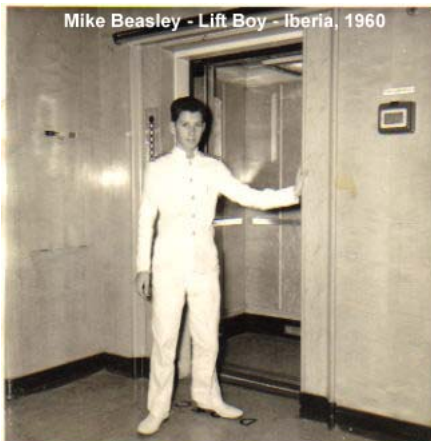


TWO INSTANT CHRISTIANS

During my time as a Bell Boy on the P and O ship 'Iberia' we sailed on many cruises to the Mediterranean. Like many of the company's ships of that time, home comforts for the crew were an absolute bare minimum with up to 12 berth cabins for the bell boys being the 'norm'. Looking back on those times it's hard to realise that our accommodations were so primitive, they would in no way be tolerated today.

The Spanish port of Barcelona was often on the ship's itinerary and of course I had already been there so often. I had a 'take it or leave it' attitude towards Barcelona as a Port, and felt Indifferent towards it because of my familiarity with the place. There was however, one visit I'll never forget, and if it hadn't been for a bit of luck my life could have changed considerably!



Most of the 'Iberia's' stops there were for a period of about 18 hours. On arrival, myself and another soccer-loving Londoner discovered that Barcelona Football Club was playing Real Madrid that very evening, it would be a big, big game. We learned that tickets were still available and so we planned to go to the game. Kick off was to be at 20.00 hrs which meant that the game should finish at 22.00 hrs, leaving us two hours to get back to the ship from the Stadium, which was situated on the other side of town. The 'Iberia' was scheduled to sail at midnight, so theoretically we would not have a problem getting back aboard with time to spare. Sorted... Well not quite, because, as we know, even the best laid plans go 'tits up' sometimes and ours certainly did that evening in that Spanish city.

I can't honestly say I remember very much about the game itself, but I can recall the absolutely 'electric' atmosphere of a game between two of the biggest teams in the Spanish league, generated by about 75,000 fanatical supporters. Unfortunately for us, we had not taken into account that these same 75,000 fans, like us, needed to get home after the final whistle, and as anyone who goes to a big sporting occasion will tell you, it's a lot easier going there than getting out again!

We had 2 hours to make the 1 hour journey back to the ship, no problem. Not quite true, because getting a taxi was a big problem and the clock was ticking against us. Sudden conversion to Christianity payed off and our prayers were answered: we got a cab. "Iberia" we told the non-English speaking cabby who looked a bit puzzled! "Iberia" we told him again, this time gesturing an up-and-down motion like a ship in a force 7! "Ah" said the driver "Si, si, Iberia, comprendo".

We set off through the heavy traffic towards our vessel with a feeling of relief that we would be back on board with half an hour to spare. Well, here's the 'tits up bit' about this sad little missive. The first thing that made us realise that all was not well was the fact there were some very low flying aircraft passing over our cab and signs to Barcelona Airport!

Of course, "Iberia" is the Spanish National Airline and this taxi driver was taking us to the airport, the opposite direction to the docks. This was the time in my life that I very nearly found out that the colour of adrenalin was brown, and a real panic started to get a hold of both of us.

The 2 hours we had put by to get back to the ship were now reduced to just under one, and we had to get back across that busy city to the 'real' Iberia. Prayers were offered up to the Almighty and were once again answered in the form of a traffic cop who spoke perfect English. Thanks to him he was able to tell the taxi driver what was going on (and maybe why his cab had started to smell so bad!).

The situation we were in was not good at all. Two sixteen-year-old boys many miles away from home with very little money and no passports and most likely, no jobs either. We were both very afraid.... Well, credit to the cabbie who drove hell for leather back to the docks and we got to the ship just 5 minutes before she sailed, in fact the last jetty was literally just about to be pulled back from the ship's side. I never believed for a single moment I would be so glad to see that ancient old ship!

When I look back on moments in my life when I've been worried about something, I think about that summer evening in Barcelona all those years ago when, as a little kid really, all I had was a prayer, but in the end that's all I needed.