

# SUPERNUMERY TO DURBAN

A series of short stories about his life at sea

by Tommy Mitchell

## 'Southampton': - UK – Supernumery to Durban MV 'Jagersfontein'

This time I write, not as a serving officer, but as a supernumery passenger on the ship 'Jagersfontein', a vessel of the Holland Africa Line. She was quite a large passenger/cargo vessel whose regular route was from Europe to South Africa. Our own company (Bank Line) had booked passage for us out to South Africa to relieve the crew of the MV 'Inverbank', which was expected to coincide with our arrival in Durban. I think there were about 8 of us, 3 deck officers, 1 radio operator and 4 engineers. We were all meeting for the first time, though each had served on other ships with other companies. I think the 2nd engineer and I were the only two who were original Bank Line employees. We were travelling first class and sharing two or three berth cabins. To us, it was a bit like being on a cruise. Travelling first class on a ship was quite an experience for us and of course it gave us a chance to see how the other half lives (as the saying goes). There was never any question of not knowing how to conduct ourselves. We liked to think that we were officers and gentlemen and tried to act so. Most of the passengers it seemed were either going to visit relatives, emigrating, or going on business.



After the first few days at sea we could begin to tell which passengers were genuinely excited and enjoying their voyage to South Africa and which were treating it as a normal part of life. All of them anyway were obviously able to pay for first class passage. Then there were the ones who were finding the voyage a chore to be endured and obviously had their fare paid for them. Let me expand on this a

bit lest you conclude that everyone on the ship didn't get on. For instance, those who really could afford to travel 1st class were almost always very outgoing and friendly, never speaking about themselves or their background. They were always willing to join in any fun and games or have a few drinks with us at the bar. In fact we found that they would often seek out our company because we always seemed to be having such a good time, whether in the bar or just playing games on deck. We were not rowdy, just having a good time. In short, they were genuinely enjoying themselves and not afraid to let their hair down. Then there were the others who although they were travelling first class, were travelling on business (paid for by their company no doubt). I guess you could say that we also came into this category, since our company had paid our fares. I can only justify our position by saying that we would have been just as happy to work our passage. Of course this group too had money but somehow or other they didn't come across the same. They always seemed to be putting on airs and graces; acting like a bunch of stuffed shirts and generally making everyone else feel that they were beneath them. Well perhaps we weren't very good at communicating in a business sense, but not having to impress anyone meant that we could get on with enjoying ourselves. During the day the swimming pool would be literally heaving with people just trying to cool off, but it was not very big and most of the time all you could really do was stand in one place up to your neck in water, which eventually became as warm as the surrounding air. For most of the time we either played deck games; or just sat relaxing in the bar. In the evenings we generally engaged in a little gambling or attended the dances. This I quite enjoyed, because dress was usually formal and it gave us an excuse to wear our uniform, which helped to impress the girls or in most cases older women and believe me there were quite a few well to do ones married

and single, young and old. It was generally our practice at the end of the evening or early hours of the morning to be exact, to head for the swimming pool. We called it our 'midnight swim' though it was always well past that. The pool was always quiet and unlit because most of the passengers were already off to their cabin or in the bar. We would strip off to our underwear, jump in and generally lark about, being careful of course not to make too much noise in case we annoyed anyone or attracted attention from the crew.

I can remember one night in particular, when four or five of us went along to the swimming pool and were larking about as usual. Suddenly from the gloom at the side of the pool, came a woman's voice calling quietly to us. We knew she wasn't there when we arrived so we were hoping that we hadn't disturbed her night and that she was coming to complain. We went over to where she was sitting in a deck chair; to discover that it was one of the passengers we had nicknamed the Duchess. The Duchess was a woman in her eighties, quite stout but very erect. She wore a pair of those pince-nez spectacles and always carried an expensive looking cane though she had no difficulty in walking. We started to apologise but she silenced us with a wave of her hand. It was amazing how one could be so subdued by one wave of a hand from this regal looking woman. Now we were in for it, for we knew that she was very friendly with the captain. She stood up and took off her bathrobe. We were absolutely stunned! There she was in a bathing costume asking if she could join us. I think we were struck dumb for a few seconds, then, she explained that she actually liked swimming but was too embarrassed to go near the pool during the day and anyway there was no room to swim. She said that she had long been aware of our little visits and had eventually plucked up the courage to try to join us. She told us that she had her own private swimming pool at home in Durban in which she exercised frequently. Well, she was quite safe with us and for the next few nights she would join us. We got to like her a lot and she would often join us at the bar for a Sherry or Port. She seemed to command quite a bit of respect from the other passengers, probably another reason why she didn't go to the pool during the day. One evening during a dinner dance, she came over to our table and said "I am not really a Duchess you know, though I might have had the opportunity many years ago". We were of course very embarrassed that she had learned her nickname, but she sensed this and just smiled. Over the next few nights we found that other passengers were beginning to come to the pool at the same time as us, so that was our secret swimming finished. The Duchess of course stopped going to the pool as soon as she knew that others were going. Well, she would have been back to square one wouldn't she and anyway she wouldn't have wanted the others to find out her secret.

One of the games we used to play in the bar was called 'Poker Dice'. This was a game played by each person throwing four dice to see who got the highest score, the highest throw of course being the winner. Unlike the card game, each person throwing could see what score each other got. After a while the game got a bit boring, as the winnings just seemed to be evenly distributed amongst us and there was seldom a clear winner financially. We devised our own version of the game that would add some excitement to it. Instead of each player being allowed to keep or discard before throwing the dice again. The rules were changed so that each player was allowed only one throw. The person then with the highest score was the winner. Well! Maybe not quite! You see this game was played in rounds of three. Generally there would be 4 of us playing and after the first round the winner was required to order a drink of their choice. If there were a tie, then they would throw again. The drink; could be anything, from a bottle of Coke' to an 'Exotic Cocktail'. This was then left aside till the end of the second round, when the next winner was required to pay for it. Then the real crunch 'came! Because the winner of the third round had to drink whatever had been ordered and paid for. Now you can see why each player was only allowed one throw. It would have been too easy to discard a good hand in the hope that you would get a lower score. When we first started to play this game, some of the concocted drinks were vile to say the least and considering that each person between games was ordering and drinking their own particular choice, you could eventually find yourself mixing your drinks horribly. After a couple of hours and maybe only three or four drinks, any one of us could be escorted back to his cabin in a very sick condition. We had to devise a better way to play the game, where everyone could stay in the game for the longest possible time. It was decided that at the start of the game only one recognised drink had to be ordered throughout, the only other stipulation was that it had to be an acceptable spirit, such as Gin, Whiskey, Rum, Vodka or some other. Even a straight beer; or soft drink would be acceptable, but definitely no outrageous mixes. This wasn't considered a problem to most of us as we were on the whole able to handle almost any spirit, so long as we didn't mix it too much. I don't mean that we were all hardened boozers (though some of us would have a hard time proving otherwise) but it did mean that at least the greatest loser would not have to drink generally more than 6 or 8 shorts and

the game could go on much longer. However you could still find yourself having several different drinks and a queasy stomach during the evening. I have mentioned this game because eventually some of the other passengers wanted to join in the fun but any more than 4 or 5 players made it increasingly difficult to keep track of the scores. Therefore we decided to keep it at 4 as a maximum, but if at any time you wanted to opt out, then your place could be taken over by someone else. Before long we'd find several other groups starting to play similar games. I don't think we were doing the barman any favours though, because during the game one could only buy bottled beer for his own consumption. If the games worked out fairly even, then at least you might find yourself just a little merry by the end of the evening.

Sometimes there wouldn't be a dance on at night, but maybe a concert or perhaps a whist drive. This was not usually our scene but we seldom missed out on a good night. For one thing there were also tourist class passengers on board, though they were segregated from the 1st class by an outside stairway down to the afterdeck space. These tourist class passengers were strictly prohibited from the 1st class areas and likewise with the 1st class. Now I doubt that many of the 1st class passengers would want to mix anyway, certainly I never saw any men or women in evening dress trying to make their way aft. Not so with us! Because we always wore our uniform as evening dress and seeing an officer making his way aft would not in the least be conspicuous. The tourist class also held nightly functions and on a couple of occasions some of us would gate crash the festivities and join in. Truthfully, these tourist passengers assumed we were officers from the ship and thought no more about it, except for some of the girls who were only too eager to be seen with an officer. There was of course one major snag in this because we knew that on the following day these girls might come looking for us among the crew and although they were never likely to find us, it meant that we had to curtail our visits to save answering awkward questions. We were never likely to meet any of the ships real officers as they would either be on duty, or attending the 1<sup>st</sup> class functions.

I have quite a few pleasant memories of this ship but most are now beginning to get a bit vague. I remember a young Dutch couple that I had met through one of the girls in tourist class. I think they were a newly married couple and gave me the impression that they were a bit apprehensive of going out into the big wide world, Well! South Africa anyway! This was probably the first time they had even left their hometown. I knew exactly how they felt. It was only a couple years earlier that I too had left home for the first time. I think they felt quite comfortable with me. One of the places that we stopped at enroute was I think the Seychelles Islands and the passengers were allowed ashore. While ashore, I met the Dutch couple in a bar. They were sitting with a couple of what looked like; local men and the young man seemed to be having a good time drinking. However I don't think I could say the same for his young wife. She saw me and invited me to join them for a drink. After a few beers, I noticed that her husband was starting to get drunk and that one of the local guys was getting a bit familiar with his young wife, even though I was sitting only a few feet away. I sat there for a while and eventually, having put two and two together, came to the conclusion, that it was time we left the place. This of course did not suit these local guys and an argument started between us. The Dutchman by this time was barely able to stay awake and his wife having read the situation was obviously frightened. Fortunately a couple of the ships stewards from 1<sup>st</sup> class were also in the bar and came to my assistance. We managed to avoid a confrontation with the locals and I was able to get the couple safely back to the ship.

One night when we again visited the tourist passenger area, I met the couple again. The man thanked me for looking after them and by way of appreciation, presented me with a pair of brightly painted Dutch clogs. I accepted graciously while hoping that I was not depriving someone in South Africa of a gift. The clogs subsequently found their way to members of my family when I got back home.

On every passenger ship, or cruise ship, there is always a prize awarded to the passenger who guesses closest to the actual miles covered each day. This prize is usually awarded in the afternoon after the noon position has been calculated. On a couple of occasions one of our guys won the prize. He was one of the deck officers and before long he was being accused by some of the stuffed shirts of taking secret readings. He assured us that he was not cheating but had logically worked out the possible miles by averaging the previous mileage. We believed him but his accusers didn't, so they challenged him to give a reading for the following day. He declined of course because there was no way that he could be sure of winning. He did however secretly give a reasonably accurate distance to one of the women passengers who subsequently won the prize. The prize was a bottle

of 'Champagne'. Whether it was good or not, only she and he could tell, because she invited him to her cabin to share it. I wonder now if he was telling us fibs and that he did have a 'Sextant' in his cabin. No matter!

### **Cape Town: - South Africa**

Some of the ships passengers were due to disembark here and it was very likely that we would get some time ashore. Some of those disembarking had brought cars with them and they would have to be off loaded. Amongst them were a couple of Rolls Royce and their owners had arranged for the R.A.C. to oversee their safe unloading onto the dockside. We somehow got talking to the R.A.C. guy and discovered that he was a Scottish ex-patriot who had emigrated there just after the end of the war. We weren't exactly fed up with being pampered aboard ship but we did want a bit of a change, so we asked him where we should go to sample the nightlife. He suggested that as soon as he had finished off loading the cars, he would take us on a tour of the city. He came to pick us up late in the afternoon and informed us that his wife had invited us to dinner. He asked us if we wouldn't mind wearing our uniforms, as he wanted to impress some of his neighbours. We of course didn't mind this a bit but it did mean that our trip to town was no longer on. Three of us decided to go along with him and quickly got changed into our 'number tens'. Firstly! He did take us into the city and showed us where some of the reasonable restaurants were and where we could have a drink. What is probably more important however is that he showed us where not to go. I can remember he drove through a district pointing out to us what he called Cape Coloured. These are of course what the South African white people call the 'half caste' blacks. He told us that this was called 'district 6' or was it 'district 9' I can't remember which, but we were to avoid it, if at all possible. Not so much because of the colour of the people, but because of its reputation for trouble. Don't forget this was in the days of 'Apartheid' and to be seen with a black or coloured person socially was strictly not on. I have never really been a supporter 'Apartheid' but as the saying goes "When in Rome do as the Romans do"!

I was now beginning to think that we were never going to get a chance to sample the city itself and asked him if we could perhaps stop for a cold beer. He obviously understood how we felt and told us that we would have plenty of opportunities to see the place on our own, as the ship we were joining in Durban also called regularly at Cape Town. Anyway I guess he didn't want us to drink too much before the drive out to his house, which was about half an hours drive from the city. Eventually after we had gone about 20 miles or so, we started along a kind of dirt track going well away from the road. Another 5 or 10 minutes later we passed a group of 5 or 6 men standing, dressed in what looked like army uniform. At least four of the men were white but I did see a couple of black men. As we passed I could see the white men looking in our direction, we were in a kind of open 'Land Rover' so they would obviously see that we were in uniform and must have wondered who we were.

Soon we had reached our friend's house and his family came out to meet us. There were other houses in the area, not slap up against each other, but probably 2 or 3 hundred yards apart and separated by large fields or at least areas of open ground all round. This guy's house was I suppose a typical ranch type, painted all white and it seemed all verandas. Thoughts of 'Plantation owner' and 'Great white hunter' came into my mind. After dinner we all retired to the verandas for drinks and general conversation. The drinks were mainly spirits like Brandy or Whisky and soda, but what we really wanted was a nice cold beer. Soon we were joined by the men in uniform we had passed earlier in the day and a few neighbours whom I think were curious to know who we were. The men in uniform turned out to be game wardens from a reserve some miles away and knew our friend from their visits to the docks in Cape Town when they went to collect any goods. All too soon it was time to take us back to the ship, which was a pity because now I was quite enjoying myself. We eventually got back some time after midnight and the gangway security staff were certainly relieved to see us as the ship was due to leave for Durban very early the following morning.