

Ask anyone, who served some or all of his apprenticeship on a cadet training ship, if he remembers the Bosun, and the chances are that you will be told a story or two that leave you in no doubt as to the special nature of that particular character.

Bertie Miller was the Bosun on *Chindwara*, and he was most certainly a character who deserves to be remembered. The following is intended to be a collection of reminiscences of those who, whilst cadets on *Chindwara*, sailed with Bertie Miller.

## **A TRIBUTE TO BERTIE MILLER**

### **From Sir Robin Knox Johnston**

Perhaps the most notable character on board the *Chindwara* was the Bosun/Seamanship Instructor, Bertie Miller. Not particularly tall, and looking overweight by today's standards, he was enormously strong, and, on one occasion, I watched him pick up a 45 gallon drum full of Presomet and heave it onto the top of No.1 hatch. I remember when I was storekeeper having a difference of opinion with him, which was unwise, and when I decided it was safer to run, he pursued me at surprising speed down the fore deck. Realising he was going to catch me, I shinned up the foremast shrouds out of reach. Bertie ambled to the rail, squinted up at me and said, "I can stand here son, longer than you can hang there". As this was so obviously the case, and there seemed no likelihood of anyone distracting him, I dropped back to the deck and was sent tumbling about 10 paces by a forearm the size of an England Rugby forward's thighs, thumping into my shoulder. A consummate seaman and great instructor, Bertie did have problems when he tried to be too elaborate with the English language. "Son, move that contraception down the deck" was one, but the classic was "Yes, I've circumcised Africa five times now!"

Bertie later got himself a mess kit for dances, and was by far the lightest on his feet of the whole ship's company, despite his weight and size.

I can only speak for my era, and probably not all of that, but he left a very strong impression with all who sailed with him.

After he was retired, I gave him a job at Mercury marina, which I had just built; this would be about 1971. He was assistant Harbour Master, and brilliant at it. Later he became Harbour or Marina Master there and subsequently moved on as Marina Master at Hayling Island Marina from which he retired. I can remember when a boat began to sink on Christmas day and Bertie went down to deal with it, up to his waist in water. By the time I found out what was going on he had the situation under control but I was furious with him for not calling me instantly. He had a lovely way with customers. If they did not tie their boats up properly, and with decent size rope, they received a lecture. Initially some resented this, but all soon came to appreciate his qualities and he became a firm favourite. Diabetes caught him in the end. I last saw him alive

in hospital in Lincoln, tragically a shadow of his former self and I was the only ex Cadet who attended his funeral. A lovely man.

I don't think society allows people like that to be made anymore!

### **From Commander T D Lilley RD\* RNR (Retired)**

*Chindwara's* maiden voyage to Australia had on board a Bosun and two Able Seamen from Stornoway. The Bosun was ineffective and the two Able Seamen could have been excellent instructors but no proper line of communication between them and the Cadets existed. All three were paid off and were not replaced for the second trip to Australia.

Homeward bound, Captain Ben Rogers at the Cadets' meeting asked if we would like to have a Bosun again. By now we felt we had completed a voyage on our own efforts and replied, "No thank you". For the Cadets the matter was closed since impending leave was very much in mind.

Those returning from second leave, two or three days before sailing from London on the third trip, were greeted with the news – 'We have a Bosun on loan from The New Zealand Shipping Company (NZSCo) and his name is Bert Miller.' Why had this happened? We had made it quite clear we did not need a Bosun!

Next morning, on turning to, I met this Bosun by No. 2 hatch. A stocky figure, about 5' 9" tall, clean shaven with a fresh complexion. He wore a well-laundered blue boiler suit, a white open necked shirt, polished black boots and a leather belt with a sheath holding a well-sharpened knife. A uniform cap with a Merchant Navy Petty Officer's cap badge completed his turnout. I also noticed his strong fore arms and whenever his fist gripped a chain stopper, it seemed to dangle like a lifeless shoelace. So this then, was Bert Miller.

Going about our work, from time to time he would ask, "Why are you doing it like that, Son?" Clearly, he came from East London. There seemed to be a note of challenge in his voice but we soon found that the reply – "We always do it like that" – worked well enough. This resulted in no more than a nod from Bert and a silence that had a hint of disapproval. One point he did demand, was that our reply should have been, "We always do it like that, Bosun." It was a small concession for us to make since clearly this guy was going to be a pushover, at least as easy as the first Bosun.

*Chindwara* left London at 23.00 on 25th April 1951. After midnight she was clear of the Royal Docks and into Galleons Reach escorted by a Sun tug. About this time a strange thing happened. Bert's eyes started to glow red and two devilish horns appeared on his head. There was now no escape and from that moment, things would be done Bert's way.

Next morning Bert's voice was everywhere. It came from alleyway doors, in the 'tween deck, out of a ventilator cowl, from behind a winch, under a lifeboat, indeed it seemed everywhere. "Why are you doing it like that, Son?" "Go and get this, Son!" "Don't do that, Son!" "Go and get that, Son!" "Make it fast like this, Son!" It never stopped. Clearly it was going to be a long, long voyage to Australia and back to London. We all prayed that the NZSCo would recall Bert very soon. Besides, if he was that good, surely the NZSCo would need him for their own cadetships?

The weather in the Bay of Biscay was overcast with a fine drizzle and a gentle roll. I found myself helping to make up rope cargo slings for Australia. Life seemed good that day, I was now regarded as an intermediate Cadet and it was right that skilled jobs fell my way. The sundeck had kept the boat deck dry enough to sit on and the engine room casing provided a warm backrest. Very soon Bert appeared to check each Cadet's progress. Each short splice was carefully examined. After looking at the first sling I had completed, Bert flung it down on the deck with the encouraging words, "If you don't get the tucks in your splices tighter, I'll \*\*\*\* you, Son!" It wasn't such a good day after all.

Bert always started the day with a courteous "Good morning" to the ship's officers. "Good morning Second" or "Good morning Third" and "Good morning Doc". Bert always referred to the Ship's Doctor, who was ex-Indian Army, as "Doc". One day Bert had cut his hand and when getting it dressed in the dispensary, the Doctor took the opportunity to make it clear he did not like being called Doc. "How would you like it if I greeted you each morning with the words, Good morning Bo," the Doctor asked. The reprimand had clearly affected Bert for he confessed his surprise to the most senior Cadets but thereafter always said, "Good morning, Doctor".

On the 7<sup>th</sup> August 1951 *Chindwara's* departure from Aden at 23.00 hrs, homeward bound with the anchor aweigh, things should have been straightforward. But once the port anchor was clear of the water the gravity of the situation was apparent for the fo'cstle party to see. The anchor was fouled. It was upside down with the cable taking a simple twist around the shank, then leading upwards into a turn around one of the arms where the weight was taken, before entering the hawse-pipe.

Chief Officer Bob Brooking fumbled in the dark for the telephone and asked for the Captain. "The anchor's fouled, Sir, I've never seen anything like it!" Back came the helpful reply from Captain Rogers, "Well get it cleared Chief". Even in the dark we could tell Mr. Brooking was not happy.

On the other hand, Bert knew exactly what to do and had started issuing orders before the phone conversation was over. "Get a cargo cluster over the side, Son." "You two start pulling the wire spring off its reel, now." "Son, go and get two bosun's chairs and gantlines and get them up here." Bert had a clear plan.

Briefly, he passed the bight of wire around the anchor's crown and once the wire was secure, the weight of the anchor was transferred to it by walking back the chain cable. Now two Cadets in bosun's chairs could work out the turn clear of the arm. This allowed slack on the cable to be taken up leaving only the twist around the shank. A careful transfer of the weight from the wire back to the cable resulted in the twist quickly releasing itself. All that remained to do was to hose off the anchor, secure it in the hawse-pipe and clear away the gear. The telegraph rang to 'Full away' and we were homeward bound again. The delay had been about one and a half hours whilst we drifted off Aden. It was a defining moment for Bert, in that he had stamped his authority as the complete seaman.



Boatswain Bert Miller – circa 1951-1952  
*m.v. Chindwara*

Bert had a great interest in knots and splices and one of his most treasured possessions was a copy of the *Ashley Book of Knots*. On his second *Chindwara* trip (the ship's fourth to Australia) he made a huge knot board for the Cadet's classroom with many fine examples of different knots and splices.

By now we had given up all hope of the NZSCo ever recalling him. However, almost imperceptibly we started to think of him as 'our Bosun' and started to realise we were doing everything better as a result of his guidance.

Bert never mentioned any family or relatives and, of course, we never pried into that part of his life.

He always gave his support to our ship's dances and turned out in a very smart lounge suit in those early days.

For 'crossing the line' he was usually more of a spectator rather than a participant, for reasons best known to himself!

In November 1951 *Chindwara* was in Melbourne. As everyone knows, no one works in Melbourne on Melbourne Cup Day. In fact, very few people work anywhere in Australia on 'Cup Day'. But not so aboard the *Chindwara*! With Melbourne docks in silence and no dust flying around on a still warm day this meant only one thing to Bert. This was a day created for varnishing.

The Cadets were split into teams for the bridge dodgers and the cabin window frames on the port and starboard sides of the main deck. Bert mixed up some of his special 'jungle juice' for removing old varnish. No one knew what the contents were and Bert refused to tell us. However, with the deft use of a yacht scraper it certainly removed old varnish. Today, some over keen Health and Safety Inspector would no doubt condemn the mixture as a serious environmental hazard to the world!

The bridge party felt that the Cadets on the main deck windows had an easier task but things are not always obvious in life. Bert recorded in a notebook which Cadet varnished which cabin window. When the coats of varnish were finally dry, Bert would inspect the windows from inside the cabins. Any excess varnish remaining on the glass pane could quickly be traced to the 'inefficient' Cadet concerned. Bert's requirements were simple: "Get yourself a razor blade, Son and get that scraped off. You can do it in your lunch hour or after you knock off at 17.00. Whatever you do, check there's no one asleep in the Cabin. Alright!" We all soon became much better at getting the varnishing right first time.

By 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1952, *Chindwara* was outward bound at Melbourne again. The derricks were being lowered for the passage to Sydney. I was on the drum end lowering the port for'd derrick at No. 2 Hatch. Suddenly, the topping lift took charge and I had lost control. The wire had been properly flaked out and it seemed as if miles of wire hurtled before my eyes before the deafening crash confirmed I had dropped the derrick. A quick glance round showed that thankfully, no one was hurt. Unfortunately, the derrick head had landed on the wooden deck just outside the Chief Officer's cabin.

The Board of Trade recommendation in those days was for six turns on the drum end. Such a rule made it almost impossible to surge the wire if needs

be. Bert's rule was to have five turns, a little easier to work with. I had only four turns on, easier still!!

Bert came up to me and said, "How many turns did you have on, Son?" I replied, "Four, Bosun". The Chief Officer was now approaching. Bert had noticed this, and I am told he said to me "if he asks you, tell him five". I neither heard nor grasped this point so that when the Chief Officer asked, "How many turns did you have on, Lilley?" I replied, "Four, Sir". Pressing the point he continued, "How many turns has the Bosun told you have on?" I replied, "Five, Sir".

Years later, I learned that the Chief Officer wanted to stop my shore leave for the rest of the voyage. With Sydney, Melbourne and Fremantle still on the itinerary that would have been hard. However, it was Bert who came to my defence, arguing that he had seen highly experienced Able Seamen drop a derrick. I really had no right to his pleading on my behalf for I had disobeyed one of his rules. But that was Bert Miller.

In May 1952, *Chindwara* called at Port Kembla (just South of Sydney) to load homeward cargo. A few Cadets became friendly with an American Cadet aboard a United States Line's freighter berthed nearby. The workings of the cadetship were explained and some proud comments on how knowledgeable our bosun was about knots and splices. "Can he do a dragging bowline?" the American asked. This was new to us – a bowline, a double bowline and a bowline on the bight we knew about, but what was a dragging bowline? "Well," the American drawled, "you get some rope and start by tying a bowline, then throw the bowline on the deck and pull it along the deck and there's a dragging bowline!" What a wheeze, to be hoodwinked by this silken-tongued American youth. But what a wheeze to try out on Bert!

A few with more courage than myself, decided to put Bert's knowledge to the test. After all, we had waited a long time for this! "A dragging bowline, Son, I don't know anything about that. How do you do it, Son?"

A brave *Chindwara* Cadet explained, "Well, you get some rope and start by tying a bowline, then throw the bowline on the deck and pull it along the deck and there's a dragging bowline!"

Bert was not amused. The fact that such a knot did not exist was no solace to him. He had been duped in his own specialist field. His frozen face and silence revealed his annoyance. But there almost seemed a smile in his eyes that signalled his happiness that we had, at last, felt able to carry out this prank on him. It was another defining moment.

At the end of the voyage, in August 1952, after my first two and half years at sea, I was sent on a long leave for compassionate reasons. I never saw *Chindwara* again and often wondered what happened to Bert Miller. It would seem from Sir Robin's comments that he did not return to the NZSCo. I can only say that was a loss for the NZSCo and a gain for BI. I would like to think

Bert decided he was happy aboard *Chindwara* and realised he had an important and fulfilling role to carry out aboard her.

If I, and many others, had known at the time, I am confident Sir Robin would not have been the lone Cadet at Bert's funeral.

It was a privilege to have known the indomitable Bert Miller and endeavour to practice the values and standards he required aboard the *Chindwara* for the rest of one's life.

### **From Glenn Baker (Dimboola, Victoria, Australia)**

I served with Bertie Miller after his cadet ship days with British India, and, during this time together, we were both employed by the New Zealand Shipping Company, which, at that time, had a quarter share in the Crusader Shipping Company.

Bertie and I travelled together to join the Crusader Shipping Company's *Turakina* in Tokyo, Japan, on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1964. We flew from Heathrow Airport on a domestic flight to Paris and then travelled on an Air France aircraft via Alaska to Japan, and we got a certificate to say we had flown over the North Pole to get there, which was pretty new then I guess. It was freezing when we left London, and we were all wrapped up in warm gear; when we arrived in Tokyo it was boiling hot. Captain Britain shouted us beer in the Saloon on signing on, and the following morning we were lowering derricks, trimming others fore and aft, and we then sailed for Kobe to discharge the rest of our cargo before loading again for New Zealand.

I was an Ordinary Seaman then, and Bertie was the Bosun, and we were signed on for a two-year stint.

We used to call Bertie "B.I. Blues", when he was on the *Turakina*, because he was always talking about his time with British India. Yes, he was a very powerful man, one of the strongest that I have ever met, and he sort of reminded me of a weightlifter. Yet, despite his strength, he was as soft as anything underneath. I agree that there will never be another Breed of Berties. Those sorts of men were special, and you remembered everything you were asked to do, and, in later years, the wisdom that went with it.

Bertie did not complete his two years, and he paid off the *Turakina* in Auckland and returned to England in one of the New Zealand Shipping Company's ships. I am not sure of the reason why he left early, but it might have been the beginning of his diabetes problem.

### **From Barrie Sanderson (Second Officer on *Chindwara*)**

Bertie Miller – I only wish he could have been made aware of how much he was appreciated whilst he was alive. He was a real seaman – a ‘nice’ chap if you follow me, and quiet with it.

I was really sad to learn how he finished up.

### **From Tom Miller-McCall**

#### A Formidable Team:

During my months serving as a cadet on *Chindwara*, during 1960, with Henry Severs, Chief Officer, and Bertie Miller, Bosun, I remember I used to have occasional quiet conversations with Bertie on the boat-deck whilst off duty and browsing the sky at night – even the moon!! Bertie confided in me and said he had been on the *Chindwara* many years and had seen many, many cadets passing through his hands. He thought nobody liked him but he hoped they were all better for it. He said: “All you people get your pieces of paper and land up on the ladder with gold stripes and rank – I don’t have anything.”



That left a vivid impression on me, so I contemplated the issue and went to Henry to explain what had happened. Henry said nothing but struck me with impact. He lowered his head slanting to the right, and I came close up face to face with that unforgettable glint in his eyes. He never had to reply to anything – his eyes said it all!!!

Shortly after, Henry was given his first command on the *Chantala*. Bertie had leave and on rejoining the *Chindwara* he came to me and said: “Look what I’ve got”. He had a thin gold stripe on his uniform sleeve. He said: “Look, I’ve also got a gold anchor above the stripe”. I never knew but I had an inclination that Henry must have had the muscle to arrange for the gold lace to be awarded.

Two unforgettable monuments: irreplaceable, consummate, professional gentlemen and mariners each to their rank, commanding respect and admiration without them even having to try. After all the years, these unforgettable memories leave a void and sadness at their passing.