

## "He Didn't Want to Leave"

No doubt about it: we all saw some very funny events at sea. Some that were definitely not intended to be funny occasions.

Back in the 1950's I spent most of the decade on OZ passenger ships running between Sydney and Fremantle. A surprising number of ships were involved in this Inter-State passenger service: vessels all around the 10.000 tons mark.

MV's Kanimbla, Manoora, Manunda, Duntroon and Westralia, ships' names which many old time OZ residents will recall. I was on 3 of them but this yarn is about the ' Westralia', which, when it became uneconomic as a passenger carrier was sold to Middle East owners. The ship became a sheep carrier carting tens of thousands of Merino's from OZ to the Persian Gulf area.

Hmmmm!

' Westralia' left Sydney with a full load of cargo & passo's, called in at Port Melbourne for cargo and at the stroke of midnight we choofed off to do something similar in Port Adelaide. Here we would all give our wine requirement orders to the reps of the Wine Co.'s who we saw every trip going West or East. You'd pick up your last ordered consignment and give the order for your next.

The system was very handy and much more economic than buying from retail shops. We all, always had vino in our lockers and all became wine connoisseurs, well sort of ! One thing for sure: we were "happy pissheads" sailing "The Bight"!!!

And there were always the intrepid, adventurous opposite gender members amongst the passo's who'd take up our invitation to come to the Messroom for a "gay & hearty" ! Music supplied by my skiffle group, a sextet of sex inclined muso's if I ever saw one ! So the vino played its part in the scheme of things...very nicely!

On this particular trip heading for Fremantle, "Freo" in the vernacular, we learnt there was to be a burial ceremony, or rather a "casting of the ashes" to take place to the West of Kangaroo Island. A notice went up on the boards around the ship. The deceased was an ex ship's company steward. He had been in the ship for years it seems but not whilst I was there so I hadn't known old Charlie.

His casket came aboard in Port Adelaide: quite where it resided for its short voyage, and its guardian, I knew not.

On the day of his "interment" all hands who were Off Duty, Mates, Engineers, Deck lads and Catering were gathered on the poop, all sorted in their respective order. One of the AB's stood by the jackstaff, haul in hand: another AB holding the casket -by his side. The Skipper close by the taffrail, stood erect - Bible in hand. At five minutes to noon everybody was in position, the lads in everyday gear, Mates & Engineers formally dressed in doe-skin uniform, the Winter clobber...the dark stuff !

The ship had been slowing for some time and at about five minutes to the hour the Skipper began the service. By the time he reached "And now we commit..." the ship had almost stopped and there was no wind at all. Not a skerrick of breeze ! Perfect ! At bang on noon the ships' whistle sounded and the Skipper having reached the "we commit" bit gave the nod to the AB's. Down came "the Duster" and the lad with the casket smartly and reverently like, took its top off and inverted it.

Down went the ashes. But, ...not very far, ... as from goodness where, a good strong breeze came up and blew 'em all aboard again. A cloud of what looked like flour (Self Raising perhaps) descended on every bastard gathered on the poop - the Mates and Engineers dancing around like marionettes dusting themselves off ! Or rather trying to !

Their doe skin jobs looked like tropical whites!

All kinds of exclamations resulted. Some called on "Jesus C" and there were a number of references to "excreta" and "coitus interruptus" !!! Hysterics broke out amongst the lads as they smartly scarpereed off the poop and down the 'companions'. Hoots of laughter rang out and one wag near me said, "Charlie - the old bastard... he just didn't want to leave, eh?"

Lads fell about, screeching with laughter! The serious nature of the event had been forgotten. It was a very funny occasion!

The Skipper, calling "Dismiss" a bit late, as the ranks had well & truly broken, stood a few feet from me with what looked like a mantle of snow on his shoulders. He'd made no attempt to dust himself down, realising I suppose the futility of such an exercise. He simply stood there, a smile creeping across his face, sort of enigmatic !

"I'll fix the uniform Cap'n" I said, "leave it as is. I'll vacuum it off ". I was his ' Tiger'.

We had a big piss-up that night celebrating Old Charlie's departure. Well, ... he hadn't really gone. He was all over the ship!!!

I'll bet Charlie was best pleased ! Laughing his imaginary bollocks off no doubt !

RIP Charlie !