

## **BARRANCA** – By Neil Morton

I stood utterly dismayed by the sight of the ship that The Shipping Federation had sent me to join. I had just signed off a smart Cunard Line cargo carrier out of the King George V docks in the Pool of London, and having seen enough of the east coast U.S.A, I had requested a voyage to South America, but this old tub looked like a bit of a joke, and I wondered if she would make it.

Lying very low against the quayside, as if looking for support, the old Liberty ship, painted in flaking black and beige, with rust streaking from the anchor chain port, she looked in need of much care, or the salvage yard. Built in Portland Oregon during the war years of 1940-44, these vessels were churned out at a record rate of one a week, mainly because the method of construction was by welding the steel plates together instead of the traditional riveting method. The Marshal Plan, Americas helping hand to a beleaguered Britain, paid for these vessels. The life expectancy of which was minimal due to the dangerous crossing of the North Atlantic on convoy duty. Somehow, the S.S. 'Barranca' had survived. I was to learn at a later date the name meant gully or small ravine in Portuguese. Utilitarian to the extreme, her lines were, let's face it, ugly. This old bucket was to be my home for the next six months of 1956. Hefting my suitcase in one hand and my old Imperial portable typewriter in the other, I reluctantly climbed the clanking gangplank At the head of which a burly redheaded man leaned against the side, a cigarette hung in the corner of his mouth, he asked in a broad Scots accent,

'What would you be a wanting laddie?'

'Joining as steward's boy,' I replied.

'You'll be wanting the Chief then?'

'I suppose so.'

After this brief exchange he turned and walked to an open port hole and yelled, 'Hey Chiefie, there's a wee laddie here looking for you. By the look of him he'll need plenty of your porridge.'

Now, whereas I was on the skinny side, I stood six feet tall, and at the age of seventeen had time to fill out. Giving him my most withering look, I strolled to the nearest entry, and stepping over the storm water coaming, swung my bags in first and nearly whacked a short, portly, balding man with the old Imperial.

'Careful son, have you got a license for that thing?'

From his navy blue uniform with two gold rings, I knew him to be my new boss.

'Sorry sir, Tom Morgan reporting for duty.'

'Well now Mr Morgan, you'll be our pantry boy. My name is Cassidy, Mister to you or Chief, I don't mind which.'

His accent decidedly nasal, and Liverpool, my new boss regarded me with a small smile playing on his lips and a glint of mischief in his bright intelligent grey eyes.

'Follow me and we'll get your gear stowed.'

The alleyway he led me down was painted an off white, a sort of biscuit, and the deck a reddish brown, a black painted hand rail ran down one side for support in heavy seas. So far, I had not seen one single rivet in the ship's construction. As I followed with my bags thumping and echoing of the steel bulkheads, I noticed an aromatic, spicy aroma wafting through the enclosed air. This would normally contain the usual ships' smell of oil, sweaty socks, and wet weather gear.

Abruptly we turned a corner amidships and there was the galley; inside which three figures in white jackets and blue checked cooks' trousers, turned to stare at the new arrival. The colour of their ebony skin highlighted by the snowy jackets, appeared to have been polished to a high degree.

'Hey Chester,' the chief called, and a boy of about my own age stepped forward.

'Yes boss,' he acknowledged the shout.

'Take Morgan here to your berth, and double back quick smart.'

'On my way Mr Cassidy.'

Chester scuttled ahead of me and threw open the door of a small cabin which contained two bunks. Everything was steel, even the bunks built from lead coloured piping bolted to the deck. The deck head contained a tangle of steel encased conduit running through the bulkheads, with drainage pipes gurgling. A metal locker was to serve as my wardrobe. A single porthole let in the watery grey light of the January sky. Chester a roly-poly individual with fat cheeks and a smile from ear to ear showing huge white slabs of teeth, gestured to the left hand bunk,

'Chuck 'em on there mate, when old 'Hopalong' says double he means it.'

Back at the galley door the chief beckoned me around an adjacent corner and shoved me into an area of about six feet by six feet, which contained a sink piled high with cups, saucers, plates and cutlery.

'This is your station Morgan, there's an apron somewhere, and clean this lot up and report to Wang the saloon steward when it's done.'

'Strewth!' I muttered under my breath, talk about welcome aboard.

Fortunately, I had spent the last year or so doing the same thing, only in much more salubrious surroundings. An hour later with soaking wet shirtsleeves, I stuck my head through a hatch that let onto the officers dining saloon. A diminutive Oriental was polishing tumblers and setting them on the three round tables that seated eight officers at meal times, each table boasted white tablecloths, resplendent with heavy silver cutlery, the company logo etched into the handle of each knife, fork, and spoon.

'Oi!' he yelled, 'what do you think you're staring at mate.'

'Are you Wang?' As if I didn't know.

'No I'm Sophia bloody Loren, if you're the new pantry boy, get your backside in here and help with these glasses.'

He gave me a clean glass cloth and disappeared through a heavy timber door leaving me to it. About ten minutes later, he reappeared with a tall thin Negro with an almost bald pate edged around with grey peppercorn hair.

'This here is Monty, he's the Captains steward and also does the officers quarters. I do the engineers; we both serve on these three tables at meal times and you do as you're told OK?'

I glanced at the brass clock on the bulkhead above a mahogany sideboard, fifteen minutes past eleven; lunch would be served from noon, in two sittings.

The chief stuck his grinning face around the door, 'Morgan go stow your gear, get changed into your sea going kit and report to my office.'

'Right oh chief,' I replied as cheerfully as I could. "Shanghaied" on this bloody scow with a crew full of odd balls was all I needed. In the cabin, I hung my good suit in the tin locker, and chucked my uniform on the bunk. It wasn't much; two pairs of navy serge pants, three white mess jackets, and cotton striped every day work shirt or two. Dressed in jeans and tee shirt I went miserably to the Chief's office, and reluctantly handed over my Discharge Book and signed on the dotted. Once back in the pantry I took stock of the space that was to be the centre of my existence for the foreseeable future. This comprised, a sink, a Bain-Marie with hot press beneath, a copper urn for making coffee, and some drying racks for plates. Mercifully, there was a porthole at eye level immediately over the sink, through which I could see the bustle of the dockers and deck hands loading cargo, amongst a tangle of cranes on long mobile legs, not unlike a H.G. Wells creation. 'Hey mon, don't stand there daydreaming come down to the galley for the soup, and put it in the Bain-Marie, make sure you have plenty of soup bowls in the warmer.'

Turning, I saw a beaming black man wiping his chubby hands on an apron that almost covered his feet. He inquired, holding out his hand with a giggle, which appeared girlish for such a rotund figure, as to my name. At last, a bit of civility; I took the offered hand with a deep sense of relief.

'Tom, Tom Morgan.'

'Morgan, sheet mon we is all from Jamaica in the galley and don't take kindly to

that name, unless it is on a rum bottle.' However, this was stated with another chuckle. 'Come on, we have nice minestrone for you down here. We will serve all the courses from our hot shelf to the two stewards, all you have to do is ladle out the soup on request, and make the coffee and tea. How you feel about being the only white man among all us all?'

'Doesn't worry me,' I offered with a shrug, although I confessed to myself I could just as easily walk away. Only time would tell, there had to be a first time for everything.

So that was the way it went, three meals a day, day after day, until the routine became automatic. The wonderful aromas I had observed on my first day clearly explained by the spices that Winston and Ambrose, his reclusive assistant, used in the curries and sauces. I could see that Monty the Captain's 'Tiger', was an older man than his papers suggested. He shuffled around on huge outward splayed feet, and constantly held the small of his back after bending to serve at table. He was kind and helpful to me in those early days, unlike Wang who liked to bully, even though there was barely two pennyworth of him.

Chester was a scamp. Universally happy and content with his lot, he adored the second cook, who on closer inspection proved to be a mulatto, lighter skinned than his work mates, strong of build, with regular, almost European features, he had hazel, softening to green eyes, very disconcerting when one met his full unblinking gaze.

Fully stored and loaded, we sailed two days after my joining, and headed across the Atlantic, next stop Brazil. On the way, I became firm friends with my shipmates in the galley. These Jamaican born Brits enjoyed life to the full. Always happy, their transistor radio, tuned to Latin and Caribbean stations, churned out rhythms to get the toes tapping and the fingers beating on any available surface. Chester was a dab hand on an up turned saucepan, his fingers flew, and his beaming smiles created an ambience of goodwill. Ambrose enjoyed in his own quiet way.

Fifty years ago, Brazil languished, as did all third world countries, in an economy that had very little in the way of industry. The export trade limited to coffee, fruit, some lumber, and very little else. Our first port of call, Recife, turned out to be a small timber constructed wharf, capable of berthing two ships only. The township scattered over a few acres, and set against a backdrop of green vegetation. Both available berths were occupied, so we dropped anchor within hailing distance of an enormous American freighter.

That night we sat on the canvas covered cargo holds, looking at the stars in an incredibly clear sky, swapping yarns the way sailors do, and looking forward to a run ashore. Among us, the deckhands and engine room 'greasers', off watch, sat spinning tall stories, mostly concerned with previous voyages, and the girls and the booze. With my eighteenth birthday coming up soon, I listened to every colourful word.

Early next day, one of the ships in the port sailed with the tide, and the pilot took us into a bustling dockside scene; the dockers, clad in tattered but clean shorts and tee shirts, yelled instructions to one another and waved up at us in friendly fashion, as they grabbed our heavy mooring lines, and snugged us gently alongside, aided by a little tug.

'Tonight we are going to have some fun,' stated Chester as he leaned over the side with me, studying the activity.

'Oh no you don't,' came the Liverpudlian drawl from behind us, 'you do not go ashore anywhere in Brazil, without an adult to accompany you, you are both minors in my care and that's the regulations until you are eighteen.' What "bullshit" I thought, however kept quiet.

'Why don't you take us chief, you must know this place pretty good?'

'No way boys, I'm saving all my money for Rio.'

It was Ambrose in his quiet matter of fact way that offered to escort Chester and I ashore that evening. After the heat, bustle, and clamour of a ship discharging

cargo, the peace and quiet of a short stroll into town acted like an electric charge to my over stimulated curiosity.

Around us the Brasileiros moved with a solemn grace, each with a smile and a murmured greeting. Ambrose, normally a silent soul, replied in the same sibilant tones as we walked, glancing from side to side at the shops and cafes, still open for business at seven o' clock. We each had a Coca-Cola and a sticky pastry, and then decided to go to a cinema. The posters outside declared that Alan Ladd was showing in the classic western "Shane". The theatre was an open-air affair, with long rows of canvas seating just like giant deck chairs. To see the American actors, speaking English with Portuguese subtitles at the bottom of the screen, caused Chester and I to chuckle quietly together.

We came out at around nine thirty, and Ambrose immediately stated he needed a beer.

'We could use one too,' Chester exclaimed.

'Just beer, one is all you get, and only one is that understood?'

The side streets were a totally different 'kettle of fish' to the lights of the main drag. The one that Ambrose led us down was constructed of nothing but gravel and sand. Never having seen an unpaved street outside of a park or seaside walking track, I listened to the crunch beneath my feet with amazement.

Lighting: none existent except for the glow from the windows of taverns and cafes helped to show us the way. I became aware of the steadily growing sound of Elvis Presley banging out "Blue Suede Shoes" as we approached a saloon better illuminated than the others. My blood quickened.

Inside, half of the crew seemed firmly ensconced, with beers and shot glasses of rum to hand. The red haired bosun, Angus by name, sat with two other sturdy looking members of the deck department, used to working in all weathers they looked sun tanned and tough.

'Hey Ambrose get over here, let me buy you a beer, and the two laddies with you.'

'Thanks bosun, but we are just having the one and then away.'

'Rubbish, you look after my lads and its time your friends put hairs on their chests.'

He arose with a push on the table, causing more grog to spill in the already large puddle. Striding to the bar, crunching the discarded peanut shells littering the floor, bowls of which came with the drinks, he called for three Brahma beers, Elvis had just got started on "Heart Break Hotel", the crew all joined in the chorus. I took a sip of the cold lager, and all the lights went out. Catcalls, whistles, stamping feet, and curses, rent the blackness. A rustle of silk like fabric, then a smell of cheap perfume, and a soft bundle sat on my knees, placing an arm around my neck, a voice murmured,

'Hello Johnny.'

Startled I stood bolt upright; the lights came back on, at my feet a plump and pretty girl howled derision up at me. Half the crew had done the same thing, and chaos reigned. What with the screams of the discarded, "business girls", laying amongst the peanut shells, the roar of laughter from the men, we did not notice the arrival of half a dozen, tanned, burly, crew-cut sailors from the American freighter.

'Hey, you Limeys, if you don't want those girls send 'em over here.'

'Go get your own Yank,' yelled Angus.

'Looks like you lads and boys,' this with a stare at Chester and me, 'never do know how to handle ladies, then maybe you don't need 'em aboard that bucket, being Limeys and all.' The suggestion that we were all poufs was clear.

The atmosphere changed in the blink of an eye; tiny seconds of tense silence, and then the first glass flew, followed by boots and fists, upturned tables and chairs, what a scene; I thought I was back in the cinema until a large glass ashtray hit me full on the nose. Ambrose picked me up, and grabbing Chester by the arm, charged out of there.

Next day our radio officer, who doubled as ships doctor, stuffed cotton wool up my nostrils, and whilst still in the throws of agony and remorse, "Hopalong" Cassidy, told me in no uncertain terms, that I was confined to the ship. I could not thank him enough, even innocent of wrongdoing, the thought of another baptism of fire kept me aboard until my eighteenth birthday, however that's another story.