

The Redcar Winkle - Part 2

At last - a life on the ocean wave. The old 'Builder' headed out of the English Channel and in to the Bay of Biscay and straight into the biggest seas I had ever seen - we were bound for Curacao and Aruba in the Caribbean.

The ship was pitching into a slight westerly breeze (gale force 8) being light ship we were not taking on board any seas but the motion of the ship hitting the waves was called, I believe, likened to bumping down a staircase. The ship seemed to stop momentarily then judder violently three or four times and then head for the next set of swells.

At this time it was still winter time as we left the UK, but as we progressed further South towards the Azores the weather improved (then we would do a 'right hand down a bit' and then head on a Great Circle course towards Curacao).



As the weather improved us apprentices came into our own. Out went the restrictive jeans, shirts and jumper and out came the rugby shorts. Our daily tasks soon became our routine for the voyage.

Awake - 0730, dress in full whites, white shirt with epaulettes with single horizontal gold band, notifying navigating cadet, white calf length socks, white shoes, my I did look cute in my uniform, I could have looked at the mirror all day - luckily breakfast was at 0800.

Breakfast was served in the Officer's dining room by the stewards - it was the only meal of the day that didn't comprise of some type of curry.

Between 0830 - 1000 it was back to the cabin. Study period - we had to compile a "diary" of our life on the ship which was sent off to the BP headquarters in Sunbury on Thames for perusal by our training Officer and eventually returned with advisory comments as to your progress (didn't like the comment "you'd be better suited to the RAF" - well on my interview he did say it would be *plane* sailing) - the literature also contained questions to be answered re: seamanship and the like.

Then into shorts and off to learn about how to clean a ship.



I was introduced to the chipping hammer - a tool to chip rust off paintwork, a long handled scraper - to scrape off loose paint, paintbrush (self-explanatory), a large circular sandstone (to sharpen scraper) ... pointed to a bulkhead (rusted) - start chipping !

The apprentices (now to be known as bbc-british builder comrades) set to with relative gusto, but after an hour in soaring heat, no breaks and perspiration rolling down our faces, the pace slowed. Thankfully about 1145 we were stood down - told to shower and lunch

was at 1200. Problem on the Builder was that she did NOT produce water from the engine room, so the only water on board - for all purposes was water taken on board at each port. So the routine was only one fresh water shower per day - all other showers had to be with salt water (plenty of that about) - very difficult to work up a lather with the BP soap provided.

Lunch was again taken in the Officer's saloon. I must say the meals were excellent - especially for the four bbc gannets who devoured everything that was brought to the table. We were progressing across the Atlantic beam on (getting conversant with the lingo now) and the ship was rolling quite steadily (about 25-30 degrees on the swingometer) and it now became obvious why there were short chains hanging down from the bottom of the chairs - because of the motion of the ship it was impossible to keep your chair near the table without fixing the chain to a hook in the floor (sorry - deck) only BP could put rollers on the feet of the chair. Furthermore to prevent the plates etc. from ending up in your lap there was an edging around the table that could be raised in rough weather. I can tell you it was an art form trying to eat soup - chasing it about the bowl.



After lunch it was back to the daily grind. Between 1300 - 1500 (at sea) were always regarded as the "silent" hours, usually the captain and Chief Officer took to their beds (not together) to catch up on sleep. Consequently there was no chipping and scraping allowed. So out came the paintbrushes and we had to red lead the areas we had attacked in the mornings. We once had the temerity to ask why we were doing manual labour when we should be learning about navigation and ship handling (a bit like Oliver Twist asking for more) - answer (a) because I told you to (b) if and when you finally become fully fledged Officers, when you instruct a seaman to do something you will have had some experience as to how it feels. I thought that has remained with me all my life - especially when meeting some of the 'fast tracked' personnel.



Very crafty this Chief Officer - wanted 3 coats of red lead - didn't trust us much, probably he knew who he was dealing with - first coat basic red lead, 2nd coat red lead with white paint added to change colour so we couldn't skimp and finally 3rd coat back to red lead, obviously a sadist.

Finally finish at 1630. Shower with salt water and then the only shower we were allowed each day with fresh water to wash off the salt. Then, evening meal, and the rest of the day to ourselves.

What sort of entertainment could a ship of the Mercantile Marine provide for an up and coming youth of 16-18 years of age ? We did have a library of sorts - every time we reach a port that had a Mission to Sailors building - one of the volunteers from the Mission would bring a couple of boxes of books aboard and exchange them with the ones already read - "Health & Efficiency" was not allowed.

There was a small radio which worked courtesy of a length of wire attached to the main mast for an aerial. The reception was nearly always patchy but we would try and tune into the BBC world service, the nearest we got to home.

We played cribbage and other card games, not Strip poker - but NEVER for money, we were warned that the easiest way to lose a friend was to play cards for money and argue about religion.

Duffle Coat Danny (pseudonym) the only person who *(this paragraph censored by Editor. Contact 'The Redcar Winkle' directly for a description of Danny's talents !)*

Excitement was building as we passed between Trinidad and Tobago and made our final approach to Curacao. We berthed alongside and the Captain said that as it was our first time in a distant port we could all go ashore (which was unusual) so we could keep an eye on one another - the only drawback, we had to be in whites - and not disgrace the company - how could we ?



A taxi was ordered - it duly arrived and as we negotiated the gangplank a voice - Chief Officer - "make sure you have some protection with you" ... was he insane ? It was 80 degrees, never rained for weeks, why the hell did we want an umbrella?



The taxi driver was asked where the 'hot' spots were, the only place was 'Happy Valley' he said.

He pulled up outside what could only be described as a compound, wire fencing about 6 feet high around the perimeter with only one entrance/exit controlled by armed security. Big notice stating over 21 years admitted, obviously the guards admitting us needed to go to Specsavers. Inside the fence were what looked like Butlins holiday chalets, most of them with young ladies sitting on the veranda making funny gestures with their hands. We headed to an open bar in

the centre of the compound, sat on the bar stools and ordered double rum and coke (1s and 6d) the coke was one shilling. Sitting there attracted young scantily dressed ladies who for some reason wanted us to go to the chalets- I think it was for education purposes, but even if we'd wanted to we would have had the equivalent of a student loan (with or without Clegg)

Anyhow the drink was cheap (even for us) and not being used to alcohol (things change eventually) we didn't have too many before we made our taxi journey back to the ship - I didn't bother reminding the Chief Officer it didn't rain.

Soon be loaded (the ship that is) and then off to the continent of AFRICA and tales of awning spars, monkey etc.