

**M.V. 'OBUASI' – TALES FROM AN APPRENTICE
BY
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The Cadet Ship Routine

The 'OBUASI' was a normal hard working cargo ship like all the others of the company except that instead of a deck crew of sailors she carried twenty Apprentices. She also carried an additional Second Officer who was deemed to be the 'Training Officer' and was supposedly in charge of the well being and training of the Apprentices. It was Elder Dempster policy that each and every Apprentice served nine months on the 'OBUASI'. Whether this nine months had any original connection with the human gestation period, I am not sure. Nor am I sure that the period aboard 'OBUASI' made me any better a sailor but it was certainly good fun and was probably character developing.

I arrived in Hamburg after a fairly routine journey, which involved taking the ferry from Harwich to the Hook of Holland and then the train across Europe. This train transited the borders of Holland as well as East and West Germany. At this time sailors were not required to carry passports but traveled everywhere on their seaman's identity documents. I never had any problems at all at any border crossing, in all my travels with the letter of my appointment to a ship, which said which port she was in and my seaman's identity card and 'discharge book'. I still have the documents now although some of the stamps in them are dimming with age. I have had far more problems getting visas for different countries today than any problems I experienced then.

I duly arrived at the gangway of the 'OBUASI' and glanced up and sure enough there was the black 'skull and cross' bones pirates flag flying proudly. The 'OBUASI' had proudly flown this flag since becoming the dedicated 'Cadet ship'. I went aboard to report to the Training Officer as I had been instructed. He must have made a strong impression, as I cannot remember his name and only remember that he was overweight. This in itself was strange, as normally at this time everyone at sea was very fit. However, when he received my 'discharge book' he accurately worked out how long I had been with the company down to the exact number of days. This was to establish my position in the 'pecking order' aboard the 'OBUASI'. He worked it out that I was right in the middle of the pack. I was number ten of the twenty Apprentices. Luckily for me he did not work it out on the total amount of 'sea time' (actual time at sea) that I had as I had had very little leave in the just over two years that I had been with the company. This would have put me in a very much more senior position. Anyway number ten suited me just fine. Numbers seventeen to twenty were classed as the normal ships' Apprentices and lived in the four-berth Apprentices cabin on the Officers' deck. They fulfilled the normal duties of an Apprentice, as I had done on all the other ships I had been on. Numbers eight to sixteen were the

nine 'watch keepers', three to each watch and were housed in three, three berth cabins on the lower poop deck (the normal sailor's accommodation right aft on the ship). Numbers three to seven were on day work and were housed in the two remaining three berth cabins on the upper poop deck. Number one (Head man) and number two (Second Head man) were housed in a two berth cabin in the amidships accommodation next to the Boatswain and the Carpenter. We had a reasonably large 'recreation room' on the upper poop deck and we took our meals in the 'mess room' on the main deck in the amidships accommodation. Whenever an Apprentice left the ship all the positions were adjusted accordingly. From what I saw over the next almost nine months, these calculations kept the Training Officer fully occupied as he certainly did very little else.

I met most of the other Apprentices in the mess room at afternoon 'smoko'. Quite a few of them I had met before however I had not actually sailed with any of them. The Chief Officer, however, was Ronnie Greenwood. I had met him at my brothers' wedding. I soon had my working gear on and reported to the Boatswain and the Head man and was told to join in with the others as apart from the 'night watchman', all the Apprentices were on day work whilst in port. I was assigned to the four to eight (Chief Officers') watch by the Training Officer. This was because Apprentices number eight, nine and ten filled the three positions on this watch in his 'master plan'. I was soon to discover that with this Training Officer everything was done by numbers! This meant that when the ship was at sea I spent one hour on the wheel, one hour on lookout and one hour on 'stand by', repeating itself watch by watch. I soon fitted in to the port routine aboard and discovered that it was nice not to having to change into uniform for breakfast or for lunch. However the wearing of uniform for dinner was expected. This even though we ate in the mess room. Most of our work at that time in port was the loading of stores for the voyage. Elder Dempster cargo ships stored up with sufficient non-perishable stores for a six-month voyage. The edible stores all had to be lifted aboard by crane or ships' derricks and then man handled to the various store rooms under the watchful eyes of the Chief and Second Stewards. I can remember that it always seemed to be raining in Hamburg. Carrying cartons of tinned food, bags of supposedly fresh vegetables and sides of frozen meat of different varieties down stairways, along alleyways and into various storerooms where it had to be stowed was hard and different work!

At sea we worked hard, especially outward bound. All the cargo working gear had to be overhauled. This included the lowering of all the blocks and wires from the masts for inspection and greasing. Great care had to be taken in lowering these to the deck using smaller blocks and tackles. On a normal ship of the company the crew would have to have been paid overtime for this work, but it was considered to be part of our 'training'. I fully agree with the accepted philosophy that a ship's officer should not tell anyone to do a job that he has not done himself but that certainly does not happen now!

Homeward bound the ship had to be painted from truck to light water line.

Luckily we did not have to do any 'chipping' (to chip the rust patches out of the paint on the ships' plating) as this task was performed by the 'kroo boys'. There was never any rust to be seen on an Elder Dempster ship of this era and the wooden decks always gleamed! Painting over the ships' side started as soon as the ship was empty and light in the water. The plating from above the load line down to the water line were painted first, and the line between the hull paint and the 'boot-topping 'cut in'. This was quite a difficult task as 'cutting in' required a straight line right round the ship with black hull paint and red anti-fouling paint from either a floating paint pontoon or from a staging lowered from the deck of the ship. However it was always eventually achieved to the satisfaction of the Bosun and the Head-man. When the hull painting was started we all knew that the ship was really homeward bound. Lowering the derricks was the 'OBUASI' Apprentices party piece. We could flatten the ship ready for sea in approximately half an hour, which was fast by any standards.

This had become the 'party piece' of the 'OBUASI' and did so quite frequently to other ships on the West African trade. In the early hours of the morning the Apprentices would paddle across to a neighboring ship, climb aboard up any rope that was handy and set to, to prepare the ship for sea. We would lower all the derricks and stretch the guy ropes very quickly and neatly. The crew of the ship concerned were not very pleased when being called to raise derricks again so that cargo work could continue.

The Painting of a Barber's Pole

My first raid of many of another ship with the Apprentices of the 'OBUASI' happened like this. Elder Dempster had at this time two very graceful and good looking cargo ships the 'EBOE' and 'EBANI'. Rumors around the fleet had it that they had been designed in order to be easily converted into armed merchant cruisers in the case of war. They were certainly the fastest ships in the fleet and rumor had it that the Captains of these two ships had strict instructions that they were not to overtake the 'mail boats' during the hours of daylight. The 'EBOE' was under the command, at this time, of a Captain Coghlan who had been in destroyers during the war. He certainly handled her like one. We were tied up at Number 2 buoys in Takoradi loading for the U.S.A. when the 'EBOE' arrived to berth at Number 1 buoys to load for home. She arrived at the pilot station with a bone in her teeth and then he took a complete round turn out of her to slow her right down. It was a pretty maneuver to watch and was obviously done by an experienced Captain with a ship that he knows well. In fact I was to use this same maneuver many times in what was then the far future. She picked up her Pilot and entered the port to tie up at the buoy berth right next to us. She was gleaming having been newly painted all over ready for home. The only colour difference to all the other ships in the Elder Dempster fleet was that her forward and after 'samson posts' were now painted white instead of the usual company yellow that matched the funnel colour. Our Captain was heard to mutter to the Mate: "Coggies' yacht looks very smart. I'm not sure about the white 'samson

posts' though”.

This was enough for the 'OBUASI' Apprentices. Our Captain did not really like the white 'samson posts' so we would definitely have to alter them. Painting them yellow again was considered to be too simple so someone suggested that they be 'barber polled'. That is painted in red, white and blue stripes. As the 'samson posts' were already white only blue and red paint would be required. Blue paint was not carried aboard Elder Dempster ships so out came the paint books and blue paint was made up from colours we did have aboard. A meeting was held in the mess room and plans were laid. It was arranged that all the Apprentices would be called at 0130 hrs. in order to be ready to leave 'OBUASI' at 0200 hrs. Two boats were to be used, the Apprentices' 'gig' and the surf-boat that was usually used for painting over the side. Four Apprentices were selected to do the actual painting of the 'samson posts' and were duly equipped with small pots of red and blue paint and a hooked 'bosun's chair'. Boat crews were selected and the others would stay aboard 'OBUASI'. I was to man one of the paddles in the surf-boat.

We all wore black clothes and our skins, although burnt brown by the sun, were blackened with a mixture of boot polish and grease, wherever it showed. Both the 'gig' and the surf-boat were always kept painted black inside and out for just purposes such as this. We left 'OBUASI' down ropes on the side away from the 'EBOE' and manned the 'gig' and the surf-boat and paddled as quietly as possible a distance astern and then across the gap to the 'EBOE' approaching her from right astern. Everything went according to plan and the four white 'samson posts' were successfully painted with blue and red stripes. They looked quite smart, painted as barbers' polls, in the light of dawn. Needless to say when the 'EBOE' came awake and it was discovered what had been done all hell broke loose. Captain Coghlan laid an official complaint with the Ghanaian Police and apparently tried to arrange for a Police Boat to be on duty circling the 'OBUASI'. Our Captain apparently met the irate Captain Coghlan in the Agents' office ashore and I would liked to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation. However when the 'EBOE' departed from Takoradi the 'samson posts' were again newly painted but this time in the Company yellow!

A War over an 'African Ensign'

The 'OBUASI' was again at Number 2 Buoys in Takoradi loading logs and sawn timber etc. for home. Needless to say she was gleaming as she always was. Into Number 1 Buoys came another very fine looking ship, also gleaming and ready for the trip home. She was the 'DALEBY' the Ropner Lines 'Cadet ship' which was on charter to Elder Dempster. She had not, however, changed her hull and funnel colours but still had the beautiful dark green hull and characteristic green funnel with the red and white checker board of Ropner's on either side. I can still see her now and she really did look magnificent. Needless to say all the Apprentices on the 'OBUASI' stopped what we were doing to watch

the opposition(?) The 'DALEBY' maneuvered to her position between the buoys to send away the head line as first mooring. Her 'flag drill' was absolutely perfect, as one would only expect from a 'Cadet ship'. As the first head line reached the buoy the steaming ensign, the 'red duster', flown from the main mast gaff, was struck and the port ensign, an even larger 'red duster', was hoisted from the ensign staff over the stern. This was very pretty to watch but at the same time two of her Apprentices in full white uniforms shook out a brand new Elder Dempster house flag and draped it gracefully over the 'African Ensign' over the stern and stood to attention. The insult had been passed from one 'Cadet ship' to the other and the gauntlet was thrown down.

I must explain here about the 'African Ensign'. In the late 1950's there were no stringent pollution laws as there are today. The only toilet facilities that were supplied for the labour gangs that came aboard the ships of this era to load or discharge the cargo was a rather primitive affair made of wood and hessian and erected over the stern of all the ships. This was always made and erected by the ships' carpenter prior to the ships' arrival on the coast. This contraption over the stern was universally known on the West African coast at this time as the 'African Ensign'.

Aboard the 'OBUASI' in the mess room all the Apprentices got together and ideas for revenge were tabled, discussed and shelved. The main theme of all the ideas throughout was that the offending 'African Ensign' over the stern of the 'DALEBY' must go! I wish I could remember the whole plan as this was war! I remember that four boats were used. There were attack boats and decoy boats and the plan was that two Apprentices had to get aboard the 'DALEBY' unseen and dispatch the 'African Ensign' to a watery grave. Two other Apprentices, of which I was selected to be one, were to get aboard the 'DALEBY' unseen and climb the funnel and paint chess men in the checker board markings on the funnel. The plans must have been good as the 'African Ensign' was dispatched into Takoradi harbour, and I had managed to paint a pawn in one square of the checker board and start on another when we were rumbled. We had got aboard by being dropped off into the water by the 'gig' and swimming to the log rafts moored on the port side of the 'DALEBY', the side away from the 'OBUASI' where it was darkest. We then hauled ourselves up onto the logs and then climbed up the 'log boys' rope to the deck. For some reason in those days the West African labour gangs loved the Apprentices. This was probably because we were the only ones on all the ships who earned less money than they did and also worked hard for it. They didn't give us away anyway and in fact helped. Two of us got up to the bridge wing and then onto the 'monkey island'. Across the awning spars to the funnel and up, one on either side with a hooked 'bosun's chair' and we were in business. On being rumbled we ran back across the awning spars like monkeys onto the 'monkey island' and then ran along the top of the bridge awning spars to the wing, a quick look for anything floating and a dive into Takoradi harbour. We then swam to the nearest 'OBUASI' boat to be hauled aboard.

Just to add insult to injury the next late afternoon, we played the traditional game of football that had been arranged by the Mission to Seamen between the two ships and the 'OBUASI' beat the 'DALEBY' 2 -1, even with me playing in goal. Looking back these were wonderful days. This was the life of an Elder Dempster Apprentice at this time: 'work hard and play hard!' My indentures as an Apprentice to Elder Dempster are proudly framed on the wall above me as I write this in my study. They are signed by Basil Millward and Bruce Glasier for Elder Dempster and promise me the magnificent sum of 68 pounds sterling for my first year's service.

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