

**FOND AND, I TRUST, SOMETIMES HUMOROUS MEMORIES OF
A DECK APPRENTICE ON THE M.V. 'OBUASI' (1/1/1960 – 5/1/1961)
BY
GRAHAM S SMITH**



Looking Back

Before putting pen to paper or – more accurately – one finger to the keyboard, I would just like to say that Captain Woodend's narrative should remain the definitive, educational version of life and training (yes we did learn things too!) on board the good ship 'O'.

I have deliberately concentrated on the lighter side (and that is not intended as a pun) in the hope that some of my shipmates may surface (and no she was not a submarine) to fill in the vast blanks in my receding memory. Who knows, we could be talking about some form of rather belated reunion; whatever the Fourah Bay crew can do we should be able to do better! After all we are that much older – but wiser?

Someone once said that, as you get older, it is easier to have vivid 'flashbacks' to the events of half a century ago than it is to remember what you were doing last Sunday. Today being Monday, I am pleased to report yesterday's happenings are retained in precise detail. However, my excuse for the content of what follows is that the events that I am endeavouring to recall happened six years short of the aforementioned half-century. Should I wait until the end of this decade to prove, or disprove, the theory? Accepting that this coincides with my allotted span, and that I may have gone to the celestial anchorage by then, let the thought process begin.

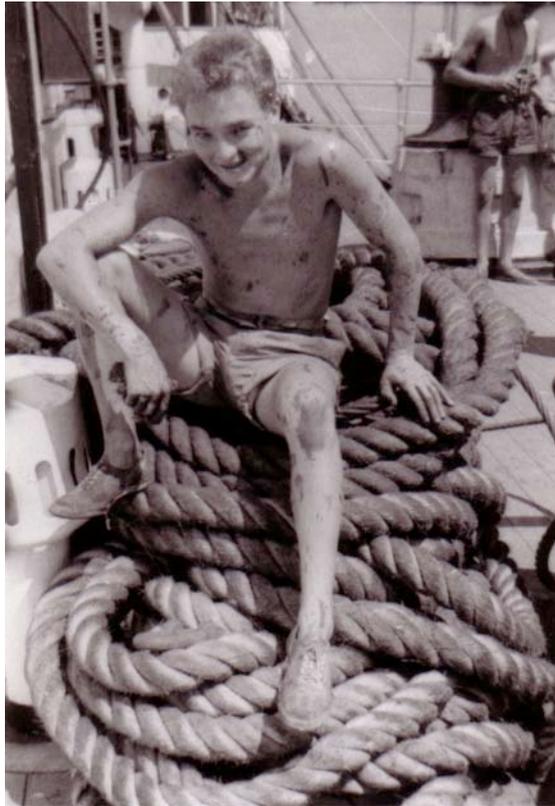


The Lads at Smoko

'Ocean Terminal', Tilbury, comes to mind as the port of joining, but I cannot be positive. Hopefully one or more of my old 'mates' will be able to confirm, or otherwise, this point and – I am absolutely certain – many more 'uncertainties' as my tale progresses. The date of January 1st 1960 I do know to be accurate but only because it appears on the back of my indentures in my 'sea time' statement.

Derricks being not lowered but thrown into freefall as the then 'headman' fed the runners, on a single cleat hold, as the derricks hurtled towards their respective and waiting crutches. This, although breaking every rule in the book and such 'health and safety' regulations, if any, that existed, was standard procedure, and the record for 'flattening' the ship was one which was there to be continually broken.

The outward voyage was, as always, to West Africa, with Freetown as the first port of call. During this passage, greasing all running gear, amongst other tasks, was the cadets' responsibility and one of the messiest.



Well Greased!

Chronology, I have discovered already, is hard. I have, therefore, decided to recount some of many incidents, which, hopefully, will trigger a date sequence in my readers. Names, where remembered, will be as per birth certificate rather than the nicknames used – for reasons of decency. The only exception being 'Noddy', as will be revealed subsequently.

Church Service and 'Fatherly' Advice

Captain Humphreys was a devout Christian, who, having conducted the Sunday Service, felt it his duty to give his assembled 'flock' moral and worldly advice on the perils awaiting us on our forthcoming voyage. Many, unmemorable 'tips' were given, but the one that always stays in my mind is:

“When 'associating' with the female sex, particularly in Africa if you have to, always use your head and a condom.”

Accra and The Suspended Female Passenger

A 'Captain's' chair was being used, attached to the cargo hook, to lower the lady over the side to a surfboat waiting to take her ashore. 'Smoko' was called just as she was hoisted into the air. The winches were immediately stopped by the cadet operators, and the unfortunate occupant was left suspended whilst the 'crew' took their well deserved break for a cigarette or, in

my case, a pipe. Needless to say the colour of the air was very similar to that of the ocean.

Fame at Last – New York

The Obuasi was chosen to feature in a documentary film about the transit of cargo through the New York docks and on to its ultimate destination. Captain Humphreys ordered all cadets to line up on the main deck, in whites, and not our usual working gear, to create the “right impression”. Unfortunately, we rammed the dock and suffered heavy damage to the stem. I never did see the film and have often wondered if this 'mishap' was captured.

This, I believe, was the States trip where the Company had organised 'educational' trips to the FBI building, Williamsburg, and to dine with our American counterparts at West Point. All very interesting and educational, but someone omitted to consider that a 'good old fashioned party' with some sadly missed members of the opposite sex might just work wonders for morale!

Port Harcourt 'Derrick' Incident and 'Noddy's' Christening

A 'certain cadet' decided, as a lone venture, in the early hours of the morning when all was quiet and peaceful, to 'visit' one of the Company's vessels berthed on the wharf. For reasons known only to himself he turned the winches on which had their runners shackled to the deck. The resultant damage (luckily, no one was injured) was not one of our finer moments. Our normal 'raids' – usually on the African cadet ship Sulima – were planned like a military operation, were usually successful and certainly did not involve criminal damage or a safety hazard. Captain Woodend's highly descriptive accounts of various 'raids' should be more than sufficient to paint a clear picture of youthful exuberance and pride in one's ship. I will not, therefore, elaborate on those undertaken during my, different, time aboard her.

That 'certain cadet' was christened 'Noddy' with the entire, cold contents of the large mess teapot, including the tealeaves, as a reminder of his stupidity. Noddy, if you are out there, it was all a very long time ago, and I, for one, now forgive you!



Teatime for Noddy!

Columbia University, New York

Having made one visit, as a humble cadet, when no shipboard parties were organised, I had decided that on my return as 'headman' this oversight would be rectified. I cannot remember how or why I contacted the university, but I do remember, very well, Jean 'Rusty' Miller from Hartford Connecticut, who was Head Girl and who organised sufficient of her friends to attend our shipboard party. It was a tremendous success and resulted in many long-term friendships. Jean later joined the Peace Corps spending time in Ethiopia. We kept in written touch and met again, much later, in Paris and London.

I must add that I was, at that time, a bachelor. One of many happy memories of this period was a visit to Greenwich Village – 'The College of Complexes' being one venue where you were given a stick of chalk with your drink to write on the blackboard walls anything you chose. Another venue was 'My Father's Moustache' where some excellent and well-known jazz players played in the informal surroundings. It was not unusual to see barefoot hippies in shorts and vests stroll past in the snow whilst we huddled into our duffle coats of the period.

My eldest of four grandchildren is just about to celebrate his fourteenth birthday so 'Rusty', if you are out there, do make contact and tell me how many you have. Do you still have the 'fish' by the way? I genuinely, and honestly, did not know it was an ancient fertility symbol when I bought it!

'Poetry in Motion' and The High School Hop

The invitation came aboard, as we lay berthed in, I believe, Norfolk Virginia, from a high school inviting 'the gang' to a 'hop' where there would be a special, guest singer. He turned out to be a spotty faced teenager who sung just one song. We were all presented with a personally signed record of his song, which we politely accepted and promptly forgot about.

On passage back to West Africa, we were looking for suitable material for our version of clay pigeon shooting. "The records" was someone's clever suggestion! Whether 'hit' or not, all those records were 'lost at sea' and committed to the deep. Months later, on arrival back in the UK, the Number 1 record was Johnny Tillotson's 'Poetry in Motion'.

I still wonder what a signed copy would have been worth then – or now?

Turning Gear – Buoys – Takoradi Harbour

'Colly' (no, I have not forgotten that I would not be using nicknames, but his was decent) had been given the job of painting the after draft marks from, I believe, one of the lifeboats. After much manoeuvring he was finally in place when the boat started, apparently of its own volition, to rise gently out of the water. The engineers had the turning gear engaged and 'Colly' was directly over the slowly turning screw. I really am ashamed to admit that I cannot recall the final outcome, but I'm sure 'Colly' will remember it to his dying day.

The Blues and Whites – Glasgow

All will remember the formal change from 'blues' to 'whites' as you head South to the tropics and the reverse when Northbound. Again, I believe, it was Captain Humphreys who decided that, due to the warm summer weather, we would not change into blues even though the voyage was nearly over and we were about to dock and sign off in Glasgow.

Don't, ever, do it! The comments from our Scottish friends, as we came alongside and – later – went onto the quayside to secure the gangway and check the draft, were completely unprintable even on this, a nautical site. To this day, I still have a complex about my legs below the short line and – at that time although subsequently proved wrong – as to whether I would ever father children. My personal impression is that 'shorts', to a Scotsman, are 'wee drams', and the rest I leave to your imagination.

Christmas Trees



Decorating the Tree!

This is me, in 1960, to the right with 'extended' paintbrush carrying out one of the 'Headman's' privileged duties, namely painting the topmast 'Christmas tree'. The exact height above deck level eludes me, but let's just say the view was quite impressive and far-reaching. No safety net, no bosun's chair – that was left behind as you inched out to the extremity of the yardarm. Also, I hear you say, "No sense of self danger or preservation". An apt précis would be "No sense!" This, three years later, was most definitely true!

Christmas 1963 – Halifax, Nova Scotia Canada. Having joined the *Obuasi*, in September of this year, my apprentice days now well in the past, and knowing this was to be my final voyage as a third mate prior to promotion to second, we were fortunate enough to be the last ship docked on Christmas Eve. This meant our less fortunate comrades were left swinging round the hook over the holiday period, gazing longingly at the shore lights, whilst we simply walked down the gangway to the joys of a Canadian Christmas!

Before stepping ashore a few beers were being consumed in the Officer's smoke room. Someone remarked that it was customary for a ship in port to have a Christmas tree on the Christmas tree. Perfectly true, except we did not have one. Whether it was the beer talking, or just the Christmas spirit, I rashly said that IF we had one I would happily have placed it in position.

Uniform jackets off, it was pleasantly warm inside if not out, the chat and refreshment continued. Suddenly, there was not just a lull in the conversation but a complete silence broken by a voice saying: "Try this for size". A real, newly 'felled/acquired', live Christmas tree was there for all to see and, more importantly, to see whether I would fulfil my earlier statement.

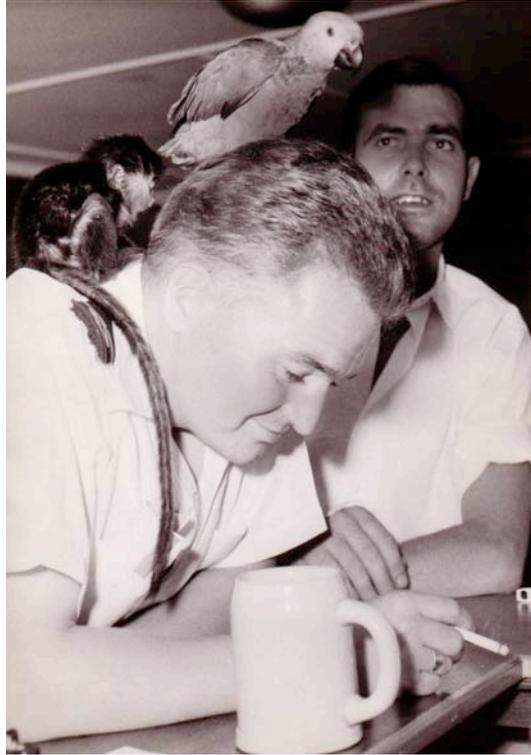
Lets just say I did. I was later advised that the temperature at the time was minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit, the thickness of the fixed ladder rungs to the mainmast was three times normal, due to ice, and I had omitted to put even my jacket on prior to the climb. What can I say? The old girl knew I loved her, had in the past played my part in caring for her and, just maybe, her spirit repaid me by being my guardian angel all those years ago.

Postscript

That night, three local taxi drivers died in their cabs. They had stayed with their vehicles, rather than seeking safety in the worsening snow conditions, to guard their expensive, new radios which they feared would be stolen had they chosen to abandon.

The Christmas tree blew down finally in a North Atlantic gale midway on our eastward passage back to West Africa. No one, including me, had ventured back up to remove my lashings. Moral of the story? If you are going to make a lash up, make it a good one! On a more serious note an 'Old Obuasian' worked hard, played hard, but, above all, enjoyed life to the full in either capacity.

I trust some of the above ramblings may strike a long forgotten chord and encourage (IN NO SPECIFIC ORDER) the likes of Harry Hathaway (Bristol?), Graham 'Arch' Hartwell (Kent?), 'Paddy' Coyne (Ireland!), Ted Clayton (Yorkshire), Roger MacCrell (Burnley), David Curd (London), Tandy (London), David Passmore (London?), Brian Early (London), Brian Mayo (London), 'Colly' Colclough (?), etc, etc., to 'come forward'. I would also like to convey my very best wishes to Paul Wood, who I now look upon as an E-mail friend, the brains behind what deserves to be an interesting and informative project on British Merchant Navy Cadet Training Ships. Without more Elder Dempster inputs, Paul's ultimate aim to write a book on this project will not be realised.



The writer in relaxed mode, circa 1964, whilst serving as second mate on the *m.v. Donga*. 'Squawk', the African grey parrot, has just said that he will talk "only to the engineer (right) and not to 'Torque', the grease monkey".

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