

17/06/48 to 30/08/48

## ATHEL CHIEF

My second trip was entirely different; It was on a tanker called the Athel Chief. This was the Athel line belonging to United Molasses. We left London on 17/07/48 In ballast for Ceinfuegos, Cuba.

My Job on this trip was to help the second steward in the pantry and to do the washing up, help serve meals in the dining saloon, and help clean the officers and engineers cabins in the Centre-castle. I also had to fetch the meals from the galley which was in the After or Stern-castle.

A couple of days after we sailed, we hit bad weather, and I thought I was on a submarine; most of the time all you could see was the catwalk, which was about eight feet above the tank deck, and was set slightly right of centre, with the mast halfway along, and joined the centre castle which was my target (coming from aft, with the stern or after castle behind me)

My only disaster was during this storm. I had collected the mid-day meal in four stackable containers, which were secured with a handle that went through all four containers, or 'hotboxes' and which also held the lid tigh. I was balancing a large joint of meat on a metal tray on my other hand. Holding the meat onto the tray was a cloth which was folded down over the edges of the tray, the weight of the tray against my palm holding it in place. As protection from the elements, I wore a stiff yellow oilskin coat that had been tied with string around my middle.

Waiting for the moment when the next giant wave had gone across from port to starboard and while the bows were just starting to lift again, I made a mad uphill dash along the catwalk to the slight safety of the mast, which was on the port side of the catwalk.

When a ships bows are lifting after reaching their low point, it's like running up a steep slope, then, as the bows start to go down, you become weightless and its like running on air; I had just reached the mast when the ship started down again.

Suddenly I was horizontal and underwater. I don't remember letting go of the container, but the meat tray was snatched by the wave, and I was lifted by the wind under my coat. Fortunately, I was able to grab the chains of the catwalk with both hands leaving me suspended horizontally over the tanks, which were about six feet below me

Once the wave had passed it was quicker and safer to go back to the galley, and there was no longer any point in continuing to go forward, but as I got to the end of the 'walk holding onto the chains, one of the chains came away at the corner upright, and I nearly fell onto the tank tops and valves below. Luckily the chippie had seen my underwater act and was standing ready to grab me. He told me he'd thought I was a goner and that I was never to tie an oilskin round the waist as it acted like an umbrella, catching the wind.

The cook was not too pleased when I went back empty handed, and said that I could help him make some sandwiches for the officers and I'd better not lose them.

That night John and I were asleep in our bunks, I being in the top one, when I was suddenly jolted awake with a sinking feeling. My bunk had come adrift from its metal supports and had fallen onto John, with me still in it! I leapt out of my bunk and tore the heavy metal bunk off John, fearing that I'd find him badly injured or worse; he wasn't moving at all and I started to shake him, terrified that he might be dead. He suddenly opened his eyes and asked me what the hell I was doing? He had slept

through the fall, and didn't believe me until he saw my discarded bunk that I'd thrown across the cabin - he hadn't got a scratch.

The weather cleared the next day and all the officers cheered when I arrived with the dinner in a new hotbox container, but the Chief Steward wasn't very happy about the loss as it came off his bonus.

When we arrived in Cuba on August 10th, we immediately began to load molasses. The molasses had to be heated in order to allow it to be pumped into the tanks, a process that went on for three days and nights and invaded the whole ship with an overpowering sickly smell of hot treacle, and a constant noise like someone pulling their wellies out of thick mud.

While this was going on we were allowed ashore each afternoon and evening, the only trouble being that the town was about two miles away, so most afternoons were spent sunbathing.

From the jetty to the road there was a set of railway lines with a flat bed truck for loading stores, and the shoreline and the jetty were infested with large land crabs whose single large claw could easily chop off your leg, or so the older sailors told us. What we used to do when going ashore was wait until all the crew going to town were on the jetty, (about a dozen) then we would all push the truck until it was going fast then all jump on and roll to the road, then do the same coming back.

Before we got to town most of the older hands went into the nearest bar, John the other saloon boy, ( who had also been at the sea school with me,) the assistant cook and myself decided to look around town. The section of road we were on was just gravel, with the railway lines running along the centre.

The minute we got to a paved road, girls and women, all prostitutes, started to pester us from the corner of one block until we reached the other end, but when we crossed to the next block, these stopped and were shouting after us, while another lot took over from the next pavement. I found out later from the local watchman on the ship, that they were allotted a certain beat, and if they followed a customer into the road were thrown in Jail.

We went into a cafe-bar and ordered beer and a sandwich but as none of us could speak Spanish and we weren't in the town proper, we had great difficulty in ordering until I spotted an advert on the wall with a picture of beer being poured out of a bottle, and Schlitz cerveza or something, and we ordered that, and by asking for beef and mooring we finally got served.

Afterwards we went sightseeing and it was funny to see a train going along the middle of the road, although I found out later that it was quite common in other countries.

We had arranged to meet the others at the bar where we had left them and just as we got to the end of the made up section of the road, one of the prostitutes started shouting at us and we were suddenly surrounded by locals, one of whom spoke a little English. He said that the cook had been with the woman and hadn't paid.

We all denied it, but one of them pulled a knife out, so the cook threw her a peso and told us to run. They all ran after us but the crew were waiting outside the bar, and were we glad to see them as the locals then stopped chasing us.

The next afternoon, I was laying in a hammock out on deck, with a bottle of rum and some home made cigars, reading a book, when the watchman came over and said that it would rain in five minutes.

I laughed and said there wasn't a cloud in the sky; five minutes later it rained so hard the drops were bouncing up about four feet into the air; fifteen minutes after that it suddenly stopped, and within ten minutes you wouldn't have known it had been

raining; Apparently it rained every afternoon around four o'clock for about a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes.

I had got soaked before I could get out of the hammock, and with the combination of reading in strong sunlight together with drinking rum and smoking a cigar, I promptly fell flat on the deck, and the second steward said I had been in the sun too long and told me to go to bed, and he would tell the chief I didn't feel well.

The ship had loaded all the molasses by the third day so we left Cien Feugos and arrived in Port Everglades, Florida, three days later to finish loading.

Everglades is a nice small town and the people are very friendly as I soon found out. We hadn't got a lot of time, but when I asked one of the dock workers where to catch the bus, he said that if I was going to town He would drive me as the bus service was minimal. When I said that I was only going to get a souvenir for my mother, and some chewing gum for my brother, he said that I could get both in the local Woolworth's. He then drove me there and waited, then drove me back again and would not take anything, so I thanked him very much, then he said consider it payment for the great way he was treated in England during the war.

We left Port Everglades the same day and arrived at Dagenham Dock in the Thames on the 30th August.

As soon as the ship docked, a swarm of customs men came on board and started searching from top to bottom and stem to stern.

I was on deck helping the galley boy to peel potatoes; both of us sitting on upturned buckets, with two tins of tobacco and a couple of bottles of spirits each, inside the buckets; The only way the crew could get spirits was by asking an officer to get it for you at six shillings a bottle, I also had a thousand cigarettes under the floor of the saloon sideboard where the customs men were sitting. They obviously didn't find what they had been tipped off about, because they next removed the complete glass skylight of the engine room deck head with a dockside crane, and started stripping the engine room, and as far as I can remember found a large haul of watches. This was where I found out how to get goods past the customs men.

I was told to make them a cup of coffee while they were checking the customs declarations, and decided that if I gave them sandwiches as well, they would remember me, so I made a big pile of sandwiches and a plate of biscuits to go with the coffee, and took it all in on a tray. They were very pleased at this. and later on when they started looking through the crews cabins and luggage, one of them asked me to show him to my cabin where he put crosses on both mine and Johns bags. That evening John and I went by train to Tilbury then across on the ferry to Gravesend, where we soon met up with a couple of girls we knew, and ended up in a pub near the ferry.

This was the same pub where we used to get people to bring us a drink when we were at the school, and I think it was called the Green Gate.

About ten pm I went to get another round and mentioned that we had gone to the school, and when he asked how long ago and I told him, he quickly took the money and said that we would have to take it outside as we were under age, although we had been there since 7.30.

Later, after we had said goodnight to the girls, we caught the ferry back to Tilbury where we found that we had missed the last train to Dagenham; so we both tried to sleep on a bench in the waiting room, until one of the railway policemen found out that we were going to Dagenham and put us in one of the carriages of the first train in the morning.

We were wakened by a cleaner sweeping the carriage next morning and she showed us where to get a cup of tea, after which we got back to the ship and were paid off that morning.

My last act before leaving the ship was to get an empty cigarette carton that had held about ten thousand cigarettes, and which I had saved for the purpose. This was made of an outer cardboard case with wooden framed sides and an inner cardboard carton secured round the top with large staples. First I carefully removed the staples allowing me to slide out the inner carton, then I packed my thousand cigarettes, (Twenty flat tins of fifty) that had been hidden in the sideboard in the saloon, into the bottom of the outer carton, replaced the inner carton, cut it off level with the outer carton, then replaced the staples, then filled the empty inner carton to the top with loose rice finally replacing the lid and sealing it with sticky tape

As I had already had my luggage marked by the customs, I only had to get past the police on the dock gate, and they only looked in one case, and didn't even ask what was in the cardboard carton.

John and I caught a bus outside the dock gate, to Liverpool street station where we parted company, and I caught another train to Enfield.

This ended my Second trip.

Alf Corbyn