex was not without its difficulties as I struggled with a suitcase of clothing, a large box of assorted foodstuff and an ex-Vindi kit-bag stuffed with an eighteen pound ham and a frozen carcass of lamb. My mother was ecstatic, declaring, "it was the best Christmas since before the war!" The local butcher kindly cut up the lamb and stored it in his cold-room. I shall never forget the look on my Mum's face when with my sailor's knife I sliced open the burlap and revealed the ham! The butter, tea and various items of canned food were also welcomed with delight. My fourteen year old sister being particularly intrigued by tins of fruit salad containing Passion Fruit, wondering if it would have an exotic effect or *something!*

With most of my 'pay off' I managed to buy several items of clothing including a smart new 'whistle and flute' (suit) from the 'Fifty-Bob Tailors!' plus an overcoat and new shoes. Soon my leave was at an end. Christmas at home had been wonderful but I was keen to get away again. Having been asked if I would "come back next trip?" and replying that I would, I was

sent back to Liverpool to 'work by' the Hororata while she was being repaired. Promotion to Junior O.S. meant an increase in pay to twelve pounds ten shillings per month.

Whilst enjoying our sojourn in Liverpool the waterfront dispute in which we had become embroiled in Auckland had escalated to a national closure of all Ports. In February a National Emergency was declared that was to last for six bitter months and cause deep divisions within the country. New Zealand had lost its innocence! It was almost three months before my next voyage began, this time to Australia. But that's another story.

