



P & O TSS 'STRATHAIRD' 22.500 tons.

Bobby and the Holy-stone from Aloft!

'Strathaird' was on the buoys at Port Said. We'd arrived at 0630 as lead ship in the convoy North from Suez. You lads will remember the order of priority in the convoys is ... "men of war", ammunition ships, mail ships and then tankers and freighters.

Tying up completed, the pontoon walkway was floated out and secured below the lowered gangway and within minutes the bum-boats were "on station"! Jock MacGregor, McTavish and other 'North of the Border' gyppo's with the strongest Celtic accents plus a resident or two of Port Said with very convincing Scouser twangs were in business, flogging initially to passo's. They of course, had more do-re-mi and a bit less sense than we "knockabout old stagers". I was all of 17, close to 18! I was Ship's Bugler and, after sounding the Sunrise call (it and Sunset were never played at sea) and later the Breakfast calls, I'd had nowt to do for an hour or so. I just watched the action from the Port bridge wing, all OK'd by the Skipper. Bridge activity was well ceased by that time. I was no stranger to the spot. It was where most bugle calls were made from: Sunrise, Sunset, BoT Sports, (Boat Drill Dismiss) to name some. Meal calls were blown on the lower decks. Seven pounds a month and a shilling a day for bugling and all the Duraglit I ever needed for polishing the bugle. I was the very last Bugler P&O ever had on articles, the last of the line - in the Line!

After breakfast when the passo's started to make their way ashore, the "Jock & Scouse" sales pitchers, making less "bunse", now moved their boats to below the forr'ard well deck which was crew space. Lines came up. "Trading" began, a veritable hive of industry it was.

We were bound for Tilbury, eight days steaming from Port Said. Sydney was almost a month astern so the atmosphere in the ship was very definitely "Channels" orientated!! It had been cooling off too the last day or so coming up the 'Red' so there was much jollification about that and the factor that "pay-off" day was just a week away.

Now ... my mate Bobby Brissen, was the best conditioned 'Bell-Boy' I EVER saw. A dead ringer for Chick Knight, a famous London wrestler of the '40's & '50's Bobby had lifted weights since he was 13. He was built like the proverbial brick shit-house! Bobby had been "dudded" by a gyppo bum-boater on the way out nearly 3 months

before. The mini camel saddle he'd bought for his Dad was a duff buy. Sort of fell apart and the poxy filling/stuffing whatever, was unbelievable! The old story IS true!

"I'll get my bleedin' money back, you'll see!" says Bobby. He bunged the saddle into a bag, and into his locker it went till Suez on the way home. He was lucky the OZ Customs didn't find it, they burnt them. Pronto!! You got a receipt.

On this day, he was well "hyped up!" Anything was likely!!! I'm watching the lad from aloft and there was lots of fist shaking and East End "vernacular" from my mate as he refused stuffed this & that, brass pyramids and sundry other wares in the boat. The camel saddle he'd bought had gone down on a line and it was "changee for changee" time. The Port Said'er flatly refused to send any money up and merely sent aloft another camel saddle. "Don't want it!" says our lad in a rage. I could hear Bobby effin' and blindin' up where I stood, surveying the scene, 50 feet up above! His instruction to the King Farouk subject below re just what he should do with his camel saddle - would have been a "physical impossibility"!! That's where the transaction stayed ... unresolved, for the time being! That was morning time.

Now, the main companionway up from the Working Alleyway lead out of the masthouse and onto the well-deck. On either side of the door, on deck, was a huge box, sand in one and holystones in t'other! Some of these holystones were BIG 'uns with fittings for 2 poles. The Lascars could push/pull these bloody things. I never saw 'em on anything other than P&O ships, and they weren't all like that. Most were for single hand ops.

Sailing time for UK was 1700 and very rarely were we late shoving off. This day was no exception. Arvo tea was finished and done with so all the stewards were off duty. Most of 'em, on the well. "Keep that bastard occupied with a likely sale, keep his line secured up here till the very last minute," says Bobby and promptly disappeared below.

When the ship had been quiet mid afternoon he'd taken one of the BIG 'uns from the box and stashed it in his cabino. This was Plan A, and as it happened there was no need for B. I never did ask him what B was. Sailing time approached and with lots of bods about on the after end of the well there would be little, in particular, seen from the Bridge. I was in amongst this crowd with a great view of the proceedings.

Bobby had finished up a bit earlier settling for a rug, one of those with camels and pyramids on it. He wasn't happy with the deal. And, was still very narked, as he was about to prove. He emerged from the mast house looking like Groucho Marx, carrying the newspaper covered holystone - scuttling across the deck around the hatch, and screened from the bridge by the upstand of the well and the deck above it, merged with the crowd.

Singled up and then the last line on its way up, the engines had just started their tremble when Bobby hauled this newspaper covered missile up and over. "Oi, cop this" he shouted to the unsuspecting trader below and let go! "Ahab the Arab", him below, was at the time yelling for his line to be released. Bobby's intention he'd told me, was to plonk the "stone" alongside the boat and cause a nice big splash to soak the boat's contents, plus the operator. With way on the ship the timing was perfect ... well almost!

"The best laid plans!"... Things didn't quite work out perfect 'cos the stone, maybe end on, hit the gunwhale and took about 3 feet of it and planks down to the waterline ... OUT!!! Well away from the entrepreneur, I might add! The next thing, apart from the uproar on the well, fellars falling about in hysterics and all, was that camel saddles, stuffed camels, rugs and other items were floating about. The gyppo was purple, the air blue with obscenities. Unable to break his line he cut it, smartish! Just about where the missile hit, I'd seen a side thwart with brass pyramids and other trinket things displayed. There was a BIG heap of space there now! Most, if not all, did the submerging bit I suppose and finished up on the bottom of the Suez Canal. They're probably there still!!!

The Simon Artz Emporium was gliding by as 'Strathaird' picked up speed and headed in the direction of the breakwater and the open sea! Lads scuttled off the well, out of sight into the mast house and down to the Working Alleyway, which echoed with hysterical laughter. Bobby wouldn't have been recognized from below by McTavish, McGregor or anyone else for that matter. He was wearing one of those "big hooter and glasses and huge eyebrow" comic things, borrowed for the occasion from the ship's shop-keeper, one of the lads!

What was seen, if anything, from the bridge we neither knew nor heard 'owt about immediately. Nor did anyone give a "Donald Duck" - we were Homeward Bound. It was England 1, Egypt nil! The occasion had made everybody's day - in our Dept. that is! The ship continued and without problem or delay cleared the Canal, with much mirth and good old "Channel Fever" abounding down below. In the accommodation lads screeched with laughter. The day's events would be a talking point till England hove into view!

A notice went up on boards the next day re a "strong complaint from the Port Said Authorities" but any of the lads questioned said they'd "been in kip" or working at the time. NOBODY, of course, knew anything about anything!! The trader's boat, unlike his brass - wares, didn't sink. Watching from ports, we saw his boat, his mates lashed alongside, being helped to shore. More than a few bob would be required to pay the boat repair guy.

Bobby, feeling very chuffed with himself & the events, said something about us both trying Royal Mail or PSNC for a while, adding a fair few expletives re gyppo's. There was much "Yahee'ing" & "Yahoo'ing" from there to Brixham, the Channel Pilot pick up point. "Every turn of the screw ... brings me nearer to you!" was heard constantly - recited to no one in particular by lads swanning along alleyways. The prickly heat rashes would quickly disappear and we'd be able to get good kip from then on. The old girl was not then air - conditioned but we'd be quite happy with the punka-louvre system output now, and under a blanket and sheet for the first time in weeks. We'd all arrive home looking fit and tanned. All with a few bob in our "kicks"!!

'Strathaird', trailing the gyppo's heaving line, & basket, sailed off toward the setting sun!



Neil Robinson. GSS 1946. R364755

