

AN UNEASY FEELING

The Story of a Brief Coastal Trip - by Brian Chaplin

At the end of February, 1959, I had just paid off the MV Valdes and was hoping for a ship that was trading elsewhere than the Mediterranean where my two previous ships had traded.

It wasn't my lucky day! I was sent to join a coaster, the MV Ocean Coast. The day was chilly and dismal with dark rain clouds threatening to unleash at any moment. I arrived at the dockside and took a look at the ship, her black hull was streaked with rust, the superstructure was white at one time,

and was even rustier. I got that sort of feeling you get when you think things can't get any worse. I had a very uneasy feeling about this ship.

I reluctantly boarded her and was greeted by the Chief Steward who looked like he had been in the fuel bunkers. "Quick as you can" said the Chief, "when you've stowed your gear come and help me and the cook in the freezer." I joined them and helped them to throw out all of the meat carcasses which were going rotten. The refrigeration pumps had broken down on the way down from Liverpool. The Chief Engineer had been unable to fix them as new parts were needed. We emptied out the "fridge" and the smell was almost unbearable. It must have been "on the blink" well before Liverpool. We hosed out the freezer and then the cool room and were then joined by the new galley boy who helped us off load the rotting meat and quite a lot of vegetables and fruit into the waste bin on the dock.

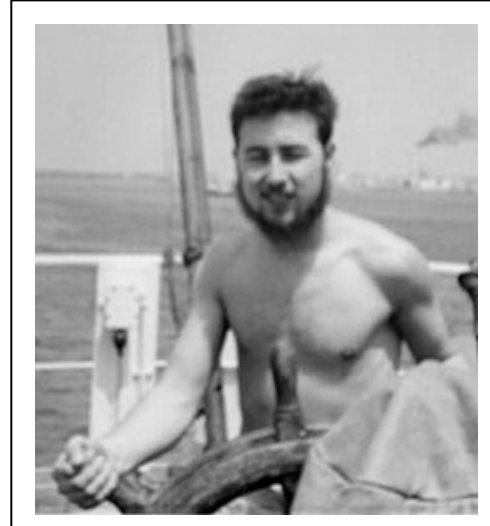
I got a half hour break to go and buy some sort of jacket or coat as I hadn't contemplated being on a coaster in winter and didn't have one in my kit bag. I can't remember exactly where we were, either Shadwell or Wapping, and I found a disposal store and bought a "duffle" coat. Not a suitably coloured navy one, not one in my size, but a sandy coloured one with a tartan lining. It got me a few choice remarks when I got back.

A refrigeration engineer came on board and managed to get things working to about 85% capacity. In the meantime, we discovered that the sewerage system wasn't working so well either, the crew toilet had a stench that would kill a brown dog. The Chief Steward remarked "It's like all the crews for the last twelve months had diseased kidneys". It took a lot of work to get things bearable - a lot of bleach, carbolic and a huge amount of caustic soda, courtesy of the Bosun. At least we could go to the "heads" without a gas mask.

The weather didn't get any better and to our dismay the galley boy and I discovered that our cabins were in a filthy state. We cleaned them up as best we could, an improvement but still decidedly grotty. We went to see the procurer of all things, the Bosun and he found us some white paint and a couple of paint brushes, so we set to painting as much as we could. The paint was oil based and probably contained lead - we were almost overcome by the fumes before the job was done. With the low temperature it was going to be a long time until it dried. That night was terrible - the paint fumes keeping us awake and feeling sick, it was a pleasure to turn to in the morning. The Chief Steward, a genuine good bloke, whose cabin was one up from mine, was also affected by the fumes but told us we were doing a good job and not to worry about it as it would, in time, dry.

We docked in Cork, I went ashore just to get off the ship if only for an hour. It was drizzling rain and almost as depressing as the ship. We sailed the next day for Liverpool.

The paint fumes were starting to diminish, the "heads" were losing their capacity to kill anything down-wind and the "deckies", most of them "Scouses" were already packing their gear so as to be off as soon as they were paid. I don't know why because Liverpool in winter looked just as miserable as anywhere else but home is home I guess. The galley boy and I had already made up our minds, soon as the ship docked in London we were off too, straight round to the "pool" to get a ship heading anywhere as long as it was warm.





A few days later we were due to dock in London sometime in the early hours of the morning. The night we were going to dock arrived, the light faded before we entered the Thames Estuary and we turned in that night thinking in less than forty eight hours we would leave this nightmare and forget about it for all time. How wrong we were!

At approximately 0230 hours there was a tremendous noise like a muffled explosion followed by a loud screeching, scraping noise. At first I thought the "old man" had misjudged it and hit the dockside at quite a rate of knots, but then I could hear shouting and people running around. I got out of my bunk and pulled on a pair of jeans, at the same time the galley boy had opened my cabin door and said "What the xxxx happened?" We stood there for a few moments listening and then we heard a muffled voice coming from the Chief's cabin. We opened his cabin door and saw him trapped by a large piece of timber jammed diagonally across his bunk. There was water pouring out of a ruptured pipe and steam hissing out of a large pipe running across the deckhead. We helped the Chief out of the tangled mess and saw that the bulkhead behind the head of his bunk had been pushed in. He got semi dressed and told us to stay exactly where we were and he went forward.

When he returned he told us that we had been rammed but all the damage was above the waterline so there was no need to worry, we were not in any danger of sinking and to go to the galley and start making tea for the crew and the cook would join us to organise a very early breakfast. Later that morning, at dawn we could see there was considerable damage to the cabin one up from the Chief Steward's, which was the 3rd Engineer's cabin. The 3rd Engineer had only just come off watch and had just turned in. A steel plate pushed in by the bow of the other ship (MV Beechmore) had acted like a giant tin snip and cut him in half! He was a young Liverpoolian and had only been married for three months.

Convinced more than ever that the ship was "jinxed" I couldn't wait for the agent to come aboard with the pay so we could go. No such luck, there would have to be an enquiry. A television crew turned up fronted by Raymond Glendenning of the BBC and they watched as we did our best to act professionally. As I carried the blood-stained mattress to the fo'csle, the camera crew followed. It was extremely unnerving. Eventually they packed up and left and we were able to relax a bit. A couple of days later we were given the all clear and we took her into dry dock. I told the Chief I had to get off, and he said he understood how I felt but would I stay until my replacement arrived. I agreed, because as I said before he was a good bloke. He also said he was a company man but when the ship returned to Liverpool he would ask for a different ship.

My only piece of good luck apart from not being the cabin that took the impact was that my replacement arrived less than two hours later. I had three days at home and then got my next ship, the SS Hendi, bound for North Africa. At last something to smile about.

THEN! HOW ABOUT THIS!?!? When the MV Ocean Coast was repaired and put to sea again, the skipper, Captain Clark, suffered a heart attack and died!

