

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.

Frank Russell was the Bosun on *Rakaia*, and he was most certainly a character who deserves to be remembered. Starting with an extract from "Crossed Flags", which was the house journal of the New Zealand Shipping Company, the following is intended to be a collective tribute to Bosun Russell from those who sailed with him.

A TRIBUTE TO BOSUN RUSSELL

From an Extract from Crossed Flags No. 7 – May 1968 – Page 54



Frank Russell

Now that *Rakaia* has ceased her Cadet Training Ship role, it means that the partnership of Frank Russell, Boatswain, and Arthur Newlyn, Carpenter, has been dissolved. Frank has been seconded to British India to assist them to train their Cadets, and Chippie remains 'to see her to the breakers!'

Making his first voyage with the *Blue Flue* as a Deck Boy in 1936, Frank Russell saw service in all types of ships and gained invaluable knowledge, which he has since been able to pass on to the Cadets who came under his eagle eye.

He was in the *Rochester Castle* in 'Operation Pedestal' – a Malta convoy – in August, 1942, and ranks this amongst his more hair-raising voyages.

Frank joined us as Lamprimmer in the old *Durham* in 1946, and after seven voyages in that ship he transferred to *Rakaia* where he became shipmates with her then famous Boatswain Kenny Stewart. After one voyage he was promoted Boatswain and subsequently served in her for 35 consecutive voyages.

'Uncle Frank', as he was called out of ear-shot, is very proud of his rather unusual hobby of collecting Foreign Birds. One got accustomed to the strange whistlings, gurglings and clucks that emerged from the Boatswain's cabin which was rather like entering an aviary in the London Zoo.

A native of Malden in Essex, hard on the Blackwater, Frank Russell says of the Cadet Scheme 'I have had some very happy times in *Rakaia* and, although I'm sad at leaving her, I have the satisfaction of knowing that many of my "old boys" have now made the grade and are Masters and Mates in their own ships'.

From John Goble

Many thanks for this stimulating reminder of another era. The name of Bosun Frank often occurs when the RAKAIA class of '58 meet up. He was one of a triumvirate (with Chippy Newlyn and PTI Pete) that I think I can safely say will not easily disappear from our collective memory. It's a truism that one's first ship and first voyage will always be the most memorable but these three and Frank Russell in particular would stand out in any company. Not that they were alone; I met up with their equivalents in Blue Funnel, Elder Dempster and Palm Line later in my seagoing career but it was still not every shipping company that provided such colourful characters. Sadly, in today's world of emotionally aware business and in the tiny crews of modern ships they'd not last very long. Someone's sensitivities would be too easily damaged and have recourse to m'learned friends.

I was surprised that Frank Russell began with Blue Funnel, maybe that explained his allergy to Scousers. But then he did also have very finely-tuned social antennae. If you were set for a hot romance or fancied your prospects at the ship's dance then he'd ensure that you had the opportunity for a spot of ad hoc Stockholm tarring of one of the wire springs on the day of your assignation. I think his favourite party trick, however, was to keep an eye on the stage hung over amidships, particularly that fleet that contained the load lines inside their nice white box. Knowing full well that some lubberly steward or the like would ignore the "do not use" signs in one of the midships toilets. Up comes the scupper board and down come the w.c. contents. If they contained anything of substance then it was Frank's delight, as they plopped into the white paint, to remark "I see John Brown's dropped by, son" accompanied by a good throaty chuckle and a re-ignition of the roll-up that was permanently attached to his lower lip. Happy days.

From Captain Keith Mayhew

I have been wracking my brains for stories to tell you, but not with a great deal of success. I am sure that the Cadets are liable to have more to say about Frank than the one-time Instructional Officer and Chief Officer. Most of my own memories are good ones, but I have overheard Frank to come out with a few choice expressions that you are unlikely to wish to print! However, he

WAS always good with the Cadets and they always had a great respect for him, happy to take whatever good hearted abuse they were likely to receive – but I am in no doubt that some who had just left Mummy and Daddy for their first voyage from home found that they had to learn a new dictionary!

A funny story that I can tell you is about Frank's wicked sense of humour. The extract from *Crossed Flags* talks about his interest in birds of the feathered variety. I think that Charles Turner was our Second Officer, when he, too, had a bird. It will have been a budgerigar, and Charles was very fond of his little fellow. Frank Russell was a trifle dismissive of it, but decided to play a prank on Charles. When the Second Officer was on the bridge and out of the way, Frank went to his room with a very large egg, which he deposited in Charles' birdcage. When the Watch changed and Charles returned to his cabin, he was MOST excited and went round to the rest of us, telling how his budgerigar had laid this egg and wondering whether a chick might be forthcoming! He soon learnt a good deal more about birds and certainly that his little chap would have suffered a severe rupture had it tried to pass anything the size of that egg.

From Mike Pennell (Rakaia 1953-1955)

Bo's'n Russell was aboard Rakaia for the whole of my three year apprenticeship – unlike most of my colleagues, I was there for the whole six voyages and senior cadet for the final two – all due to the reinstatement of Durham as a second cadet ship. Apart from his colourful language – second only to the stream of invective that Chippy Newlyn could manage – one cannot forget the outstretched arm and beckoning finger that implied he required your attention in person at close quarters.

My most memorable recollection of that summons was when I dropped a marlin spike from the foremast table whilst overhauling derrick blocks, and it landed about three feet in front of Frank as he stood on the foredeck. I don't recall the exact content of his conversation with me but I'm sure "Cowboy" featured somewhere.

Frank suffered from a bad back and I can visualise him now, standing in the mess room doorway when we had overstayed "Smoke-O" time, hanging with his hands from the door frame to relieve the pain as he suggested we returned to deck work.

By the time I reached the elevated position of senior cadet, one was detailed to more selective jobs. As an oarsman, I spent most of the outward voyage "preparing" one whaler for the NZ/Aussie coast whilst John Needham had a similar task on the other boat (that was preferred for sailing). By then, Frank had become aware of my fear of heights, and, in a vain attempt to cure me one morning in Adelaide, he instructed me to report to Lampy where I was given a bucket, a small tin of gold paint and some cotton waste. Repairing to the afterdeck, I found Frank reeving off the dummy gantline to the mainmast truck and quickly realised the task at hand; the view from the truck was

excellent but painting whilst trying to hold on with both hands is difficult. In the afternoon of the same day I was suspended in a boatswain's chair under the bow, painting the anchor – an equally unpleasant task for someone who preferred something solid to hang on to.

Other stories I recall are rather like those of my fellow contributor – too laced with colourful language to be printed, and, without the exact words, tend to lose their point. One such was the occasion when I was “given” a new first tripper to assist me in re-splicing an eye in a mooring rope, parted on leaving Liverpool. The lad had obviously learnt some “real seamanlike phrases” at his Sea School (not to be identified!!) and after suggesting he put the discarded rope yarns “in the Big Locker” (Overside!!!), Frank overheard and closed upon the unfortunate cadet, suggesting that he might inject some sense into the lad's head by doing something extremely unpleasant to one ear. The result was instant blushes, for I don't think such words had been heard by the lad before.

Finally, there was an occasion when we had to do without Lampy for a period (reason unknown) and Frank took over the forward paint locker and store. He re-stowed the bolts of canvas (usually folded on shelves) by making them into long rolls and stringing them to the deckhead; apparently this was a throwback to his days in the Blackwater as a young forward hand on one of the Shamrock/Endeavour yachts. On Lampy's return, they were returned to their more usual stowage.

From Angus McNeill

I presume that to the majority of the world's population I am considered old but to the honourable company of the Durham Association I am still a mere pup. Frank knew me as a real pup and then as “schoolie”.

Since those days I have met some interesting people around the world some of who attempted to teach me about life but none had the same success in maturing my thoughts and linguistic capability as did Frank Russell, though the retention of the information was assisted by the threat of having it “pumped in through one of my ears”. This is one way of communication seldom advocated by other professional trainers of today.

However there are a couple of Frank's experiences that may not have been known by many, passed on when the rest of the crew were asleep and as chippy's mate I was waiting for bunkering of fresh water to be completed.

Frank had been crew on a barge (Malden presumably) when there was a Skipper, a boy and a dog. Frank, the boy, was for'd hand and therefore responsible for all the sail and leeboard changes as the skipper could not get over the horse, and the dog was only good when there was fog.

Frank had also served as crew on one of the “J” class yachts, one of Lipton’s Shamrocks, I think. He told of the level of pay and the need to pay for the food consumed out of the pittance.

At sea sleeping accommodation was reasonable as there was always a watch on deck, but, in port, not only were all hands trying to sleep in the foc’sle, but they had to share the space with ALL the head sails. He maintained the space only allowed sleeping on your back with your nosed against the deckhead or on your stomach with one’s face being chafed with the rough canvas.

These snippets of information built my understanding of how a real sailor was trained!

He never showed any disdain for we who had only recently left our mothers’ apron strings or a comfortable pre-sea training establishment, nor the listlessness of those who succumbed to mal de mer for days on end across the Indian Ocean in the SW monsoons.

From Charles Turner

To try to give some idea of the type of man he was. I was a first and second voyage cadet on “Rakaia” in 1954, before transferring to the newly recommissioned cadetship “Durham” to complete my cadetship.

During those first two voyages, Frank was the Bosun and, therefore, virtually my boss. During the next few years, I kept meeting and sailing with him as I rejoined “Rakaia” first as Third, then as Second and finally, in 1967, as Chief Officer.

He was undoubtedly one of the finest Bosuns a Chief Officer could hope to sail with, especially on a cadetship. Never once during the time we sailed together did he mention that I had been a first tripper under HIS command! I was still learning things from him even if I did have those three stripes on my shoulder. It gives a little insight into the calibre of the man – an amazing seaman and great shipmate.

From Brian Baggott

When I joined the Durham, she was on the last voyage of her first post war period as a cadet ship – joining her at Silley Weir in London in September 1949.

Frank was Lampie and Kenny Stuart Bosun.

Every now and again one became Lampie’s Mate. At 0700 after PT (with Pete Wallen) an hour’s work took place, and Lampie's mate had to report to Lampie at his locker for’d. Without fail on your arrival you would find Frank

Russell waiting, and, equally without fail, Frank would emit a high-pitched squeak (fart!!). On completion of this feat he would always say: "Tight Arsed, that's what you've got to be to be a good lamprimmer in this outfit"!