53) M.V. G.A. Walker
Salina Cruz Mexico 15/10/87 - 12/2/88 Singapore. (Ice)

This turned out to be my last voyage, and again was an eventful one. We finished our Mexican charter to Pemex, and then loaded at Los Angeles. On the shorter, Great Circle route to Korea we were ordered to take, we had to pass north of the Aleutian Islands, where we experienced severe icing on deck. The weather was being influenced by the cold Kuril current, and the wind cut like a knife. Going out on deck was very unpleasant, with gale force winds and air temperatures of minus 10 - 15 degrees. Spray froze on contact with the deck and railings, steam lines froze up and most steam driven deck machinery was badly damaged. The ship was just not built for such cold conditions. This was another "weather routing" fiasco, where we were routed to avoid storms further south, but in so doing, travelled into areas where the final effect was much more expensive than if we had been left to make our own way. We tried to keep steam to all machinery forward, but as the heavy swell kept breaking over the deck, and cooling down the steam lines, we ended up doing more harm than good. The steam pressure drove condensed water into the cylinders, where it then stopped the machine from working, and later froze causing burst pipes, cylinders and valves. The weather was too bad during the night to let anyone go out to try and release the condensed water.

I took a number of very impressive pictures of the iced up deck early the next morning. On arrival at Inchon, South Korea, the anchor could be dropped, but not heaved up again as the anchor windlass had burst its cylinders. Even some of our mooring winches were damaged. It was just as well the ship was dry-docking shortly! We left the anchor behind in Korea as it could not be pulled up. A salvage firm being contracted to pick it up from the harbour bottom.

We received a telex on route to Singapore saying that the majority of the British officers would be paying off there. Also, that there would be no further employment for them as all Hong Kong registered ships were going over to totally Indian manning. The only British registered ships remaining were the box boats (container ships), and they were shortly to be sold or re-flagged. This was not totally unexpected, but was none the less very unpleasant and unhappy news.

We left the vessel in a Singapore dry-dock, virtually all the English Officers being made redundant, and Indian Officers joined. They had a lot less pay, and were willing to serve 9 months or more before being relieved. To the accountants this sounded good. The crew were already Indian, and they were not too happy at the change. They knew, I think, that their own nationals would probably not be so easy going as we were. We left before the new officers arrived, and did no handover at all. We were asked if we would stay a day or so to show them the ropes, but we all refused. Under the circumstances this was understandable. The shipping company was obviously being run by accountants, looking for saving money NOW and unable to comprehend the long term results of their actions. The Indian officers lacked experience in maintenance and operation. The end results were pre-programmed and clear for us all to see.

The Captain agreed we could have an evening at a Singapore hotel before flying home. He was not a very happy man either. He and the Chief Engineer would be the only Europeans afterwards left aboard. We were sad and somewhat angry at what was happening to us, but it was a process being performed throughout the C.P. Fleet, and indeed, throughout the entire British Merchant Navy. Loyalty to a company had no meaning, it was purely a financial question, in a time of falling freight rates, specialised services and the oversupply of ships. Ships were sold or re-flagged, crews disbanded, conditions changed with reduced (and cheaper) manning, longer tours of duty and reduced pay rates.

The Indian Officers in many (or most) cases were unable to maintain the ships as we did. Some of our ships were now getting rather old and needed skilled maintenance to keep them running efficiently. Because the Indians lacked these skills and experience on the ships, it caused repair costs and delays to soar. I later heard from my old personnel boss (Mr Bob Balneaves) that the radio telex systems fitted on all the tankers never worked again after we left. The Indian radio operators had little or no electronics knowledge, and knew nothing of the mysteries of CITOR, ARQ or FEC working. It was all strictly Morse telegrams and very little (if any) electronic maintenance. Various bits of equipment fell into disuse when they could not be kept working. Relatively rapidly the delays, problems and costs increased to a point where it was not economic to continue.

Approx 1 year later, C.P. progressively sold all vessels and pulled out of the direct shipping market. C.P. Ship management (Hong Kong) continued for a while as a management company, looking after other people's ships, until it too ceased operations. Some of the officers found employment in other shipping companies, some remained ashore. It was the end of an era.

Seamen are a strange breed. They put up with conditions which most people would not or could not. Their world lacks a lot of the things we take for granted ashore. It does not, for instance, often have a stable floor to stand on. One is often thrown violently about by one’s cabin. It is often too hot, or freezing cold. The food can be anything from a sumptuous feast to something the dog refused to drag in. There is no TV and little radio. Working conditions are often long, loud, hot and dirty. They have to put up with living for long periods in close proximity to each other, with little privacy and very little to distract them from the problems which crop up.

On the other hand, life on some more modern ships can sometimes almost be like being held in solitary confinement within a mobile prison. A huge modern 280,000 ton (or more) tanker, around 1000 feet long, having only 12 or 14 people on it (sometimes even less). With 3 watches going on 24 hours a day, most people are

probably sleeping. One can look for ages until another living soul is found. Social contact is almost non-existent outside watch handovers or perhaps mealtimes.

I have always maintained that the average seaman would look at a six month prison sentence as a holiday camp. He would get regular mail, regular visits from family and friends. Radio, TV, reasonable food and a bed that doesn't try to throw him out of it! The work he may be called upon to do could not possibly be worse than what he has to do aboard ship, and the working conditions considerably better!

I often wonder what happened to the shipmates I sailed with, some of them quite often over many voyages, and the friends I made. A shared life for a few months, then goodbye, maybe until the next time.

I joined ANT in Offenburg about 2 months later.

There is a sequel to this story. ANT was acquired by Bosch, the well-known German manufacturer of car electrics, ABS systems, tools and household appliances. They were not very successful in their venture into the telecommunications market, and after losing a considerable amount of money, they sold the firm to GEC – who then changed their name to Marconi.

I am back to my first employer again, in a different country, and in a different job, but still back with the old firm.

The circuit has been completed.