

# SECOND TRIP

A series of short stories about his life at sea

by Tommy Mitchell

I had agreed to do another trip on the 'Eskbank' as I had been promoted to 4th engineer. In the meantime while the ship was being fumigated, I and my shipmates went home for some leave. I am not going to go into any detail about my home but suffice to say that while my family was pleased to have me home, I guess that I disappointed them by the fact that I became a fairly hardened drinker after only some seven months away from home. I was not what I would call an alcoholic (you might think different), but I could afford to have a few drinks most every afternoon and evening. I had accumulated some £70 pounds during the voyage of which I gave half to my mother. That was quite a lot of money in those days. On the remainder I was able to enjoy myself and treat some of my friends to a night out on occasion. The frequency of treating them however got less and less, for two reasons. Firstly I was spending money faster than I thought and I had used up what duty free drink and cigarettes that I had taken home. Secondly I was finding that some of my friends either got sick or very drunk so quickly that the evening seldom lasted long. Of course I sometimes got very drunk too, but remember that I was used to drinking on average, a bottle of whisky in less than a week. My pals on the other hand were lucky if they could afford a quarter gill every other weekend and two or three pints at the best of times. They weren't sponging off me. I was glad of their company and gave them every encouragement to enjoy themselves. The consequence of all this was that the drink took effect on them very quickly. Yes! I was being very selfish; I should have curtailed my habit a bit (and it was a habit, a bad one). Maybe I was drinking just a little more than my usual because I had so much time on my hands? Maybe I was just unconsciously showing off? Maybe it was both! I am not boasting that I was a better man than they, so far as holding ones drink is concerned. I am only drawing attention to what my friends had noticed and kept reminding me, that I had become a hardened drinker. What probably is more alarming was the fact that I had just turned 21 only two months earlier.



I returned to the 'Eskbank' in 'Liverpool' eleven days later and signed on for my second voyage on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1953. The following morning I went ashore to buy some odds and ends for myself and some of my shipmates. Things like writing paper, envelopes, sweets etc., things not readily available from the ships store. The time being only around 10.30am I did not have anything stronger than coffee to drink before going ashore. A couple of hours later I was walking along Lime Street in the city centre when I started to feel a

## MV 'ESKBANK' (2<sup>nd</sup> Voyage) - 21<sup>st</sup> Jul. 1953 to 15<sup>th</sup> Mar. 1954

little unwell. I dismissed it at first as being just the remains of a hangover. I thought, perhaps I should have something to eat since it was now early afternoon. As I crossed the road towards a cafe I began to feel dizzy and noticed that I was dragging my toes on the ground, I could feel a kind of numbness in my feet so that I was hardly able to walk. I was not so bad that I could not see that every time I moved either leg, I was unable to prevent my feet from drooping. In fact I had no control over my feet at all. It was as though they were paralysed and I could sense this numbness affecting my knees. I just managed to reach the other side of the road, when I tripped. Fortunately I was able to grab a lamppost and hung on to it. The numbness now had gone past my knees, so much so that I was unable to control them to support my body. Only my arms clasped around the pole prevented me from dropping to the ground.

I hung on to this pole for what seemed hours, but was probably just 5 minutes or so, then my arms began to tire and I was conscious of slowly sliding down the pole onto the ground. I was completely unable to do anything and appeals to passers by for help were falling on deaf ears. I don't really blame them; they obviously thought that I was drunk. A man came out of the café that I had been making for and stood some feet away from me with his arms folded as though waiting for something. I called to him that I was feeling unwell and would he please send for help, but he didn't answer me, change his expression or his stance. I don't know how long I was like that but eventually a policeman came along and crouched down beside me. He realised that I had not been drinking, obviously sniffing the air to be sure. He asked me who I was and where I had come from, so that he could notify someone. Now in these days policemen did not carry radiotelephones. Their usual means of communication was through these strategically placed blue police boxes (of which the 'TARDIS' in the fictitious TV programme Dr. Who! is probably the only one left). He turned to the man from the cafe and shouted angrily to him. "Call an ambulance, can't you see this man is ill, not drunk". Obviously there was a phone in the café and this guy had phoned the police. Soon an ambulance arrived and I was carried off on a stretcher. I cannot remember what hospital I was taken to, but I was thoroughly examined from head to toe. Part of the examination consisted of the doctor sticking me with a pin and I would say 'sharp' or 'dull', depending on whether he touched me with the point or not. It was almost the top of my thighs before I could definitely say 'sharp'. After some further blood and urine tests he diagnosed that I was suffering a kind of alcoholic poisoning. I was to be kept in over night and given some sort of infusion. I wasn't required to be back on board that night so I didn't have to contact the ship. I was somewhat shocked that this could happen to me and I was a bit concerned that it probably meant I could no longer drink alcohol, (just shows you how stupidly a young mans mind can work). To be thinking of enjoying my booze, rather than thinking of enjoying living without it. On the following morning I felt fine and was given some test exercises to do, after which the doctor examined me. He told me that my blood showed that I had consumed a lot of alcohol over a very short period and my system had been unable to cope with it. Something about my blood being unable to carry sufficient oxygen round the body. He stressed that if the lack of oxygen had paralysed my brain instead of my legs; I could easily have been brain damaged, perhaps even dead. I prefer not to relate this episode of my life too often, lest I encourage wisecracks from the listener.

I was discharged that day with a warning that, while I was not prohibited from drinking, I was to make sure that I did not drink to excess. The whole episode I suppose did frighten me a little but made only a small difference to my drinking habit. I convinced myself that my usual alcohol consumption was normally spread over a whole week and not as had happened recently at home, a week's consumption practically on a daily basis. I'm not saying that I didn't get pissed any more! I just didn't do it so often.

### **Rabaul:- New Guinea** **'Earthquake'**

We had berthed at a port, which I think was called 'Rabaul' in New Guinea. I say think because I am depending entirely on my memory to recall things and after 48 years, although some events are still quite vivid it is often difficult to place the location. I can well remember being alongside a dock, which had a couple of large sheds on it together with some trucks and what looked like bulldozers. As with most places in the Pacific Region, all of the equipment seemed to be ex military. Along the road from the quay was what appeared to be the outer suburb of 'Rabaul'? There didn't seem to be much there, but it was well within walking distance of the dock area. It did have several shops, maybe a cafe or two and I seem to recall a kind of open-air bar. A couple of mates and myself decided to go ashore for a look around and as usual we had a few drinks before going. We also took our customary hip flask of spirits in case the local beer was unpalatable.

There was an active volcano nearby on Rabaul; (well it looked near). Oh yes! It was active all right; we could see the plumes of white smoke or gas rising from the summit, not exactly belching but kind of slowly drifting.

After a few drinks in the fore mentioned bar we came across a shop selling odds and ends in the way of local art and souvenirs. While browsing we got talking to the owners who told us that Volcanologists were on their way up to the summit of the volcano to try and assess its condition. We couldn't see the guys on the upper slopes but there seemed to be quite a lot of people on the lower ones. We assumed that some of them might be local people just being nosey. It didn't look too far so we thought we would be just as nosey and perhaps find some transport to take us along the road a bit. None of us had ever seen an active volcano let alone being this close to one, so why not get closer? As we made our way to the door of the shop, I felt a bit dizzy and leaned against a glass showcase for support, when that too began to move. I quickly let go of it for fear that I caused some damage, but the showcase continued to slide back and forth. I knew that I hadn't had a lot to drink, so why was I so dizzy? Then I turned to see the owner and his assistant rushing around the shop lifting glass cases onto the floor. He shouted to us to crouch down on the floor where we would be safer as we were experiencing an earth tremor. "No fear" I shouted to him. "I'm going back to the ship! It must be safer than here". I didn't wait for my mates but started immediately for the door. As I walked unsteadily onto the road, the ground beneath my feet began to jerk very rapidly. So jerky was it that I was unable to stay on my feet and fell on my knees. No! Not to pray! I was far too terrified even for that. As I was trying to get back on my feet, visions of buildings falling on people flashed through my mind, a vision of great cracks opening up and swallowing people as I had seen in some films. I was suddenly overcome with a terrifying feeling of helplessness. I tried for what seemed ages to get to my feet but it was probably only a few seconds. As the movement of the ground and my fear subsided I soon realised that there were no large buildings to fall on me. I wasn't so sure about the ground opening up and swallowing me though. Suddenly there was a very loud bang, like a gunshot and the tarmac road about 6 feet in front of me suddenly opened up a crack 2 or 3 inches wide that streaked like lightning for about 20 yards towards the grass verge. I will admit that I have never been so terrified in my life. It is an event that not many people get to experience and one that I never want to experience ever again.

We later found out that this was an occurrence that had happened several times over the past 2 or 3 months, hence the reason for the Volcanologists. The threat of an eruption must have been very real, because we had been advised at one time that the ship might be required to assist in case of evacuation. Later that same night I was standing on deck leaning on the handrail over looking the quay. Suddenly there was a loud rumble and I watched the quay coming up to meet me. In truth it was the water moving out from under the ship, which seemed to touch the seabed. It certainly dropped down about 10 feet or so. I stood there trying to understand what was happening and watched as the sheds on the quay seemingly turned to rubber. I don't know how long this lasted, but suddenly there was an almighty rush of water and the ship rose again just as quickly. This must have been a tidal wave of some sort because it lifted a couple of small boats and a fair sized barge onto the quay beside the shed, which by now had developed a distinct twist. I never did find out if that volcano ever erupted. I hope not for the sake of the people living there. Certainly we were not required to evacuate anyone.

### **'Tarakan': - Borneo** **Crocodile hunt**

Tarakan is quite a small place in Borneo or at least it was when I was there. We were there to load logs of Mahogany as a deck cargo. The logs were floated out to the ship, which of course was at anchor, then lifted aboard using the ships own derricks. We knew we would be there for a few days, because the logs were so heavy that they could only be lifted a couple at a time. One day on our time off, some of us decided to lower a lifeboat and go for a sail. Actually it was the motorised lifeboat but we still intended to use the sail. When taking a lifeboat out, you require a deck officer with you, which of course was okay because most deck officers are generally good yachtsmen. The 3<sup>rd</sup> mate was in charge and we set off into the bay. After larking about for a while we got fed up, started the engine and made our way to the shore. We had been told that the area was a known home to salt-water crocodiles and that they could sometimes be seen basking in the creeks and near the shore, so we decided to look for them.

We entered a wide creek about 30 or 40 yards wide, but this gradually got narrower and shallower as we progressed along. We stayed in the middle of the creek where both banks could

be seen and any possible signs of crocodiles. We had been chugging slowly along for about an hour and it was now starting to get quite shallow and there was a real risk that the propeller was in danger of getting entangled in weeds. So to prevent this and avoid the risk of damaging the propeller on underwater obstacles, we stopped the engine and used the oars to pole our way along. It wasn't deep, probably about 2 or 3 feet but the sides were a mass of undergrowth broken here and there by muddy banks where we had hoped to see a crocodile.

The creek got narrower and shallower until we had to duck under the overhanging bushes, which were getting thicker as we progressed. Eventually we reached the stage where we could go no further. There was hardly any water under the boat and the banks of the creek were only just wider than it. When I think of it now, anything could have been lurking in that undergrowth, poisonous spiders, snakes or other creepy crawlies. Not to mention the animals we were looking for. As for the water, well maybe there was a crocodile lying in wait or a school/ shoal, whatever, of 'Piranhas'. We decided that since we couldn't take the boat any further and nobody was adventurous enough to step out onto the bank to explore, we would just have to pole our way back, which we duly did. Little did we know that on reaching the mouth of the creek, we would be in for a big surprise?

We had become so engrossed in our adventure, we had completely forgotten the fact that the creek was tidal and if we didn't get back soon, we would be left high and dry. Fortunately we were able to get into slightly deeper water but as we approached the mouth of the creek, Surprise! Surprise! A sand bank was beginning to show just above the surface. We could see the waves breaking over it. The 3rd mate reckoned that there was probably still about 12 to 18 inches of water covering it (and that was when there was a wave coming over it). He now suggested that if we got out of the boat, it would give us more freeboard and we could probably push it the 3 or 4 yards over the bank. Normally this would have been no problem, but the water was very murky and considering where we had been and what we had been told about crocodiles, no one was very keen to go into the water. We jointly decided to restart the engine and try to speed over the bank.

There was never a more stupid idea! The bank was at least 15 feet wide and god knows how long. All we had was a small 2-stroke petrol engine capable of maybe 5 or 6 knots. To clear this bank, we would have needed a jet-powered speedboat. Anyway, we decided to give it a try, only to become stuck fast half way up the bank. Our options now were to sit there till the tide changed, or to get out and push. Well we were not going to sit there for hours, so the remaining option it had to be. We all hesitatingly got into the water which only gave us another 4 inches or so extra freeboard but enough perhaps to allow us to push the boat with difficulty over the bank into the deeper water beyond. As soon as the bow got clear, the 3rd mate jumped in at that end, presumably in the hope that it would help raise the stern. The rest of us continued to push to get the stern clear. All of a sudden the 3<sup>rd</sup> mate shouted. "Look out behind you!" I didn't look behind me, or I think, did the others, we just dived headfirst into the boat. We don't know what he saw, but he said it was a Crocodile. Certainly there were now a few waterlogged trees in the area near the beach that the outgoing tide had uncovered, maybe that's what he saw. He insisted that what he saw was not a log, as it was between the beach and us but wasn't there now. If it was a crocodile, all we could hope for was that it wasn't capable of jumping. We made it back to the ship safely, so we will never know!

### **Flying Fish**

When sailing in these tropical seas, I would often spend some of my time between watches just relaxing on deck with a can of beer. I would sit for ages on a 'Bollard' or leaning on the rail watching 'Flying Fish'. I found them quite fascinating, especially when the sea was a flat calm. Oh yes! I have seen the sea like a mirror, when there was actually no horizon and the only disturbance of the water was from the bow wave and the wake of the ship. On these days, the Fish would leave a herringbone pattern on the surface as they took off. They are not very large, probably not much bigger than the size of a herring but with two very large fins sticking out from their side, giving them a fin span (if you like) of about 16 to 18 inches. As they break the surface they spread out these fins and with rapid flicks of their tails they take off. It is the initial tail flicking that causes this herringbone pattern on the surface. They would then glide about 12

inches or so above the surface for about 30 or 40 yards, before, splashing back into the water. I often wondered why they did this. Was it to escape a predator? Or did they just enjoy doing it? Like, Dolphins like to leap in the bow waves of a ship. I had always thought that they only did this on fine calm days and only in daylight. However one very windy morning after a very stormy night we discovered some of these fish on the main deck. They had obviously been blown there by the storm, so they evidently take to the air at any time. Why would they want to launch themselves from the safety of the sea into a howling gale, unless it was to escape a predator! Not for long though, because our cook had told us that they were quite good to eat and as it was still quite windy, every so often another fish would hit the deck (literally). We would pick up the freshest ones and take them to the galley for him. I cannot honestly say what they would have tasted like if they'd been fried, baked or poached, because we had them in a fish curry. This was to be a snack meal outwith our normal menu and was cooked as a traditional Indian curry. These cooks made very good Indian curry, Hot! Certainly, but I must also say, very good. While on the subject of hot curries, I should mention that the very first time I tasted a real Indian curry was when the 'Lascar' crew were celebrating the 'Feast of Ramadan'. During the month of 'Ramadan' the Muslim religion forbids the taking of any food or drink during the daylight hours for the duration of that period! A daylight fast in fact. The 'Feast of Ramadan' therefore is a celebration of breaking that fast. Part of that celebration includes the custom, that the crew serve the officers part of their first meal. Now! You have never tasted a hot curry until you have eaten one that they have prepared for themselves. This was not a curry prepared for a European palate but a genuine Indian curry. I have said earlier that their palate is somewhat distorted by these curries and it is little wonder. Their taste buds surely must be gradually introduced to it as children so that by the time they are adults, the hot spices have little affect on their palate. I kid you not, these curries bring the tears to your eyes and your throat becomes so hot that no amount of cold drink will cool it. I doubt even that the hot sweet tea that they drink would help any. Strangely though, if you can persevere with this burning sensation for long enough, your throat eventually becomes anaesthetised so that you somehow begin to get that really good Indian curry taste. The whole thing is certainly an experience, but it takes several days to recover your usual taste buds. As for the fish! Well as I have said! It tasted good, but really it could have been any kind of fish, so I'm still none the wiser.

### **'Monte Video': - Uruguay** **Dashed Hopes**

We were lying at anchor in the bay waiting for a berth, and were only about three or four hundred yards or so off the beach, (which looked very enticing). We obtained permission to lower the motor lifeboat and some of us headed for shore. We could see that it was not too busy and that there were a lot of bronzed beauties lying around sunbathing, so, what the hell! We decided to head for the beach for some fun. As we steered for the shore, we came across a buoy about 100 yards from the beach, with a large sign on it which read 'Peligro' with smaller writing underneath. We discussed amongst ourselves what the sign could mean. We knew that it was a warning of some kind, but of what? Too late! There was a bump followed by a crunching sound as we discovered that the boat had struck a submerged object of some kind, the crunching sound was the propeller being damaged which immediately stalled the engine. Well, we had some oars aboard for just such an emergency, and not to be put off our mission, we began to row for shore. About 30 yards off shore, two armed men in white uniforms arrived at the waters edge and started calling to us. They pointed to another buoy that we had just passed and were shouting and gesticulating wildly at us. Then they seemed to give up and just stood there with hands on their hips watching. We had come this far, so we kept going till we were only about ten yards away. One of the men drew what looked like a pistol and held it up for us to see, at the same time shouting at us to stop or halt.

Since the men were armed we decided to keep our distance. The 3rd engineer was nominated to wade ashore to see what all the fuss was about. By this time the water was quite clear and didn't look deep, however, when he jumped in, it came up to his chest. He was over 6.ft. tall so I was glad that I hadn't been nominated, I would have been up to my neck in it (literally). The men on shore started shouting again but the 3rd was already in the water, so he continued to wade ashore with his hands held high in a surrender attitude. The beach dipped into the sea quite steeply, and after half a dozen steps or so, the water was only up to his knees. Meanwhile, the two uniformed men had been joined by a couple of others and a small crowd of onlookers, mainly

the 'fore mentioned bronzed beauties, (come to think of it, I don't recall seeing any men except these guys in uniform). As the 3<sup>rd</sup> reached the men, he shouted back to us to stay in the boat! One of them could obviously speak English, because they stood talking for a few minutes. We of course were out of earshot and could not make out what was being said, but assumed that he was explaining our situation to them. After a while he shook hands with them and they seemed to be enjoying a laugh together. We found ourselves smiling too in anticipation, thinking that everything must be all right, especially when the 3<sup>rd</sup> beckoned to us to row in. GREAT! We were going ashore after all, ALAS! No! Our hopes were dashed when we realised that it was just so that he didn't have to wade out so far to get back into the boat!

Once back in the boat, he told us about his conversation with the men on shore who had explained to him that we had attempted to land on a private beach. These guys are known as 'Marineros' or marine police and had evidently been assigned to protect the privacy of the beach (I wonder whose beach?). The first sign that we had encountered had apparently read 'DANGER' 'Wreck visible and dangerous at low tide'. The other sign, which had so agitated the guards, had read 'Strictly Private Beach'. We knew now of course that even if we hadn't damaged the propeller, we would never have been allowed ashore. The 3<sup>rd</sup> told us to wave to the guards on the shore so that they would know that we had intended no trouble. This we did reluctantly while displaying a forced smile, then rowed our way back to the ship. On the way back, the 3<sup>rd</sup> told us that he had tried to explain to the guards that the wreck had damaged our propeller and we could not use our engine. They had just laughed and suggested we use our muscle power to row back to the ship. By the time we got back and the lifeboat hoisted aboard, the captain had returned from ashore after seeing the agent. He informed us that we could berth in 'Monte Video' on the following morning. Hooray! Maybe now we could look forward to some time ashore and perhaps pay a sneak visit to that private beach. On second thoughts, maybe we should avoid the place. I have heard that these guys shoot first and ask questions after.

### **'Monte Video': - Uruguay** **Toothache**

I had been suffering on and off for some days with toothache, (more on than off I might add). Our shipping agent had arranged for me to have my tooth extracted at the British hospital in the city, its name being (of course) "Hospital Britannica". I was given instructions to get a bus immediately outside the dock gates, which would take me the short distance (about a mile or so), to the hospital on the outskirts of the city. I distinctly remember being told to take a number seven 'Collectivo'. Several buses passed, but none of them were going to 'Collectivo', not even a number seven. I must have waited for a good twenty minutes and thought that perhaps I had got the instructions wrong. I summoned up the courage to ask a passer-by the way to the hospital and which bus I should take. I think the only word the poor guy understood was "Hospital"; anyway, the gent pointed up the road toward the city. Now, of course I knew it must be in that direction, because I could see the roofs of the city buildings in the distance and I had been told to get the bus immediately outside the gate. However he was so intensely explicit in his instructions, that I listened politely, after all, he had tried to be helpful in spite of my poor attempts at broken Spanish, (which must have sounded to him like a lot of gibberish). My eyes followed his pointing finger (though I understood nothing of what he said). He mentioned no number that I could make out, but I'm sure I heard him say 'Collectivo'. Well at least I was sure that the place was correct. I thanked him and decided to carry on waiting. I was the only person waiting at the gate and must have waited a further fifteen minutes but there was still no bus to 'Collectivo'. My tooth was beginning to give me hell and I was in no mood to hang about any longer so I decided to start walking.

I'd been walking for about ten minutes, when I heard a bus coming up the road behind me, I looked around hopefully, but, no, it was not going where I wanted. I continued walking, although with each step that I took, my tooth "jarred" and the pain was getting worse, I was beginning to wish that I had taken a couple of pegs before leaving the ship. That had always done the trick in the past, but everyone knows that you shouldn't drink alcohol before going to the dentist. Anyway if I had taken a drink and killed the pain, I wouldn't be on my way to the dentist, having convinced myself that I didn't need my tooth out. No! It was better this way!

About another five minutes of careful walking, I again heard a bus behind me. Yes it was a number 7 but it wasn't going to 'Collectivo'. Now I didn't care, I just wanted to sit down, as I was feeling pretty nauseous by now, so I flagged the bus down. Well, with my luck, it ran right past me like I wasn't there. By now I was getting angry and frustrated and my tooth kept telling me to look for a bar. That would solve all my problems! I sat on the kerb for a few minutes and that's when I realised that, of course, the buses only stop at designated places, just like at home. In fact, the common or garden bus stops! I was probably nowhere near one, so I carried on walking. I came across a group of people standing in a line and assumed that it must be a bus queue. I was going to wait for a bus, even if it was going to ('Outer Mongolia'). I was about to speak to someone, when "Hey presto" a bus came. NO! It wasn't going to Outer Mongolia, but neither was it going to 'Collectivo', what's more it wasn't even a number seven. It stopped anyway and poking my head in the door I enquired hopefully of the driver. "Collectivo"? "SI" replied the driver looking at me with a somewhat puzzled look on his face. "Ah!" I said and again enquired, "Hospital Britannica?" "SI" said the driver again, (I could tell that this was a man of few words), so not wanting to task him too much, I paid him the fare and sat down. I noticed however that I was the only person to board the bus so what were the others waiting for? I didn't much care now whether I reached the hospital or not. The bus was heading in the direction of the city centre, so if the worst came to the worst, at least I'd be able to get to a bar. If I could get a couple of drinks my troubles would be over at least for the day. However I had no sooner sat down than the driver called out to me and pointed to a large white building with the name of the hospital in huge letters on the wall (un-missable really)! If I had known that I was this close to it, I might as well have walked the remaining short distance, since I'm sure I must have already walked well over a mile. I went in and reported rather sheepishly to the girl at reception. She was more than a little cross with me (understandably I suppose, since I must now have been more than an hour late for my appointment,) I tried to explain that the buses to 'Collectivo' were very thin on the ground or non-existent. Why? I complained, did 'Collectivo' not have a better public service. I was still complaining about the bus service, when the receptionist went into convulsions of laughter! She then called over several of her colleagues and began to tell them something hilarious in very rapid spoken Spanish, not that I would have understood any better if she had spoken slower, but I did get the distinct impression that I was the butt of the joke. I was beginning to get a bit miffed with all their hilarity at my expense and was obviously starting to show it. The receptionist realised this and told me (in perfect English) that there is no such place as "Collectivo". 'Collectivo' is just a name meaning small bus. Boy! Did I feel a complete idiot or what? No wonder they were having a good laugh. That meant that every damn number seven bus that had passed me (and there had been several) whilst I was standing at the docks, had been going past the hospital! After a while however I was persuaded to see the funny side of it too, but only for a few short minutes before I was painfully reminded exactly what I had gone there for.

### **'Monte Video': - Uruguay** **Greek Wedding**

One night a few of us went into the town to sample some of the nightlife. After visiting a few bars, we eventually found ourselves in a 'Restaurant-cum-Bar' where a wedding reception was taking place. We settled ourselves at the bar, where we got talking to the father of the bride. After a while we were invited to join the wedding guests, where we were given sandwiches and drinks. Guests were dancing, clowning around and generally having a great time! It wasn't until they started smashing plates, that we realised we must be at a Greek wedding! I thought the plate-smashing thing was just a gimmick for films. It didn't really matter what kind of wedding we were at, because the food, booze and the hospitality were magnificent!

Some of the men had gathered in the centre of the floor and started to do one of those dances, where they hold a corner of a handkerchief! Now okay, so it's a traditional dance, but some drunken idiot at another table made a rather loud statement in English. "Look at that bunch of pansies!" You can probably guess, that's when all hell; broke loose. It obviously started at his table when one of the male guests had taken exception to this guy's remark. Then someone else at a nearby table stepped in try to defuse the situation and for his pains was rewarded with a bloody nose (more pains you might say). Someone else stepped in to the melee, then another, and another etc., even some of the women! Before long the whole place resembled a bar brawl

that would have done proud to the best of western movies. We of course were quite content to let them get on with it since they were not near our table. Besides! I'm not much good in these situations.

Suddenly, a guy landed on our table, flat on his back, sending glasses, bottles and plates in all directions. Now, we normally would have been quite content to help the guy back on to his feet, but there happened to be a young cadet at our table and unfortunately he was absolutely drenched with a cocktail of drinks when this guy cleared our table. WOW! Was he 'mad'? This poor cadet was most definitely not drunk, (although the rest of us were not exactly sober). He did however now smell like a combined brewery and distillery and if any of the deck officers got hold of him, he would be in deep trouble! Big time! The skipper is responsible for these cadets and drinking to excess is strictly not on. The cadet jumped to his feet seething with anger, and lashed out at the poor guy still lying on the table. I can remember thinking 'It's not his fault, someone else knocked him there'. The guy started to retaliate, but the cadet was that little bit quicker. He started laying in to him like a madman, punching wildly and not being too careful with his language either. All of this of course happened I'm sure over a matter of seconds, but at the time it seemed to go on for ages. I grabbed the cadet trying to pin his arms to restrain him and at the same time shouting to remind him of the consequences if the skipper found out he had been drinking and fighting. I don't know whether he heard me or not, maybe he did but just wanted to get on with it. Whatever it was, it was the last thing I remembered doing. Suddenly, I was on the floor feeling very sick and dizzy, the cadet I think had kicked me in the groin! Well someone did. I can honestly say that at that point, I no longer felt any compulsion to save him! Anyway, he seemed to be doing all right on his own; meanwhile I stayed on the floor. I didn't really have much option; my knees seemed to be attached to my chin in an effort to absorb the pain. I was lying half under the table in a puddle of booze and as I started to recover, someone helped me to my feet. I anticipated another kick or punch, but instead was half supported out into the street. As I started to regain my senses I realised that the cadet and another shipmate were holding me up. I was still unable to stand upright.

We got about one block along the road from the bar, when the police arrived and rushed in to the bar. The next thing we knew, a group of people were being frog-marched out to a waiting van and taken away. This, we saw of course from the relative safety of the end of the street and I couldn't help feeling relieved that we were not among them. The skipper never did find out about the cadet, but I learned that he was pretty reliable in a tight situation (when he wasn't hitting me!)

### **Buenos Aires:- Argentina** **'Taken for a ride'**

I doubt that I can say much about this city, not that I can usually say anything much about any city. Most seamen when they go ashore, seldom get further than the nearest drinking establishment, which is never very far from the docks. A bit regrettable really. We travelled the world to different countries and had the opportunity to see a bit of a country's art, culture, politics or even a bit of its scenery. No! We never looked further than our desire to have a good time (and they say travel broadens the mind). However! What I can tell you about Argentina, or at least Buenos Aires, is that everywhere there were slogans and huge posters depicting pictures of 'Peron' and 'Evita'. Great posters advertised the 25th. May and their five year plan. There were slogans and cries of "Viva Evita" or "Viva Peron". I can remember being told that if anyone spoke to us and used any of these two phrases, even if we didn't understand what they were saying, we should just reply 'Viva'. This was fine if they were 'Peron' supporters, but what if they weren't? After all! These political figures must have had their opponents too. We never had to put this to the test fortunately. Anyway as I said before, we are generally only interested in wine, women and perhaps song, not necessarily in that order. As usual we had a few drinks before going ashore and just as usual we each took a hip flask filled with our individual preferential drink. That sounded a bit long-winded, but you know what I mean. Sometimes the local plonk can be a killer. Beer might be okay? But we were always a bit wary of local spirits.

We did a pub-crawl for a while before ending up in a bar where some couples were dancing on a small floor to music from a 'Juke' box. It looked quite nice so we decided to stay awhile. I went

to the bar to order some beer and got talking to an attractive girl sitting alone on a barstool. I took the beer back to my mates and told them that I was returning to the bar to chat up this girl, I felt sure I was on to a good thing. meaning of course that I fancied my chances. I sat next to her keeping her going on drinks and cigarettes while we talked. After a few more drinks I was beginning to feel quite confident and she was getting more and more good-looking.

This might be a good time to relate a common observation among men, (not just seamen), about girls in a bar. There are sometimes, girls that one would not normally give a second glance to when first seeing them. I don't mean that they are ugly, but maybe just not normally your type. However, after a few drinks, they begin to look quite attractive and before closing time they could well be described as raving beauties.

Anyway! To get back to my story! Eventually, this girl persuaded me to try one of her cigarettes. It smelled strongly of perfume and tasted like it too, (not that I've ever tasted perfume) but rather than offend her I continued to smoke it. Now I was beginning to wish that I hadn't, for I started to feel sick, in fact more sick than drunk. I must have looked as bad as I felt because she leaned over and asked me if I would like to go to her flat for a lie down. I thought, well I had better go somewhere and lie down before I fall down.

She called taxi and off we went. I can't remember what her name was or even if I ever did know. I do remember that I was getting more and more drowsy. Slowly my brain was suggesting that she had slipped me a Mickey. No! It couldn't be that! She would have nothing to gain. I would not have much money left and to have me pass out on her wouldn't do her any good, assuming of course that she was just out for a good time like myself. I dismissed these thoughts and tried to focus my brain on staying awake long enough to get to her flat. I knew that my brain was able to comprehend what was happening but my eyes were telling me to go to sleep. I was finding it very difficult to fight this funny feeling of drowsiness while she kept talking to me as though trying to keep me awake. I was hoping now that we would soon arrive at her flat, only for a sleep if nothing else. I could still feel a desire to have sex and I convinced myself that if I could sustain that, I might last out the journey. I am not going to go into the details of my sexy preamble. Suffice to say that after a few minutes I became very much awake and very, very sober. I had suddenly realised that this was not a girl. It is impossible to describe just how I felt. Not what I felt! I was momentarily stunned. I didn't know whether I felt shock, anger or just plain cheated. Everything rolled into one I expect, but uppermost I suppose was 'blind rage'. I shrank back screaming something at her! (Sorry him)! The taxi driver slammed on his brakes throwing both of us onto the floor. I remember lashing out at her/him as she/he was trying to get his/her door open. You can understand that I was now seething with rage and I am sure I would have killed the 'B\*\*\*\*\*D if I could really get at him/her. As the door open I pushed, or perhaps kicked him/her out onto the street. (Sorry for all the slashes, but lets face it. What name would be appropriate?)

The driver by this time had come round and somehow managed to restrain me. He got me to sit back in my seat to try to calm me down and I can vaguely remember thinking how stupid I had been. How could I have been so naive? Slowly it started to sink in. It must have been that damned cigarette. Anyway I was now feeling more and more tired and not at all well. I can remember being led by a couple of people into what looked like an office. Now I was really ill and I don't think I could have helped myself if I'd wanted to, I seemed to be walking like a zombie, and then I must have passed out. I awoke with a splitting headache in a strange almost bare room and tried to piece together the events of earlier in the evening, (or so I thought). It turned out that this was in fact the following day and I had spent the night in detention. Our shipping agent had apparently squared things with the local police and the ships captain. I considered myself very lucky indeed! That 'Mickey' could have got me jailed for life, or worse maybe! I never found out what my mates did or if they knew all along what kind of bar we were in but just left me to find out for myself. There's nothing like learning a lesson first hand I guess. This was another of these occasions that I must call 'gaining experience the hard way'.

**'Rosario': - Argentina**  
**Winestoned Cowboy**

'Rosario' is Argentina's largest inland port and is situated on the Parana River, which runs into the 'Rio De Plata'. As a matter of interest I also discovered that there is another town further up river and to the east called 'Fray Bentos'. I only mention this because I, like many other people, always associated that name with a name of tinned meats back home. Maybe then the stuff is actually processed in that town and exported to the UK. Not surprising really, since Argentina supplied Britain with much of its beef shortly after the war, including the popular 'corned beef'.

I can't now for the life of me, remember why we were in 'Rosario'. I do remember though that we were tied up to a quay about a half-mile or so from the town. We didn't expect there would be much nightlife in such a small town, so at first we tended to either relax on the ship, or on occasion, walk the few hundred yards up the road to a small 'bar-cum-cafe'. Apart from the cargo sheds this was the only building in the immediate area. The owner probably thought himself an enterprising sort of individual, though I guess his only custom would be that of the local workers and of the crews of any ships that came in. I doubt if there would have been many though. Maybe he had an ulterior reason for opening a bar so far from town? Maybe it had been there long before him or the town. I can just see it, a 'Cantina' for the 'Caballeros' by the side of the river! It could well have been, because this bar was just a simple square building with a flat roof and was complete with a wooden walkway, hitch rails and water trough for the horses. One day a couple of shipmates and myself were sitting in this bar enjoying a few drinks and generally soaking up the atmosphere of a Mexican style 'Cantina' (although this was Argentina). Through the door came a couple of 'Vaqueros'? Or might they be called Gauchos, Caballero's? I don't know! Anyway they were both immaculately dressed in Mexican style including wide sombrero, leather trousers and tunic with silver studded belts or Bandoliers. One chap was dressed entirely in black, the other equally resplendent in white. We expected at any moment to see a camera crew following them, it was so much like a scene from a movie. They both spoke good English and we invited them to join us for a drink. Actually they preferred the Argentinean wine so to be neighbourly we decided to do likewise. We got talking generally and they explained that they were waiting for a boat/ferry to take them and their horses up river to a 'Rodeo'. Horses! When was the last time I saw a horse? This we just had to see. They were tied up outside and boy were they something! Like their owners they were resplendent in their saddlery and trappings, which quite contrasted with their colour. One horse was completely white from nose to tail, while the other was all black. Strangely enough the riders also contrasted with their mounts, because the white horse belonged to the rider in black and of course the black horse belonged to the other.

While we were admiring these magnificent animals, the men obviously appreciated our interest and suddenly one of them invited me to get into the saddle of the black horse. I thought he was kidding at first. I was half pissed and didn't know the first thing about horses. However I was keen to get in on this adventure. One of my mates was helped onto the other and we sat there looking at each other a bit apprehensively.

Just outside the bar, a sandy road about ten or so yards wide led off away from the town. Presumably this was the way they had come, because there was evidence of horses quite a bit up the road and right outside the bar where we were now standing (and I don't just mean hoof marks). Now, I had never ridden a horse before in my life and I don't know what stupid compunction persuaded me that I could ride this one. About 200 yards up the road there was a small clump of bushes and these guys explained that we were to ride to the said bushes turn round and head back.

We were given the signal to start and we dug in our heels. Nothing happened! We knee nudged, flicked the reins and tried every damn way to get the horses started but they just stood there like statues. The owner of the horse that I was on told me that I was too tense, that I should not put my feet too far into the stirrups and relax my grip on the reins. As soon as I had done this, he gave a very low and soft whistle. The horse immediately reared up, whereupon I slid down its back onto the ground with a heavy thud, well, perhaps not as heavy as it might have been, for I had landed on some of the afore mentioned 'dung'. I wasn't really hurt except, perhaps for my pride. Everyone had a good laugh and of course, I knew that the whole thing was deliberate. Why else did he get me to take my feet from the stirrups? Mind you, I guess it was safer that way. I decided to hold my tongue though, lest I offend the guys. I got the feeling that they

were taking the 'Mickey' and that anyway they were in complete control of their mounts, whether they were riding them or not. After I had cleaned myself down a bit, (though I wasn't too messy), I got back on the horse again. This time I was given the same instructions but told also to grasp the saddle horn or pommel it might be called, just for safety sake. My mate was also beginning to get in on the show now and we were at last ready. As soon as we settled ourselves the men gave their horses the signal to start.

Now I don't know what the signal was, but the horses took off at breakneck speed and I mean that literally, if I hadn't been holding on to the pommel and leaning forward, I could very easily have been left in mid air. Anyway we rode along side by side enjoying the experience and yelling like a couple of cowboys. Yippee! It sounded like, but on reflection it might have been a scream. As we approached the clump of bushes we slowed down (not voluntarily I might add). They just seemed to know when to do so. Or were they being controlled from afar. We turned round and started back, again at a very fast gallop. As we got close to where we had started from, I tried to slow down a bit. Now, to do this I had to let go of the pommel so that I could pull back on the reins. Did the horse slow down? Not a bit! In fact it was going just as fast when I drew level with its owner. For a brief moment I thought I was going to head off up the road in the opposite direction. I could not have been more wrong! A shrill whistle from this guy brought the animal to a halt on its haunches. Inevitably I flew over its head because I wasn't prepared for it, (would it have made any difference if I had been?). One of my feet was still in the stirrup and I was left hanging precariously upside down in front of the horse, my mate of course suffered a similar fate, but he at least managed to stay on its neck.

As soon as I had been freed I screamed at the guys, demanding to know why they had tried to kill us, this time I was really angry and would have hit out if my mate hadn't restrained me. I don't lose my temper easily but I was getting the distinct impression that these jokers were playing with us (I could use a more descriptive word, but I've been trying to keep these pages clean). I more or less accused them of this but they just laughed it off, insisting that we were never in any danger. They told us that the horses were very highly trained and knew exactly what they were doing. Well! Maybe they did, but they had forgotten to tell the horses that we were a couple of novices. No matter, I just had to put it down to another experience.

I wonder how they got on at the rodeo, probably got a few good laughs, relating how they had conned a couple of half pissed seamen in 'Rosario'.

I was signed off from the 'Eskbank' in 'Hull' on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1954