

On the 8th March, 1969, the *Chantala* was in collision with the collier *Hudson Light* in the Thames Estuary. Hugh Ferguson and Clifford Cadman were on the bridge of the *Chantala* at the time of the collision. Hugh was the Pilot, and Clifford was the cadet at the wheel. They have both kindly contributed their recollections of this event to the following article.

**CHANTALA COLLISION
BY
HUGH FERGUSON AND CLIFFORD CADMAN**

Hugh Ferguson

“The sequence of events leading to the collision involving the Chantala and the Hudson Light, on the 8th March 1969, as I see them, are as follows:

The passage of some 54 miles, from the time I boarded at 0719, occurred in dense fog and had been uneventful until arriving in the vicinity of the West Oaze buoy at about mid-day. Varying speeds had averaged out at 10.5 knots. At this point the situation became more complex on account of the fog beginning to clear from landward. This resulted in a considerable out-flow of shipping proceeding at speed down the Sea Reach Channel. A large number of ships bound inward, which had come to anchor during the night, were still at anchor, and thus there was a situation in which outward-bound ships were moving, but most in-bound were not.

However, knowing that visibility up-river was rapidly improving, ships arriving inward tended to remain underway. The flood tide was beginning to flow, which made it an ideal time to proceed up river. At this stage (first of the flood), there is a strong set to the South West (Medway River effect) and the true course from West Oaze buoy to Sea Reach No. 1 should have been 283°. But, in order to counteract this tidal effect, a great deal of ‘set’ was necessary. Also, the dead slow speed at this stage added to the problem.

It was at this point that I noticed, on the radar, a strong ‘trace’ left by an outward-bound ship approaching Sea Reach No. 1 buoy, and, as it passed the buoy, Chantala gave the obligatory fog signal of a ship underway. I have often wondered what motivated the master of the Hudson Light to make such a drastic turn to port. He, like many masters of ships that frequently entered and left the port, held a licence to pilot his own vessel, and it has to be said that professional pilots, such as myself, did not care for this system. Had the master of the Hudson Light stayed on his original heading, he would have passed clear, as other ships had done. I am convinced that, on hearing Chantala’s fog signal, he panicked on account of suddenly realising that the ship he thought was at anchor was in fact underway.

But what ensued I can never forgive him for. Having crashed into us at an alarming speed and with both anchors still in their hawse-pipes, he then, without pause, backed out of the hole he had made and allowed No. 2 hold to

flood with 25 ft of water before Chippy could reach for his sounding rod. That action was a travesty of good seamanship.



Chantala in Dry-dock
(Photograph courtesy of Hugh Ferguson)

How no one was killed is a miracle. Captain Bell said at the time that the saving from a far worse disaster was probably the full-astern movement, which took the last bit of headway off our ship before the collision.

The case did not go to court but was settled in the usual way of allocating damages – in this case: two-thirds Hudson Light and one-third Chantala.

One act of kindness I have never forgotten was that, after we had gone to anchor, I went below for a bit of a rest, and Chippy (I think it was he) appeared at the door with a bottle of beer. God bless you Chippy wherever you may be.”

Clifford Cadman

“I was the unfortunate cadet to be at the wheel of the Chantala on that fateful day. I had taken over at 12 o’clock from another cadet having spent the previous hour on the bridge keeping the bridge notebook.

The Late Bertie Miller was the Cadet Seamanship Instructor at that time, and he had plans to put all the cadets in one lifeboat and row for his house on Sheppey, if we had to abandon ship!

On the bridge at the time of the collision were:

Captain Bell, Masters Ticket;

Hugh Ferguson, the Pilot, Masters Ticket;

Chief Officer Don Cherry, Masters Ticket;

Second Mate Graham Wright, Masters Ticket;

Third Mate John Craig, 2nd or 1st Mates Ticket;

Extra Third Mate John Dyson, 2nd Mates Ticket;

Me, Steering Certificate (!); and

Another Cadet.

On the front of the Boat Deck:

Cadet Instruction Officer John Edwards, Masters Ticket; and

B I Marine Superintendent, Masters Ticket.

Some of these held an Extra Masters ticket, but I do not know who.

The Cadets on board at the time were:

C.P.O. John Clark;

Leading Hand Steve Cribb;

Leading Hand K Macquodale;

Senior Cadet Peter Bennett;

Senior Cadet Chris McKenny;

Senior Cadet Cliff Cadman;

Junior Cadet Rob Wight;

Junior Cadet Steve White;

Junior Cadet Len Hodgeson;

Junior Cadet Martin Batrick;

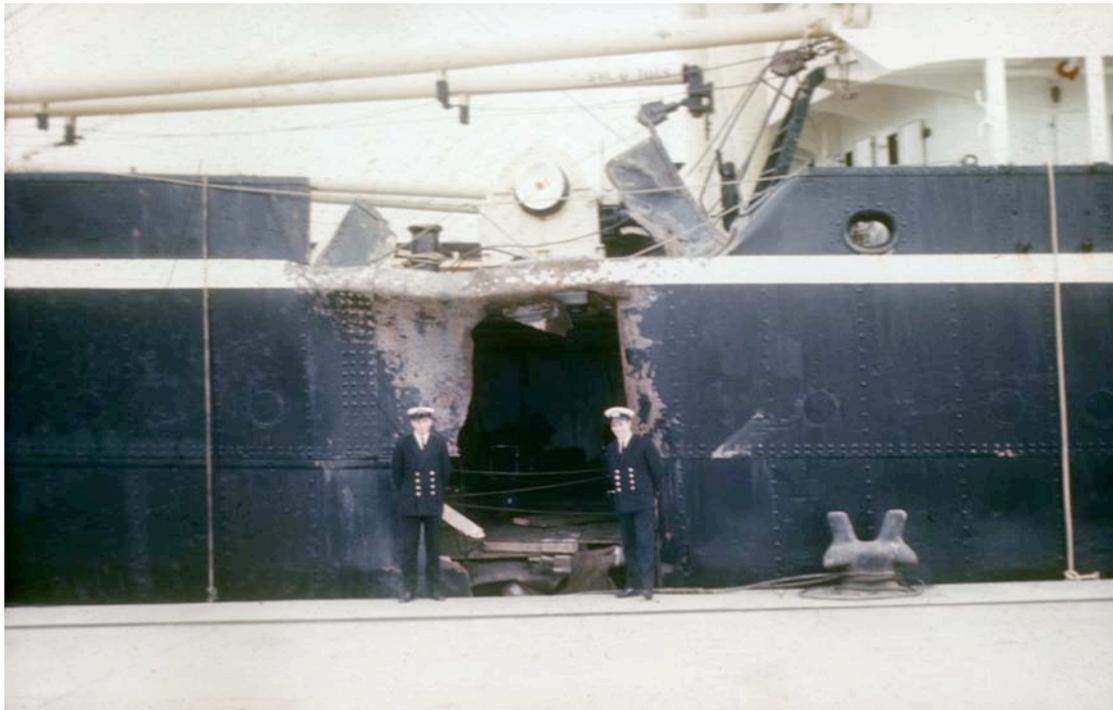
Junior Cadet Norman Sheard; and

Junior Cadet Chris Blake.

It was Voyage number 87/88: Middlesbrough – London – Tilbury – Durban (Bunkers) – Karachi – Madras – Chittagong – Chalna – Calcutta – Madras – Trincomalee (Bunkers) – Capetown (Mail) – Dakar (Bunkers) – Marseilles – Tilbury. The return Cargo was Tea, Jute and Sisal.

The person who shouted clear the Bridge was Don Cherry, who, when I didn't move straight away, told me to get a move on. I remember looking back as I left the wheelhouse as the Hudson light struck Chantala and seeing a big splash of water as Hudson Light's Forepeak tank burst, or that is what I have always assumed it was.

I remember Hugh at the radar sounding concerned, and I was wondering what was happening as the orders to sound three short blasts and full astern and emergency full astern were not given in the usual calm every now and then way.



Chantala at Tilbury – Prior to Dry-docking (1)
(Photograph courtesy of Clifford Cadman)

I had used the RT to call my parents, as we picked up Hugh at Folkestone, to tell them they could pick me up at about 16.00 hrs in Tilbury. They received a call from B I saying the ship would be delayed because she had had a “slight knock” in the estuary. They were astounded when they eventually saw the

ship and the size of the hole on Sunday evening when we eventually reached Tilbury.

The Chantala dry-docked on the Monday, and I went home in my Battle Dress (Cadet Steering Uniform), which I had been wearing since early a.m. on Saturday. The cadets had bedded down in our mess on the main deck Port forward accommodation, as we were not allowed back into our berths, which were in what was originally No. 3 hold's tween deck for fear of the bulkheads bursting. I was covered in chalk from sounding tanks.

On our way up river to Tilbury, Thames Radio was broadcasting our position and predicament under control of four or five tugs as I recall. It was quite amusing to see the ships coming down river suddenly realise it was us, and, as they had been requested to pass at slow speed, grabbing their telegraphs all too late. Everybody on our bridge would run out to the port side to watch the wash splash up the gapping hole!!



Chantala at Tilbury – Prior to Dry-docking (2)
(Photograph courtesy of Clifford Cadman)

The transcript of the statement I made after the collision to company lawyers is reproduced on pages 6, 7 and 8 below.”

“Chantala”

and

“Hudson Light”

STATEMENT

– of –

**CLIFFORD NIGEL CADMAN
Apprentice**

**Thomas Cooper & Co.,
27, Leadenhall Street,
London E.C.3.**

CLIFFORD NIGEL CADMAN of-----

Ilford, Essex.

STATES:

I am an apprentice with British India Steam Navigation Company Limited. I have been an Apprentice for 9 months, all of which time has been served on the "Chantala".

On the 8th March 1969, I was ordered to stand watch on the bridge for 2 hours from 1100 hours until 1300 hours (B.S.T.)

For the first hour I was Junior Officer of the watch and my duties were to record in the Bridge Movement Book the times of passing Navigation Marks, Engine Movements and other events such as echo soundings, whistle signals. I also sounded Fog Signals on occasions; but these were usually sounded by the Officer of the Watch.

The entries in the Bridge Movement Book were recorded by me from 1110 hours until 1150 hours.

These movements and entries were as follows:-

11.10	E/S 12 fms.	
11.14	Buoy N.E. Knob	→┐ E/S 12 fms.
11.12	E/S 10 fms.	
11.25	Half Ahead.	
11.30	E/S 8 fms.	
11.32	Buoy Shivering Sands.	←┐
11.40	10 fms.	
11.43	Full Ahead.	
11.50	E/S 10 fms.	

In these entries the abbreviations used are as follows:

E/S means Echo Sounding

→┐ abeam to starboard, the arrow indicating the direction of the buoy

The entry at 1112 hours should read 1117 hours as I have made a mistake of five minutes in recording the time.

The "CHANTALA" was navigating in foggy weather and proceeding at slow speed, sounding regulation fog signals at frequent intervals, a lookout was on the forecastle and indicating by bell the direction of fog signals of other vessels.

The positions recorded were given to me by the Officer of the Watch.

At 1200 hours the order Half Speed was given and I recorded this in the Bridge Movement Book after an entry of E/S 12 fms made, I believe, by the Officer of the Watch.

Shortly after 1200 hours, I relieved the wheel and thereafter steered the courses as ordered by the Pilot.

On taking over the wheel the course was 250° by gyro and thereafter I was ordered to steer a compass course of 280° which I did. I am unable to recall exactly what courses I was ordered to steer after this, but I am sure that all orders were correctly obeyed and that the general tendency was to starboard.

Shortly before 1215 hours, I heard the order Stop Engine given. This was shortly followed by an order of Full Astern. I was concentrating on steering the course at that time, but since the accident which was quite a shock, I am unable to remember what course this was.

I heard several signals of three short blasts sounded and I also heard a shout of clear the bridge. On hearing this I leaned forward and saw the bow of another ship, bearing about 6 to 7 points on the port bow, heading straight for me.

I ran to the starboard wing and as I reached the starboard wheelhouse door, the collision occurred and I was thrown off balance and stumbled out onto the starboard wing.

I am unable to say now what our heading was at the time of the collision and I can only definitely say that the helm was amidships or to starboard.

Immediately after the collision I was asked what the ship's head was and I told, I believe the Pilot, the heading at that time i.e. when I returned to the wheel, but I cannot remember now what I said.

ON BOARD AT TILBURY
10TH March 1969

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