



Londoner Floats on Whisky

In March 1970 I joined the Oregon Steamships Company Ship "Londoner" from the KG5 Pool.

She was a Tramp but I had accepted the job on the strength of the report that her first port would be Wellington in New Zealand. The lure of a trip to Kiwi was enough of an attraction.

The Londoner had already loaded her cargo before I joined, so it wasn't until we were sailing down the English Channel that I learned that the cargo consisted of 8,000 Tons of Johnny Walker Whisky, of both the Red and Black Label varieties! Thousands and thousands of cases of the stuff as well as hundreds of timber barrels to be bottled and branded in New Zealand, lay in our holds.

It was during the almost incessant discussion about our cargo that I also learned that almost every man aboard had accepted this ship in order to cover their last discharge, in most cases, at least one DR! I knew that this would be a trip that I would never forget! It wasn't very long into our trip before the first of the broached cargo made its appearance. It was served from tea-pots, water jugs and even coffee urns, and we imbibed at every meal and smoko! Captain Cook's theory about lime-juice didn't get a look in!

While we all managed to turn to for our watches, it was generally

agreed that there was nothing like a large tot on a cold night on watch. It didn't have to be a cold night either, the lookouts were seeing three of everything, and the trick on the wheel was always fraught with danger when the compass was so difficult to read! One day our Sparkie fell down a companionway, breaking both a leg, and his arm which prevented him from sending morse. Had we encountered trouble, say with an on-board fire or whatever, we would certainly have been in serious pooh pooh, as now not only did we have an almost permanently pissed crew, but the Company wasn't getting any daily position reports, and had no idea where we were!

It was fun at the time, but looking back with a wiser head on my shoulders, I wonder how we managed? We were all talking brail, and on many occasions the "hand over" instructions during watch change overs were unintelligible! Mind you, most of the crew were Geordies so that was small wonder! How we ever managed to negotiate the Panama Canal defies imagination, and the three week voyage from Panama to Wellington was but a blur to most of the crew. Lookouts would ring the bell with sightings of anything at all, ranging from herds of elephants to land masses that weren't shown on any chart!

We all knew that we would have to do something about hiding the grog from Customs who would be

boarding as soon as we arrived in Wellington. The Punkah Louvre system was loaded with whisky, the mess-room tables unscrewed from the deck and bottles stowed in the pipes.

With the return of cooler weather of course, hot air was piped through the Punkah Louvre system, and whisky poured out of the blowers when the bottles exploded from the heat! Every time the ship rolled we could hear the clink, as bottles rolled around in the pipes. On our arrival in Wellington the Customs Officers searched the ship, and after finding a few bottles, they called in the Police who even sent scuba divers down to check out the hull in case we had our stash tied in a net or something! Luckily we hadn't thought of that!



The ships lifeboats were searched, but the major stash remained unfound. Our runs ashore became legend and only the very best whisky was consumed. We paid for taxis with bottles of whisky, and it was rumoured, by other ships crews, that we were being

paid some sort of exciting new agreement! Our next cargo was tobacco for the Philipines, as well as many other ports. Many of the crew jumped ship, but I remained with her until, after eight months, we paid off. I took a Shell Tanker as my next ship to "Dry Out" and resolved never again to willingly take on a job on a ship carrying whisky! I never heard of the old "Londoner" again, nor met any of her crew.

- Glenn Baker (Vindi '62)