

MV TYRIA

A series of short stories about his life at sea

by Tommy Mitchell

MV 'TYRIA' - 28th Aug. 1959 until 15th Oct. 1959



I had been ashore now for over a month and it wasn't long before I went back to sea. This time with a company I had already sailed with Anchor Line! I have mentioned earlier in these pages that this company's vessels were all classed by the first letter of the ship's name. I had sailed on two 'E' boats, namely 'Eucadia' and 'Elysia,

now I was about to join one of the 'T' boats. I signed on the 'Tyria' in Glasgow on 28th August 1959 as 3rd engineer.

The 'Tyria' was a vessel of almost 6000tons gross and was engaged on a regular route between Glasgow and New York, though having said that, she did sometimes call at other ports in UK and other Eastern American ports. However her main ports were still Glasgow and New York.

Anchor Line owned a warehouse at Yorkhill quay in Glasgow and it was there that I joined her. The main cargo was usually Scottish beers and spirits. By that I mean Tenant's, McEwan's and Alloa Ales. The spirits comprised much well known malt and blended scotch whiskies. We also carried cases of Drambuie Liqueur. The dock workers controlled the entire loading operation from shore to ship including the winches and were very adept at it. Being typical working class men, they generally tried to ensure that they got a free helping. This was usually pre-arranged between the men who loaded the slings on shore, the winch men and the men in the hold. One of the deck officers always assisted the 'Tally Clerk', along with a customs officer. Everything had to be accounted for, even breakages. However customs would only certify a breakage if the bottle cap and seal were still intact. It is well known that if a bottle accidentally gets broken, the neck and stopper usually remain intact. For the dockers to get their whisky therefore, they could not simply empty a bottle then break it. No! They would get their whisky another way. I have said that they had a pre-arranged method and I will try to describe how it worked.

Some of the dockers would board the ship to rig and man the winches. Others remained on the dockside to load the spirits onto the slings. But the main ones were down in the hold unloading the sling and stacking the cases neatly and safely. These men carried on board with them, a few galvanised iron buckets and I assumed that this was for them to 'piss' in since it was a long way up for such a basic function. In their jacket pockets they would also have a bottle of IRN-BRU and I presume, their 'pieces' (sandwiches). I found out later that one or other of them would also bring a Jelly bag. You know! A bag used in the making of home-made jams and jellies.

At first nothing was noticeably wrong with the loading and one can assume that this was intentional, to lull the 'Tally Clerk' and Custom's officer into a false sense of security. Or maybe it was just because they didn't want to start drinking too early. As far as I remember the spirits were in cardboard boxes and these were loaded into mesh type slings, occasionally some of the cases would hang rather precariously near the edge of the sling. This of course is what the men in the hold are looking for. The winch men would cleverly and deliberately bump the loaded sling against the hatch coaming with the result that one or more cases would fall. Too high and all the bottles would smash. The skill was to do it at just the right height so that at least a few bottles would survive. In any case, the cardboard box usually burst open. Now I could see what the buckets were for. As the remains of a fallen case were cleaned up, the neck containing the stopper and seal were put into one of these buckets while the rest of the broken glass and unbroken bottles would be returned to the deck later in their soggy cardboard. At least that's what it looked like to me but actually in the shadows of the hold, some of the intact bottles were being kept back and deliberately broken at the neck. Their contents were then emptied into another bucket through a jelly bag. Of course some very fine particles of glass might still filter through, but they obviously considered it a risk worth taking.

At lunchtime the men would exit the hold and join the rest of their mates ashore. I said earlier that when they came aboard, they had bottles of IRN-BRU with them. Having spent all morning down a stuffy hot hold, their bottles were still remarkably full. Yes! You've guessed it; they had either drunk or emptied the original contents and were bringing ashore the whisky they had salvaged to share with their mates. They weren't of course foolish enough to get pissed during their break. They still had an afternoon shift to do with the prospect of more spirits to collect. The afternoon would more or less be a repeat of the morning shift and I find it hard to believe that these covert actions were going un-noticed by the authorities. However nothing was ever said by those responsible for the loading. Perhaps they too were getting their cut, or maybe they thought that a few dozen bottles were an acceptable loss considering the total cargo.

I have explained on previous pages the general layout of the accommodation on the ships I have sailed on. This ship was no different in that my cabin porthole opened onto the outer deck and my bunk immediately below the porthole. While in port I usually leave my porthole open, but of course keep my door locked. I returned to my cabin one day to find a bottle of Whisky and a bottle of Drambuie lying half-hidden on top of my bunk. Obviously these had been put through the porthole so that I would eventually find them. Knowing the score with the dockers fiddle, I couldn't very well advertise to anyone that I had acquired a couple of bottles. The dockers didn't owe me any favours so I knew that this wasn't a present from them and anyway every bottle had to be accounted for. I hid the bottles and went out onto deck where I met one of my shipmates. He immediately asked me if I had got the two bottles. He was involved with the loading of the cargo and knew perfectly well that there was a fiddle. He told me to break one of the bottles and pour its contents into my water flask; he would take the other bottle and do the same with his flask. As an engineer I always had an adjustable spanner in my cabin, so breaking the neck off the bottle wouldn't be much of a problem. However I did realise that there was a possibility that the bottle itself might shatter spilling the liquid everywhere. My cabin would smell like a distillery for weeks. So I decided to do it in the shower cubicle at the end of the alleyway. That meant I could sweep up any broken glass and wash away any spillage. The problem now was how to filter its contents into my flask. I needn't have worried about it, because my mate soon turned up with a jug and clean tea towel from the pantry. The tea towel was placed across the top of the jug and held in place with insulating tape from the electrical store. We then broke the neck from the Drambuie bottle and poured it into the jug through the tea towel. The tea towel was then removed so that the Drambuie could be decanted into my flask. Having washed the tea towel, we then did the same thing with the Whisky into his flask. My mate then left with the two bottle tops, leaving me to dispose of the broken bottles overboard. He came back about fifteen minutes later with another two bottles of Drambuie. Now! We could get any amount of Whisky quite cheaply from the bonded stores, but Drambuie is a liqueur and not something one would drink in the same quantity as Whisky, so we didn't want to pass it up. Our flasks were full so we didn't have anything to decant into. Not to be outdone, I went ashore to get a couple of empty lemonade bottles, which proved a wee, bit difficult at first because most of the dockers had already refilled theirs with spirits. However I eventually managed to acquire a couple and

we repeated our decanting and disposal process with the two bottles. My mate said that he could get his hands on more bottles, but let's face it enough was enough and the more you get involved, the more likely you are to get caught. Anyway the loading would go on for a couple of days, so if we did want more, there was plenty of time. I have said that the ship was in Glasgow, which meant that I could go home at night if I wanted to. On this particular night I decided to do just that and to take a bottle with me. The Drambuie was in my water flask, so it would have to be the Whisky. Having told the family the story behind the lemonade bottle and the uncertainty that there might still be some fine glass particles in it, my father decided that it would be best if the contents were re-filtered. He was not a boozing man but did enjoy a pint of beer occasionally. This then would be something special for him to enjoy at his leisure. I went off early next morning to rejoin the ship.

They had now almost completed loading the spirits and were beginning to load the cases of beer. This was not something that the dockers were much interested in and it was not surprising that very few cases were dropped or damaged. They had only been interested in the spirits and that part of the cargo was now complete. I can't help wondering if many intact bottles of spirits actually fell into the waters at the dockside. Who knows! Yorkhill Quay might still yield sunken treasure.

When the beer was finally loaded, the lower holds were covered at the 'tween deck' with the usual hatch boards. Perhaps I should explain what the 'tween decks' are. As the name implies, it is a deck between the lower hold and the main deck. This deck runs 'fore' and 'aft' along the length of the vessel and 'port and 'starboard' across it at the main 'fore' and 'aft' bulkheads. In other words it is almost a copy of the 'main deck' including hatch openings. Apart from the obvious structural strength that this gives to the ship, it also creates a large flat area level with the lower hold when they have been covered, on which bulky cargo like machinery or vehicles can be stowed, hence the term 'tween deck'. There is no entry to the 'tween deck' other than by a fixed ladder descending into each hold. I have said that the holds have a 'fore' and 'aft' bulkhead each having what is called access holes or better known as 'manholes'. These have covers bolted on and are removed only if the shipyard requires access.

Manhole covers are also located on the bulkheads adjacent to the machinery spaces, such as the engineroom, steering gear compartment or refrigerated storerooms. I know that all seemed like an introduction to naval architecture, but it was necessary that the reader understand the layout of the ship for what was to follow later in the voyage.

I have said that the 'tween deck' was often used to carry machinery, vehicles or other similar cargo. However! I remember one particular occasion when the 'tween deck' was used not to carry any of the above possible cargoes, but horses.

Yes! We were to carry some thoroughbred horses to New York. I don't know if they were racehorses, show-jumpers or what, but they all looked quite tall and in immaculate condition. I think there was about eight of them and to accommodate them comfortably, the 'tween deck' in the forward hold was converted into stalls. They were simply a series of strong wooden compartments arranged side by side along the 'tween deck'. They were lined with straw and had a kind of padding around the framework to protect the animals against injury, should we experience bad weather. In fact you could say that they were not much different from a normal stable layout. The horses themselves wore, what can only be described as 'crash helmets'. This was more like a series of leather straps fitted to cover the top of their head and forehead. This was a very necessary piece of headwear since there was only be about 2feet between their head and the deck above. In fact on one occasion I had to go into the hold to check on an air circulation fan and while there I approached one of the horses, stretching out my hand to touch its nose. Obviously this was not the correct thing to do, as the horse immediately drew back throwing its head upward and striking it hard on the 'deck-head'. The headgear was definitely a requirement. The animals were to be looked after by a couple of 'Grooms', if that is the correct term, who would be responsible for feeding and cleaning the animals. The horses would be confined to their stalls for the duration of the voyage. That is not as bad as it sounds, because on fine days the top hatch covers would be opened to let in plenty of fresh air and light. In any case the trip across to New York would take less than a week. The 'Grooms were able to share a spare cabin in the main accommodation,

I have mentioned in earlier pages that I always had a 'peg' of whisky and a couple of beers at the end of each watch. This voyage would be no different, except perhaps that I would

partake of a small Drambuie from time to time. Drambuie being a liqueur is best savoured slowly and in not so generous a measure as whisky. Anyway I preferred my whisky and beer chaser. I calculated that by the time we arrived in New York, I would still have about ½ litre of Drambuie in my water flask.

About a day or so before we were due to arrive in New York, one of the deck hands was discovered dumping some cases of beer overboard. The Chief Steward had caught him late at night when he'd gone 'aft' to check his stores. He was of course reported to the Captain who immediately began an investigation. Apparently they were not from the ship's stores but were part of the cargo. What was not so obvious; was why they were throwing them overboard. The initial investigation revealed that several crewmembers had gained access to the 'aft' hold by removing a manhole cover. I have said that these covers are bolted on and are removable. However there are a considerable number of nuts to be undone, probably in excess of 20. These covers would obviously have to be replaced after each excursion into the hold, especially at the beginning and end of each watch when myself or one of my shipmates would be required to go to the 'aft' machinery space to check the steering gear. I must say that I personally never noticed anything unusual at any time, but then I was only interested in the machinery and being familiar with my surroundings I would have paid no attention unless something was blatantly obvious.

You are surely thinking that a lot of time must have been spent undoing and replacing all of these nuts each time. Not so! You see the cover would only be replaced with perhaps 3 or 4 nuts, the others being drilled out so that they would just slide over the studs. This was evidence that some of the engineroom hands were also involved. It was later revealed that these men had tunnelled their way through the beer and down to get to the spirits. A very dangerous undertaking at any time since the cargo could shift and cause tons of cases to collapse and trap, injure or crush whoever was inside.

These people did not want the spirits for personal consumption, but to be sold ashore for some extra spending Dollars in New York. Obviously most of the extracted cases of beer had to be thrown overboard, there being far too many to conceal. Well! Their elaborate plan had been uncovered and the search was now on to find the spirits, if any, that had been removed from the hold. The search would cover every conceivable hiding place, including the machinery spaces but particularly the living quarters of both officers and crew.

You will remember that I still had about ½Litre of Drambuie, so I obviously had to get rid of it to avoid being implicated. Knowing the nature and timetable of the search, I was able to get a head start. I had just come off watch and before I even took a shower, I made straight for my flask to dispose of its contents. However I couldn't bring myself to pour it all down the drain, but instead I poured some into a glass, which I drank. I still felt that it would be a shame to throw away what remained, so I poured another. Still, there was a considerable amount left and I made up my mind that I was going to drink the lot. I emptied the flask into a coffee mug and topped it up with black coffee from the pantry. This done, I rinsed out the flask and filled it with fresh water. After I had showered and changed I sat out on deck to enjoy my special coffee. It would be almost 8 hours before I was due back on watch, so I knew that I had plenty of time to finish it. I certainly took my time and in fact I kept topping up with fresh black coffee. By the time I had finished it a couple of hours later, I had vowed never again to drink Drambuie. Well! Not for a while anyway.

The search of the ship did not reveal any stolen cargo and certainly all that was found in my cabin was a few cans of beer and a half-empty whisky bottle that I'd bought from the ship's store. The Captain went so far as to confirm this by checking my 'tap' record with the Chief Steward. Everyone was warned that the matter would have to be reported to the authorities when we arrived in port. This could mean a further search of the ship by them. When we arrived in New York the police did come aboard but for some reason they decided not to conduct another search. However they did station some guards aboard especially at the gangway, presumably their tactics were to observe the crew generally and to search anyone going ashore. If any stolen cargo was to be smuggled ashore, it was going to be very difficult. That's not to say that nobody succeeded. One chap said to me afterwards! "Almost everyone has a price and some also have a taste for whisky". One can assume then, that at least some

of the guards were bent. Anyway my conscience was clear enough, although I had purloined a couple of bottles in Glasgow; they had been accounted for in the manner described earlier.

When the cargo was being discharged, it was discovered that there was a tunnel over 20 feet long through the beer and indeed some cases of spirits had been removed. I guess this had been expected anyway, but the main talking point was how cleverly it had been done. It may have been considered clever by the police and Longshoremen' (name for Dockers in USA), but most of us thought that it had been a very foolhardy undertaking. Certainly one would have to be very brave or very stupid to endure crawling along such a narrow tunnel and to come all the way back dragging a case of spirits. I say dragging, because there was no room to turn around, so one would have to exit again backwards. I know that many brave men have dug narrow tunnels as a means of escape from their captors but they had the advantage of usually stable mother earth. However, our tunnelers had had to endure a very unstable environment caused by the rolling and pitching of the ship. No! I wouldn't have called that brave, not even Foolhardy. Just plain stupid fits better.

I cannot remember what the final outcome was and I don't recall anyone being charged with the theft. Maybe the insurers decided to write it off since the amount of loss was such a small proportion of the thousands of cases that we carried. I did two trips on the 'Tyria' carrying the same cargo, but the fore mentioned saga was never repeated. Mind you all of the bulkhead manhole covers were now on the regular checklist for all of the watches.

New York

What can I say about this American City? It is probably the most important City after Washington. Certainly when I was there in the 1950's it was the busiest seaport on the American East Coast. One of the most impressive sights of course is the famous 'Statue of Liberty' which dominates the entrance to New York harbour. Of course there are also many fine buildings in the city itself, but they are so high that one can't quite see them without getting a sore neck. I think you would have to be a New Yorker to really appreciate them. I have said many times on these pages, that I was never much interested in a country's customs, architecture or politics. After 7 ½ years travelling the world, I had learned nothing. I'm afraid New York would be no different. Mind you! I almost didn't get the chance to even see beyond the ship. You see, the American immigration was obsessed with communism in these times and anyone with any communist connection was automatically refused entry. All of us were questioned on our political beliefs and whether we had ever been to a country under a communist regime. Without thinking, I admitted to having visited 'Shanghai' on a previous vessel. I'm afraid that immediately put the 'shutters' up on me getting an entry visa. Not only myself, but also a couple of crewmen who'd similarly at one time been to ports in some of the 'Eastern Bloc' countries. It took almost a whole day of negotiation by the Captain, the company agent and to some extent, the British Consul before we were allowed ashore. Never mind, all's well that ends well.

One place that I was determined to visit was 'Broadway' I had heard so much about it that I just had to see it. Myself and a couple of shipmates did eventually manage a couple of times, to visit a cinema in that area. I cannot remember the name of the theatre but I do remember that one of the films we saw was a black and white one called 'Some like it Hot' with Tony Curtis and Jack Lemon.

It was after one of these visits and we were making our way back to the ship that we were stopped by a policeman for 'Jay Walking'. Quite a serious offence I understand and punishable by an 'on-the-spot-fine'. As soon as he started speaking to us we realised that he had a Scottish accent and of course we got talking to him and invited him to come to the ship the next day for a few drinks. He told us that he was originally from Airdrie and had immigrated to the USA shortly after the war. We explained that we were Merchant Seamen and that we'd had a few drinks. I guess that was fairly obvious to him, else we might not have attempted to start crossing the road and he might not have stopped us. Being drunk and incapable is another offence. We were I suppose a bit 'drunk', but certainly not 'incapable', though I'll admit we were being a bit boisterous. He had by now decided not to book us, but instead gave us a lecture about the large 'WALK' and 'DON'T WALK' signs and that they mean exactly what they say. He explained that we should only cross at recognised places where these signs

are displayed. Understand that many of the City streets are 6 lane dual carriageways and always busy with traffic, which seemed to comprise mostly of 'Yellow' taxis. To add to that the vehicles are all driving on the wrong side of the road? It's easy to become disorientated especially after a few drinks. I remember several times being caught in the middle of a crossing, not knowing whether to 'WALK', 'DON'T WALK', 'STOP', 'RUN' or just stand and 'SCREAM'.

One of the things that did intrigue me was the American love for fast foods. Many Americans seem to live entirely on this. Nowadays it is commonly called 'Junk' food and obviously does more than satisfy your hunger. To be honest I've never seen so many obese people in my life. Sure! We had 'hot-dog' and 'hamburger' stalls at home, but generally these stalls resembled converted caravans and were usually sited at strategic positions in the city only (generally in or near George Square in Glasgow) after midnight. But the street vendors of New York sold their stuff from handcarts at any time of day and would move frequently to a different location. There were of course the usual 'hot-dogs', 'burgers' and various other so-called fast foods, but the one that I particularly liked was the 'Tamale'. The 'Tamale' (pronounced 'Tuh Ma Lee') I am told is really a Mexican dish, but often available in the USA, well, it was in New York anyway. Basically it is a kind of dough, filled with a various selection of chopped vegetables, meat and spices. This is then wrapped as a parcel in softened cornhusks and steamed until cooked through. I sometimes would buy one while walking (maybe staggering) back to the ship at night. I must admit that the first time I ever tried 'Tamale' I didn't realise that the cornhusk had to be peeled back before eating. The vendor of course soon put me right after watching me struggle to get my teeth through the package. A bit I suppose like trying to eat a fish supper without unwrapping it.

You will remember that we had invited the policeman to visit the ship. Well he duly arrived with one of his colleagues. A big burly New Yorker who spoke in an accent I was barely able to understand. I'm sure he said he was from the 'Bronx'. No matter, he was a nice guy and after a few drinks they asked us if we would like to go to a beach barbecue. I never knew that New York had a beach! But we decided to go along anyway. We took a couple of bottles of whisky and a few cases of beer with us. I am sure that the place was called 'Long Island' beach and it was a bit of a drive outside the city. The car belonged to the big guy and although it was a bit old and scratched it still looked like a flashy big car. But, then all American cars at that time looked flashy. We piled the stuff into a cool-box in the boot of the car and set off. We'd been driving for about five minutes and all the while the big guy was cursing at his car and complaining that its performance was unacceptable. He said as much in a more colourful language of course. In the end he pulled into a second hand car sales place and traded his car in for another. The whole transaction could not have taken more than ten or fifteen minutes. The big guy seemed quite pleased with himself, saying that the dealer was a friend of his and had given him a bargain but I wouldn't mind betting that he made sure that the dealer realised that he was dealing with a policeman. Certainly the car was a little bit bigger (if that was possible) and a lot more quiet and comfortable. Certainly it had that prolonged bouncy feeling that you see in these big American cars. I had heard a lot said about fast living in this country and I'd say that this could be considered a prime example. Where else in the world could you change your car in a matter of minutes? Legally anyway!

The barbecue went well considering there must have been about forty people at it. Not all at the same place of course. It was made up of several different groups, each with their own little fire on the beach, but once the music started everyone just mingled together dancing and singing, perhaps even exchanging a drink or two. I'm afraid I don't remember much after the first hour or so and spent the rest of the evening sitting under a blanket feeling absolutely sick. I don't even remember returning to the ship. The following morning I no longer felt sick but suffered from the world's biggest hangover. I couldn't remember what I'd been drinking or smoking the night before, but one can assume that some of the stuff I'd been smoking wasn't always tobacco. Yes! New York is a truly cosmopolitan city and it is a pity that I didn't take the time to really appreciate some of its finer qualities. Like so many of my visits to other countries, I was intent only in my own self-indulgence in having a good time. The ship returned to Glasgow on 6th October 1959 where I was paid off. However, I was asked to stand by for a week and to sail with her to Liverpool. This done, I eventually left the ship on 15th October 1959.