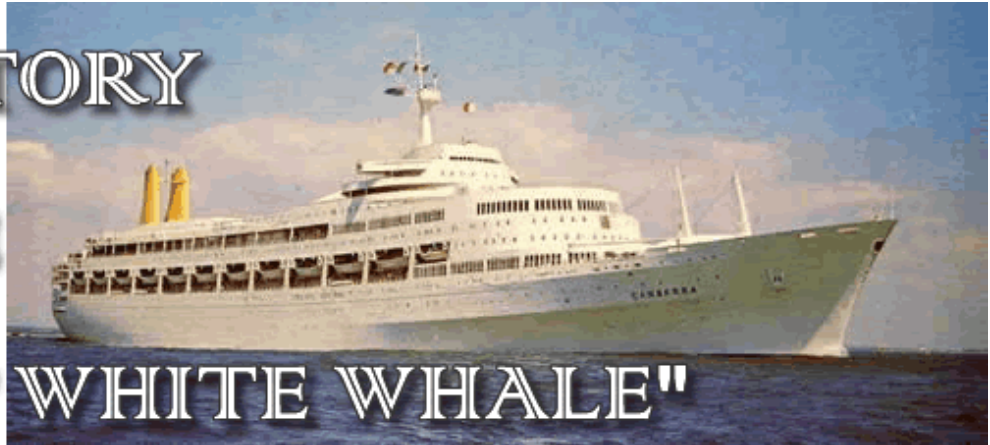


PURGATORY ON THE "GREAT WHITE WHALE"



- Mike Beasley

Approaching my 64th year and retired for the last 12, this has given me plenty of time to look back on a lifetime spent travelling with P & O as a steward and British Airways as a cabin crew member.

A few other casual type jobs in between these two featured for a short while, but a life on the ocean waves and flying through the wide blue yonder were the main features by far.

Obviously both of these jobs brought me into contact with the general public and very many times I saw the good, the bad and the very ugly side of the afore mentioned. I've often wondered what rated as the hardest and most stressful job I've ever done.

With British Airways I flew on their short haul sectors apart from a 4 year spell on Concorde. Believe me, when that aircraft had it's full compliment of 100 passengers it stretched all the cabin crew to the absolute 'max'. As a Cabin Service Director the pressure was even greater because you were there to pick up the pieces when things went pear shaped - and they very often did.

Hand baggage, and not being able to give the punter - who had paid maybe £3500 for a one way ticket to New York - what he wanted to eat, were the main problems. And combine this with an almighty race against the clock to complete the cabin service before arrival at New York's JFK airport!

Most short haul flights, when full, featured this manic race, plus an attempt to get everything stowed before landing. However, it was soon over and done and you could go home to chill out and get ready for the next day.

The bad times could not have been that bad because I did 25 years in a very fast lane with no real mental scars at all, so when I recall sheer bloody graft that seemed to last forever, working as a 'winger' (steward) in the tourist restaurant of the P&Os 'Canberra' comes to mind in a flash!

Nothing I've ever done comes close to doing the 6 week round trip to Sydney with 1,500 '£10 Poms' to feed. These were people who had decided that a better life could be found living in Australia and most of the money for their passage was provided by the Australian Government - those emigrants contributed just ten quid!

I'll never forget the time I spent on working in the Canberra's restaurant with 750 people at each sitting for breakfast, lunch, afternoon teas and dinner. Each sitting was timed for one hour and it was absolutely essential that you got the first lot fed and watered and had your table of 8 (bloods) cleared and set up for the second sitting one very short hour later. There was no pressure with the second sitting because the wolves were not at the door so to speak, but the first.....

The chariot race in the movie Ben Hur comes to mind when I look back and see a vision of all those 'wingers' rushing around like maniacs to get the first lot fed - and out and one little hiccup could send all the apples flying

out of the cart. For instance, the galley/restaurant was served on either side by 2 sets of electric revolving doors, one for in and one for out. Sounds simple doesn't it, but the number of times some poor sod would let his tray slip while doing the sidestep in those doors caused near panic among the 'wingers'.

That dropped tray could have had a combination of just about everything on it, from ice cream to soup, carrots to cauliflower, broken plates and chop covers, etc and the whole horrible mess would go around and around with the doors like a giant food mixer until they were switched off and the mess cleared up.

This never happened to me I'm very pleased to say - but how the poor sods who copped this misfortune recovered, I really can't remember, but it must have been bloody murder. Of course, everyone who could would assist the guy who had to try and catch up when the dreaded phrase 'I'm up the wall' was heard.

Rough weather presented another challenge for us and a 57,000 ton ship in a force 10 blow could do all sorts of strange things and carrying a plastic tray with eight meals on it could be a real test. One time while crossing the Great Australian Bight the wind reached near hurricane force and the Canberra was head on into this maelstrom for 5 (?) days between Perth, Melbourne and finally Sydney.

How many degrees she pitched up and down I don't know, but I remember very well the unnerving feeling of one minute struggling uphill with my 8 meals as the ship pitched up, and the next trying not to run downhill as the back of the ship pitched down. Never really having found my sea legs completely I hated any sort of rough weather with any substance, and so did the passengers. The many empty places at the restaurant's dining tables bore testament that the passengers who normally sat there were doing something else - and it certainly was not eating!

For some forgotten misdemeanor the head waiter had given me, and my good friend John Hughes, tables right at the top of the restaurant with the longest distance to walk to the galley. Another cross to bear, and we must have been so fit to have handled it - I mean, the nearest tables to the galley were about 10 yards whereas the furthest, ours, about 100. Go figure....

It seems funny with hindsight, but the reality was a lot different, and those 21 days to Sydney and the 21 days it took to get back to Blighty took its toll. Every spare minute we had we seemed to spend crashed out in our bunks knowing that in a short time the whole cycle would start over again - and could those emigrants eat! You could see those people putting on weight more or less on a daily basis because most likely a vast majority of them had never ever imagined so much food, and it was all there on tap for them to gorge themselves as much as they wanted to, and they did!

Both out and inbound also took it's toll with the enormous time changes. If you believe that the 1 hour change we get here in the UK twice a year can bugger up your system try plus 12 hours over 3 weeks when you're working like a slave and see how that feels, and minus another 12 on the return trip to Blighty! Absolutely knackered.....

The almost complete lack of any promotion prospects made me want to look elsewhere after a couple of years of this purgatory and all that graft and misery paid off when I saw an advert in The Daily Express by British European Airways (BEA) looking for people to apply for jobs as cabin crew with them. Well, a 10 bob bet with a work colleague paid off when I wrote to them, got an interview and a job which for most parts I loved, meeting many of the world's rich and famous folk and making some truly awesome friends along the way.

Strangely I look back on my time on The Canberra with, for most parts, a lot of affection. After sailing on heaps like The Iberia, Chusan and Himalaya it was luxury as far as the crew were concerned, with the best bit the 2 berth cabins as opposed to 16+ on the other ships that I sailed on.

Regrets? One big one! How I wished I had treated myself and my wife to a cabin on The Great White Whale's final voyage in the late '90s. I'd most likely have been overcome with all those memories and seeing the ghosts of all those people who dreamed of a better life 12,000 miles away from these shores over 40 years ago and found out just how much food they could eat on the way!