

# FIRST TRIPPER

A series of short stories about his life at sea  
by Tommy Mitchell

I was eighteen years old and serving an apprenticeship as a locomotive fitter with British Rail at their St. Rollox works in Springburn, Glasgow. I remember it was some time in June or July 1950 when I received a letter, telling me that I was due to register for National Service. This was a compulsory requirement introduced at the end of World War II that all young men should serve two years in the armed forces on attaining the age of eighteen years. However, because I was serving a recognised apprenticeship, my registration would be delayed until that was completed. I had always known therefore that as soon as I reached the age of 21 my apprenticeship would be completed and that I would be called up. I think it was some time in October 1952 that I got a further letter to confirm that they hadn't forgotten me. I was now almost 20½ years old and was definitely not looking forward to serving 2 years in the army in just six months time. I had heard from a couple of my friends who had already done their National Service, that although the experience could be quite interesting and educational, the initial training was something less than pleasant. Another thing that put me off was the fact that the pay was only £1 and 7 shillings a week (that's £1.35 today) of which 7 shillings minimum had to be compulsory allotted home. As a last year apprentice I was already being paid almost £3 a week so that would have meant a considerable drop.

I accept that doing National Service was the making of many a man and that it offered opportunities for some lads to learn skills that they might otherwise not get a chance to do. I am not of course referring to skill in the use of firearms. I don't therefore decry National Service completely, but I reasoned that this was not for me! The war had been over for the past seven years and although there was now further conflict in Korea, I assumed it was unlikely that national servicemen would become involved. I was of course very wrong! Many young servicemen were involved. Don't misunderstand me! I would of course have gone if my services really were needed.

Doing ones National Service meant serving in either the Army or the Air Force. The Royal Navy was not an option! The minimum period for that branch of the services was seven years, but the pay was little better. I had a friend who had been in a similar position to me and he suggested that because of my engineering background, I might be able to join the Merchant Navy. If I could, I would not be required to do any National Service and I would be better paid.

I had always been interested in ships and the sea so this sounded like a good option. The only snag was the fact that, if I left the Merchant Navy during the next 10 years, I could still be called up. At my age I wasn't giving much thought to the next ten years though it did sound like a very long time. I decided to try anyway and after some enquiries found that by going to sea I could possibly earn £5 or £6 a week. I also discovered that I was eligible to go immediately as I had already served more than four years in engineering, four years being the minimum requirement for acceptance as an engineer in the Merchant Navy. I would be able therefore to finish my apprenticeship at sea. My mind was made up and I decided to register with the Merchant Navy Offices in Glasgow's Broomielaw (better known to merchant seamen as, the 'Pool') as soon as I could. I managed to get a position with a company called Bank Line. This company was owned by Andrew Weir who had offices in Hope Street in Glasgow. In fact I signed on at £27 per month and was now awaiting word to join my first ship. This came in late November 1952 in the form of a telegram, telling me to report to the Glasgow offices. There, I was given travel vouchers and told to report to a ship called MV 'Eskbank' in North Shields. I was not yet 21 years old.

I arrived early in the afternoon in North Shields and made my way by taxi to the docks. A taxi, to me was something only ever used for very special occasions, like weddings, funerals or other. I must say that I felt that this was a very special occasion! Anyway I wasn't paying for it; the company had already made these arrangements, as they had done with my train ticket. The ship was actually in dry-dock and as I made my way across the gangway I looked down into the dock at the workmen far below and thought, 'I'm going to sea and the ship's not even in the water.'

I stepped aboard apprehensively and couldn't help noticing that there wasn't much in the way of noisy activity. A few hammer strokes, rattling and perhaps raised voices now and again. It seemed like a dead ship and I suppose in actual fact it was. Obviously any electrical power to the ship was being supplied from the docks. I stood for a few moments not sure what or where I should go. I noticed a couple of men standing on deck talking so I made my way towards them. One of them was wearing a white boiler suit and before I could speak he addressed me saying,

"Are you the new junior engineer?"

"Yes" I answered and nervously thought 'should I say aye - aye sir or something?' He stared at me for a few moments and then said,

"Are you a first tripper"?

I thought! 'Oh my god, I am supposed to say sir' I said yes again and quickly added, "I'm sorry sir I don't know how to address you".

He smiled and said,

"That's okay lad, you just call me Chief!"

Before I could say anything he added.

"Have you brought a boiler suit with you?"

I said yes and wondered if mine would do because it was the standard navy blue and not white. I also felt a little bit dismayed that I was to be put to work almost before I'd got my breath. If he was my boss, then I was obviously in for a hard time. He directed me to my



cabin, told me to leave my gear and report back to him. I hurriedly dumped my gear and duly got back (in my boiler suit of course).

From his top pocket, he took out a fairly large notebook and pencil. Handing them to me, he said, "Report to the 2nd. Engineer in the engine room and tell him that you are to sketch a diagram of the pipework from the 'Bilge' and 'Ballast' pumps to the overboard outlets". It all sounded a bit technical to me, but I had to remember what he had told me.

#### **MV 'ESKBANK' 5137 Gross Tons (1<sup>st</sup> voyage) 1<sup>st</sup> Dec.1952 until 10<sup>th</sup> Jul.1953**

Finding the door off the alleyway into the engine room was fairly easy; it was the only heavy steel one there. As soon as I stepped into the engineroom I marvelled at the huge main engine, which stood as high as a three-storey house and seemed to take up almost all of the space. As I progressed down into the bowels of the ship, I passed various other strange looking bits of machinery. Machinery and equipment I would later become very familiar with, down to the last nut and bolt. Bridge control systems were practically unheard of when I was at sea, so all of the engine's movements had to be controlled from the engine room control platform or manoeuvring platform. When I reached the bottom of the engine room, I saw three men in white boiler suits working inside the crankcase of the main engine. Now! I really felt conspicuous! I had now seen four engineers in white boiler suits and here was I dressed in a navy blue one like any ordinary fitter. Not that there is anything wrong in being an ordinary fitter I hasten to add, but I felt that I wouldn't be a real marine engineer until I looked like one. I vowed that I would buy myself a white one at the first opportunity. I approached the three men and after a few moments asked for the 2nd engineer. One chap stepped out and extended his hand to me,

"That's me", he said.

I told him that I was the new junior engineer; that I had met the chief on deck and what he had said to me. He seemed not at all interested but instead asked me my name. Having told him, he said

"We can't be calling you junior all the time, so from now on you will either be Tommy or 'Five'o.

That was fine by me, because I didn't fancy being called junior and feeling that I was the baby of the ship. 'Five'o' sounded more like I was a member of a team.

He then introduced me to the other two men, who were the 3rd and 4th engineers ('Three'o and 'Four'o if you like).

"Don't worry about the chief just now" he said "It's time for 'Smoko', come with us".

The term 'Smoko' simply means 'time for a break' and obviously 'time for a smoke'. I wasn't so sure that we should just disregard the Chief's instructions after all he was the boss. I said as much to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and he explained to me that so far as the engine room is concerned, the second engineer is the boss. It made me feel a bit easier because this guy sounded a bit friendlier. We sat in the 3rd engineer's cabin, had a can of beer and a smoke for about fifteen minutes or so then returned to work. I was shown where the pumps were and left to get on with my diagram. Following the pipelines included crawling through a maze of pipes of all sizes above and below the floor plates. It must have been well after 5 p.m. when I reported back to the chief and proudly handed him my sketched diagrams. He barely glanced over it and said,

"Can you remember where all of the valves are?"

I told him that I thought I could remember most of them. He took a long look at me. "You won't need this any more then", he said.

He then proceeded to rip the pages from the book and tear them up. You can understand that I was not at all pleased, after all the work I had put in to it. In fact I was downright angry. He stood there looking at me as though waiting for some kind of reaction from me, but I just held my tongue, afraid to say anything.

"Aye you'll learn lad," he said while walking away.

On reflection now, I think the whole episode turned out to be quite a good thing. In the process of tracing these pipes and valves, I obviously came across others just as important and I would learn more about them later. It didn't make me like the Chief any better, though I sometimes wondered if that was the real meaning of his remark "Aye you'll learn lad".

That evening after a late tea, the 3rd engineer knocked on my cabin door and told me that normally this night would have been my duty night aboard, but since I was new and inexperienced, the 2<sup>nd</sup> had agreed to give me the night off. He also told me that he and the 4<sup>th</sup> were going ashore and would I like to join them. Of course I would like to, but explained that I had come down from Glasgow with very little money and couldn't really afford it. He told me not to worry about it and explained that since there was no way of knowing how long our voyage would last, it was important that we learned to get on together as shipmates.

Therefore they would sub me tonight and I could do likewise for them, if the need arose. It sounded good to me so I got cleaned up and went along to the 4<sup>th</sup>'s cabin. Over a few drinks they gave me a few golden rules to remember as a first tripper.

For example: - Have a few drinks before going ashore, it's cheaper, but don't drink too much or you won't last the night.

Fill a small bottle with spirits, to keep you going and to help influence friends if need be (especially girls).

If you smoke, always make sure you have plenty with you (another good influencing tool apparently).

Always try to keep enough money aside for a taxi back to the ship.

If you do go with a girl, make sure you don't get more than you bargain for.

Of course there were other simple rules, like not getting into fights and not getting conned etc. All of these rules are pretty basic and of course, not really in order of any importance, but probably thousands of other seamen have lived by them throughout their sea going careers.

Anyway, after a few pegs and a few more cans of beer, we went ashore.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> was a 'Geordie', almost a local in fact and knew his way about. About an hour or so later we ended up in a kind of club. By this time I think it was becoming obvious that I was beginning to feel the effects of the drink. When at home my limit would normally be 2 or at a push, 3 pints of beer, mainly because that was all I could usually afford. I don't think I had ever drunk more than 3 pints. I must have already drunk that much and a couple of pegs (a peg being a generous measure of spirits) before going ashore. On the face of it, I thought I was holding up pretty well. I found out later though that they'd been feeding me beer shandies shortly after we had gone ashore, so that I wouldn't pass out on them. I must say that I never even noticed. I do know that they were pretty well on themselves from drinking the stuff they had taken with them and from the bottle I had taken. Well why not; it was they who gave it to me. We got back to the ship some time in the early hours and I remember that I was quite drunk but very happy; what's more, I didn't have to explain myself to anyone.

This was to be my home now for I didn't know how long.

Next morning the cabin steward awakened me with a cup of hot but very sweet and milky tea. It was so sweet that I was unable to drink it; there must have been at least a half dozen spoonfuls of sugar in it. I found out later that the 'Lascar' crews always make their tea like that. Apparently their palate is so used to the hot curries that they find it difficult to taste anything sweet, so they tend to put a lot of sugar in their tea and I guess they think everyone else is the same. The Bank Line was one of the many shipping companies that employed Lascars as ordinary crewmen. They came mostly, but not always, from the West coastal areas of India, such as Goa, Pakistan and of course India. I remember that they were predominately Moslem and every time they prayed they had to ask one of the deck officers the direction in which Mecca lay.

After breakfast I was taken down into dry-dock by the 3rd engineer, none the worse after his night ashore, though I still had a bit of a 'hangover'. I don't think it is all that relevant, or important, to relate everything that happened on this day. I would however like to give an idea of how I felt going under the keel of a ship for the first time, as it is something that most ordinary people are unlikely to experience. It was quite an awesome sight and a little frightening. I was very apprehensive as I looked up at this huge hull above me; (well it looked huge to me). I knew it wouldn't fall over on me but I couldn't help feeling very small and vulnerable. What I really noticed was how flat the bottom was, yet the whole ship seemed to be just resting on a long row of blocks under the keel. However, as everyone knows the ship is also supported by long props from the dockside on to the hull on both sides. We made our way along to the propeller, which looked gigantic and was probably, over 12 feet or so in diameter. It was explained to me that if I had some understanding of the outside, normally under water, the better I would understand the workings of the inside. I'm afraid his explanation was lost on me at the time, but much later in my career I remembered being shown the difference in distance between the 'High' and 'Low' sea suction inlets. It never occurred to me at the time to ask why the ship was in dry-dock in the first place. Later I was told that she was just in for a routine check and to have her bottom scraped. This being a term used to describe the removal of barnacles' etc from the ship's hull. Apparently removal of these things helps the ships speed and subsequently reduces the fuel consumption. Later that morning I was able to watch the dock slowly fill with water and the ship gradually become afloat. Soon I would be going to sea. The moment was very exciting and I wondered what countries I would visit? Will I settle in and enjoy the life? Will I be a good sailor? Or will I get seasick? All this was going through my mind and the ship wasn't fully afloat yet. When the dock was full and the gates opened, the tugs took over and towed us out into the river. That was about as much as I remember, before I was called to the engine-room to log the engine movements. Now, I know that most of today's modern ships have the engine movements recorded electronically, but in my day, this had to be written down in a little note book called the 'Movement Book'. While the ship is on (standby), the bridge and engine-room clocks are synchronised, as the bridge also has to log their telegraph orders. In other words the time of the telegraph order and engine movement is recorded. This is a necessary requirement for the (Board of Trade) in the event of an inquiry. All movements of the engine were carried out from the manoeuvring platform through a series of levers and rods. Not like today's modern ships, where most of the machinery is controlled almost entirely from the bridge electronically.

Each time the engine was started it gave a loud bang as it burst into life, before settling down to a steady thump, thump depending on the speed required. This took a bit of getting accustomed to and at first I had no real sensation of moving until we had cleared the river mouth and dropped off the pilot. The telegraph order was for 'Full speed ahead' and as we headed out to sea I could feel the surge of the ship under my feet and a very slight swaying. Later, I would learn to call this pitching and rolling. After we were given the order for 'Full Away' I could relax a bit although there was still much to do for the other engineers. Now I was beginning to enjoy the movement of the ship and I knew that I would settle in and was going to enjoy this life at sea.

### **Antwerp:- Belgium**

Of course, I can't remember everything that I've said or done since that first day at sea, but I can relate some things from memory on the various incidents that have made up my sea going days.

Antwerp was the first foreign port that I visited so it is little wonder that it comes easily to mind. It was only about 7 years after the end of World War II and much of the city was being transformed, or perhaps I should say rebuilt. I managed to get ashore with a couple of my ship mates. Just a matter of course for them I suppose, but I had never been abroad in my life (unless you count Ireland) so now I could say that I had been to Antwerp. I had no idea what other ports I would visit so I didn't want to miss out on anything at any time, if at all possible. We only got as far as a couple of bars close to the docks. I had been told that if there was anything going on anywhere, it would usually be in the dock area. I mean by that of course, that this was where the fun was likely to be. I was immediately struck by the number of women in these bars, because at home, or at least most pubs in the UK, this is something I had very seldom seen. A few good lounges perhaps! but never in a bar. I realise now of course that the dockside bars in Glasgow and most other British ports would have been very similar to these, I wouldn't know about them, because I had been used only to having just a couple of pints in my local pub.

Most of these women looked to be aged between 30 and perhaps 40. They made no secret of the fact that they were available, at a price of course, what most men would know as (On the game). They would take whatever they could get, drink, cigarettes but mainly money. I have never paid much attention to the social life or the politics of the countries that I visited. I am therefore not qualified to pass judgement on the morals of these women. You could after all say that they are providing a service to many homesick sailors. Shall we call it, Therapeutic Recreation? I am always made aware (through conversation of course), that these women usually become prostitutes, because some event in their life forced them into it. Now, I do not doubt that this is invariably true. However I have yet to meet a girl (woman) whatever, who will admit to plying the trade of what is commonly called the oldest profession in the world just because it is a commodity always in demand and usually pays well. Not always a very safe profession I presume, but one that they can generally keep in control. This time, I was told that the main reason for them making themselves available, was that they have young children to bring up, conceived as a result of consorting with (or being raped by) German soldiers during the war. I don't doubt that these stories are on the whole true, but I wouldn't mind betting that a good number of allied soldiers were just as responsible. Well, the saying goes something like "All is fair in love and war". I found myself listening intently to these stories and could easily have sympathised with them. This was a side of life that I had never encountered before. Most of them to me were old women, or looked old and although I was just as interested as my mates in attracting a girl, my preference would have been someone a bit younger and definitely prettier. As usual my mates were looking after me and making sure that I didn't get into trouble. Although I had a couple of girl friends at home, I was still a bit naive about these worldly goings on, though I was certainly keen to learn (not like today when they know everything by the time they are thirteen).

I was standing at the bar chatting to a young barmaid who looked to be in her late twenties, not particularly good looking, but pretty, certainly a lot better looking than the others and definitely the youngest. It wasn't long before one of my friends joined me and taking me aside, warned me to drink only bottled beer as they were doing. He told me that he thought he saw one of the girls put something into another customer's drink and he felt sure that she was slipping him a Mickey. He also suspected that the barmaid was probably getting a cut from whatever money or goods that the other women got from the men. This girl could speak and understand English perfectly and knew what we were talking about. She was quick to tell me that she hadn't touched my drink; nevertheless I didn't drink what she had just given me. She started to cry as she pleaded her innocence. She insisted that she was not aware of what the other girls did and asked me not to say anything to them as they might start trouble or at worst get into trouble with their proposed clients. What the hell! I was always a sucker for the waterworks and anyway it was no skin off my nose. I suppose she was typical of the barmaids in Europe at that time. This was another lesson I had learned from my friends. When drinking beer abroad, or anywhere else for that matter, you should always drink from the bottle and have it opened in front of you. Nowadays, this is recognised as the 'Macho' thing to do and is done almost everywhere. I wonder how many of them know that it all started a long time ago, probably when beer was first bottled and that was a very long time ago. I can't really remember where our next port of call was. However, I will just continue to relate events as they occur to me. Sometimes it might seem like 'Sixes and Sevens' with no real chronological order to it but hopefully some sense will come out of it.

When reading these recollections, one can be forgiven for thinking that life at sea was just one big holiday. Believe me it was far from it. You had to work hard aboard ship whether you

were an engineer or a deck officer or for that matter an ordinary hand. I mean no disrespect by calling the hands 'ordinary', many of them were far from it and I am sure could tell a few tales of their own. Let me try to give a sort of picture of an engineer officer's daily duties. This particular ship, 'Eskbank' carried 5 engineers including the chief. Only the 2nd, 3rd and 4th kept a watch at sea. I, being the 5th and junior engineer was always on day work, except when arriving or departing a port, when, along with the others, except the chief, I would assist on the control platform, logging the movement book mentioned earlier. As a day worker I spent a lot of my time on deck. No! Not lying sunning myself but maintaining the steam winches, windlass, pumps and valves etc.

The watches at sea are divided up as 4 hours on and 8 hours off. Over the 24 hours then they are split up as 12 till 4, then 4 till 8 and 8 till 12. The chief of course has over all responsibility for the engineers and all of the machinery in general but never keeps a watch, at least never on any ship that I sailed on. The 2<sup>nd</sup> always, had complete charge of everything regarding the main engines and power plant, in fact you could safely say, everything that gets the ship from one port to the next, except for navigation of course. I have always been given to understand that there is a kind of unwritten law at sea, that the Chief seldom enters the engine room without first telling the 2<sup>nd</sup> engineer. I can remember one 2<sup>nd</sup> that I sailed with, telling me that if the chief appeared unexpectedly in the engine room for no good reason, then he himself would leave it. How true that would have been, I have no idea. However every time I see a film where the exhausted chief emerges from the engine room in a dirty, sweaty vest trying to convince the skipper that he will get everything going, I think to myself, (I wonder just how many chiefs would actually be able to do this?). In the royal navy or even the American Merchant fleet perhaps, but in the British Merchant Navy, I doubt it? In spite of this, the chief still enjoyed the respect of his engineers. Perhaps now is as good a time as any to explain some of the shipboard terminology. For instance 'TAP'. Your 'TAP' is basically the supply of beer; spirits, cigarettes and miscellaneous items purchased from the ships bonded stores while at sea. No actual money is paid for these goods at the time but when you were paid off at the end of the voyage, your 'TAP' bill was deducted from your pay, together with any money advances you might have had. I say 'might' when I really mean 'did have'! In fact there were times when you wondered if there would be any pay left. I have already said that my first wage was about £28 per month, which seemed quite a lot then. You were also paid extra for every Sunday that you were at sea and this also earned you an extra day's leave. Remember that all of these events happened a very long time ago, but just to give you an idea of how things have changed; I will try to recall some of the prices. Obviously I can only remember things in what we now call 'old money'. For instance a 5 gills or 70cl bottle of spirits could be bought for 7/6 i.e. (Seven shillings and sixpence). That would be about 37 or 38 new pence in today's money. Beers and Lagers were sold only by the case; a case being 24 cans each 1/3 of a pint. The price per case would be about 12 shillings, or 60 new pence. Cigarettes were sold as they are today in packs of 200 and the price per pack was 10 shillings, equivalent to 50 new pence. In simple arithmetic that would be equal to one shilling or 5 new pence for a pack of twenty.

The vast majority of us were smokers and at these prices it was little wonder that we smoked quite heavily. I personally would smoke between 40 and 60 a day, though I kidded myself that I really only smoked half that amount. After all, you would light a cigarette while working, lay it down somewhere while you attended to some duty or other and by the time you got back it would be almost burned away. The first thing you would do is light another one. Smoking in these days was considered quite normal and very few people were non-smokers, amongst seamen anyway. So far as spirits was concerned, I could get through a bottle in about 3 or 4 days. A case of beer would last perhaps a week. Of course we didn't all stick to our own supply. I mean if you were visiting a shipmate's cabin, he would supply the drink or vice-versa. I would emphasise, that I never went on watch at any time under the influence of drink, nor did any of my shipmates. However, I cannot say the same for some chief engineers that I have sailed with. Unless there was a problem with any of the machinery, the chief had little to do with his time and sometimes would over indulge in the bottle. I am not accusing any of them of being an alcoholic, but I have sailed with a couple who must have been close to it.

The general routine at sea after finishing your 4 hour watch, was to first have a shower, then a peg of spirits and perhaps a couple of cans of beer, before relaxing or going to bed, depending on the time of day. After all you knew that you had eight hours before you went back on watch. By the way a peg is any measure of spirits and can be anything upwards of 1/2 a gill. If you kept strict control of this and consumed it slowly over an hour or so, then you would be

well capable of keeping your watch 7 hours later. As I have said earlier, much depended on which watch you were on. For instance! If you were on the 12 till 4 watch you probably would not drink when you came off at 4 a.m., but almost certainly would when coming off at 4 p.m. The same thing would apply to the other watches i.e. drinking mainly in the afternoon or evening. In the case of the 4 till 8 watch, it would mostly be at night. Perhaps occasionally, one might have a couple of beers at other times. Our personal beer and spirits supply was kept in our cabin, so one of our problems was how to get our beer cooled.

In my days at sea there were no domestic refrigerator on the ship, not even the Captain had one. Come to think of it! Domestic refrigerators were not even commonplace in most homes. Of course we had the main freezer and cold room for the ships provisions, but that was aft of the ship and always locked. One way we sometimes tried to cool our beer was by wrapping it in a wet cloth and tying it to a stanchion on the outer deck where the air generated by the movement of the ship, would help the water to evaporate. This is a natural cooling method, but it takes quite a long time to be effective. On the whole we just had to consume it at room temperature, which was generally in the 90's. Air conditioning was another luxury unavailable to us.

Because there was always at least one other person off watch at the same time as yourself, you were able to have a beer together, perhaps a game of chess or cards and generally just talk. I must say though that after a few months of talking to the same people, you began to hear many stories being repeated. The same of course would be true about oneself. No one ever said "I've heard it all before". Instead, we all agreed to recognise the signal of holding your can or glass on top of your head and hope that the speaker would take the hint. This really was a good way of avoiding any ill feelings. Of course if you held your glass upside down, it just meant that you needed a refill. Another unwritten rule that had to be observed was that the subjects of Politics or Religion should be avoided. Perhaps now you can appreciate why it is so important to get ashore for a change of scenery and conversation when in port. You will also have guessed why a sailor is accused of having a girl in every port! It's really only to hear a female voice for a change and somewhat different chatter. (Honest)! We were required to have all of our meals in the dining saloon while at sea and generally in port. We, the engineers, were of course permitted to use the mess room at lunchtime if we had been working in the engine room. Generally the 2<sup>nd</sup> engineer would have us turn out at about 6.00 or 6.30am so that we could finish around lunchtime. This avoided working in the engine room at the hottest time of the day. Naturally if it were a big job, then we would work on regardless until it was complete. Eating in the Saloon often meant being in the dress of the day. In temperate conditions this meant navy blue trousers, white shirt with black tie and shoes and of course jacket. Sometimes on special occasions you would be required to wear a cummerbund. In tropical conditions the dress was white shorts and shirt with epaulettes and white shoes and socks. Sometimes in the evenings, again on special occasions, you were expected to wear what is called (number tens). These comprised white trousers, white high-necked tunic with epaulettes and white shoes and socks. All of these conditions depended on how strict the skipper was. No one really minded dressing up, it usually helps to create a sense of discipline and pride in your position as an officer. Although the rules of the Merchant Navy are much more lax compared to those of the Royal Navy; we nevertheless had our rules. I have always felt that the 8 till 12 watch, which was the 4<sup>th</sup> engineer's watch, always seemed to be that little bit longer than the other watches. I suppose in a way it was. Because in the morning it meant having a quick breakfast at about 7.30, then into your work gear and down below to take over your watch at eight bells. Yes! We actually rang a bell in the engine room. (Well! Not really a bell, generally just a length of steel bar hung from a convenient position near to the control desk). From that moment on you are fully responsible for all of the machinery and boilers for the next 4 hours. The main reason that you seem to have less time off is the fact that it is also the duty of the engineer on this watch, to relieve the 2<sup>nd</sup> engineer on the 4 till 8 watch at about 5.30 p.m. for his evening meal. Depending on whether he got engaged in conversation with someone would determine when he might return to his watch. Generally he would be back within a half-hour or so, but sometimes of course it would be much longer. So you can imagine that by the time you came out from your relief duty, you would just have time to relax with a book and perhaps a couple of beers. It always seemed no time at all before it was your turn to start your next 8 till 12 watch. We didn't carry an electrician on the 'Eskbank' that was always the responsibility of the 3rd engineer, helped on occasion by the other engineers. This is not as difficult as it might seem, because the ship's electrics were only 110 volts D.C. After all most of the auxiliary machinery, like pumps, compressors, winches etc., were steam operated, including the steering gear. By saying this

was not very difficult, I do not mean to belittle the skill of the electrical marine engineers who were most definitely needed on other ships I sailed on, where practically everything but the main engine was electric. Nevertheless I am sure they would agree that our simple electricians would be a piece of cake to them. We did however carry a 'SPARKS' that is seaman's jargon for 'Radio Operator'. Apart from looking after his radio equipment, he was also responsible for any electrical navigational equipment like Radar etc. I believe that nowadays the term 'Sparks' applies in general to all electricians, but in the Merchant Navy when you spoke of the 'Sparks', every one knew you were referring to the Radio Operator. A ship's electrician was known as 'Lecky'.

So far I have said nothing about the deck officers. Although our duties were entirely different, we nevertheless had to work together, more or less as a team. We as engineers were responsible for the overall mechanics of the ship, while the deck officers were responsible for the seaworthiness of the ship in general. They were also responsible for the cargo, the trim of the ship, the deck hands and of course the navigation. The Captain is in overall charge of the entire crew regardless of station including the Chief engineer and his word is law. That's not to say that he was unapproachable, on the contrary he could be quite a nice guy. Although the Captain is not treated as one of the boys, he can sometimes be quite sociable and on occasion may have refreshment with his officers, including the engineers. The hierarchy of the deck officers starts with the Captain down to the 3rd mate. The Captain, like the Chief Engineer, never kept a watch, but the 1st, 2nd and 3rd mates kept the same watches as us, that is 4 hours on and 8 hours off. In port of course all watches are suspended and everyone goes on to day work. The deck cadets, whom I guess you could call junior officers, were I suppose likened to midshipmen in the Royal Navy. Like the junior engineer, they were mostly on day work while at sea. The 'Sparks' had his own hours. Of course I don't mean that he pleased himself when to start and stop. He, I understand kept what is known as a listening watch. I presume that radio messages were always transmitted at certain times of day and these times obviously alter depending on where the ship is. So his watch might vary somewhat. When he is not actually on watch, there is always an automatic alarm relayed to his cabin in case of a SOS Signal. You can see then that, on the whole we are a very close - knit bunch and must always try to get on together regardless of faults. Of course there are times when you get absolutely fed up with each other's company and sometimes have to endure repeated tales of various topics but I have already said a few words on that. One just has to learn to accept it. After all you can't avoid your shipmates when you are thousands of miles at sea. While on the subject of crew I should mention that we carried a ship's carpenter or 'CHIPPY', as he is more commonly known. Any Chippy that I ever sailed with was of Chinese nationality and I would add that I found them to be very clever and resourceful people. The Chippy did most of his work for the deck officers but was available to the engineers if required. He seemed to spend quite a bit of time in the engine room machine shop in his spare time making all sorts of unusual bits and bobs. To give you an idea of the skill of these guys, I can remember once in port during a visit by the Chief engineer of another ship, a friendly argument arose over which ship had the most skilful Chippy. Our Chief tried to impress his counterpart by giving our Chippy the stopper from a glass lemonade bottle, (which was the old style that screwed into the bottle with a rubber seal). He told him to make an identical one out of steel, complete with knurled top. The Chippy returned about an hour later with the finished stopper. This was screwed into a fresh lemonade bottle complete with the rubber ring. The bottle was given a good shake to pressurise it, then laid on its side to test for leaks. Needless to say it passed the test with flying colours. Now this might not seem such a remarkable feat, but I have tried it since and after a couple of hours, have given up because it was so difficult. To this day I have no idea how he managed to do it so quickly. All I am really saying is that the Chinaman's skills certainly have to be admired. We never did find out whether the visiting Chief was impressed or not.

### **The Copra Run, 'Solomon Islands'**

Copra' is the dried and broken kernel of the coconut. As everyone knows the coconut is quite a versatile fruit. The oil from it is used in the making of soap and lotions. The dried kernel is mainly used in the confectionery industry while the fibre from the husk, known as 'Coir' is generally woven to make doormats. Coconut plantations were perhaps the mainstay of the economy for many of these smaller groups of Pacific Islands. I am referring in the following pages to the Solomon Islands only.

The 'Copra Run' was so named, because it involved calling at several different islands in the group when the copra had been harvested and bagged ready for shipment. The 'Run' started on what was probably the biggest of the group, at a place called, I think, 'Hinari'. We picked up about 40 or so local native inhabitant workers whose job it was to load up the bagged copra from this and the different islands we would visit. When one consignment was loaded, we would move on to another island taking the workers with us. When our cargo was loaded and we were leaving these islands, we would drop them off again. These workers had to eat and sleep out on the deck, which wasn't too bad really in these tropical climes. However to make some sort of shelter they would stretch a couple of hatch tarpaulins across the aft derricks, which were stowed whilst under way and this provided a kind of large awning, under which they could relax or sleep. Aft of the ship, on the deck above the steering compartment, there was a large steel plate that had been set into and bolted onto the deck. This plate was roughly 6 or 8 feet square and I understand was once the foundation for a gun! It seemed that some merchant ships were fitted with guns during World War II, but only on the after deck, apparently, for defence purposes. I can remember being told that if a gun was fitted forward of the bridge, it was classed as a warship and could be sunk without warning. We now know that not many ships were warned, whether they had a gun or not.

The men would have their cooking fire on this plate and sometimes in the evenings many of them would gather around this fire, singing songs. A few of them had instruments like flutes, bongo drums and even a couple of guitars. It was not what one might think i.e. tribal chants, but rather a mixture of joyful rhythm singing and soft melodic music.

At one of the islands we called at, there was no quay as such, only the hull of a sunken Japanese freighter, which had been, beached close to the shore. This hull or hulk as it should really be called had been stripped of its entire superstructure. Its two or three hatches had been filled right up with rubble and other rubbish and the hatch coaming had been removed, so that the result was a fairly flat makeshift quay. I don't think it was all that stable though, because every now and then some of the rubble would subside into the hold, which then had to be refilled. This was due to the fact that there was a gaping hole well below the water line, apparently caused by a torpedo and the sea kept eating away at the infill. We noticed that there were never any vehicles or equipment left on the quay overnight. Obviously this was just in case they disappeared into the sea.

It wasn't possible, or advisable, to tie up to this quay, so a unique way of mooring the ship had been devised. This comprised dropping the anchor some little distance out, then taking mooring lines ashore at the 'Stern' when they would be fastened round a couple of palm trees with a shackle. The ship would then heave in on the mooring ropes and anchor, until it was in a more or less fixed position. The workers could now load the cargo. I think most of the equipment here was ex-military, probably American, a couple of jeeps, some trailers and a few barges. The 'Copra' was brought to a shed, (actually an ex army Nissen hut) near to the hulk, where it was bagged before being put aboard the barges. These barges were then towed out the short distance to the ship, where they could be loaded on board in cargo nets and stowed in the holds along with the copra from the other islands.

### **Snakes and Ladders**

Whilst we were at one of these islands, the 1<sup>st</sup> Mate decided it would be a good time to touch up some of the paintwork, and highlight the draft markings especially at the 'aft' end! The 'Lascar' seamen usually did any painting about the ship, but they were busy helping with the cargo. The task then, was given to the deck cadets (I mention the word deck because when I was at sea there were no engineer cadets). These lads' ages range from about 18 to 21 or more and they can have quite a hard life at sea, a continuous routine of work and Study. But then it's the same with any apprenticeship and I suppose in a way, it sorts out the "Men from the Boys". I think the fathers of some of them might already be serving captains, or are retired and often push their sons into the Merchant Navy.

Anyway, we had two such cadets on board, who were put onto a makeshift raft with the necessary gear and pulled under the stern, so that they could paint the markings. This was fine, at first! But working from the raft had its difficulties. They had to distribute their weight as required to keep it fairly stable. Although they could both stand at the same end they nevertheless had to keep a reasonable distance away from the edge. Several times the cadets would, (just for a bit of bravado) stand close together, and inch their way towards the edge, until the raft began to tip dangerously. They would then jump back towards the middle again to stabilise it, gaining applause and laughter from anyone who might be watching. Now! The

raft was never in any danger of sinking, but if it tipped over too far, there was always the danger of them losing their footing on the rather wet and slippery tarpaulin, that covered the raft. They could both swim, so there was no immediate danger if they did fall in!

Danger did appear on the scene however! A snake! We, on deck, were first to see it and shouted to the lads that it was swimming close to the raft. It was approximately 5 or 6 feet long with yellow and orange or red rings along its whole length. At first the cadets weren't too bothered, in fact they were quite interested and keen to see it, like us, they had never seen a snake in the wild before. The snake now turned towards them and slowly started to raise itself on to the raft! Well, that was a different matter! Now the lads started to back away, shouting and screaming at us to do something! But what could we do? They were under the stern on a raft that was on the opposite side of the ship from the gangway. If we could get the raft untied and pulled round the stern, then they could simply step off.

The snake was on the raft and they wanted like hell to get off. It wasn't long before their wish was granted, because terror had driven both of them perilously close to the edge of the raft. Of course, the inevitable happened; the raft tipped up and deposited them in the sea! The snake however remained unmoved on the raft. Neither of them wanted to get back onto the raft or swim to the gangway for fear that there might be other snakes in the area. They clung to the line attaching the raft to the ship, this didn't help much, as the line was too thin to climb and anyway everybody knows that snakes can also climb. They were still in the water and becoming more panicky as time went on. We had by now abandoned the idea of pulling the raft round since they were determined not to get back aboard it. A rope ladder was another option, but that was locked in the aft mast-house and by the time that was obtained, it might be too late. Anyway the overhang at the stern might make it difficult to reach the ladder. Nevertheless, someone was sent to fetch the key and the ladder. The cadets by this time seemed to have calmed down, but were still refusing to get back on to the raft, nor would they let go of the line. Staying in the water might be just as dangerous; after all, the snake had originally come from the water, so who knew what might happen? Meanwhile the snake looked to be leisurely soaking up the sunshine while basking on the raft.

Suddenly, one of the cargo lads shouted to them (in pidgin' English), that they should get back onto the raft and keep the snake at bay until we could pull the raft round to the gangway. At first they were having none of it but eventually they were persuaded to put their faith in this islander, after all he was a native of these islands and must know about the wild life, so he could be trusted couldn't he? He was now shouting, "No frighten" and "No bite". (Did that mean not to be afraid because it was not dangerous) or (If they didn't show fright they wouldn't be bitten). I doubt that it meant (they were not to frighten the snake or bite it). Well! They couldn't see anything funny in that either. They did however manage to compose themselves enough to warily climb back on to the raft. One of them threw a paintbrush at it that he was still holding, (now that's what I call discipline). Either that or his fists had frozen in fear. The snake immediately withdrew and slipped from the raft to disappear into the depths.

We learned later that this had been a deadly coral snake and if it had gone back into the water while the cadets were still in, then they would have been in extreme danger. The water, being the natural environment of this snake, meant that it could move much faster than on land. Apparently that was why this guy wanted the lads back onto the raft, where it was hoped the snake would be slower and would feel intimidated by them. There was no way of telling just who was intimidating whom and (there are no prizes for guessing). This islander suggested that the snake was probably just being curious and its acute sense of smell had homed in on the paint. I would have thought that the smell would've been a deterrent. Anyway, how true that was is debatable, personally, I think it was hungry. When it was over we all realised just how close a shave they'd had but none more so than the cadets themselves.

### **Tropical Paradise?**

Another of these islands that we visited, was called 'Gizo' and yet again we were lying at anchor. Now, one can be forgiven for wondering why we were always at anchor. Well these islands are usually just fertile atolls with generally nothing on them but coconut plantations. One morning into the bay sailed what its captain later described as a 'Motorised Schooner'. It was named 'KIRIMARU'. I had always associated the suffix 'MARU' with Japanese vessels, but here was a vessel with an Australian skipper and a predominately black crew. The vessel also had the letters B.S.I.P. underneath the name, which I took to be the country of registration. In this case I presumed it to mean 'British Solomon Islands Protectorate'. I have since learned

that Japanese ships are referred to as males, and the name 'Maru' seems to suggest a variety of things, a man, a tool, a circle and the protector from the perils of the sea. The supposed connection between them is that the ship will hopefully always return safely to port. I wouldn't dare to even attempt to understand the connection, but I can assure you that the meaning of the word 'Maru' contains all of these definitions. The 'Kirimaru', which seemed to consist mainly of accommodation and was not very big, was given permission to tie up alongside us. Apparently she had been on a cruise of the 'Fiji' islands with some fare paying passengers and had dropped them off at 'Samoa'. What a life eh? Now she was heading for New Guinea on business, what business? We wondered. Drugs, Gems, People. Nobody really asked him and he certainly wasn't volunteering any information. I don't remember ever finding out why he had even stopped at 'Gizo'. So far as we knew there was nothing here but 'copra'. The schooner was between our ship and the shore and we had a rope ladder going down to the schooner. I mention this because the schooner had a little dinghy making trips ashore and I was to make use of both ladder and dinghy the following day.

I had the day off and decided to go ashore alone, just for a break really, because there was nothing there but the plantation. I think I fancied myself as an explorer! I have said before that it was usual to have a few drinks before going ashore because it was always cheaper. Not that there was anything to spend money on at this particular island, (not that I knew of anyway), but habits are sometimes hard to break. Armed with a coke bottle filled with rum I set off, every so often taking a swig of rum (just to fortify myself of course). I remember walking (perhaps a little unsteadily) along the beach, the beauty of which, words could not describe! There were no marks or footprints at all on the sand but my own and I don't think it would have been too far a leap of the imagination to see 'Man Friday' walking to meet me from the palm fringed undergrowth at the top of the beach.

I had been walking for a little while now and stopped for a rest on the high shoreline. I sat down under a clump of palm trees and gazed out over the sea, a tropical paradise indeed. There was a rough track leading off into the undergrowth and I suppose eventually the plantation. I had another couple of swigs from the bottle and was beginning to feel a bit tired. I was also beginning to feel the heat a bit. I slowly realised that I had been out in the tropical sun for a couple of hours and perhaps worse, were the facts, that not only had I no shirt on, I also had not thought to protect my head. All that I had on was my white shorts, and sandals. I could feel my whole body starting to burn, but being half canned, I foolishly tried to drink the burning sensation away. I made my way to the top of the beach and laid back in the semi-shade to rest. I must have fallen asleep, for the next thing I remember it was getting dark and my chest felt like it was encased in iron. I was in pain with each breath that I took and I realised that I must have been lying on my back and of course as the sun moved, so did the shade of the palms. The sun must have been beating down on my chest for god knows how long! Slowly, through the haze of booze and pain, I knew that I probably had severe sunburn, and if I didn't die from it, then I would surely wish that I had. In the distance I could see the ship, and started to retrace my steps back along the beach, which by now was bathed in bright tropical moonlight. The tide was in by now and I found myself paddling ankle deep through water. It felt wonderfully cool on my baked feet and I had to resist the urge to cool my chest by going swimming! I took the last mouthful from my bottle and dropped it beside me, (absolutely shocking thing to do, when I think of it now, to litter such an idyllic location!) and staggered towards the ship, or so I thought! The rum was no longer effective and I was sure my chest was going to burst into flames. Through the haze of pain and drink I could see the lights of the ship but I remembered that the schooner was between it and me. The schooner looked to be quite close, so I foolishly decided to wade out to it! I had only gone about a dozen unsteady yards, when I suddenly walked off the gently sloping beach and ended up over my head in water! It felt so cool on my parched skin and for a moment I thought I had been miraculously cured! So relaxing was it in fact that I wanted to sleep.

From what I learned later, perhaps I did fall asleep (albeit a drunken one), or more likely a drunken stupor, because when next I opened my eyes, it was daylight and I was in a strange cabin, being awakened by a black crewman, whom I recognised was from the schooner. My head was trying to split open to let my pounding brain out! My chest felt like it had been roasted over a spit and my shoulders seemed to be encased in very hot cement. I tried to sit up, but something seemed to be cutting into the very inside of my stomach. This turned out to be a kind of sarong tied round my waist. The crewman gave me cool drink and gently pushed me back down again, telling me to rest. Some time later, the Aussie skipper came in and in response to my puzzled and painful expression, explained what had happened and why I was on his boat. Apparently, when I thought I was wading out from the beach, I was only

partially right. The beach hadn't suddenly fallen away beneath my feet! It seems that some of the schooner's crewmen saw me staggering along the beach towards an old makeshift pier or wooden jetty, which was partially submerged in the water. (I suppose to my drunken mind I was only paddling). They had watched me make my way along this jetty and realised I would eventually reach the end and fall in! Fortunately there were some locals fishing by lantern in their canoes in the bay. The schooner crew shouted to the fishermen to warn me, but it was too late! Off I stepped in to about 10 or 15 feet of water, apparently becoming unconscious. One of the fishermen managed to pull me across his canoe and took me out to the schooner, where the skipper had told his crew to get me out of my wet clothes and look after me until the morning.

In the meantime, he had got word to my own ship that I was safe and sleeping it off on his boat. Much later, over coffee, this skipper explained to me that one of his crew had rubbed raw coconut oil over my chest, shoulders and back. He assured me that although I was still badly sunburned my skin would be less likely to blister, (you know, to this day I swear by raw coconut oil). While still feeling the pain of the sunburn, my skin did not blister, not much anyway. I knew that I would have to keep myself covered to reduce the risk of any further damage, so that would be the end of sunbathing for a while. Whenever I showered after work, it would be quite painful but I kept putting on more ('special oil') I called it, for about a week or so, until I was reasonably well again and I might add, quite brown! Needless to say, I never let myself get so badly burned again and even to this day I am wary of the power of the sun though I am unlikely to experience it in such intensity ever again. For the whole duration of my recovery time, I was not allowed to take time off from my duties (apart from my normal off shifts). Sunburn is classed as a self-inflicted injury (a term borrowed from the armed services). Of course everyone was very sympathetic and helpful, but you still have to do your stint. The schooner skipper on several occasions would come aboard our ship for a few drinks, (well it was always an excuse for a booze up), but no matter how many drinks he had, he never did tell us what his business was.

### Shark Tales

At this same island, we learned that a young lad had been attacked the previous week by a shark and had tragically died from his injuries. The locals were out in force at all hours of the day and night trying to catch it. The crew from the schooner and of course ourselves were also shark fishing but we didn't hold out much hope of catching anything. It is not difficult to fish for sharks, all it takes is a meat hook with a piece of rotten meat or fish on it, preferably with some blood through it and tied to a strong line. Fishing and catching however are two different things. The smaller fish including small sharks seemed to eat away at the bait before we could get a chance to hook a big one. The crew of the schooner were also fishing and within an hour or so they had caught one. Looking down from my position on the main deck 20 feet above, I guessed it to be about 5 or 6 feet in length. I have no idea what kind it was, or if it was even dangerous. I remember when they started to pull the shark clear of the water; it was in danger of falling off the hook. It was struggling so much that one of their crew fetched a rifle and shot it a couple of times in the head until it became still! Another man lowered himself over the side to try and secure a rope to the shark, since it was obvious that it would be too heavy to lift from the water using just the fishing line. He did this by pushing the end of the rope through one of its gills, and putting his hand into its mouth, to pull the rope through. Now! I am sure that I have read somewhere that sharks are notoriously difficult to kill and this one seemed determined to prove it. The guy just managed to pull the rope clear, when the shark's jaws snapped shut, almost severing the rope in the process! If his arm had still been in its mouth when this had happened, (shudder the thought!), he would now be nicknamed Lefty, or maybe Righty, because I can't remember which arm was in its mouth. Anyway, another couple of shots were fired into its head and after a little while it was hauled on board.

Some of the locals in their canoes had witnessed all this and asked the men if they could have it! That night, they lit a huge fire and had some kind of ceremony. We could hear lots of yelling etc. We were told later that the shark had been cut into pieces and they were stamping, spitting and stabbing the various parts, especially its head! It seemed that they could not inflict enough punishment on it. I suppose they had to vent their anger somehow, and maybe this helped. No one will ever know whether this was the guilty shark or not. It was a shark and that was enough for them! When one thinks of it now, why, on earth did we want to catch a shark in the first place? What could we possibly gain from it? Apart, from the

mild thrill of reeling it in. I say mild, because any of the smaller sharks that we had caught just tended to swim in with the hook. The water certainly wouldn't have been any safer to swim in for the loss of one shark or a dozen for that matter. Yes, of course I felt for these people, they had lost a young child, but deep down something else bothered me. This was the very water I had fallen in to. If a shark had got me, I mercifully would not have felt a thing, considering the state I was in.

The thought of swimming with the knowledge that sharks might be around has always disconcerted me. I can remember one time when we were again lying at anchor somewhere. It was the usual hot tropical day, and some of us decided to go in to the water for a swim. We were told that there might be sharks around and knew that it was in all probability true. We had caught a couple of very small ones earlier in this area (maybe a couple of feet long at most). The water was calm, very blue and looked so cool and inviting that we decided to throw caution to the winds and go in anyway. Strictly speaking that is not quite true, I wasn't going to throw away even a tiny little bit of my caution, not even to a light breeze, never mind a wind. The gangway was lowered until it was just touching the water, but before taking the plunge however, we had taken the precaution of asking the cadet on duty to act as look out for us. I was not a great swimmer, about 20 yards was my limit (that's 10 out and 10 back) so I tended to stay nearby the gangway. The others, (there were four of us in all), were quite strong swimmers and were swimming and diving some distance away. The cadet was positioned high up on the wing of the bridge, some 30 or 40 feet above us. He was on duty and dressed in his white tropical uniform. After some 15 or 20 minutes larking about I was beginning to feel quite brave even though I was never more than ten yards from the ship. Brave only until I remembered that I was swimming in shark infested waters about 50 feet deep. Your imagination can run riot and it's a very uncomfortable feeling when you realise that you've got a long way to go to get your feet on the bottom.

Suddenly, there was a piercing cry of "Shark"! "Shark"! I can tell you, I heard him the first time before he'd even finished the first syllable. One of the other lads and myself were quite close to the gangway at the time and it didn't take long for us to get out of the water. The others had quite a distance to cover and were striking it out strongly for the ship, not daring to look behind them. We helped them on to the gangway and all of us ran up to the cadet on the bridge to get a look at the creature. When we got there, he was doubled over with laughter saying "I've never seen anything so funny! you all looked so panic stricken". Believe me we were panic stricken, in fact I was almost hysterical. (Oh my god ! The thought of a Great White bearing down on me). When he was asked to point out where he had seen the shark, he continued laughing, saying "There wasn't one; I only did it for a laugh". Well, I'm afraid none of us at that time felt like laughing, we were just too scared to see the funny side. We looked at each other for a few seconds then someone said to him. "In that case, you won't mind going in then" Whereupon, he was picked up and thrown off the bridge into the water below!

When he eventually surfaced, he started flailing his arms about and shouting. We quickly realised that he must have been winded or injured in some way, falling uncontrollably from that height. A nearby life belt was thrown to him, but although it landed very close, it was obvious that he was never going to reach it! The 3<sup>rd</sup> engineer being the strongest swimmer ran down to the main deck and jumped in, reaching the cadet in no time. Actually, he made for the life belt first, and taking hold of it, placed it over the cadet who immediately held on to it for dear life. The 3<sup>rd</sup> then got hold of the line trailing from the belt and swam with him to the gangway where we helped to pull them out. The cadet was now starting to get his breath back and began hurling verbal abuse at us, until the 1<sup>st</sup> mate appeared, and took him away. We were later told that the cadet had been reprimanded for neglecting his duties, which included betraying the trust in him to act as the 'look out'. No! We weren't sorry we'd thrown him in, he had given us a "helluva" fright and we'd given him his just desert, poetic justice wouldn't you say?

It should be remembered that many of these islands were the scenes of many battles between the Allies and Japanese during the war in the Pacific and generally some evidence of this could be found. Sometimes it would be the wreck of a vessel lying offshore or a burned out tractor or lorry near the remains of a camp close to the beach. I have already said that the ship was often at anchor off one or other of these islands and I make no apologies for repeating it. A few of us decided to lower one of the lifeboats so that we could take a closer look at one such island. We landed the boat on the beach and made our way to what looked like the remains of some buildings. It is hard to say what they had been used for originally or whether they had been American or Japanese, probably both, (at different times of course). At the shore end of this complex, a concrete ramp went out to meet a kind of pier. There wasn't much left of the

pier now, only a series of badly rusted posts and girders which stretched out into the water some 30 or 40 feet. At the far end of this and on one side was a row of posts running back towards the beach. On closer examination we could see that a strong wire grid was suspended from the pier and these posts down into the water. In effect it looked like what we deduced, was probably a shark proof swimming area. Obviously the original occupants of the place took shark attacks seriously.

The water was deep, probably about 20 feet or so and looked as inviting as always. It wasn't long before we had stripped off and were in swimming. I have said that I am not a very good swimmer so I suppose I clung on to the wire most of the time. The water was very clear and I could see some of my mates occasionally swimming several feet below me amongst some brightly coloured tropical fish. I too wanted to see these beautiful fish at close range. I did have a facemask with snorkel, but there was no way that I would be able to swim down that depth. I decided therefore to pull myself down using the wire grid. I took a deep breath and started down. All of a sudden at about 10 feet or so I found there was no more wire to hold on to. Now! Either I had been pulling it up, (hardly likely, since it was made from about 3/8 inch diameter steel rods) or, it only went down this far. I shot to the surface like a cork from a bottle of Champagne as I realised that the place wasn't shark proof after all. I warned my mates of my find and thereafter contented myself by sitting on the beach until it was time to return to the ship.

You could say that I have a phobia about sharks and I would be the last person to argue. I remember on another occasion, going ashore with some of my mates at another island. Near the beach was an old house, which at one time had been quite a large building. It might at one time, have been the home of one of Britain's Empire builders but now it was in ruins. Whether it had suffered war damage originally or just fallen into ruin is difficult to say. Certainly it had no roof or windows. About 50 yards or so from the house was large swimming pool, only yards from the beach itself. So close to the beach was it that it was obviously tidal filled. As usual we decided to relax by this pool and swim in the knowledge that there were no sharks. The pool was big, probably 30ft by 20ft and about 3ft deep to 6ft deep. In the afternoon sun we could see that the water was perfectly clear and that there was nothing in the pool other than marine plant life and perhaps some small marine creatures. We had taken some cold grub with us and of course lots of beer, which was always warm for reasons mentioned earlier. We stayed and played by this pool until it started to get quite dark. We wouldn't need lights to see our way back to the ship but we thought it best to return to the ship before it got too dark. Before leaving, a couple of us decided to have a last dip. This was to be one dip that I wasn't going to forget easily. I was somewhere in the middle of the pool, when one of my mates shouted 'SHARK'. Now! You would think that logic would tell me that there could not possibly be a shark. As I said earlier, the water was clear and I'd been swimming there all afternoon. But no! I immediately panicked and found myself struggling for breath as one of my mates grabbed my legs from below and pulled me under. The fact that I felt no pain didn't register and I was convinced that I was about to be eaten alive. The prank lasted only a second or two, but my mates, realising what they had done, were very apologetic and from then on there was no more horseplay.

### **Copra Bugs**

All of the 'Copra' that we picked up from the 'Solomon Islands' was destined for 'Port Sunlight' on the river 'Mersey' in the UK. Port Sunlight in fact is the home of a well-known soap manufacturer. 'Copra' as I have already explained is dried coconut kernel and we carried it in bags in the holds. While making our way back to UK with this cargo, the holds are partially opened for ventilation; otherwise the tropical heat would cause the cargo temperature to raise to danger level and could cause instantaneous combustion. While we were obviously in favour of reducing the risk of instantaneous combustion, the opening of these hatches also caused millions of problems for ourselves. The millions I speak of are little bugs that normally live on the coconut. However because of the now higher than normal temperature in the hold, they were desperate to reach fresh air. They are well known by seamen who have sailed on what is known as the 'Copra Run' and are simply known as 'Copra' bugs. These little black winged insects are very small, only about 3 or 4 millimetres in length but they get everywhere. Occasionally one would see slightly larger ones, maybe about 7 or 8 millimetres in length. These ones we called 'King Copra' though someone suggested that they were actually females of the species. Although they can fly, they tend to do so only over short distances. Most of

them seemed to be content alight on the nearest surface away from the heat. This included the decks, the handrails, the hatches themselves and in fact anywhere outside the holds. Within a day or so of opening the hatches, they seem to have multiplied themselves a thousand times and soon the normally white paintwork of the superstructure would be a dark grey. So dense were they, that if you swept your hand along this surface, you would leave a mark like a bright white brush stroke, only to find it turning grey again in a matter of minutes before your eyes. It is not just the colour white that attracts them. They are literally everywhere in equal density. The bugs are not dangerous; they don't bite or sting and apparently live entirely on the coconut. They were becoming a bit of a nuisance and would become more so as their numbers continued to rise. The trouble was that nothing could be done to control them. They would find their way into the accommodation through portholes and ventilators, in spite of fitting them with fly screens. There wasn't very much else you could do about it, apart from spraying the place from time to time. So far as the engine room was concerned, there was absolutely nothing you could do. They invaded the place through the open skylights, air vents and fans. Trying to sleep in your cabin was difficult because you couldn't just close up all openings. Don't forget that in my seagoing days, only the most modern ships had air-conditioning. After a few days you had to learn to accept it and just get on with it. Once these little insects settle on a surface, they tend to just walk about, with their wings tucked under an outer shell, similar in habit I suppose to our native flying beetles. I have said that they seemed to live entirely on the coconut, so unless they returned there to eat, then they would surely die. I can think of nothing outside of the holds that could replace their diet and I am not surprised that the little pests didn't want to go back there to eat. One of the main problems that we had with them was at meal times in the dining saloon. While sitting eating your meal, the overhead fan would knock down those that were flying or shake off those that had already landed on it onto the table and of course inevitably occasionally on to your plate. At first you would spend some time trying to pick them off, (the ones you could see anyway), but after a while you didn't bother to try so hard and just got on with your meal. It wasn't too difficult to accept, because, after all they were probably already in your food from the galley. There was no way that the cook or his staff could have prevented at least some of them getting into the cooking pots. As the ship approaches cooler climes, the bugs become more and more sluggish till they eventually die. For the next few days the crew are kept fairly busy sweeping them up and washing them overboard, food for the fishes I guess. At 'Port Sunlight' the cargo was offloaded but what happened to all of the dead bugs in the sacks is anybody's guess. I do know that we were kept busy cleaning the hold bilge filters as the crew kept cleaning and flushing out the holds. More food for the fishes! Eh.

While on the subject of insects, I should mention that this ship was already infested with ants and cockroaches. Not an unusual thing for these old ships, all of the ships that I sailed on except perhaps the MV 'Caxton' had similar problems at one time or another. Ants were only the very small kind and didn't bother us too much. Using a spray would help to some extent but you couldn't use a spray near foodstuffs. Ants however are very clever insects and can find a way round everything. For instance sometimes sandwiches would be left in the mess-room for use by the late watches. In reasonable weather, the plate of sandwiches was placed on top of a bowl, which in turn was placed in a large dish of water. The ants would not cross the water and it was always thought that the sandwiches would be ant free. Not so! I remember going to the mess-room one night with a shipmate to see what must have been thousands of ants crawling all over the sandwiches. There was also a column of them stretching from the plate along the table and onto the bulkhead. At various places round the plate ants were piled up in the water making in effect, bridges for the others to cross. A continuous chain of two-way traffic then was formed across each of these bridges, up the side of the bowl, along the underside of the plate and onto the sandwiches. The outgoing ants would each be carrying a small crumb of bread, sometimes two or more ants carrying a larger piece. I must say that it was fascinating to watch how they seemed to hesitate for a fraction of a second each time they met an incoming empty handed one. One could imagine them saying "Hurry up before it's all gone". They had devised then, a rather ingenious method of raiding our larder to supplement their own. They didn't all escape however; we managed to kill most of those on the table and promptly disposed of the sandwiches down the loo. It seemed a shame to destroy all their hard work especially when we knew that it would make little impact on their numbers. Cockroaches were a different problem, there were probably, just as many of them as there were ants. But they were bigger and uglier. These insects are a dark brown colour and usually about 20mm long and 5mm broad. The females when carrying their egg sacks are about 25mm long. They are generally more active at night and can be seen scurrying about

the accommodation looking for hiding places. So far as I know they don't bite but nevertheless are a health hazard. To try to reduce the numbers in our cabins, we would try to trap as many as we could. A reasonably successful method was to place some dry cocoa powder in an empty jam jar and smear the inside of the jar with butter. The cockroaches would drop down inside but were unable to climb back out. I remember one time in particular when I had gone aft to check on the refrigeration rooms. The cook had left a side of beef on a table outside the freezer to defrost. This beef was literally alive with cockroaches and I reported this to the 1<sup>st</sup> Mate. He checked it out with the chief steward and the meat was subsequently thrown overboard. Not long after the ship arrived in the UK she was to be fumigated. This certainly gets rid of many of the pests but many somehow always manage to survive to start the infestation all over again.

I was paid off from the 'Eskbank' in Birkenhead on the 10th July 1953.