

My First Ship

My first ship was the Ellerman Line TSMV City of Port Elizabeth. I joined as junior R/O on June 17th 1970. The events leading up to that portentous day seemed to have a life of their own.

As far as I can remember, the idea of becoming a Radio Officer was planted in my imagination by an advert for one of the wireless colleges – Colwyn Bay. I think that ad was in "Radio Constructor," my favourite magazine of all time, and now, sadly, long defunct. I read it with fascination, realising here was a terrific way to combine my passion for electronics with a strong urge to travel.

I applied for and was accepted at Colwyn Bay Wireless College, but then found out that Barking College of Technology (later to become North London Polytechnic) was running the same course. Taking it there would enable me to live at home, with about an hour's commuting each way. I applied there, and after a technical interview was accepted.

The two years at Barking Tech were great. I found the academic side of things came easily, and revelled in learning the theory of electronics and radio. I loved the lab sessions, learning how to use test equipment and conduct experiments. The morse was harder, but I eventually made the 25 wpm for the first class PMG.

So it was in the summer of 1970 that I approached Marconi at their East Ham depot for a job. At that time they were short of R/O's and had plenty of ships waiting. The next few days whisked by in something of a daze. I nipped over to Leadenhall Street and sorted out the uniform. Marconi put me in a taxi to pick up my Seaman's card and another for the Discharge book. I was glad to get out the office in the end, with the famous morse-code calls in the shabby waiting room, and head for the Royal Albert Docks to find my ship.

I must have had a guardian angel on that day, as no-one took advantage of the newbie with the usual practical jokes. A respectful lascar on gangway watch asked if he could help. When I said I wanted to see the Radio Officer, he said "Oh, you Marconi-Sahib!" and showed me where to go.

The Chief R/O was a Scotsman from Glasgow, who struck me as dour on first acquaintance, Bob Kerr. We didn't hit it off at first. In those days I had a moderately full beard. "Ye can get rid of that thing right off, laddie!" Bob exclaimed. "Never cultivate around your face what grows wild around your arse." Eventually he agreed to a compromise. I set to work with scissors and razor, and reduced it to a neat little van dyke. It turned out to be much more comfortable and I never changed the style from that day to this.

Bob was a great raconteur. In port he always had a crowd of officers in his tiny cabin, telling great stories and jokes and one-liners, lubricated by lots of gin. The same thing was repeated in longer sessions at sea with passengers instead of crew. He was great company. But he didn't invite me to these do's, and was very critical of everything I did. We coasted light ship to Immingham to load cargo, and after another blasting I volunteered to sign off so that he could get a junior more to his liking. He backed off then, talked me out of it, and was much kinder from then on.

He stood over me when we first got under way and told me to send a TR. In spite of two years' intensive morse training, including plenty of simulated coast station working, I had never touched a morse key in anger – never been on the air. I was terrified! I thought of all those old hands out there who would immediately know I was a newbie. I thought my sending would be terrible, and that I wouldn't be able to understand any incoming. And what about the fact that there was always a crowd of people sending on 500 kHz at the same time? How on earth was I going to be able to pick out my own callsign? At college we had only one signal on our dummy 500 kHz station, and the signal was in beautifully perfect morse at a steady 20 wpm.

Bob bullied me into doing it. Believe it or not, I sweated, literally, over that first QSO. GNF answered my call straight away and directed me onto his working frequency (was it 425/418?). I sent a very short TR, exchanged a couple of dit-dits, and that was it. I still had a lot to learn, especially about HF working, but nothing was really hard again – not after that first TR.

The City of PE was a graceful old lady. She carried about 15,000 tons of cargo and 80 passengers, first-class only. I think she could raise about 16 knots downhill. The accommodation was adequate, old-style, and suited me. The R/O's cabins were on the bridge deck, close to the wheelhouse and the OM's cabin. The radio room

was just aft of my cabin. If I left both doors open, I could listen comfortably to 500 in the background while in my cabin, and often did. It never ceased to amaze me that I could be deep in a book or writing a letter, and would somehow pick out GPLC (they say you never forget your first callsign) from where it was buried in the muted background twitter on 500 kHz.

All officers ate in the passenger's dining room. Junior officers ate together there, but had to be on their best behaviour and socialise with passengers if required. The silver service and cuisine was excellent. I'll never forget the wonderful fish dishes, many of which were caught on the day from the stern by the crew.

Once Bob was satisfied that I could run my own watches unsupervised, and things were going much better between us, he left me alone on watch. Later I used to do quite a few of his too. I also did all battery maintenance, and the official corrections for the Admiralty List of Radio Signals (have I recalled the title regularly?). I'll never forget the official-issue paste we used. It smelt to me of almonds, and that smell takes me straight back to the City of PE to this very day.

One duty I found onerous were the late-night news transmissions on 4 Mhz from Portishead. I had to type these up for the purser, who then Roneo-ed them into a little news-sheet to be served with breakfast. If I missed parts (or even all of it) I used to make up news items myself. I remember on one occasion letting my imagination get the better of me and dreamed up a high-speed car chase across the South Downs, with the police desperately trying to intercept a drugs ring. A couple of days later passengers were asking if the perpetrators had been caught, and I had to look bemused and say that no follow-up story had been transmitted.

When things were going well with the broadcast, I could go onto auto-pilot. The signal would come down the antenna, through the RX, into the headphones and my ears, through my head and down my arms, fingers, typewriter keys and onto the paper, without me really knowing what the message was. I could sometimes read the little newspaper at breakfast the next morning and have no memory at all of having read some of the items before.

Our itinerary on that first ship was London, Immingham, Rotterdam, Hull, Tilbury where all the passengers embarked, Las Palmas, Capetown, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Lourenco Marques, Beira, then all those ports in reverse order back to Tilbury. I loved seeing all those places, exploring ashore, working all the coast stations, meeting new people.

One of the things I liked about even very short trips ashore was that there was a Seaman's Mission in just about every port. You could post letters, get low-priced beer and a low-price home-cooked meal, borrow books, play pool or darts, or just flake out in a comfortable armchair. I wonder if those missions survive today?

At the start of the voyage, I made friends with the Leccie, a scouser and a real character. He introduced me to the delights of Rotterdam's red lantern district and many other things a mariner needs to know. I can remember him clearly, but his name stubbornly remains locked in some memory cell somewhere. I also made great friends with my oppo's, the engineer apprentices and the deck cadets. We had some very jolly runs ashore together, including taking the cable car up Table Mountain and partying in LM's club strip.

South Africa was a revelation to me. I found it hard to believe apartheid in operation. "Blanks/Net Blanks" signs everywhere, coloureds having to use different doors to the post office etc, stand at the back of the buses while there were plenty of vacant seats at the front, and so on. The only coloureds you ever saw in restaurants were waiters.

At that time, the ruling whites thought that an English Officer was the bee's knees, and they treated us extremely well. I remember being in a restaurant with some shipmates in Durban when a middle-aged white couple latched on to us. They bought us dinner and invited us back to their ranch! I nearly came unstuck in a restaurant on another occasion when I started chatting to a pretty coloured waitress. She looked very worried and only stayed talking through fear of giving offence. Some frantic signals from a companion gave me a clue, and I let the girl go back to the kitchen. It turned out that other customers had seen this conversation, and were starting to look very disapproving. I hadn't heard of Nelson Mandela, and had no idea that he was already serving his long prison sentence.

Lourenco Marques was great fun, but only for the night life. Drinks were bought in escudos, working out around threepence! We usually went in groups of four or more, and toured the bars and clubs one after another. It was very cheap, and usually hilarious too. In those days, Mozambique was still Portuguese East Africa. LM has now been renamed Maputo, and I believe it's not much of a run ashore for merchant mariners these days.

Our visits to Beira were even more amazing. Ostensibly we were there to load peanuts and cashew nuts for Europe. But those were the days when neighbouring Rhodesia (sorry, Zimbabwe to younger readers) was living under UDI. To survive, Ian Smith had to export copper. This was transported by rail overland to LM, and a fair amount was loaded into our holds.

When we left port, we were usually stopped by the British Royal Navy in the channel. This was the blockade to prevent Rhodesia exporting anything. The RN would send a boarding party to search us for anything of the sort in our holds. I don't know what went in the ship's log, but what happened is this. The boarding party would be ushered into the OM's stateroom. We junior officers would be dispatched around the ship to collect up books, magazines, etc to send back with the boarding party for their amusement on the lonely patrols. The captain in the meantime would serve drinks and nibbles and show them the innocent manifest. After an hour or so and several drinks later, the boarding party would leave, complete with a couple of sacks of books and maggies and a couple of complementary bottles of hooch with a few cartons of cigarettes thrown in for good measure, compliments of Ellerman Lines. They would return to their ship, and we would steam on our merry way, complete with about 10,000 tons of copper ingots.

On the way back to Europe we would call again at Las Palmas for bunkers, stores, and mail. On the way south, we would have earmarked certain items in the shore-side duty-free shops, and on the return journey north we would once again go ashore and seek out those items. By then we would have seen if this price could be bettered elsewhere. If not, and assuming we still had sufficient funds, it would be purchased. In those days, it was hi-fi stereo systems that we all wanted.

I believe Las Palmas is something of a dangerous place these days, with muggings, robberies, and scams being perpetrated on any unwary tourists. When I used to go ashore there, it was perfectly safe. I used to wander about on my own, and was never accosted, mugged, or even over-charged. Either I led a charmed life, or things really have gone downhill.

Returning to the UK after three months for a couple of days' leave was strange. Of course, as a younger student I had seen a fair amount of the Continent, but I'd never been outside Europe, and never farther from land than the middle of the English Channel. I enjoyed the leave, but everything seemed so much smaller and less interesting. I definitely had the travel bug now, and returned to my ship eagerly.

The second voyage was almost an exact repeat of the first. By now, Bob was leaving me to virtually run the station, and I got to do maintenance, the accounts, etc, as well as all the other things I had taken on. I was much more relaxed about operating, and enjoyed some of the challenges. Working Portishead from off the South African coast at all times of the day and night can involve you in frequencies from 4 MHz to 22 MHz. The latter frequency was quite a challenge. We reckoned our Oceanspan VI probably only managed about 20 watts on 22 MHz, even with the antenna insulators newly polished.

I was unable to spend quite as much time socialising on this second leg as on the first, and missed the fun of splashing about in the small pool with colleagues, but there were compensations. In spite of being forbidden to do so, I struck up friendships with some of the young lady passengers and enjoyed the clandestine nature of these assignations.

I spent Christmas on board, and the New Year celebrations were something else. I finished the last watch in time to join the big passenger party just before midnight, and had fun dancing into the middle of the night. I remember spending some time with a stewardess and then going back to her cabin with her. I had to be on watch at 0600 if I remember rightly, and turned up at my cabin to shave and shower about 0545!

During this second leg I had an unexpected meeting with Bob. I came off watch late one night, set the autoalarm, and went to my cabin. Bob's cabin was opposite mine and his door was open. Unusually, he was alone. He invited me in and gave me big glass of gin. He asked me how I felt I was doing, and had I enjoyed my training.

We chatted about all sorts of things and had several drinks until, around 2 am, we got onto what I am sure he was leading up to: the subject of SSB. He had heard about this then-new form of RT, and pooh-poohed it, saying traditional RT was fine. I realised after a while that he wanted information, he wanted to know how it worked, and he wanted to be prepared for the inevitable day in the near future when he would be required to work with it. Bob's ticket was ancient by then, and he was past taking courses and learning new tricks.

I was fresh out of college, and we had studied SSB intensively – theory, circuits, the lot. Over several more gins I laid out why it was the upcoming wave, the principles, and gave the opinion that Bob would have no trouble using it. Eventually he was satisfied. He'd found out all he wanted to know without having to cry off

operating an SSB ship when assigned to one.

By the time he let me go to bed I was definitely woozy – it was about 4 am. Nevertheless, I still had to turn to for the first watch, but it was worth the hangover; I felt I had made firm friends with my chief after a dodgy start.

I was signed off articles on the City of PE on January 6th 1971, and felt it was a fabulous first ship. I had learned to run a station, built up confidence to be a member of a ship's complement, and had a lot of fun and travel experience as well.

My big regret is that I didn't realise that those days were coming to end for all of us merchant mariners, but especially "sparkies." The merchant marine continues (although not the way it used to be!), but satellite communications and navigation have rendered the R/O obsolete. If I had realised how momentous those trips were to prove to be, I would have kept a detailed diary – radio equipment, stations worked, ports visited, names and addresses of my shipmates, etc. I have a poor memory, and a lot has been forgotten. Hopefully, the QSO magazine, with so much input from R/O's, will preserve some of this wonderful history.

Dave Ellis,

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