31) M.V. Fort Norman 29020 GRT 12000 BHP
Bremerhaven 16/12/79 - 19/6/80 Rotterdam.
32) M.V. Fort Norman Re-signed on articles.
Rotterdam 19/6/80 - 5/7/80 Ghent Belgium.

I travelled by train (quite a new experience) from Offenburg to join this ship in Bremerhaven drydock, It was a previously (ab)used ship that the company had bought cheaply. Later, we found out exactly why it was so cheap. As it turned out, it was certainly no bargain. On joining the ship, we had no power, no information as to what equipment was fitted or where controls or switches were to be found. All controls and switches that we did find had Yugoslav/Norwegian labels on them and were thus indecipherable.
As we had no handover notes or helpful hints from the previous owners, we were posed with an interesting problem. How do you start up a ship! There is no ignition key like in a car, and each ship has its own procedures for starting from cold. It took the engineers quite some time to work out that one.

I had a nice old high-power SAIT AM valve transmitter (1Kw) with its high power modulator in the radio room. I have always liked older high power transmitters. I have always thought the sight of glowing anodes and filaments inside the large glass envelopes looked fascinating. This transmitter was quite a beast, but worked well. The SAIT receiver, however, was sick, and as deaf as a post. Unusually, I had Nife cell emergency batteries instead of the usual lead-acid type, and had been bequeathed a massive old typewriter that apparently predated Gutenberg. A huge emergency generator was situated in the bow, with various starting methods (battery, air, hydraulic), which ran the emergency lighting, radio room, bridge and navigation gear (radar etc). It was also used for some engine room systems, as well as that most essential piece of equipment, the bridge kettle for tea/coffee! It took us ages to find out how to start it, (the generator I mean,... we could manage the kettle quite well, even without a driving licence!) - and what were "nodlys"? (They eventually turned out to be emergency lights, but we puzzled over it for days).

The power supplied from the drydock was quite limited, and the Electrician and I quite often used to black out the ship by turning on an unknown switch in the engine room which started a large piece of machinery, such as the air conditioning or one of the big pumps. As we could not read the labels, it was all very trial and error. There then followed a long cold trek from the ship over to the dry dock power house, to turn the circuit breakers on again. These periods of

total darkness did not go down well with the rest of the crew, so we tried to minimise any experiments as much as possible.

One radar was an S band (3GHz) Raytheon unit with a large blue/green display. It contained no transistors – only valves, and was relatively old. The transmitter had an impressive output power of around 75 KW, and a maximum range of over 100 miles – which is pretty good for a civil marine radar! I actually had targets right to the edge of the screen too. The antenna was a huge 5 meter array, which turned very slowly on the very top of the mast. It was powered by a large motor generator next to the bridge. The Captain was on the bridge when we turned the radar on for the first time. He got quite worried about what was causing all the noise! The other radar was a small Marconi Raymarc, transistorised, simple but quite reliable. The scanner was also more accessible, being lower down.

We spent quite a while getting the ship ready for sea. Like all drydock stays, it was very uncomfortable for the crew. You must remember that it was winter, and the weather was appropriate for the time of year, wet, cold grey and dreary. We had no toilets on board, we were not allowed to use the showers, there was no heating, only limited electric power and a tremendous amount of dirt and noise. The ship's hull was sandblasted and then repainted. New funnel colours were painted on and quite a bit of maintenance was done all over the ship. A lot of repairs were done in the engine room, and we were trying to get replacements for some wornout bits elsewhere. I was trying to get a new typewriter to replace the ancient Gutenberg one I had to use in the radio room. The keys used to sometimes stick, which meant I could end up several words behind if I had to unstick a key when receiving Morse telegrams or weather messages. This was a rather nerve-racking experience and not something I wanted to occur too often. I had to wait until next time back to Europe before I got it however.

Virtually all the navigational publications had to be replaced, as they were so old, and had not been kept up to date. (The charts of the English Channel for example, did not even have the latest buoys and navigational marks, so how the previous crew navigated was anyone's guess!) Hundreds of marine navigational charts encompassing the entire world (32 folios in all) were replaced as well as a complete set of pilot books (around 100 volumes!). We were told to dump the old ones at sea, but that was just too much for me. I boxed them up in the original boxes and got them sent home by train as freight. I salvaged some old charts too. We still have them at home, and though old, they contain much interesting information.

The repairs eventually came to an end, the dock was flooded, and we left. Unfortunately it was just one day before Christmas. We were rather unhappy about this, as we were looking forward to a quiet Christmas in dock. The company, however, had other plans, and we just had to make the best of things. Our Christmas dinner was eaten in a somewhat bumpy North Sea in a force 8 gale. We had still not yet found out where all the switches were, resulting in there being no ventilation fans in the galley, and it was a mixture of a sauna and a smoke

room inside. Despite the smoke from the grilled steaks, the steam and the heat in there, the cooks did a marvellous job!

We sailed up the UK East Coast, around the North of Scotland and across the stormy North Atlantic to Norfolk, Virginia to load coal for Argentina. We took this route to avoid a storm nestling in the Western Approaches. Even so, it was quite a bumpy passage.

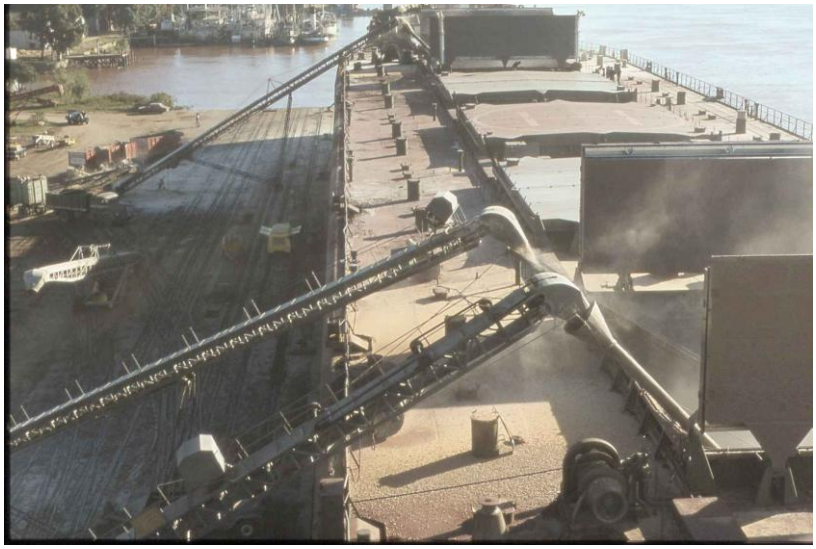
The first time we had to open the cargo hatches at Norfolk was a foretaste of things to come. The hatch covers were hydraulically operated. Several hydraulic lines burst whilst in use, showering those on deck with fountains of oil, and delaying loading until they could be repaired.

I used to help the Electrician quite a lot on this ship, as he had more than enough to do sorting out the various electrical catastrophes that occurred. One minor example of such an event was a loud explosion in the passage outside my cabin one evening, then it all went dark. We had experienced several days of heavy rain, and some water had found its way through a small crack on the monkey island above the bridge (two decks above!)running down some pipes and into a light fitting just outside my cabin, causing an electrical short circuit. It took us ages to find exactly where the water came in and plug the leak. Until then, no lights in the alleyway.

I remember sitting astride the main engine crankshaft, actually inside the crank case, leaning against the piston connecting rod. (The engine was of course stopped, but it was still rather warm inside). I was being gently dripped on by warm oil as I changed engine temperature probes, and checked wiring. As an Electronics Officer, remote sensing, alarm and control electronics, no matter where situated were my responsibility. It took several hours, checking all the cylinders, crawling in and out of the engine casing. Towards the end, I was getting quite worried … I was starting to LIKE it in there!

This ship had very comfortable accommodation for the officers, with cane furniture, indirect lighting, big picture windows and plants in the bar. We had also been given a very nice hi-fi system paid for by the company. We had built our own bar, in what used to be the smoke room and were very proud of it. The ship itself however was a floating disaster area. Maintenance had been skimped by the previous owners, and the condition of the hull began to give us real cause for concern. During the first loaded trip from Norfolk, Virginia to San Nicolas in Argentina, big cracks opened up in some holds during heavy weather and got us very worried indeed. The cracks were inspected twice a day to see how they were spreading, not that we could do anything about them but watch. Towards the end of the voyage, the Chief Officer refused to go down as it looked as if that section of hold would collapse. It never did, but only I think because the weather moderated, and there was then less stress on that section.

San Nicolas is about 200 miles up the River Plate from Buenos Aires. We first transhipped some cargo onto another ship so we were light enough to transit the river as far as San Nicholas. Even that didn't go well. The other ship (of around 10,000 tons) had problems mooring up to us, and demolished one of its own lifeboats in the process, as well as denting one of ours. We then travelled further up river to Rosario where we took a week to load a part cargo of various types of cattle food. Even though these were mostly as pellets, it was still very dusty. Then down to Rio Grande del Sul in Brazil to load more cattle food for Cape Town, then we were due to return back to Europe.

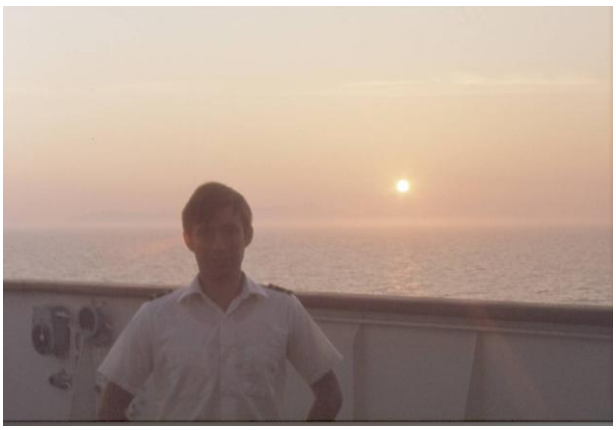


There was some worry that water would enter the cargo spaces and spoil the cargo due to holes in the hatch covers and leaky seals. Cattle food swells when wet and can exert tremendous pressure if confined. It can also give off large quantities of dangerous carbon dioxide gas if it ferments. We were lucky, but it could have been serious. We found that some hatch covers had holes in them which had been covered over with chart paper and then painted over to hide them! They were not of course particularly weather proof, and after the first few weeks at sea, started to leak badly. We were then delayed in Capetown for 2 weeks to repair hatch covers and fix patches over the various cracks in the hull. (According to the original dockyard quote it should have been only 2 days!) As the patches were fixed on, the metal hull was found too thin to weld to so the patches had to be made bigger until metal of proper thickness was found to stick them to. It certainly made us wonder at the ship's sea worthiness! The hatch cover drift pins were rusted solid. These were the pins which held the huge hinges for the hatch covers in place. It took a number of large 40 ton hydraulic rams to push them out, and much heating with oxy-acetylene burners then cooling down again to loosen the rust. All this of course took considerable extra time to remove them. During the voyage we used to joke that they should just jack up the accommodation and put a new ship under it. At the repair dock, it seemed as if they would have to!

Whilst in Capetown, I of course made use of the free time, and rented a car. I met up (as usual) with some of the local radio amateurs. One of them being a well known doctor specialising in back injuries. Another was a local businessman who wined me and dined me like a king. I grew to like Capetown, its environs and the people very much. It was very hard to leave after making so many friends, but the repairs were finally done (as well as possible in the time available and within

the financial limitations imposed by the company). We then made our way back to Europe, where Christine came out to the ship to visit me.

Afterwards, we did a trip up to Narvik, which is situated north of the Arctic Circle to load coal. This was highly interesting, as it was midsummer, and the sun never set. This confused my time sense no end, and ended up with my going to post a letter in the town at 11PM, thinking it was only about 4 in the afternoon. Needless to say, I was not very successful! I managed to take a photo with our position on the sat-nav, the midnight local time showing on the ships clock and the GMT time on the digital clock. To prove it is still light, I took another photo with sun still over the horizon!



The scenery was highly spectacular as we sailed up the Norwegian fjords, narrow waterways with high cliffs and mountains on either side. The water was sometimes mirror smooth, and wonderful reflections of mountains and sky could be seen in it. In Narvik, I had the opportunity to climb a local hill and view the area from above. This was a steep climb, and every pause to rest caused a plague of tiny flies to appear around my head. Interestingly, there was still some snow up there, even in the middle of summer! When fully loaded, we sailed back down to Rotterdam for discharge, where I left the ship.

After I had left, I heard that the ship had failed a US Coast Guard seaworthiness survey in Norfolk on her next visit. The forward double bottom tanks, which would be used for ballast or sometimes for storing fuel, only contained what looked like thin rust cobwebs where main structural members should have been. The Chief Officer reportedly looked pale and shaken when he came up after a before survey "look-see". It basically meant that the bow section of the ship lacked main structural strength, and could have folded up in a heavy sea at any time. A nice thought remembering some of the weather I had gone through whilst on board not all that long previously. The reported repair cost was over a million dollars! Approximately 3 years later, after a number of other major problems, the ship was scrapped. The ship had been, quite clearly, a very bad buy, and probably more money was spent on repairs and various fines than the ship had cost initially. I believe one of our technical superintendants, who had apparently approved the ship had quite a lot of explaining to do because of this. As always however, these things go on behind closed doors. We, at the bottom of the ladder, were the ones who had to sail and operate the ship. We never got asked for our opinions, and we never found out the entire story about why the ship was bought.