



MEMORIES

by Doug Amor

I was recently reading the February 2009 newsletter from the Queensland Vindi Association when a story about the Royal Mail, Loch boats caught my attention. I went straight to my discharge book and there it was the Loch Garth and through it brought back a flood of memories.....

It was September to December 1953 usual trip Panama, USA and Vancouver, but unusual for me, exciting, happy, sad, very sad – terrifying, scary and glad to get home though for the wrong reasons. We were off to the States and Canada for my first, Oh! for some Levi jeans at US\$4 a pair and then it was US\$4 to the pound so good buying.

I was signed on as an AB and soon after was asked to be storekeeper, but with extra pay and thought to myself would look good in my discharge book. Usual stops Jamaica – 4 stops in Texas then round the corner to Panama (my first). My first laugh was when all the peggies saved the bread for the mules. (Ha, the mules being the locomotive engines that pulled ships through the locks).

Our first stop in US was Frisco and we didn't know what hit us, about a dozen suits with dark glasses waiting on the dock, then the spooks came on board and took over the mess room. The first question was "are you a communist" my answer (not having much to do with politics) at the age of 21, I'd not even voted, I said "What's that?" It took about 15 to 20 minutes for each crew member to go through this inquisition; and took nearly all day. At the end of the trial we all knew we could now go ashore, but first we had to raise the derricks and uncover the hatches – Ha ha! I managed to get two pairs of Levis so was very happy.

My job was, surprisingly easy, measure out soojie, cut lambscloth and handout buckets and off they went. I would get out paint cans and clean brushes ready as well as splicing ropes and wires, a bit of sewing canvas, repairing flags, it was a real doddle.

Up to Canada and it just started to get cold but in those days it did not stop us finding the local bars. About a week later we went down to Frisco again and topped up (no bread this time). We heard in the Panama port that a hurricane was coming up the coast to Miami, so it was life lines all round the ship, the skipper was going to outrun it Ha Ha!

WE were about a day out that we heard it was coming straight for us so nobody was allowed on deck, that made my job irrelevant and most of us were cabin bound, with six hour checks to make sure we were still on board. At this time the skipper came to see me (I had my own cabin) and he had some very dire news by telegram, my 7 year old sister was in hospital very sick with leukemia, so that did not improve my mind. For this reason the other boys gathered to bolster my feelings.

Two days later we survived the storm and we all went to check the ship, the funnel was completely stripped of paint down to the steel and two lifeboats nearly destroyed and it was all things that couldn't be fixed by the crew, till we arrived in port, which was to be Antwerp.

Three days later the ship was pretty much back to normal and better weather. A knock on my door was a visit from the skipper and Chief Officer, we sat as the telegram was read. My sister had died after a short illness in hospital, nothing could be done. To explain is impossible how I felt. It was three days before I came out of my cabin. Someone had fed me but it was all a fog, even now. The crew found it very hard to talk to me but as usual we all survive after a death.

We were about a week away from the UK coast when again the skipper sent for me and told me that the shipping company had agreed to drop me off at Falmouth, where there would be a pilot boat to take me off, a taxi to the station and a voucher for the train to London. I could only blubber and thank him with what I had left to give.

Later I found out that the ship had been chartered by Royal Mail and about two months later I received a letter from them to offer me a job as Lampy/Storekeeper on the MV Darro and because they had been so good I felt obliged to return the service. I stayed five trips there and she went everywhere, so ends the story. I never got the opportunity to really show my gratitude to that skipper and co. for all they did for me in my time of grief. I was 22 and my sister was 7 so I was more like a father than a brother and often got mistaken for that. We had great fun times on my shore leave and I will always cherish those times.