

RAKAIA DECK APPRENTICE BY BEN JONES

Jim Thompson, Ian Rankin and I joined the “Rakaia” in London. All the cadets had gone on leave with exception of Roger Blood, an Australian, who having taken his leave at home during the voyage was left on board all alone until we arrived. It was by now April 1953 and with three months of dock staffing behind us we were pretty useful around the ships.



Brian J C Jones and James Thompson on board Rakaia
Royal Albert Dock – April 1953.

On finishing unloading we set off down to Falmouth for another dry-docking. Falmouth is a grand place, down in southern Cornwall a very old town with lots of interesting pubs and a very picturesque inner harbour.

There is one tale I should relate regarding the trials of living on a ship in dry-dock. This was before the days of holding tanks for ship generated sewage. It just went straight over the side. While in dry dock the toilets and bathrooms were closed to save the painters and other bods working in the dock below from meeting a fate worse than death, we therefore had to traipse ashore to an ablution block. Now this all right during summer in sunny Falmouth but becomes a bit tedious in winter in some grotty northern port like Liverpool. Sunday mornings were the worst; guys would take the Sunday papers in and read away merrily. The problem in Falmouth was that each ship was allotted only a three-seater. This was a pretty crude arrangement with three partitioned spaces serviced by a large pipe underneath with one common flushing cistern in the first cubicle. All the shouting in the world would not get those already ensconced to hurry up and vacate the place. That was until some brain box devised the following plan. As soon as the cubicle with the cistern became available, a paper boat was made from newspaper, filled with

oily rags and ignited. As soon as a good heat was being generated, the chain was pulled, producing a gentle flow under the other slots, down would go the fire ship and Hey Presto the burnt-bum brigade rapidly evacuated the premises.

However, this was not the end of this saga. What we did not know, was that after passing the cubicles the pipe did a smart left turn and changed into a concrete trough running through a single larger establishment. This was designed to make Indian seamen, known as Lascars, feel at home. They apparently had different toileting habits from us chaps.

It does not take much imagination to realise the outcome of our little enterprise. Having cleared our tardy readers, the next thing we heard was an ever growing plaintive wailing which grew until it sounded like a zillion cats being strangled. A door crashed open and lots of white clad figures with angry faces came milling round the corner. We took to our heels and decided to delay our trial of the amenities until another time.

Eventually the other cadets joined the ship including two guys junior to us at Warsash. Pete Wright and Malcolm McNish. Jim, Mac and I shared a tiny three- berth cabin for some two years.



Cadets, Officers and POs on first voyage – May 1953.

Living in such confined spaces had its lighter moments despite the cramped conditions. One such incident happened during my third voyage around the time of my nineteenth birthday. Mac's father owned a brewery in

Huntingdonshire entitled Paines Ales. One of their products was a home brew kit mainly exported to Canada under the caption. 'Every Bathroom a Brewery'. Mac had acquired one from his father and brought it aboard. Unfortunately he had omitted to include the pack of brewer's yeast, which was part of the ingredients. We decided to carry on, substituting bakers' yeast obtained from the second cook.

We borrowed a large milk churn from the same personage and proceeded to make up the brew in the dead of night. The directions were a trifle sparse but all seemed well. The churn full of the evil looking liquid was secreted in a wardrobe and a strict watch kept on the contents. Eventually it turned out a very flat though potent brew and was used to good effect when celebrating my birthday. The duty watch had to be called out to extricate some of the partygoers who were incapable of getting out of the swimming pool.

However this was not the end of it. As the days passed after this incident, an ever increasing smell pervaded the cabin, which was remarked on by the Mate as he inspected the accommodation on his twice weekly rounds. Mac and I blamed Jim and his working gear for creating this pong and poor old Jim was to be seen scrubbing away at his dungarees for hours. Eventually the Mate decided we should empty the cabin of everything, move to temporary accommodation in the small hospital while the cabin was scrubbed out and repainted.

We dutifully moved all our gear and bedding up to the hospital before starting on the clean up. On returning to the hospital to get washed up before the evening meal, it was observed that the smell had followed us. We immediately instituted a very thorough search and found it. Surplus bakers yeast had been stowed in an old tobacco tin, fermenting as we progressed through the tropics. When Mac removed the lid, the writhing contents almost leapt out and grabbed him by the throat. Without further ado the whole lot was donated to the great sea God and the smell was no more.

The upshot of all this was, Jim had the cleanest working clothes in the ship and we had a newly painted and sparkling cabin and were the envy of everyone.

Life on the cadet ship was good and many a life long friendship formed there. The ages ranged from nearly seventeen to twenty-one. We were taught in a specially designed classroom complete with instructor. Seamanship instruction was taught by the Bosun and a senior AB assisted by a Storeman come bosun's mate who was officially titled the Lamptrimmer. His name came from the days of oil lamps and when such a position was a full time one. To us he was Lampy. Also instruction was got from the ships Carpenter (Mr Newlyn), known as Chippy. Bosun Russell taught us lots of things including how to swear fluently and various other inventive turns of phrase. I once asked him why he gave us such a hard time, to which he replied with a wicked smile, "Because in a few years time you'll be kicking my butt". Never, he was a great bloke and now I am very grateful for all I learned from him including his sense of humour.



"Smoko". Cadets in working rig.

L to R: John Crowder, Malcolm McNish, Acutt, Myself & Alfie Jackson.

The seamanship instructor taught us how to splice everything including the mainbrace. Lampy showed us how to mix paint among other things; he was also a good soccer player.

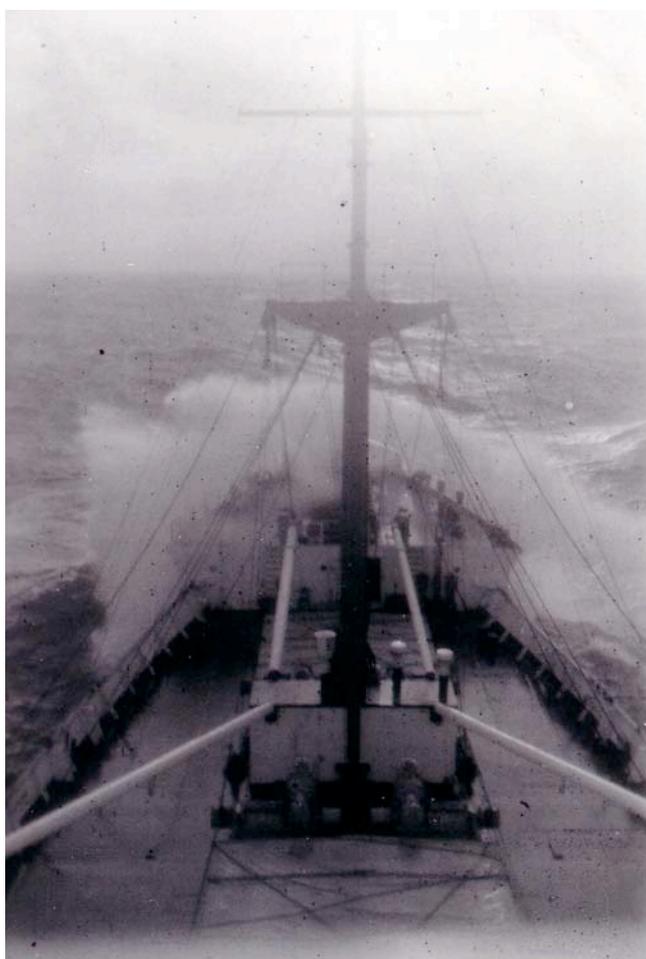


Myself painting a No. 2 hatch derrick.

Chippy showed us all sorts of magical places in the ship to dangle plumb lines down pipes to check bilges for water and water tanks for quantities of H₂O. This was called sounding the tanks. As Chippies Mate, you went to every part of the ship learning all the time how such things were constructed and worked. He had been awarded the British Empire Medal during the war, for going over the side of his ship on a rope and cutting free a live mine ensnared

in the wires of the paravane. The mine had to only to bump the steel hull and it would have been "Goodbye Mr Chips", literally. He accomplished this with only a hammer and chisel, which should have been recognised by a much higher award I reckon.

My first voyage deep-sea had a few highlights apart from the fact that it was my first and everything was new. On leaving Liverpool, bound for Australia, we went straight into a gale.



In the Irish Sea we passed two halves of a Greek tanker. They were spaced about three miles apart as the jolly thing had snapped in two. Tankers were getting bigger and the designers had not quite got to grips with the strengthening required. However there it was. The rear half was where the galley was so that the crew down aft were OK for food and sustenance while the men on the forward section were being looked after by Royal Navy helicopters, dropping food to them. The ship was the "World Concord" and it was not until 1998 when I was staying in Greece with Giannis Ikiades, (an old pal from Warsash days) that I discovered he was a crew - member at the time. On the front bit too.

Gale in the Irish Sea.

I developed tonsillitis after leaving the Suez Canal and spent three days in the sickbay, covered in wet sheets, with electric fans playing on me to get the temperature down. My temperature was 104F, one degree hotter than the nighttime air outside. I missed the coronation celebrations by being there but my pals saved my extra beer issue. After leaving Aden where we bunkered, we set off across the Indian Ocean bound for Fremantle. The Southwest monsoon was blowing and our course was at right angles to this, Southeast. Well we rolled and rolled for two weeks, at one stage going over 33 degrees each way. By the time we reached Fremantle there were only five china mugs left in the cadets' mess room. I celebrated my 18th birthday by going ashore and purchasing an enamel mug. Together with Ian, Jim and a young Scots lad Jock Hume, I nipped into a pub to celebrate my new seniority with a

schooner of Ozzie beer. I am sure it was Jock's first ever ale because on taking a swig he exclaimed, "Oooh its Garrrsiel!". Australia is a big country so it took several days to reach Adelaide, then on to Melbourne. My uncle, George Gillingham and family lived here and I got in touch with them soon after arrival.

George came and picked me up and took me to The Hotel Australia for dinner together with his new wife Dallas and gorgeous daughter Claire. Claire was the same age as me to the day, except I was some 17 hours older than she.

While in Melbourne NZS put on a Coronation Ball, to which all the big wigs and shippers were invited. I had a ready-made partner in Claire and she was able to organise another beautiful girl friend of hers to partner Jim. When we arrived, we caused quite a stir amongst our senior colleagues, as here were these two first trippers walking in with a couple of angels on their arms. With a suitably smug look on our faces, Jim and I realised that our social standing had risen to the stars.

The grog rules at the function were for only one jug of beer at a time, to be on each table of six cadets and their partners. Fruit punch with a mild alcohol addition was reserved for the ladies. Every time a jug was delivered to the table it was stowed underneath where was stationed one, another cadet. The idea being that he should look after our supply and prevent it being kicked over, while we did the social bit in public. It soon became apparent that whenever you reached under the table for a refill only a part filled jug emerged. After a while sounds of muted singing commenced from the nether regions and one of the girls complained of having her ankle kissed. On inspection we found our barman, tight as a tick surrounded by empty jugs. We smuggled him outside and left him to sleep it off in a disused cupboard. Fortunately someone remembered he was there before we departed and got him safely back to the ship.

I must mention that this same chap was very much an individualist, who had that uncanny knack of fading into the background somehow. The usual utterance would go something like this "Where's so and so?". To which the reply would be "Oh he's here somewhere..... I'm sure I saw him a while ago.". Bearing this in mind he is reputed to have left the ship in Fremantle and somehow got across the Nullabor Plain, reached Adelaide and rejoined the ship without being missed. Apparently it was a life-long ambition of his to make this journey. Either that or he did it for a bet.

Our next stop was Sydney where Uncle George had organised some business colleagues to show me the town. Two of them gave me a night out which ended up in a nightclub called The Chequers. I have vague recollections of an ex Aide-de-Camp to the Governor of New South Wales and I playing noughts and crosses on a tablecloth while the wine flowed free. How I got away with all this, I do not know as we cadets had to be back on board at a certain time, 2200 for juniors such as me. This could be extended if you had special permission to see relatives or some such. I must have used

up all my long lost Grannies and Uncles by the time I reached Brisbane our next port.

At about this time rumour was rife that on completion of discharge we would load 10,000 bales of wool for a secret destination on our way back to the UK with the usual homeward bound items such as frozen beef, lamb, barrels of tallow etc. Speculation was rife until we were all gathered together for a serious lecture from the Chief Officer, Mike Heron, naturally known to the cadets as "Dickie", short for "Dickie- bird". We were off to Russia to discharge at Odessa in the Black Sea. Forty budding James Bonds relished the idea at getting a peek behind the Iron Curtain. We would be making history as well because this was to be the first shipment of Australian wool to go to Russia since before the war.

We retraced our steps back down to Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Fremantle. Across the Indian Ocean to Aden for fuel and up through the Suez Canal. We stopped in Port Said, tied up to buoys to take on fresh water and while there a naval bod came aboard and lectured us on what and what not to do while in the Soviet Union. All Royal Navy Reservists personal papers and those who received letters from family or friends in the armed forces were told to put these in the Diplomatic Pouch he had with him. These would be returned to us on arrival in London.

Off we went. Up through the Aegean and at the entrance to the Dardanelles picked up a Turkish Pilot resplendent in rather grubby white uniform with food stains down the front. We transited the narrows and passed out into the Sea of Marmara and into the Bosphorus before entering the Black Sea. It really is black. On the way we had grand views of the heights above the Dardanelles, scene of all the conflict in 1915 and passing through the narrow waterway at Istanbul had a great view of the Blue Mosque glinting in the bright sunlight. Myriad's of vessels of all shapes and sizes mingled with ferries chugging to and fro between Europe and Asia Minor just a mere mile apart in places.

We arrived off Odessa in mid afternoon the next day, hove to and hoisted the flag signal asking for a pilot. After a period of drifting around a small motor boat came plodding out and as it got closer we could see it was some sort of fire tender as it had a canvas shrouded fire-fighting nozzle mounted on the foredeck. A breeze got up and we seemed to be drifting too close to the shore so Captain Cordran ordered slow ahead to move a bit further out. This produced instant action on the little boat. Off came the canvas cover revealing a 40mm gun, which was straight away trained on us. Several of the bridge team nearly had to call for a clean pair of trousers but we did come to a grinding halt. Soon after another launch put out from the shore and a pilot clambered up the side. We eventually entered Odessa and tied up just inside the mole protecting the harbour. The quay was jam packed with fully armed troops so it was with some trepidation that the gangway was lowered to let this lot on board. Everyone was herded onto Number 4 hatch and kept under armed guard while soldiers searched every nook and cranny of the ship. Each team of snoopers was accompanied by one of the Mates to ensure

there was no pilfering. They went through all our personal gear, everything. No wonder the navy bod in Port Said had taken our bits and pieces.

After four hours we were allowed to go back inside and start a rather belated evening meal. We had just sat down when through the open porthole came the sounds of gunfire. We all leapt to our feet to see if they had shot the Chief Steward but no such luck, it was only some red army rambo having target practise on the beach on the other side of the mole. You may think we were mean regarding the Chief Steward but we were always in conflict with him over our allotment of stores. Young men doing physical jobs are always hungry.

We started unloading the wool the next day. Nobody seemed in much of a hurry in fact all shoreside officialdom just wandered around picking their noses half the time. The "wharfies" came aboard at the appointed time and every single one of them was a hairy, muscular, grim looking female. They were all dressed in the traditional peasant headscarf, blouse of some very rough material, midlength skirt of a dark hue and a damn great big pair of leather calf high boots. Over this they wore a sort of canvas apron. The skirt and apron were fitted with big deep pockets. As they passed us there were signs of muffled conversation, much digging in the ribs, finger pointing and giggles. There were sighs of astonishment from the assembled cadets, at observing the flower of ruskie womanhood for the first time. To this were added several suggestions as to what might happen to a fresh-faced young westerner if he got caught by them.

Ten minutes later I was trembling mightily as another chap and I had been appointed cargo watchers. This meant he went down one hatch and I went down another to check that the right wool was sent ashore. We would be all alone with these man-eaters! It was a bit scary at first but after a while I felt more at ease. Later when they all sat down on bales of wool to eat disgusting looking great chunks of grey bread and cheese, they even offered me an apple. I declined with thanks and kept my distance. Later as the hold emptied and they were working farther back in the darker recesses, I noticed that something was going on. They were pulling out wool from torn bales and stuffing it in their pockets. Suddenly they realised I had seen them and were almost on their knees with hands clasped begging me not to report them to the armed guard who was up on deck. This was all done by sign language but I got the message all right. I felt so sorry for them as they were so poverty stricken that I grabbed extra handfuls of wool and gave them each a big bunch, held my finger to my lips and nodded towards the armed guard. The tears came into their eyes and they all wanted to kiss me. I fled.

The next day the local authorities provided a rickety old bus to take us for a sightseeing tour of the city. There was not an awful lot to be seen as it had been laid waste during the war. In fact the only new building I saw was the Communist Party Headquarters for the Ukraine built of concrete and red brick. We visited a place called the Potemkin Steps that had some connection with the revolution and then taken to a dusty old mansion, which had once, been some Aristocrats Palace.

Here the Russians had established an International Seamen's Club, staffed by attractive young ladies who spoke pretty good English. There was a library with books in nearly every European language plus communist newspapers from each country. We all made a dive for the British Daily Worker and found a copy only two days old and turned to the sports page to examine the cricket scores. England and Australia were battling for the Ashes at the time. The Ruskiies were intrigued by the match analysis with its rows of numbers. Even though it was in a socialist journal, they seemed to think it was some sort of code. We therefore had to introduce these local popsies to the mysteries of cricket.

We commandeered the ballroom using a chair back as a wicket, a length of timber as a bat and an old nondescript ball. We sent the girls to field at silly mid-off, square leg and cover and had them a bit worried when someone told them he was going to try and bowl a maiden over! What a hoot though. Malenkov had just come to power after Stalin fell off his perch and allowed women to have cosmetics. These poor girls, starved of fashion magazines and the like, wore great slashes of lipstick and heaps of rouge on their face. Some wag remarked that they looked more like Apaches than Russians. After the match we all retired to the Samovar for coffee, which was a mistake, it was awful but then it was time to all go back to the ship. We went out via the library and were invited to take a book as a gift, "Everything in Rosha is free" we were informed. I got a book on the life of Joseph Stalin in which the fly- leaf is inscribed in red, "Workers of the World Unite". Shades of Peter Sellers. I still have this in my possession.

These ladies at the club had been pumping us all the time about Britain etc, after all that is what their employers the KGB paid them to do. Even when we walked through the town, we were followed by supposedly, invisible tails. They stood out from the surrounding crowds like sore thumbs. Most of the populace were in raggedy attire, while these guys slunk around in smart raincoats and trilby hats with the brims pulled low down. There were a few bars usually in basements reached by a few steps from the pavement. One was near a public building with large columns at the front. We zig and zagged through these shot across the road and dived down to the bar entrance. Our tail appeared round the end pillar looking left and right for us. He looked dead worried and became very alarmed and agitated. Someone whistled and beckoned to him to join us for a drink. He sheepishly toddled across the road and stood guard outside while we imbibed.

The rate of exchange as I recall was some eleven roubles to the pound. I saw people standing in lines everywhere waiting to buy things. One shop was selling tiny wee aluminium milk saucepans, the price over two hundred roubles; work that out, just under nineteen pounds sterling. This was 1953 remember.

Finally we finished the cargo work and got ready for departure, but not before everyone was herded outside under armed guard again while the ship was searched for another four hours. Later I found out that this was the normal

procedure in all Communist ports whether they are Chinese, Polish or East German.

After we had safely cleared this neck of the woods and were in the Mediterranean, the Instructor, "Schooly", got us all to write down everything we had seen of military and political nature. These were exchanged for our other papers that had preceded us to London in the Diplomatic Pouch.

So ended the first voyage of my sea career which had lasted five months and five days and I paid off with about fourteen pounds six shillings and eight pence, after tax. But boy had I learned a lot.

The rest of my time as an Apprentice is full of interesting things. However, I will not go into any detail, just recall the important bits etc.

Having had some leave I rejoined the ship to be told we were off to New Zealand. The usual loading schedules commenced in South Wales for stillages of tin plate weighing about a ton each and thus providing bottom weight.

The next stop was for general cargo and then we got to Glasgow to fill the tween deck lockers with cases of Scotch. We loaded that much, I came to the conclusion that Kiwis must be toppers of great magnitude. Once again I was on cargo watch in number three hold. The crates of "Molten Heather" and "Stags Breath" came swinging gaily down into the hold in big nets. After which the dockers manhandled them to the lockers for stowage. Here I was among all these Glaswegian toughs who came from just up the road in an area called the Gorbals. Our berth was at Plantation Quay, just off the Clyde and adjacent to this notoriously rough area. Even the policemen walked around in twos and threes with long lead filled batons. The dockers all had little tin cups clipped to their belts, which at first seemed strange until I observed that every so often the sling of cases would be expertly allowed to knock against a steel pillar. This cracked open a case and bottle or two. Out would come the little cups and a wee dram was had all round. I ignored the first time, as accidents will happen but when it was repeated, I stepped in and insisted that the broken bottles be put aside to be returned as damaged cargo.

The leader of these fellows came over to me and pulled out of his pocket a child's wooden pencil case. As he slid open the lid, I saw it contained a cut-throat razor and in the partition meant to hold the rubber was a bit of cotton wool, presumably to clean the blade after it had been used.

"D'you noo what this is fer laddie?" he asked.

"I assume you mean me", I replied.

"Och yer a quick one, noo doot" he said.

I immediately dived for the booby hatch got through, slammed the lid and kicked the dogs shut to lock it. On reaching the deck I informed the mate who called the police. Heaps of them roared down and arrested the whole gang. I did not dare go ashore there again that trip.

We finally sailed just before Christmas into the teeth of a North Atlantic gale. Christmas Day was therefore a bit of an up and down affair. The voyage to New Zealand took about a month by way of Curacao, in the Dutch West Indies or Netherland Antilles depending on which school you went to. While the ship took on fuel oil, I went for a walk ashore to view Henry Morgan's castle. This was a bit of a disappointment as it was in reality smaller than I had envisaged. Captain Morgan had been a notorious pirate in days gone by and had built this stronghold on the island as a base from which to operate. Being brought up on Hollywood's version of these happenings, complete with Errol Flynn and his ilk I had always imagined huge ships and even bigger fortresses to be fact. Apart from this, my stroll ashore on this hot tropical night was made worthwhile by a fine display of fireflies dancing about among the local flora.

Next was the Panama Canal, so different from Suez. If anyone has not been through it, they should before they quit their mortal coil. The astounding locks in which large vessels rise at an amazing speed. The control of the electric locomotives called "mules" which clang along the dock wall, holding the ship in position by way of wires away from the dock gates and other hard bits, to the crossing of the man-made Gatun Lake surrounded by jungle on either side is truly amazing. Although I did many transits during my years at sea, I never failed to enjoy every single minute of every mile through this engineering wonder. You really do have to hand it to the American engineers.

Having cleared the Pacific end at Balboa it was off across this largest of oceans to Wellington. I think it took some eighteen days or so with great weather all the way. The Pacific really lived up to its name. We passed close to the Galapagos Islands which was of interest to me as I had just finished reading "Brown on Resolution" by C.S.Forester. Then we struck a more southerly course passing a few South Pacific Islands in the French, Tuamotu Group. We also passed an island called Rapa, which was reputed to be populated by more women than men. This was naturally of great scientific interest to forty or so young cadets.

While on the subject of scientific interest, I experienced one such event on another trip when one of the other cadets invited a pal aboard while berthed in Fremantle. The visitor was a hypnotist and after introductions he was persuaded to demonstrate his skills. I cannot remember whether anyone else offered himself up for the show but I did.

He put me under and I went through all sorts of exercises such as playing piano concertos and memorising whole pages of The Rules for the Prevention of Collision at Sea. I was aware all the time of what was going on but just had this compulsion to comply with the requests made of me. The last thing I was

instructed to do, should anyone snap their fingers, was to immediately fall asleep. This instruction would not be obeyed after 6pm.

I was brought back to reality and everyone had a good laugh. Later while collecting my soup at our 5.0pm evening meal, a real 'shipmate' Mick Elsom, snapped his fingers. The bowl of soup went one way and I the other, falling fast asleep on the deck.

Another interest among forty young bucks was food. Now we were supplied with three meals a day but it seems there was always space for just a little more. The question was how to get it.

The galley was situated right underneath the cadets' mess-room and pantry. In order to provide extra light and ventilation to this compartment, an overhead skylight or fiddle was installed. While able to be opened, it was guarded by heavy steel bars. Directly under this aperture was placed the galley work table and on the odd occasion, tins of sugar, jam, loaves of bread or some such other delectables were left in full view. The temptation was often too great. Various devices such as a bent spoon or fork lashed to a pole would be poked down through the steel bars to spear, ladle or snaffle the prize. A loaf of bread was difficult to fit through the bars. So near, but yet so far. However, the problem was overcome by having an accomplice hold the loaf while cutting the purloined bread into small enough hunks to slide between the bars. While this was a slow process, spooning sugar and jam up in a similar manner was even more prolonged.

It was then decided that a much bolder and daring approach should be made. Food from the galley was delivered to our pantry by way of a dumb waiter. This small lift was about three-foot square and four feet high, fitted with shelves. It was operated by a rope pull, the same as very old style passenger lifts. We removed the shelves and God knows why, selected a tall cadet to fold himself into the lift. He was well over six feet tall and was keen to make the descent it seems, probably because he had more to fill than the rest of us.

The lift descended complete with the occupant curled up in the traditional foetal position. Now it so happened that the cadet had boarded his "Galley lander" side on but when he arrived, because of the access configuration, had to back out stern first. Consequently he had no idea that the galley was occupied by none other than the Bosun, who it seems had permission to hang his newly washed dungarees to dry in front of the bakers ovens.

Imagine then, Mr Russell's' astonishment when on hearing the lift squeakily commence it's descent, he turned in time to see a cadets backside lowering into view.

His remarks were typical of Bosun Russell.
"Well b..... me, if it isn't Santa Claus his b..... self".

Up above we were all rolling about clutching our ribs while listening to an anguished plaintive Scots voice demanding weakly to be launched upwards.

While on the subject of food. We had a third mate who was a bit of a glutton. His favourite observation was to pat his uniformed stomach commenting all the while, "There's not much room between me and buttons".

He kept the eight to twelve watch and in the evening was always disturbing the standby cadet to make him cheese on toast. One lad got so fed up having his reading frequently interrupted that he laced the cheese with that awful yellow soap we used for scrubbing out. The smell was terrible and when the concoction was finally delivered to the bridge, the Third commented on the poor standard of cheese the Chief Steward was providing and that he would complain. Nevertheless, he ate the lot such was his gluttony. The effect was somewhat explosive, like having an enema from the other end. The Third made it to the end of the watch but only just and spent most of his off duty time crouched in the little house clutching his buttons.

We arrived in Wellington, New Zealand, on 25th January 1954 to an absolutely brilliant day and berthed at Aotea Quay. I remember this date, as I have often referred to it over the years, as being the first time I set foot in the country in which I would eventually spend the rest of my life.

Two incidents remain in my memory from this date. One, was when I went ashore to use the public telephone to call up the son of a friend from home.

Walking along, I was approached by a young man in New Zealand army uniform. He wanted to know if I was from the British ship and where I came from. It turned out he knew exactly the road where I lived as he had resided not far away and had emigrated out some three years before with his parents. Here I was 12,000 miles from home and the first person I meet knows to the inch where I come from. This was in stark contrast to a person in Liverpool who had asked me the same question. When I replied Ilford, a sort of glazed expression had crossed their face with the response "Wers Dat?". Liverpool, was after all, only 200 miles from home.

The second impression that remains with me is of the Kiwi wharfies going on strike for "Embarrassment Money". They were discharging lavatory pans, loose stowed in straw and wanted another three-pence an hour for handling these items of very personal use. Whether they got it or not, I cannot remember but I do recall seeing them sitting on the same equipment, in a familiar crouch, while they enjoyed a cigarette and cuppa at afternoon smoko. This was my first experience of the Antipodean wharfies and seaman's union tricks from both sides of the Tasman. The next port was Auckland where we arrived in early February.

The training ship had been adopted by the Takapuna Grammar School. I was told that I must stay aboard to help show a party of school children over the ship, instead of joining my pals on another excursion ashore better suited to my tastes. Imagine our surprise when the schools' Geography master, Mr Pountney turned up with his pupils amongst whom were some rather good looking young ladies of nearly our age. Little did I know then that included in the party was a lady destined to become my wife and mother of my three

daughters. Likewise, neither did Mike Hughes who met the same fate. The only exception being that he is still married to his and I am not.

The weekend following we were invited to join some of these young folk on the North Shore where we went swimming, dancing and partying. All very good and a welcome change from ship board life. We were welcomed into private homes and enjoyed much hospitality. The more I saw of New Zealand the more I liked it. There was an air of peace and well-being throughout the country. There was a lack of formality compared to England and there was no rationing which appealed to me enormously. Everyone was friendly and I recalled the few Kiwis' serving in the RAF I had met as a boy during the war. Exactly the same types.

After Auckland we called into Gisborne to load frozen meat. The port was too small to go alongside so instead the ship lay at anchor in the bay and loaded the cargo from lighters. There being a shortage of wharfies I found myself in number three lower hold the only European amongst a gang of Maoris. What a time I had, quite apart from the fact that I was being paid full wharfie wages these guys were the tops. I managed to get shore leave one night and one of the men, only a year or so older than me, invited me to his home for the evening. We had a meal and a few beers, then out came the guitars and the singing commenced. I sang a few old scout songs and taught them the actions as well. I have always been a bit rhythmical so knocked out a good bongo beat on the bottom of an old tin can. They loved it and a good time was had by all.

An uncle in the family was present and I had a good yarn to him. He had been in England during the war having been wounded in the desert campaign and sent to the UK for special treatment. While recuperating, the local folk had made a great fuss of him and he had never forgotten this. I told him about the rationing and rather depressing situation pertaining at that time.

After a while he said, "You know, with your attitude to people and your manner, why don't you think of coming out to live in New Zealand"?

Now I have related that story many a time. This chap was more Maori than those who rail against the European today, yet here he was inviting me to come and live in his country. Some Maoris, who have heard this story, have accused me of not telling the truth. Well I jolly well am.

Part of our cargo was barrels of tallow in a lower hold. An engineer turned on the heating coils in the double bottom tank directly under the hold. This would improve the viscosity of the fuel and enable it to be pumped into the ready use bunker in the engine room. I think he must have forgotten to turn it off because the heat rose and melted the tallow from the barrels and this ran into the bilge.

The next morning, the wash down gang rigged up the deck hose, rang down for more pressure and waited. I think the same engineer was on duty and left the pump on bilge suction instead of sea water because after a long wait the

hose suddenly went rigid, tossing the gang in all directions and a yellow stream of smelly tallow was extruded all over our lovely clean decks.

Part of our homeward cargo was apples bound for Montreal. Our arrival here was in time for the first onset of the northern winter. There had already been a few flurries of snow and some remained lying around when we got there. Our next-door neighbours in Ilford had business friends in Montreal; these kind folk contacted me on arrival, having been forewarned of my visit. They met me at the ship and I was driven through the town in an open topped white Cadillac with electrically heated seats and hot air blasting around me to take the chill off the atmosphere. I remember rolling grandly past my seniors, trudging through the slushy streets and lazily acknowledging their startled looks with an equally lazy wave. Oh the joy of it. I could almost read their thoughts. How does that blighter do it?

We crossed the Atlantic in record time as there was a westerly gale blowing. I have since seen bigger seas but these were right up the chuff and made steering very difficult indeed.

On the subject of steering all cadets had to do at least a hundred hours of steering, you were then issued with a steering certificate and were on your way to qualifying as an Able Seaman. Apart from the PO's there were no sailors in "Rakaia". Cadets qualified as they progressed and thereby manned the ship to the satisfaction of the British Ministry of Transport Regulations. The ship had an unusual steering set up. The energy generated from turning the wheel was transmitted to the steering engine by electricity. On most ships this was done hydraulically. The difference being that on Rakaia you could turn the wheel a couple of spokes and leave it. Whereas with the hydraulic "tele-motor system one had to hold the wheel, otherwise it spun back to midships again. The ship had a right-handed single propeller so that it tended to claw away to port all the time, about two degrees of starboard rudder would offset this and a nice straight wake resulted. Of course wind and wave action on the hull kept making the ship want to do other things so the wheel was in constant motion.

On the odd and very rare occasion you could set the wheel and the old girl would sail along for a couple of minutes before the helmsman had to do anything.

I beat this by miles on one occasion. We had disembarked the Barrier Reef Pilot at Thursday Island and were bound for Wyndham, a "delightful" little spot in the Cambridge Gulf south west of Darwin. The sea across the top end of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Arafua Sea was absolutely flat calm. So flat that the evening sun was showing in relief, thousands of jellyfish floating on the surface. The sea surface looked as though it had warts. Once the ship built up to cruising speed I set the wheel with the ship bang on course and left it. The Gyro- Compass chattered away but she kept going straight as an arrow for just over twenty-five minutes without a touch from me. The officer of the watch hearing this steady rattle of the gyro kept coming out to check as this sound could also mean you were doing tight wheelies all over the ocean. But

no she just sat there. When my relief came up at 1800, I told him about it and the blighter beat me, he got her out to thirty-two minutes.

When we found out that we were to call at Wyndham there was a scurry to see where it was as nobody had heard of the place. Eventually by dint of study in Pilot Books and an atlas we discovered that it was south west of Darwin at the head of a place called Cambridge Gulf.

Some wag composed a bulletin for our notice board in which was described this long forgotten jewel of the West Australian Riviera nestling in the bosom of the Kimberly Ranges. On doing more research we also found it also had reputation as having the hottest temperature in the British Empire. This sounds jolly we thought and started to conserve our beer ration.

We picked up our pilot half way between Darwin and the entrance to Cambridge gulf and once there, proceeded up between ever narrowing shore-lines to our destination. As we neared the port we saw a lone figure, standing on a bluff, watching our approach clad only in his birthday suit and leaning on what looked like a very business like spear. I think we all subconsciously checked on safe places to duck behind. The country was a dusty brown colour and seemed bereft of any vegetation whatsoever.

Eventually the wharf hove in sight and it appeared a pretty ramshackle sort of place. Apart from one small shed on it and a narrow gauge railway line disappearing towards nothing the place looked absolutely deserted.

On approach some sunburned characters appeared from the shed and took our mooring lines. They all wore big hats, singlets and tattered shorts. On their feet they wore scuffed brown elastic sided boots.

The meat works was some distance away tucked in a valley out of sight and there was a settlement of sorts containing a few houses, a general store, pub and police station complete with lock up reputed to be capable of housing hundreds.

The permanent residents numbered fifteen and the rest of the populace were seasonal workers who came up from Fremantle and Perth to earn the big money. We were the last ship of the season so as all were eager to return home we did not expect any delays. However it seemed the wharf was not able to cater for a ship of our size as at one end of the jetty was a wreck of a small ship, which had been sunk by the Japanese at the same time as Darwin was attacked during WWII.

This required us to move, not only up and down the wharf but also to leave, turn round and put the other side against the loading area. Also as it transpired we had to leave the wharf on another occasion to let the Government supply ship come alongside to replenish (A), the pub and (B), the general store among other facilities.

Once there we were introduced to the local Police Sergeant and his Constable. The sergeant became known as 'Polio Bill' as it was reckoned he

paralysed everything. Actually in retrospect I think he was a decent chap as he allowed us to go in the pub as we were mostly over eighteen, but not to consume alcohol. Mind you he was a bit naïve there!

Some cadets were detailed off to go up to the meat works to act as tally clerks. Counting the huge sides of frozen beef as they whizzed down a chute to be loaded onto the little train, which transported it to the wharf. The cattle were not killed in Wyndham but at Halls Creek hundreds of miles away. There it was roughly butchered thrown on an old DC3 aircraft and flown to the local airstrip by an outfit called oddly enough, Air Beef. The meat works trimmed it all up and dressed it in a nice muslin stocking. Then it was frozen and loaded onto the ship.

While acting as tally clerk I was fascinated by the size of the ants rushing about the place. This was especially so at the general store where if you wanted an ice cream the procedure was a trifle bizarre. The trumpet was placed in a holder, one scoop of the goods picked up from the frig, slapped into the cone and the frig lid slammed back on pronto. I wondered at this the first time until the lady said watch the floor. I did and as soon as the lid came off, out came heaps of these huge ants heading for their birthday treats. As soon as the lid was slammed back they all retreated. (Pardon the pun). The mystery was solved.

One weekend a group of us were taken to the Orde River Research Station where the scientists were experimenting with growing different types of rice. While there we were told that a particular species of crocodile lived nearby and could move as quick as a racehorse. When chasing you, the only way to escape was to run round in circles as these beasties could not make sharp turns on account of their heavy tail, which, when swinging round, caused them to capsize, I think someone might have been pulling our legs. However I kept a beady eye open and fortunately only saw them from the safety of the back of a truck. On the way back we went on a roo shoot but because the truck was being driven full tilt across very rugged country, the famous Aussie emblems survived to get jobs on the tails of Qantas airplanes.

At another time a few of us went for a bit of bush-whacking in the surrounding country. There was a fresh water swimming hole free of crocs, which we headed for. Clad only in our big hats we swam around until we all felt our tender parts getting nipped by some water beetles and vacated our aquatic sports.

As we were the final vessel to call that year, the wharfies and a few others were keen to clean up their looks before returning south. The local barber had gone down sick and been flown out. It just so happened that I had taken over the art of hair cutting from John Withington and so after work I would set up shop on the deck and snip away merrily until the early hours. I made heaps at ten shillings a pop and was able to buy new clippers, scissors and the like when we arrived in Fremantle. I still have some of them today.

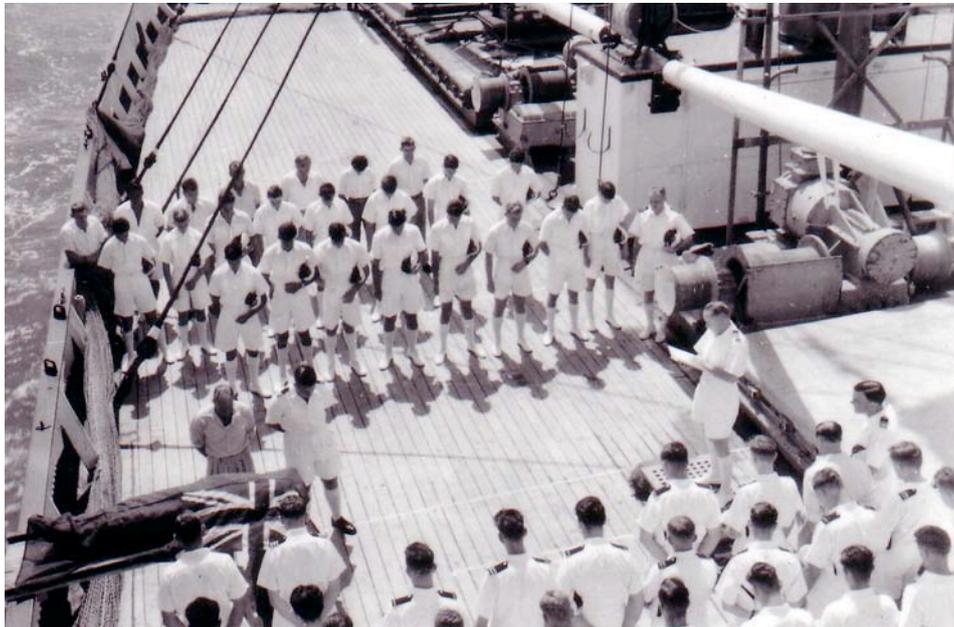


Swimming in a water hole.
L to R: Bert Crane, Mick Roberts, Mike Hughes, Myself and John Hutson.



John Withington's Successor.

While in Fremantle our dear old Doctor was taken ill and when he returned to the ship was too sick to carry on with his duties. An Australian doctor was employed to come back to England with us. While on passage from Fremantle to Aden our Doctor Vidot died and we buried him at sea complete with weighted canvas bag and last stitch through the nose. Doc was a lovely guy having seen me through my tonsillitis on my first voyage. He apparently had been Medical Officer to the court of King Farouk in Egypt and had many an interesting tale to tell.



Doctor Vidot's funeral.

Before leaving these tales of life in the cadet ship I must add that it was not all beer and skittles. We did work hard. There was lots of studying to learn the skills of our profession in preparation for the forthcoming examinations. NZS provided an excellent training scheme, striking a good balance between academic and practical subjects.

Not only the mind received stimulation but also the body. We were kept fit by various means. Physical training every morning at sea except Sunday. In port we had a mile run every day, again except Sunday. Other sports were encouraged and we fielded rugby, soccer and cricket teams. There was also rowing and sailing in the ships whaleboats plus dinghy sailing in the two 'Frostbite' class two man boats. At sea we had deck cricket and Ocean Olympics. The latter including long jump, greasy pole pillow fights and an assault course around the whole ship which would have made the SAS work hard. All of this was supervised by a full time Physical Training Instructor, Arthur Wallen a West Indian ex naval PTI. He was a great bloke and good fun to sail with.



Ocean Olympics – Myself competing in the long jump.



Whaler sailing somewhere on the Australian coast.

L to R: Jim Thomson, Jock Hume, “Swag” Avery & “Jock” Gibson.

As all cadets had to go ashore in uniform, the chance to get away from the ship in ordinary clothes was always jumped at. Consequently even a run ashore in tramping gear was a must. I took as much advantage as I could of this scheme as it provided me with a chance to observe the countryside of various places we called at. Hence the bush -whacking in Wyndham already mentioned.

On one such expedition while in Lyttelton, a group of us tramped over part of the Banks Peninsular. After reaching the highest point above Diamond

Harbour, the cloud base descended and we were completely misted over. Stupid as it may seem, we did not have a compass with us and so the only thing to do was to find a stream and follow it down. We did this and finally came out at a place called Camp Bay. We saw a house and approached in order to confirm our position. The owner turned out to be a sheep farmer and on hearing our story invited us into the kitchen where his wife whipped up a batch of scones. We demolished these in no time at all. As if this was not enough Mr Acland got his car out and ran us back to Diamond Harbour so that we could catch the ferry back to Lyttelton. For want of a better name this story was written up in the cadet's scrapbook entitled 'Operation Bootlace'.

Another escapade happened in Sydney. This yarn has been written up in a book entitled "A Pinch of Salt" compiled and edited by John Agnew and John Russell. An excellent collection of sea stories put together in one volume. However I must take to task my old shipmate Charlie Turner, the author of the tale "Yamashita Line", as to certain inaccuracies. Not wishing to be too hard on Charles, most of the facts are correct but I would like to put a few matters to rights. I might add I have checked them out with Johnny Needham and he concurs with my memory.

Rakaia was berthed in Woolloomooloo, ahead of the aircraft carrier, HMAS Vengeance, one of the main training vessels for Australia's midshipmen. Opposite were two other ships the American, ss" Pioneer Reef" and a Japanese ship of the YAMASHITA LINE.

We had challenged the Australian midshipmen to a whaler rowing race from Fort Denison (Pinch Gut) in the middle of the harbour into the finishing line in Woolloomooloo. Having won the race by heaps we were invited to the midshipmen's Gun-Room for drinkies that evening. In the heat of the moment someone remarked that I had said earlier that if certain letters were expunged from the Yamashita bit on the ship opposite, it would result in a very rude message.

Y A M A S H I T A L I N E
X X X X Get the message!

This idea was seized upon with glee by our Antipodean hosts and plans put afoot to carry them out. The refinement being that a mixture of black paint AND boiler fuel be applied so that any attempts to quickly cover it up would thereby be thwarted. Also, the deed was timed to occur just after the Yankee ship had departed which spies had determined would be at 1.30am. The carriers' admirals barge was used to tow Rakaia's painting punt over and a combined team of two cadets and two middies applied the mixture.

The Lieutenant (E) in charge of the Gun-Room supplied the Admirals Barge and boiler oil. NZS, the paint and brushes. The aftermath of this was a ride in said barge over to Luna Park where I think they ran out of fuel and had to be assisted home.



Woolloomooloo Harbour, Sydney.

The blurring was caused by me laughing as I took the picture.

Later when the Japanese found out, they tried to paint over it but their efforts ran off into the harbour. They went out of Sydney Heads with their slogan in full view. The Australians just loved it. The war was only nine years gone and feelings still ran a little on the warm side. The Sydney police did question the Old Man, Captain C. P. Robinson, and he told them that it would not be his cadets, he was half right anyway.

The only time I was ever involved in a collision with another ship occurred while I was in Rakaia. The cadets had recently rejoined the ship in Liverpool after enjoying a spot of leave. Having settled in and waiting to shift ship to a loading berth we went for our evening meal. While seated there commenced a frightful commotion out on deck. We craned our necks through the porthole and there was this vessel bearing down on ours. She was being shifted 'dead ship' with only tugs to move her along and had just come out of a dry dock near by. A tug towing wire had parted releasing the ship to approach us bow first.

It so happened that Mersey Insulation Ltd had just boxed up some repairs to one of our holds where the hull plating had been removed and then replaced all ship-shape again. On came the ship, touched our side and to our amazement kept on coming. From memory I do not recall any noise just the sight of our newly painted hull plating and deck being peeled apart as though it a mere pack of butter. We all learned a valuable lesson on the inertia inherent in slowly moving vessels.

Another interesting observation was the odd skills acquired by Radio Officers. Our Chief Radio was a Mr Broome, a rather quaint character to say the very least. It was not unusual to call on him in the radio room where he would be seated at his desk, headphones on, while receiving messages in Morse code and rattling it out on the typewriter. As you came in he would lift one

earphone aside and hold a perfectly sane conversation with you. Truly amazing!

Most of the other officers not immediately involved with cadets were good value. But occasionally, one of them could be a real pain. Each of the cadets had to do quartermaster duty at the gangway. Among the instructions was one to salute all officers when they went ashore and when they returned. Quite a few of these chaps, especially the more junior of the Engineers did not bother with this ritual. However we had one frig engineer who must have thought he was admiral of the fleet or something. He insisted on salutes and being called Sir etc. He got his just deserves one day though.

We were nearing Gib on our way home from Australia when one Saturday afternoon the ship was covered with locusts blown out from the African coast. These four-inch plus long grasshoppers were everywhere. As there was no work a crowd of us were putting the finishing touches to our tropical tans before entering the cooler northern latitudes.

It became a game to swat these creatures with a wet cloth until someone had a great idea. Not only swat 'em but keep them. For what purpose you may ask. Read on!

Having captured a whole kerosene tin of the beasts we crept down to the offending Chief Frig's cabin, (he was on watch) and stuffed them into the trunking of the ventilation system. Tightly shut his window, put the electric heater on full and shut the door. At 4pm up comes our victim all hot and sweaty from his duties down below.

On opening the door the place is like a blast furnace and his immediate reaction is to reach up and turn his blowers on. The locusts had by now woken up and were extremely angered by having been shut up in a narrow metal tube. They roared out like a squadron of fighter planes and smothered the guy. He immediately turned tail and fled up the engineers' alleyway frantically clawing some out of his hair while the remainder were in hot pursuit.

As if this was not enough punishment, outside the Chief Engineers cabin, he met the steward carrying a tray of afternoon tea and tab nabs (confectionary) plus the Chief, newly arisen from his afternoon kip, who was just opening his door clad only in his underpants. There was a horrible crash and raised voices. We all scattered at once and found various occupations elsewhere. It turned out later, that it took some minutes for the Chief to find his voice while the other two involved tried to extricate themselves from a mixture of spilled hot tea, tab nabs and very angry insects. When the Chief did recover his linguistic powers he apparently gave the engineer a right dressing down as only a McNair could.

I will end these incident reports regarding the training ship with the relating of a quaint custom that took place every Christmas Eve at sea. The cadets would get themselves up in makeshift fancy dress. The themes varied but could be counted on to be rude, lewd, topical or just plain crazy. We had from

memory ghosts, Egyptian whores, explorers, bomber pilots, Russian spies, Homosexual Vicars, pirates (why they bothered dressing up I don't know), cowboys, big game hunters, ballet dancers (female) and of course Santa Claus. We toured the ship roaring out carols at the top of our voices and collecting donations of ale in Santa's sack from those who were not rationed to two cans a week.



Cadets in fancy dress on Christmas Eve.

After this, Christmas was a little merrier, and it was easier to wash down the Plum Duff. The donors were, in the main, very generous.

As I have mentioned dressing up there was one other occasion when we got into some fancy gear.

Someone had a relative who was studying at Perth (West Australia) University. It so happened that we were berthed in Fremantle during capping week. Through these connections we were invited to join with the students and provide a float and join in their parade. I think this was the medical school because medicine was the theme.

The Mate was very good about this and organised a truck complete with driver, on and around which we built a ship with mast, flags, signal lights and all sorts of paraphernalia. On the back was the portable operating table from the ships hospital and several cadets swathed in white. Our theme was 'Doctor at Sea'. Very topical as the film of that name was being shown at local cinemas around this time.

As the float rolled through Perth someone would yell 'anaesthetic', upon which a hammer was thumped on to a block of wood while 'doctors in white' gathered round a violently kicking patient pretending to plunge large knives into the victim. Hidden underneath the table was a plentiful supply of our butchers' galley scraps. At intervals the odd chop or some bloody morsel would be raised on high to be viewed by the watching public. When a string

of sausages was so raised it caused much mirth. The rest of our crew not being able get aboard marched along behind representing ships surgeons though the ages. This included one bloke mincing along in suit and trilby hat carrying a large briefcase upon which was a notice 'Pox Doctors Clerk'.

Another cadet and I had a portable South Sea Island complete with palm tree and sandy beach. We were dressed as hideously attired hula girls with rope yarn grass skirts. We nipped ahead of the float and as it neared, pretended to lure the crew ashore. It was a great success and we produced some real crowd stoppers.

A bit later some of the following 'surgeons' kidnapped a nurse (a real one) from another float and tied her (gently) to our mast. We ended up at the University for the Capping Ball; this was unfortunately brought to a swift end when a chemistry student let off a huge firework blowing a hole in the dance floor. Meanwhile, my antipodean mate (a Kiwi) somehow got himself chased up the road where all the red-light houses were as he was causing a disturbance in his grass skirt. The Madame who chased him with a broom thought he was trying to drum up business for himself.



June 1955.
Cadets on my last voyage in Rakaia.

After this last trip to Australia in Rakaia I was promoted to Uncertificated Fourth Officer. I was to join the ss "Pipiriki" as soon as my leave was over.



SS Pipiriki – December 1955.
Uncertified 4th Officer and fellow saloon eaters.

What a difference this made to my way of life and of course my salary. I would no longer eat in the mess room, instead in the main saloon with the other officers. I would have my own cabin and share a steward with the other deck officers and be allowed to go ashore in civvies. I also had one thin gold stripe on my uniform instead of three gold cadet buttons. I had arrived.

Author's Footnote

After leaving Rakaia, the next time I was to step aboard was some 16 years and 8 months later. On this occasion I had arranged to see the old girl off the premises, so to speak.

On 14 July 1971, with Captain Trevor Rowlands in command, I piloted my dear old lady on her final voyage out of Auckland.

I had coasted with Trevor several times and knew him pretty well. So, after clearing the berth and dismissing the tug, I asked if he still played his drums. He replied in the affirmative and, once clear of the inner harbour and busy cross channel traffic, suggested that he demonstrate his latest drum break. He disappeared below and shortly afterwards the sounds from the 'would be' Gene Krupa resounded from under my feet.

When the bridge team, headed by the Chief Officer, gave me a surly look, as much to say, "Why the heck did you raise that particular subject, don't we have to suffer enough?" I realised I had raised a sore point.

However, after handing over the con and en route to the pilot ladder, I passed through the now empty silence of the cadets' accommodation. It occurred to me then, that it was indeed appropriate for Trevor to 'Beat this Lively Retreat' to the memory of all those previous occupants. I remember having a very pensive journey back in the cutter.

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