

Ghost Walks Ships Deck !

by Dennis Crosby (R318269)

Arriving home DBS on the Troopship "Scythia" loaded with returning XIV Army types from Burma, we had sailed from Bombay & arrived in Liverpool on the 19th Dec 1945. I had joined my first ship, SS Samlorian, a brand new Liberty vessel in Manchester in the middle of July 1944 and after wandering in convoys to and from the US to various ports in India, had been taken ill whilst in Madras. I was paid off and eventually travelled by train for three days across India to Bombay. Upon my arrival home in Manchester on the 19th December 1945, I had been away for a period of 17 months ! Quite a first trip !

The Samlorian after I left her, sailed around the world and eventually arrived back in the U.K, in March 1946, having been away for 20 months. On the 2nd January 1946 I joined one of Andrew Weir's vessels. SS Hazelbank in Salford Docks, Manchester. She was bound for New York and then onward to New Zealand. We sailed down the Manchester Ship Canal and during this time, we were involved with the collision of another vessel. Luckily no damage was sustained and late in the afternoon we tied up at Partington, a small place along the canal, to stay overnight before completing our transit of the canal.

A short walk across the fields from the ship, there conveniently stood a Pub ! As would be expected, immediately after the evening meal, quite a number of the crew headed for liquid refreshments. This being the last night on shore for perhaps two weeks or more, quite a number of the crew, over imbibed. The next morning, it was discovered that the 3rd Engineer was amiss ! When last seen, he apparently was not exactly in very good shape and in spite of several persons searching for him, he was not found. To this day I never discovered if he fell into the canal and drowned or just simply returned to his home !

We sailed onward to Liverpool and anchored off the Liver Building to await the arrival of a new 3rd Engineer. It now being Sunday, we were required to wait until the following day. In the meantime, watches had been set and I, a J.O.S. at that time, was together with two AB's the 12 to 4 watch. Being at anchor we just kept the watch upon deck, smoking, and getting to know each other. After some time, one of the other AB's a fellow named Michael Finn (Mickey Finn) came on deck and began talking to us all. What he was saying caused us to begin thinking that he was somewhat strange to say the least. He was telling us that the other AB with whom he was sharing a cabin, was waiting until he slept, and then intended to smash his head in with a hammer !

His story being, that the other fellow had discovered that Finn had been involved with an affair with his Wife. As Finn was telling us this story, he made an attempt to climb over the taff rail intending to jump into the river below, saying that he was not afraid to die ! This is in the first week in January and of course not exactly tropical !

The two AB's immediately grabbed Finn and managed to calm him down a little. They also decided to report the incident to the Skipper. When told about the attempt to jump. His comment was...Why did you stop him? However, nothing further was done about the incident. Later, after the evening meal, I was cleaning up the Sailors Mess and washing the dishes, being the youngest I was the "Peggy" and this was one of my duties. Just as I was about finished, Finn walked into the mess and asked me if I had a sheet of notepaper & an envelope. I went to the cabin which I shared with three other guys and found the items for

Finn. Thinking that he wanted to write a letter and perhaps hand it to the Pilot to take ashore when we sailed. I left him to it.

Perhaps 10 minutes later while we were sitting in the accommodation yarning about prior voyages, an ear piercing scream echoed through the air and also the sound of a large splash. Someone shouted, "He's done it!" and everyone rushed topside to the stern taffrail. Looking over the side of the ship one could see Finn splashing in the water, a lifebelt was thrown to him, however, he ignored it. By this time it was beginning to snow and one could just see the top of his head and hair floating in the water and then he disappeared completely. In the meantime, one of the Sailors had dashed to the Captains cabin to inform him of the occurrence and request that he lower a boat to search for Finn. The request was refused. A message was radioed ashore and later a Coast Guard vessel searched for some time, but failed to find any trace.

During the night watches, an eerie atmosphere became apparent. We were keeping an Anchor watch, this required one man from the watch to make periodic rounds on the foredeck and afterdeck. The only illumination being from the anchor light swinging from the forestay and as the ship rolled from the movement of the sea so also did the shadows causing mysterious and weird shapes, certainly not helped by the fresh memories so recently impressed into ones mind. To make matters worse, one of the West African Fireman who was on watch in the stokehold feeding the fires and dressed only in a pair of pyjama trousers, came screaming onto the deck with his pants ablaze. Shrieking that evil spirits had set fire to his trousers !

At breakfast after a great deal of discussion, the Deck Crew of 12 men decided that this ship was far from being a "lucky ship". First the collision, then the disappearance of the Engineer, the suicide of Finn, the refusal of the Skipper to even report his behaviour or launch a lifeboat and much mumbo-jumbo from the African Fireman.

A delegation made contact with the Skipper informing him that 19 of the crew were not prepared to continue with the voyage. He immediately radioed ashore requesting that a Shipping Master be sent to the vessel from the Shipping Office, plus a Representative from the Seaman's Union.

These officials were on board within the hour, also the arrival of a new 3rd Engineer, who, as he climbed aboard from a Jacobs Ladder, slipped, fell upon the Deck breaking the spectacles he was wearing and rendering him blind without them ! This of course doubly convinced everyone that this ship was certainly cursed

Upon the arrival of the Officials from ashore, also arrived a newspaper reporter who began taking copious notes of the remarks and statements being made. During this time it was stated that one could feel the presence of the dead man Finn which gave forth the headlines later in the newspapers "Ghost Walks Ships Deck, crew refuses to sail". After much discussion and threats to place us all into jail, we were informed that a tug would come alongside at 9am the following morning and take us ashore to be Payed Off at the Shipping Office.

This duly took place and upon signing off at the Shipping Office, we were each presented with a summons to appear immediately in Court. Standing in line before the Magistrate, we were each asked how did we plead. Each man pled Guilty! The Magistrate then suggested that we reconsider our plea, informing us that if found Guilty we could be sentenced to a One Hundred Pound Fine, or, three months imprisonment, or BOTH! He then once again asked

for our plea to which we all naturally pled, NOT GUILTY! He then bound us all over for a week to allow us to engage a Lawyer, which we duly did.

The following week we all appeared once more before him and were judged Guilty, however he decided to discharge us all as first time offenders. Needless to say, we each received a DR in our Discharge Book for Bad Conduct. Not exactly good for my second ship entry.

At this time, I was rated as a J.O.S., but having 18 months sea service I applied and was accepted into a course of three weeks instruction in Liverpool, and after passing an examination was issued with an Efficient Deckhand Certificate, which raised ones monthly wage to be equal with an Able Seaman.