

LAST TRIP

A series of short stories about his life at sea

by Tommy Mitchell

MV 'CAXTON' - 21st December 1959 until 11th April 1960



The 'CAXTON' was a ship of about 5700 gross tonnes and had been purpose built to ply the often-treacherous North Atlantic Ocean. I joined her at Salford docks in Manchester on 21st December 1959. Manchester of course is some 35 miles from the mouth of the river Mersey and before the voyage could begin we would have to navigate our way down the well-known 'Manchester Ship Canal'. I can remember little of this experience, as I was on duty throughout the passage. Once clear of the 'Mersey' we were on our way to Canada.

I have touched on the fact that the ship had been purpose built for the North Atlantic. She had a strengthened ice breaker type bow to help cope with navigating the ice bound St Lawrence Seaway in winter. Aptly named 'Caxton' the ships main function was to transport large rolls of newsprint from a paper mill in Dalhousie, New Brunswick in Canada, to the printing empire in London. Having said that, I can remember that on one occasion we carried our cargo to Glasgow. The voyages of this vessel were quite short, each lasting no more than a month. The stay in port in UK was also brief, just long enough to discharge our cargo. Generally we would sail again the day after our arrival.

I did three voyages on this vessel but can only recall one occasion where we had to struggle through thick pack ice in the ST Lawrence Seaway. That was an unforgettable experience. We had been warned in the engine room to remain on stand by in case we were required to manoeuvre the engine. I was actually in the engine room when we had our first encounter with the ice. One could feel the ship shudder, followed by a loud grinding noise as the ice scraped along the hull sides. I knew of course what it was but would not get a chance to see anything until I was off duty.

Now off duty and looking out from the bow I watched the ice break into long cracks that zig-zagged away from us a distance of probably 40 or 50 yards, ever stretching as the ship forced her way through. It was fascinating to watch the huge slabs of ice some at least a foot thick, buckle along the bow to be pushed away by the hull sides. As long as they were pushed clear, there would be no damage to the propeller! Sometimes the ship would rise up onto the ice before breaking through. I can remember several occasions when she actually would shudder to a halt with her bows stuck up on the ice. On these occasions we had to go astern for about a hundred yards or so and then have another run at it, maybe several times. As I have said, she was designed for this type of navigation so I knew we would eventually make it to 'Dalhousie'. While on the subject of icebreakers, I should mention that we spotted the British weather ship 'John Biscoe' also equipped with an ice breaker bow, doing her bit to keep the seaway open. Fortunately we didn't need her help. We exchanged the usual message that is commonly passed between two ships when they meet at sea "What ship?" and "Where bound?" That's how we know it was the 'John Biscoe'. Although I found the spectacle of pack ice, ice floes and mini icebergs fascinating, it was much too cold to remain on deck for long.

On an even more chilling note, I remember also on this particular voyage, that one of the 'Lascar' crewmen had died suddenly when we were still a few days from 'Dalhousie'. I know that under normal circumstances and after fulfilling all legal obligations regarding a death, the body would be buried at sea. This may however also be dependent on how far the ship is from

the nearest port. Also since this was a sudden death, a 'post mortem' would have to be carried out to determine cause. This meant keeping the body in cold storage until our arrival in port. With an outside air temperature of around minus 25 to minus 30 degrees Celsius, one would think that the body could well have been stored on deck but that would not be very dignified. For obvious reasons then, it would be kept in the ship's own deep freeze meat store. Not a very pleasant thought, but then the only person, who would be likely to go there, was the chief steward or the ship's cook.

'Dalhousie' **New Brunswick, Canada**

'Dalhousie' is quite a small coastal town in 'Chaleur Bay' and at the mouth of the great 'Restigouche River'. Although I have remembered these latter two names from more than forty years ago, I have never been able to pronounce them properly. I do know that although the language is predominately English, the town also has a very strong French connection. Probably where these names came from. The name 'Dalhousie' on the other hand is very definitely Scottish.

I have already indicated that it was extremely cold, the coldest in fact that I had ever experienced even colder I believe than it was in the South Falkland Islands. I can remember when going ashore that I had to wear double clothing including two pairs of socks and thick woolly gloves. Over my cap I wore a thick scarf which also covered my neck and lower face. Often I would have to clear the ice that formed at the mouth area of the scarf so that I could breath properly. I can remember passing a bar in town (me passing a bar?) and seeing several men standing outside it talking. They were obviously locals and were dressed like lumberjacks just taking a break from work. They were apparently only wearing Jeans and open neck check shirts. My god they must have been hard men, or were we just softies. Probably the latter! Mind you eventually we were able to go ashore a bit normally dressed for winter but not over dressed. I recall being told that although it was cold, it was a different kind of cold, more like dry air coldness. Unlike back home in UK where the cold air is also filled with a dampness, which always forces you to breathe through your mouth and seems to catch at your throat. But then! Back home I'd never experienced a coldness of -25 degrees though I'm sure that many times it must have felt like it.

There was always snow on the ground and even that seemed different, though my feet weren't any warmer. In spite of all that, I still managed to enjoy my time ashore though it was mostly just a couple of drinks at the local bar then back to the ship.

The post-mortem on the dead seaman revealed that he had died of natural causes, I can't remember what it was but I understand that his next of kin had decided to have him buried in 'Dalhousie'. This was easier said than done since the ground is so frozen at that time of year, that it is impossible to dig graves. The body would therefore have to remain in cold storage until spring at the earliest, I understand that this is normal procedure each time there is a death in winter. Unless of course the body is to be cremated. This poor chap, being Indian may have been a Moslem and I don't know what their custom is regarding dead bodies. Spring was still a couple more months away at least. My apologies for going on a bit about burials and cremations, but it is a fact worth mentioning.

One Saturday afternoon, I remember we had a visit from the minister of one of the local churches. Contrary to what we thought, he had not come in connection with the death of the crewman or to start preaching to us. He had called offering an invitation to any crewmember to attend his church for services the following day. He went on to explain that visiting British ships were few and that his congregation would be pleased to welcome us to join them for tea and cakes after the service. Well! There was nothing much to do on a Sunday anyway and perhaps a visit to church would do some of us some good.

Myself and one of my shipmates had taken up the invitation, though to be truthful it was probably the promise of tea and cakes that persuaded us. Since it was 'Sunday' we decided to wear our uniform. Aside from wanting to be reasonably smart, our uniform was by far the warmest. As we made our way to church, we passed a car park in the middle of town. I remember noticing that most, if not all of the cars were connected by a long cable to a pole with a coin box. I guessed that these were a kind of heating system. I don't know how they

worked but presumably a heating element or pad of some sort was placed under the car to help prevent the engine from freezing. Or maybe it was plugged into the underside of the car somewhere. Of course there may have been an entirely different reason for the cable. Maybe it wasn't a heater at all. Anyway! Who cares I just thought I'd mention it.

I guess the church service went well enough. The minister thanked us from the pulpit for attending his service and I could feel a hundred pairs of eyes looking at us. Apart from the fact that my mate and I were the only ones from the ship, we were in uniform and stuck out like sore thumbs. After the service we were invited by a couple of ladies, presumably on behalf of the others, to join them for refreshments. I couldn't help noticing that there were very few men present. During tea and cakes we were obliged to circulate among the congregation answering all sorts of questions about our life at sea and for some expatriates, about life back in UK. Actually I found myself quite enjoying my visit to church. They were a very nice group of people and made every effort to make us feel welcome. Before leaving, one very nice woman invited us to have dinner with her family later in the evening. That invitation was gratefully accepted, it would make a change from galley meals. Not that there was anything wrong with the ships meals, but you can't beat home cooking. Her husband would pick us up around 7o'clock. But in the meantime we headed for the nearest bar for a few drinks.

At 7o'clock a police car arrived at the ship and enquired for us. Yes! You've guessed it! The woman's husband was a RCMP. (Royal Canadian Mounted Police), only he was riding a big American car and not a horse. He was a nice guy and even stopped at a bar on the way to his house so that we could get a couple of bottles of wine to take with us. Of course we had plenty of booze on the ship but nothing so sophisticated as wine. We already had a bottle of whisky for him, so we needed something for his wife. While at the bar we of course had a couple of beers. Not the policeman I hasten to add, though he did accompany us in. It was strange how the place suddenly fell silent for a while as everyone eyed us up. No doubt they were wondering who we were and why this RCMP was so friendly to us. We were still in uniform and that must have added even more mystery to their thoughts. Oh! They knew we were from the ship all right, after all it did call there regularly every six or eight weeks. They would no doubt be wondering why were we in uniform. It was also obvious by the policeman's attitude to us that we were not in custody. I guess they would eventually learn everything.

On arrival at the house, we were introduced to the family and some friends. I remember they had a son perhaps a bit younger than myself, early twenties I think and a daughter slightly younger. Dinner was served soon after we arrived so any real conversation would have to wait till later. We were looking forward to the meal and of course we behaved like perfect gentlemen (as always).

I will never forget that meal! Ever since I was a child I'd never been able to eat sour foods like Yoghurt or Cheese. I couldn't even use a knife that had been used on cheese. Sad to say, this good woman's main course had a very strong cheese content like 'Macaroni Cheese' and the smell was already making me uncomfortable, but I couldn't say anything. She was so pleased that we had come to dinner and she was passing out liberal portions to everyone. I did attempt to lie to her that I was not a big eater and that a smaller portion would do. That way I felt that if I spread it about my plate a bit, perhaps she wouldn't notice that I'd hardly eaten. "Nonsense" she said. "In this weather you must get plenty of nourishment inside you" and seemed to pile even more on my plate.

To this day I will never know how I managed to get through that main course, but I do remember that I didn't want to eat quickly, like taking a medicine dose to get it over and done with! No! I couldn't do that, for fear of giving the impression that I was a glutton. I did however put fairly large forkfuls in my mouth, swallowing each practically without chewing and drinking almost a glass of beer or wine with every mouthful. At the same time having to join in any small talk from time to time. I kept my eye on the plates of the others and when I thought I'd about matched their leavings, I breathed a sigh of relief and pushed my almost empty plate away.

"Anyone for seconds" our host called and of course her daughter sitting next to me replied yes and turning to me said.

"You fairly cleared your plate Tommy, I'm sure you could handle more!"

"No thanks" I replied, but her mother put a couple of spoonfuls on anyway. This time I felt that I could leave most of it, in the hope that I would be forgiven. After all I had declined the offer of seconds and I was sure that I hadn't hurt her feeling in any way. The sweet was called 'Baked Alaska'. I'd never heard of, or tasted it before. It was ice cream encased miraculously in a hot sponge. Very clever and very nice. This time I did volunteer for seconds.

The meal over, we just sat around talking and having a few drinks. Strangely! I did not feel ill after eating all that cheese but I could still taste it and to a certain extent, smell it. I felt sure that it would affect me later. I don't think that I was drunk but I knew that if I did drink anymore I certainly would be. I didn't want to spoil the evening so I settled for fizzy soft drinks from then on. Not a very clever thing to do as I soon felt my stomach starting to protest. I put it down to a touch of wind due to the mixture of beer and fizzy drinks, but of course it could have been the meal. I wouldn't say that I was starting to feel sick, but I certainly wasn't in any frame of mind to linger around much longer in case I was. I suggested to my mate that we should be thinking of leaving and he readily agreed! Almost too readily I would say, but I think it was because he felt that the woman's daughter was getting a bit too interested in him and he didn't want to encourage her. He wasn't married or anything! I guess he just didn't fancy her.

As we got ready to take our leave, the woman's husband apologised that since he too had drunk rather a lot, he wouldn't be able to drive us back to the ship. But not to worry! He had phoned the police station and a patrol car was on its way. We said our goodbyes and made arrangements to see them again before the ship sailed. When we got back to the ship, I went straight to my bed, but was up half of the night being sick as a dog. The strong after taste in my mouth suggested that it was the soft drinks that did it and not the 'Macaroni Cheese'; though I'm sure it played its part.

I was able to turn out for work in the engine room next morning without a hangover, but still feeling a bit dodgy around the stomach. I kept making regular trips to the toilet in case it wasn't just my stomach. You know the kind of feeling! When you don't know whether to hug the toilet or sit on it. By the end of the day I'd say I was back to normal, well! Almost.

In the evening the son of the family and his friend came to take us for a drive around the countryside. I'll always remember that trip. The car was a 'Ford Galaxy' saloon, silver blue I seem to recall and very typical of these large American cars. Every movement of it was like being on a small boat, bobbing up and down with every undulation on the road. I commented on this and the chap asked me if I could drive a car and would I like to try his. He didn't ask me if I had a licence and I certainly wasn't going to enlighten him. After all I had driven my wee 'Flying Standard' around for months without a licence and considered myself quite competent. Of course my car was only about a third the size of his, was manual transmission control and right hand drive. His car was at least 20 feet long, was automatic transmission and of course left hand drive. Nevertheless, I took up his offer. He pulled into the side of the road so that he could explain the controls and change places. For the first time in my life I would be driving a large American car with only two pedals (automatic transmission), the lever on the steering column and on the wrong side of the road.

It was a quiet country road and there was absolutely no other traffic anywhere near us. The road was long, very long and straight. Before I knew it I was speeding along the road at 60mph. It was quite exhilarating and strangely the car didn't seem to bob up and down quite so much. Eventually I stopped and handed the driving back to my friend. When he enquired whether I'd enjoyed my experience, I of course was very enthusiastic, but added that I hadn't really felt like I had been driving. All I did was move the gear lever once, press one pedal, steer the car in a straight line and press the other pedal to slow down and stop. I don't think he took too kindly to my comments. I know that like any young man, he probably knew a lot about different cars and about manual transmission ones. What he really didn't understand was that back home you were lucky to get maybe a mile or so of dead straight road. The rest of the time you had to literally drive the car up and down hills, some quite steep. Negotiate corners, bends and sometimes double 'S' bends. Sometimes in fact many of the aforementioned could be encountered almost on a daily basis. I tried to explain that this was where the skill and fun came into driving a car, though I did admit that it could also be tiring. I guess he understood okay and told me that getting tired of driving was also common in Canada and North America in general. Not from exertion and concentration, but rather from

the lack of it. Apparently driving at high speed for mile after mile on a straight road encourages you to over relax, possibly even falling asleep with potentially disastrous results. Nevertheless I did enjoy driving his car and it was easy to understand why most cars have automatic transmission, the roads are mostly suited for 'Go' and 'Stop'. One doesn't really need a gear lever. Not even in the city.

On our return to the ship we had a few beers in my cabin and generally just chatted. I told them that this was to be my last deep-sea trip as I was going home to get married. After a tour of the ship's bridge and engine room, I gave them a bottle of whisky to take home. I guess it was a bit of a sad end to a friendship that never really got started. Especially knowing it was very unlikely that we would ever meet again.

I paid off the ship in London on 11th April 1960. But since then I have often been involved with ships during my work as a marine engineer, however, that last homeward trip on the 'Caxton' would also be the last time I would ever experience the 'Channels'