

Richard Coyne was an apprentice on *Obuasi* from 15th January to 11th November 1960. His account of that time takes the form of a series of interesting and often very amusing tales.

TALES FROM *OBUASI*
BY
RICHARD COYNE



Supper

Left to Right: Ted Clayton, Harry Hathaway, 'Collie' Colclough and 'Paddy' (Richard) Coyne

First Trip

I was ordered to report to the seventh floor of India Buildings for my next posting as an apprentice with Elder Dempster. Mr Millard, our personnel supervisor assigned me to *Obuasi*. I was in dread, as most ships I had sailed on only had two cadets, and I usually found that I either didn't like, or didn't get on with my fellow apprentice; how was I going to get on with twenty? To add to my misery the 'reputation' of this vessel preceded it. She was the scourge of the Atlantic Ocean. When she came into port, every other ship greased their ropes, shipped rat guards, flaked hoses fore and aft to repel boarders, and raised their gangways. This ship was trouble and certainly not suitable for a peace-loving soul such as me, but what could I do?

I joined *Obuasi* in Brunswick Dock, Liverpool, and ran into trouble almost immediately, as the ship was being secured for sea. It is worth bearing in mind that, up until then, most of my time as an apprentice had been spent polishing brass, or scrubbing the wheelhouse floor on my knees – although I had handled hatch boards, but not in a professional way. No. 5 hatch was

being covered, and the Head Man ordered me to get to the after end of the hatch board and swing it with him onto the hatch. It was fairly heavy, and it needed to be swung into position, which required teamwork. Not being used to this, I got it wrong and let go too soon. The poor old Head Man took the full force against his shinbone. I never really made up my mind whether it was the pain or whether it was me being a Paddy that held him back and prevented him from laying into me.

The remainder of that trip I kept my head down, and a healthy respect for each other ensued. It was not a happy trip; there was no fun, and *Obuasi* did not live up to her 'reputation', but, when I rejoined her, I shared a cabin with two others – Mick Kelly and Collie Colclough – and we vowed to recover that situation!

Raid on *Sulima*

The company decided to set up an African cadet ship, called *Sulima* ⁽¹⁾, which also had a conventional crew. We were told that the two ships would never share the same port at the same time – for obvious reasons. Her Master was Polish by berth, and he spoke in very broken English.

We arrived in Takoradi, berthed at the Manganese Wharf ⁽²⁾ and commenced discharge. We couldn't believe our eyes when *Sulima* entered port, made fast to the buoys and commenced loading logs. Neither could we believe it when, as soon as the day's work was done, a Pilot arrived. We singled up, let go and proceeded out of the harbour to anchor two miles off.

Here was our chance to recover the 'reputation' that *Obuasi* deserved! We had to plan this carefully, as we had to keep the Head Man and Lampy in the dark; the newer cadets we didn't know, and they could be a hindrance; and of course Noddy ⁽³⁾, our resident Jonah was, certainly, to be excluded.

Our Officers were smug and content knowing there was no way we could launch a boat, because, even though no anchor watch was kept, any noise would reverberate throughout the vessel.

There was a gig, a fourteen-foot whaler, beside No. 5 Hatch, which was on board for the cadets' pleasure, but how could we launch it without making any noise? We needed the starboard derrick, at No. 5, but this was holding up the tent, which was housing thirty or forty sleeping Kroo boys ⁽⁴⁾, and we didn't want to disturb that lot. We couldn't use the winches at No. 5, as they were used for the purchase of the jumbo derrick and had a ratchet system, which would make an awful racket. We swung the port derrick and used it to hold up the tent. This freed the starboard derrick and, using the guy and an amount of muscle, got the gig over the side and into the water.

With the selected crew we paddled the gig in complete darkness for the two miles into the harbour and under the bow of *Sulima*. She was loading logs, and there were a lot of bodies on deck, both dockers and cadets. It had been

decided that the gig would remain under the bow and, when all hell let loose, we would all jump over the bow and make our escape. Two of our crew were to remain tending the gig, one of whom was Graham 'the pipe' Smith. Collie Colclough, with a pot of green paint and a three-inch brush, made his way to the boat deck, having exchanged pleasantries with some of his 'African cousins' en route. Using the awning spars as a stage, he commenced painting a large N on the port side; whilst, on the starboard side, another lad was painting a skull and cross bones and the usual 'Kilroy Was Here'.

Eventually it dawned on our 'African cousins' that something was afoot. A semi-naked white man wandering about at three o'clock in the morning with a pot of green paint was bound to attract attention – eventually! The alarm went up, and there were screams coming from the boat deck, with African cadets trying to grab Collie. The next thing I saw was Collie flinging the pot over the side and jumping clear himself. The drop from that height was nothing less than fifty feet and, as he commenced the drop, he let out the cry 'Geronimo'.

How he managed to miss the floating rafts of logs I'll never know. All hands were picked up, and we paddled back to the ship. Without any noise we raised the boat and stored everything away. Peace and tranquillity reigned over the revitalized *Obuasi*. When our Captain – James Hutchinson – went down to the saloon for breakfast the sun was shining; the Pilot would board shortly, and the vessel would manoeuvre to her discharge berth. Life was good. The Old Man was a little surprised when 'sparkie' came into the saloon to say that the Old Man of *Sulima* wanted to speak to him on the R/T.

He couldn't believe his ears when he heard this guttural, Polish voice describe in broken English how his ship had been boarded by our cadets and now had "Bloody skulls and cross bones painted all over his funnel".

The Pilot re-boarded and we proceeded back into the harbour to continue discharging. I can't remember exactly, but I think we were all assembled and dressed down by Captain Hutchinson. We expected this as well as some form of punishment, which duly arrived. Captain Hutchinson announced that, as we had such a love for small boats, we were to spend the rest of the day rowing around the harbour in No. 1 lifeboat with our Second Mate in command. He must have been a bit miffed as he hadn't even been involved with the raid.

No. 1 lifeboat was lowered into the water and all hands boarded. I think the two head men were excluded. However, it had been some time since our poor Second Mate, affectionately known as 'Mouse', had completed his lifeboat ticket and only a short while since we had completed ours. The order came to let go fore and aft, and this was obeyed. The next order was "Right lads lower your starboard oars". The correct, Board of Trade expression, is "Down oars Starboard". We had agreed amongst ourselves that we would only obey the correct BOT expressions, and the poor old Second Mate was stuck; we wouldn't obey his orders because they were not valid. The Old Man was screaming at the Second Mate and, when eventually informed, the Old Man and the Mate went to search for the book on lifeboat procedure.

Eventually the Second Mate got it right, and we were under way. He brought the boat along the side of *Sulima*, and our darker cousins shouted at us to “bow down our heads in shame”. Had we been able to board her, we would have dumped the lot of them in the sea.

The Monkey Money ⁽⁵⁾

I can't remember which port we were in, but we received on board one hundred and thirty grass monkeys, two chimps – one a baby and the other a grumpy auld sod – and a cage containing twelve snakes. These were being brought to the USA for discharge in New York.

The welfare of all animals brought on board came under the remit of the apprentices; perhaps I should qualify that in stating that the apprentices were made to shovel up what the animals left, and also it was their duty to feed, water and care for the animals.

There was a bright side to this, which we were well aware of, namely that the Agent would give to the apprentices one dollar for each grass monkey that survived the trip, ten dollars for each chimp and nothing for the snakes as they were supposed to sleep throughout the trip. Needless to say Noddy had those snakes wide-awake and hissing in no time!

One hundred and fifty dollars was a lot of money, but when divided between twenty cadets, it worked out as nothing, so a muster aft was held without the presence of the Head Man, Graham Smith, and the Second Head Man, Collie, and it was agreed that the two Headmen should do the lot and receive the reward.

Both Head Men were up an hour ahead of the rest tending the monkeys, as well as during smokos and meal times, and, when our day was done, they still had to look after the monkeys!

Ten of the monkeys died, as did the grumpy auld chimp, and this reflected on the pot, but one hundred and thirty dollars was something not to be sneezed at.

Eventually we tied up at berth No. 2 under Brooklyn Bridge; the Agent boarded and, as expected, went straight to the Old Man's cabin. It was late afternoon towards evening. The Head Man was called up, and the Old Man gave him a sum of money; I can't remember how much, but it wasn't the colour of one hundred and thirty dollars. Graham came aft, looking glum, and we insisted on knowing how much he had received. When he explained what had happened, we told him to go to the Old Man to state that we would not turn-too until the Monkey Money was handed over.

All derricks were topped prior to arrival, but the longshoremen would not touch them, and they would all have to be swung outboard before the dockers arrived. Not a hard job for a Mate, two Second Mates and a Third Mate.

Starting at No. 1 Hatch and working aft, they were soon at No. 4. The Mate, Pete Finan, who was on the starboard side and un-aware of the tendencies of the port derrick, unshackled the guy. The Old Man was on the boat deck, overseeing and jubilant that his Officers could show these cadets a thing or two, when the derrick did what we knew it would do. It took off swinging out over New York harbour. The Second Mate, trying to save the situation, held onto his guy but was dragged over the bulwark, and, with his hands full of grease, he slowly slid down the rope into the fast flowing Hudson River.

Shouting started from the boat deck: "Get that bl**dy man inboard". We were all aligned at the forward end of the poop, and each time the shout came we retorted with: "Give us the Monkey Money"

The poor old Second Mate was now getting tired and losing the battle; he was now half way along No. 5 Hatch and coming towards the end of the rope. The Old Man could see this and was aware that his Second Mate was coming to the end and, giving in, shouted: "I'll give you the bl**dy Monkey Money".

Needless to say we had a Jacob's ladder ready, and the poor old Second Mate was soon hauled inboard.

It turned out that the Old Man had split the Monkey Money between the Mate and the other Officers and had to ask them for it back, but we got our Monkey Money.

Connie-Onnie ⁽⁶⁾, Nuns and a Naked Welshman

As I recall we spent one month as watchkeeper, one month on day work, and one month as Peggy. We were outward bound and off the West African coast, and we had passengers, two of whom were Nuns, who were being sent out to convert the black babies.

Have you ever noticed how passengers get up an hour before breakfast and go charging around the decks for the benefit of their health? Well our two nuns used to do likewise – only they did it with a prayer book in their hands! Maybe they realised they were amongst a bunch of hairy ar*ed Able Seamen and were asking for protection from above.

A part of a Peggy's responsibility was to collect the supplies each Monday – so many pounds of sugar, so many pounds of jam and so many tins of Connie-Onnie – and to make sure that these supplies lasted until the next Monday.

The standard of food on board was so bad that all hands had mutinied (but that is for another story). We were getting too much Cottage Pie, too much Lancashire Hot Pot, too many Irish Stews. If truth be told we were bored and the delicacy on board was Connie-Onnie on bread.

Now if you were a good Peggy, you could end up at the end of the week with one or maybe two tins of Connie-Onnie over. This would be hidden under the planking of the cupboard in the mess room, and this hidden store would be allowed to accumulate until we had sufficient to have a Connie-Onnie Party.

It was the middle watch; the 'Farmer' ⁽⁷⁾ was making his way forward to relieve the lookout on the fo'castle, and, when passing the mess room on the starboard side, he noticed the light had been left on. With nobody about at that time, he looked through the porthole and was horrified to see that the 'Taffy' Second Steward was on his knees, and stealing our precious Connie-Onnie from the hidden store.

This could not be tolerated, and the lad quickly locked the 'Taff' in the mess, ran aft and called all hands. The blood was up and so were all hands. Poor 'Taffy' was stripped naked and lashed to the after mast facing forward. He was then brushed down with black polish and left for the remainder of the night.

After our Captain had refreshed himself with his morning tea, and as was his habit, he decided to venture outside and relish his Command. Scratching his chest he arrived at the after end of the boat deck at just the same moment as our two prayerful nuns on the deck below. The expression of horror and disbelief on the faces of both the nuns and the Old Man would be worth a fortune had it been captured.

Once again Captain Hutchinson lost his cool and anyone who was still in their scratcher awoke abruptly to "get that bl**dy man down".

The Groper

I had at this time become one of most senior apprentices aboard, with Graham 'the pipe' Smith as Head Man and Collie as Lampy. I now had the choicest accommodation, namely a two-berth cabin on the upper deck of the poop.

We were under way and off the West African Coast; the hour, I think, was about three o'clock in the morning. Our cabin door was on the hook, and the portholes open to allow a draught to reduce the heat and give a more pleasurable night's sleep. Naturally it was dark, and it was impossible to see anything without artificial lighting.

Lying in my bunk, in a deep sleep, I was awoken when something touched the mattress in the proximity of my feet. Startled, I lay as stiff as a poker, and as the cabin was so dark, I could not see anything.

Within moments, there was another movement, and then I sensed a rough, cold hand feeling my shinbone. I lay there wondering how I was going to handle this situation. The other cadet, in the opposite bunk, was fast asleep and completely unaware of my predicament. All sorts of confusing and

conflicting thoughts were going through my mind. Some new cadets had recently joined, replacing those that had left; two were Cockneys, and I was a little suspicious of them.

The hand moved upwards, rested on my knee, and, no matter how I tried, I couldn't make out the shape of a figure. What was I to do? When the hand reached my thigh, I lunged out and held on with all my strength. There was an almighty and continuous scream, and the lad in the opposite bunk nearly hit the deckhead in panic. He switched on the light only to see me holding a baby chimp by the wrist!

The chimp spent the rest of the night snuggled up in my arms.

We learnt later that the chimp had mastered the locking arrangements of his cage and could escape, at will. He used to make his way to the mess room and at smoko we would fill him a mug of tea. He would follow us to the poop deck, sit down with his fag and mug of tea, surveying us motley crowd as if we shared a lot in common.

Notes:

- (1) Elder Dempster operated *Sulima* as a training ship for a certain number of African deck officer cadets between 1959 and 1965. However, unlike *Obuasi*, she also carried a conventional deck crew.
- (2) The Manganese Wharf was on the outside of the main jetty at Takoradi. General Cargo berths were on the inside.
- (3) Apprentice 'Noddy' was one of those characters who only had to touch something for it to go wrong. He was also famed for his scatter-brained ideas. For example, like all apprentices, he was always short of money, and so he decided to sell his hair – offering small portions of it in exchange for bottles of ginger beer. Demand outstripped supply, and Noddy ended up with a chequer-board pate!



'Paddy' (Richard) Coyne and Noddy (with hair!)

- (4) Kroo boys were native boys, who normally boarded at Freetown, and they were used as ancillary deckhands. They slept under hatch tents and had their own cook, who prepared all their meals, using ship's supplies provided by the Chief Steward.
- (5) Elder Dempster Lines ships were referred to as the Monkey Boats because from time to time monkeys were carried as cargo.
- (6) Connie-Onnie is condensed milk.
- (7) The 'Farmer' was the standby watchkeeper.

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