

John Norris was an Able Seaman on the *Durham* during the early 1950s, when she was not operating as a cadet ship. He has written this very interesting article about his experiences on *Durham* during her voyage number 35.

### **M V DURHAM – VOYAGE 35 BY JOHN NORRIS**

Firstly, I would like to apologise for any inaccuracies that may occur and the correct nautical terms. I left the sea in 1957 and have not much chance to use them. However I hope that somebody will find my narrative of interest.

I was an Able Seaman and making my second trip on the *Durham*. We signed on in London on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1952. She was in the Company's berth in the Royal Albert Dock loading for the Fiji Islands and New Zealand. Needless to say that some of us were hoping to have Christmas at home, and I was travelling to Sussex each evening and returning early next morning.

We had general cargo, with double-decker buses in the lower hold of No. 2, a couple of army vehicles as deck cargo aft for Suva and locomotives forward. We had a deep draft, and I remember the shore gang remarking about it. It was at the time of the infamous London smogs, and, in fact, much of the superstructure had changed from white to a violet shade, which took some removing.

The master was Mr J D Bennet, the Chief Officer I cannot recall (the previous Chief Officer was Mr Rollison), the Second Officer was Mr Moran and the Third Officer was Mr Sparrow. We sailed on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1952 for Curacao, and from my experience she was a good and happy ship for the deck crowd. We had excellent accommodation aft, and my cabin mate, Bertie Wray, shared the same cabin for 3 trips. There was that grand companionway from the deck with a refrigerator at the top of the stairs. Also a recreation room with table tennis. The Bosun was Paddy O'Keefe (an Irish gentleman and popular with us); the Lamprimmer was Mr Mcleod.

The Atlantic passage was without incident until getting the forward ropes up from the forepeak for berthing in Curacao. Apparently, the windlass electric motor bearings had burnt out. As a result, we berthed forward using the cargo winches, which seemed no problem, and we then sailed for Panama after bunkering was complete.

During this part of the trip, I was in the 4 to 8 watch. We subsequently arrived at Colon and berthed, and there we waited whilst new bearings were sent out to us. I think we were there several days.

On the day of the canal transit, I had 2<sup>nd</sup> wheel in the evening. When I went to the wheel at 1800, we were approaching the narrows, and it was almost dark. After a while, we were nearing a right hand bend prior to the Culebra Cut, and I

recall to this day that she was heavy in the water and needed a fair bit of helm as we had very little steerage way. The bend ahead was well marked with lights and the large boards with crosses.

The young Pilot asked for starboard helm, and she did not respond, and eventually hard a starboard, and she still did not respond. Then ahead on the port engine, and she then started to move to starboard, but, as she could not be checked by port helm, then ahead on the starboard engine. She developed a rapid swing with the Pilot trying to correct it with engine movements. During a swing to starboard, she gave a tremendous shudder as she hit the bank and seemed to slide back into the water. The Captain asked the nature of the canal bottom, and the Pilot replied that it was rock. The Pilot radioed for the big tugs and that we had bumped in the cut.

The Captain ordered the Carpenter to sound Nos. 1 2 and 3 starboard bilges. The soundings were passed to the bridge, and the Captain asked the depth of the bilge, and it was realised that the water was over the ceiling of No. 2 lower hold by a foot or so. He ordered the big pumps to be used.

The Pilot ordered both anchors, which had been dropped during the swings, to be recovered. After a while, the Chief Officer reported that the anchors had fouled a submarine electric power cable that crossed the canal; I think it was of very high voltage. The Pilot ordered that the ship would proceed with the tugs and that we would break the cable. A short while after there was a loud explosion on the starboard side and abeam of the wheelhouse with a flash that lit up the canal. I often wondered how many lights etc. we extinguished. At 2000, I was relieved at the wheel, and I think fireworks were mentioned.

We were watch below and in our cabin at the port quarter. As the canal at times is very humid, we had a scuttle in the porthole. All of a sudden we heard a loud grating sound as the port quarter was scraped alongside a lock wall or fender. What was left of the scuttle dropped into the cabin and landed on my bunk. We rushed up on deck to find she was entering the locks diagonally. We eventually berthed, and, at this point, I can only assume that work was carried out during the rest of the night.

The next morning, I saw that divers were making repairs under water, using large nuts and bolts with rubber washers, where rivets had sprung. We were required to take a tarpaulin to No. 2 lower hold by way of passing it like a snake through vents and hatchways. Down in the lower hold were the buses, and one could see where the water had reached up to them. There was no water there now, but the insulation cork was all over the place – probably removed during the night to effect repairs. No.1 lower hold contained basic slag, and I do not think it gave too much cause for concern.

We remained at Cristobel for several more days. Whilst there, I attended the Port Captain's enquiry regarding the incident together with the Captain, Chief Engineer and others.

The finding of the enquiry was that the collision was due to an underwater seis that passed through the canal now and again, and I think that we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. No blame was apportioned to the Pilot or to the execution of helm or engine room orders. The Canal Company would accept responsibility for repairs to the cable, and the New Zealand Shipping Company for repairs to the vessel. I never really did understand this outcome.

We subsequently left Panama for Suva, then New Zealand. During the Pacific crossing, the watch took the soundings of the starboard forward bilges. We chalked the depths on the winch house deck, and when it went over a certain depth notified the officer of the watch.

During this crossing, I remember sitting on No. 4 hatch talking to the Bosun, Paddy O'Keefe, about his wartime experiences. He was very interesting as he had been on the *Rangitane* when she was stopped and sunk in the Pacific by the German raiders. He stated that they were interviewed by German officers, and that some were taken prisoner but that the majority were put ashore at Emirau Island. He added that he was soon back at sea. I remember him briefing me about painting the *Durham's* fore topmast (my first one) and I did it a couple of times after that.

In Suva, we had divers down inspecting the damage we had received in the Panama Canal, but we were not delayed. While there, I remember going to a small village where we went to a Sunday evening church service and then, after midnight, to a kava party. It was very enjoyable.

Whilst in New Plymouth, when the vessel was light, she was ballasted aft so that the bows were out of the water, and the damage could be inspected. The Chief Engineer went under water with a smoke helmet.

We subsequently loaded and sailed for the UK, and my cabin mate, Bertie, and I were asked back for the next trip. We had heard that she was going to Falmouth for repairs and asked the Chief Officer if we could do fire watching on the ship at Falmouth. The Chief Officer said that he would arrange it. Bertie had a relative who had a public house in Penryn and who was a Bosun on the *Orari* when I was on her. Another uncle was Frank Newall, the legendary Bosun of the *Hororata*.

In Falmouth, it was the summer of 1953 (Coronation year), the *Durham* was in dry dock, and only 3 or 4 lived on board. The Second Officer, Mr Moran, and his wife lived on board, and the *Durham* was shut down and power came from ashore. Mr Moran was good to me and allowed me to go for the occasional weekend. During this time, major work was carried to her shell plating and

decking and part of our duty was the detection/prevention of fire, particularly after the workmen had finished for the day.

One of the major jobs done was to replace the shelter decking (main deck?) from the refrigeration engine room, through Nos. 4, 5 and 6 hatches and including the after accommodation. To see all the machinery moved to one side while the work was carried out was quite staggering. A rumour had it that it was to correct some of the repairs carried out in World War II. The whole ship appeared a complete shambles, but it all came together in the end due to the skill of the workmen at Siley, Cox and Weir. On the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1953, we signed on and eventually sailed for Australia.

Voyage number 36 passed without any memorable incident. However, on the return passage, we had as deck cargo: wallabies, emus and parrots. The wallabies and emus had cages on the boat deck, and the whole of the starboard side had deck tennis nets rigged around the deck giving the animals access to a large area. They were very friendly, and, when washing down, we would bend our heads down, and the wallabies would examine our hair as though looking for nits. The emus would peck at anything bright on our clothing, and we became quite fond of them as time went by. It was quite usual, when working on the after deck, to see them peering over the after end of the boat deck. We also had caged parrots, and they were on the bridge; I think that the Third Officer may have looked after them.

After leaving the *Durham*, I made 4 trips in the *Hurunui* with: Captain Pover, Chief Officer Masson and Chief Engineer Moir. I came ashore in 1957.

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