



SHIPMATES

Reardon Smith Seafarer's Newsletter

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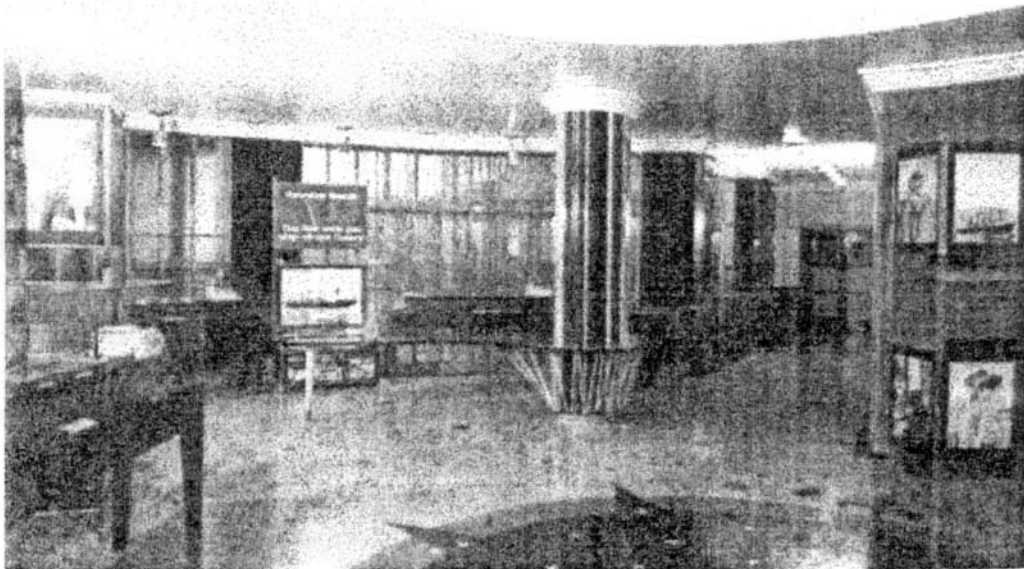
"DEVONSHIRE HOUSE"

CARDIFF

HOME OF THE REARDON SMITH GROUP OF COMPANIES

The photograph below is the Entrance Hall of "Devonshire House". This spacious, palatial building built in 1958 in Greyfriars Road, in the very heart of the City, for Sir William Reardon Smith & Sons Limited. The company moved from its previous office, "Column Buildings", Mount Stuart Square, Cardiff, into the new building on 8th December 1958. The office Christmas party that year was celebrated shortly afterwards with pride and optimism for the future expansion of the Company.

The Company headquarters was to remain there until 1985 when due to a prolonged recession in the shipping industry with very low freight rates, resulting as became necessary in an endeavor to weather the conditions, the slow sale of assets. However, despite every endeavor, unfortunately the Company had to cease trading at the end of May, 1985.



Some Memories of Tommy Major

Like many other Reardon Smith sea staff I was saddened to learn that Tommy Major had crossed the Bar last November. I knew Tommy very well having in a way grown up in the Company during his own progress from Engine Super to Chief Super and then Technical Director.

Our paths first crossed when I was a second year deck apprentice aboard the m.v. "LEEDS CITY", Captain Blake Carnaffan in command. The ship was in dry-dock in Hamburg at the Finkenwerde Yard and Tommy was in attendance together with another two icons, R.B. Smith (engine super) and Capt. Alfie Ward. (Deck super).

Together with the other three apprentices, I was working helping to load stores on the after deck from the shore side crane, when word came down from on high that Charlie Boyer (me) was wanted in the Chief Engineer's cabin. I duly attended the Chief's cabin on the port side of the amidships accommodation to be met by two very stern faced, bowler hatted gentlemen in dark blue overalls and a third gentleman, in a very natty suit and flat hat. Tommy and R.B. were the ones in the boiler suits, Alfie, bless him, was impeccably dressed. The Chief, Lionel Wainwright, was sitting at his desk, head down in a lot of plans, so I stood there wondering which of my many crimes I was being called to account for. The shorter of the two engine supers, said in a rather condemning sort of voice. "I understand you speak German, boy!" Well, what was I to say? Yes, I could speak rather good German, having passed the language at 'O' Level two years previously and also having enjoyed more than one run ashore through the famous Reeperbahn District and quaffed a few jars in the Zillertahl. You must remember that the war had been over barely ten years and Germany was not yet peopled by the prosperous, widely traveled Herrenvolk. That came later, courtesy of the Marshall Plan. "Ja, mein Herr. Ich verstehe Deutsch sehr gut!" says I, (showing off of course). "Das is gut!" a loud voice said from the wings as it were. Then I noticed a dockyard matey standing to one side. He turned out to be the foreman of the repair gang working in the engine room and it looked like he had had one or two run ins with R.B. over "Just what the hell are you doing down there man?"

Anyway to cut long story short, for the rest of the ship's stay in the dry-dock, I spent my working hours in the Chief's dayroom, with occasional excursions into the engine room acting as interpreter for the supers who were doing their usual game of trying to get more out of the dockyard mateys than they were prepared to give. The funny thing was that when I got to know the foreman,

Hans Blatter his name, it transpired that his English was probably better than my German and although we never let on to Tommy and R.B. Alfie soon twigged that my work was not so vital. However, if he did suss it, he never let on and so I had a real cushy number during the two weeks the ship was undergoing repair in a bitterly cold Hamburg winter. Hans said that he did find it very difficult to understand both Tommy and R.B. because as we old timers remember, in those days, they both had strong Geordie accents and even we southerners had trouble understanding them at times. Alfie always put a packet of ciggies in my pocket each day, however there was nowt like that from the two engine supers. Alfie Ward was a diamond and someone who will always have a special spot in my memories.

Years later, language again played a part in my dealings with TWM. In 1973, I think it was, the two Ruston engined cargo vessels. "CORNISH CITY" and "WELSH CITY" were in the Japanese port of Aioi in the Ishikawajima Heavy Industries yard, being re-engined, and I was Master of the "SARA LUPE". We had been ordered to Aioi for routine dry-docking. We duly arrived and tied up at the wet dock awaiting entry to the dry-dock the next morning. The usual authorities, port health, immigration and Customs had all been and gone. Nippon Maritime local agents had delivered the mail and cash advance and I was sitting at my desk writing up the Official Log Book, when I heard a noise at my open cabin door. Looking up I saw, (I thought), a Japanese official from IHI standing in the doorway. He was dressed in the grey IHI boilersuit, with the little short-time towel wrapped round his neck. Clamped down on his head was the green IHI safety helmet (green being the colour denoting an IHI manager). Thick lensed glasses again very similar to the spectacles worn by many Japanese. "Ohio, gozai-mashta," says I in a welcoming sort of way. "

"The name's Major and I am not Japanese!" says our Tommy, for it was he and I was immediately classed, in his mind, I am sure, as another idiot shipmaster.

That particular day did not end well either. Tommy wanted to know if anyone wanted to speak to him about anything. It just so happened that we had just received at our previous port of call, the results of the survey that RSL had asked sea staff to carry out to determine the number of hours each officer worked each day under the infamous Limitation of Hours Agreement. It transpired that as a result of the survey, all ranks got a pay rise. All ranks that is, except 2nd Engineers. Even Radio Officers and Chief Stewards got something. Our 2nd Engineer and here I have to confess that I cannot remember whether it was John Claydon or Keith Rowney was furious at the

result and had told me that he wanted to resign and be paid off. Our next port being Aioi and with TWM on board I told him that the 2nd Eng would probably like to discuss the recent pay award with him. "Send for him" says TWM, "I will see him next door in the Owner's Suite. A quick 'phone call to the ER and the Second duly arrived. I directed him next door and then all hell broke loose. A full scale shouting match developed between our Second and TWM that culminated with the Second storming off. Tommy appeared at my door and boy was he mad! Mostly mad at me it turned out. "You didn't warn me about that man!" says Tommy, "He told me to stuff the contract and the ship up my..." well I'll leave the reader to imagine the rest. Black mark No.2 for yours truly.

Years later, when I was in the Cardiff office for one of those famous debriefings when people kept looking at you as you wandered from department to department, obviously wondering what the hell you wanted. I found myself eventually in the Technical Dept., and TWM came out of his greenhouse at the end of the room to collar me and say "I am still not happy about the way you handled that business on the "SARA LUPE" with the Second Engineer. What a memory!

Finally, it would not be fair if I did not include a story with Tommy and one of his favourite Chief Engineers.

It is early March 1977, place Sunderland Shipbuilders fitting out berth, just upriver from Greenwalls. The ship is RSL's first British built Panamax gearless bulk carrier the "ORIENT CITY" The ship is preparing to depart for the North Sea and sea trials. There is a trials Master in command, Captain Harry Tate. I am there together with all the deck and engine officers who will be the ship's sea staff once it is handed over in Southampton Dry Dock. I have been asked by Sunderland Shipbuilders' Director of Finance whether my deck and engine officers would stand the sea watches so that the shipbuilder did not have to hire a trials crew. My officers were only too pleased to stand the bridge and engine watches when I told them that the shipbuilder would pay us the wages they would have paid the trials crew. It is 10:00 p.m. in the evening. There are upwards of 130 souls on board who would be sailing with the ship for the first 24 hours of sea trials outside the harbour. Extra lifesaving equipment had been placed on board and the Board of Trade surveyor had satisfied himself that the ship could safely sail. We RSL staff were all allocated small areas in various cabins that were to be our "quarters" Tommy was also on board. My "quarters" was the Chief Engineer's settee in his office. The sailing Chief was Danny Trigg, someone that TWM always had a soft spot for. Tommy had the settee in the Chief's Dayroom and the bedroom had been reserved for Len Taylor who was there

to observe (all expenses paid, eh Len?). Just prior to departure, I was in the Chief's office when Tommy pokes his head around the door. "Where's Dan?" he says looking at me with that so familiar look. "He's just bringing his gear on board Mr. Major," says I and just then Danny appears at the door carrying one small suitcase and four long sea angling rods all neatly wrapped in their canvas bags. Tommy's face was a picture. "Just when do you think you are going to have any time for fishing Dan?" he asks. "Why," says old Danny in that lovely soft Gloucestershire drawl, "when we break down of course!"

Wonderful!

So there is my little book of memories of a RSL icon Tommy is in the same mould as Lionel Ford, R.B. Smith and Alfie Ward. Oh, by the way, we never did get the wages Sunderland Shipbuilders promised us for standing the sea watches on passage from Sunderland to Southampton via Flushing (for bunkers). Tommy saw to that alright! He told me afterwards that working for RSL was reward enough!

Captain Bryan (Charlie) Boyer.

Reardon Smith Reunion 2005

At the "Queens Head", Ockbrook, near Derby, 14th September 2005.

If any Shipmates attending the above Reunion have any RSL memorabilia that they could bring with them, please do so. It would be nice to have a RSL house flag and any other items that we could set up as a display for the reunion. All items would remain the property of their owners and would be returned to them at the end of the "do"

Obituary Terry Haxell from South Shields gave me the sad news that his father crossed the bar on 3rd February 2005. Terry and his wife Barbaba went to his house to find him dead on the living room floor. He was 84 years old. he was given a good send off at the Mission to Seafarers, Mill Dam, South Shields, his ashes were scattered on the River Tyne from the Mill Dam pontoon . Frank Renton from Canada was sailing with Terry's father on the rescue tug "Empire Fred" in North African Waters during the war when he won his Oak Leaf. Our deepest sympathy goes to Terry, Barbaba and there family.

New Member.

We welcome aboard Leon Slawinski who lives in South Shields Leon was Chief Steward/ Purser on the Reardon Smith ships for many years. Terry Haxell intruded Leon to "Shipmates".

THE PRESENT

In "SHIPMATES" Issue 31 a request was made for there to be more of the present and what past Shipmates are doing since the demise of RSL. So in this edition herewith some recent events:-

From The Prime Minister's Office I received the following communication:-

Quote " In recognition of those who served on the Arctic Convoys during the Second World War **The Prime Minister** requests the honour of the company of Captain O.J.T. Lindsay at a reception at 10 Downing Street, White Hall on Monday 7th March 2005, from 6.30 pm to 8 pm." Un-quote.



The Prime Minister, The Right Honorable Tony Blair warmly welcomed the 150 veterans to No.10 Downing Street. Also present at the reception was the Minister of Defense G. Hoon, A Admiral and several R.N. Commodores serving at the M.O.D., London. During the reception The Prime Minister made a speech in which he made a tribute to and acknowledged the special hazards endured by those who served on the Arctic Convoys to North Russia and afterwards signed their invitation cards The hospitality was cordial and friendly, waitresses mingled through the guests with trays of white and red wine and platters of food. Before the Prime Minister retired he invited all who wished to view the Cabinet room.. The memorable occasion came to an end at 8.40pm. with the veterans expressing how much they had appreciated and enjoyed the event and meeting shipmates from distant times when as boys they ventured forth into the Arctic. Their recollections brought to mind engagements with the enemy and sad memories of Shipmates who never returned and those that did who have now crossed the bar. Of the veterans of the Arctic convoys few are now under 80 years, their numbers are fast diminishing. The Russian Convoy Club will be laying up their Standard in the Imperial War Museum at the end of August, 2005.

The above photograph was taken from the PM Website.-- The Prime Minister Tony Blair with Cdre. O.J.Lindsay.

Merchant Navy Association (Wales) receives the Freedom of the County Borough of the Vale of Glamorgan.

At 1145 hrs.16th April 2005, the Mayor of the Vale of Glamorgan held a ceremony at the Merchant Navy Memorial in front of the Civic Offices Barry to confer the said Freedom. Mr. J. Greenway (Shipmates Member) Chairman of the Barry Branch of MN Assn., (Wales) was presented with "Freedom of the County Borough certificate in the presence of a large number of guests and spectators. After which Mr. Greenway thanked the Mayor and Members of the Vale of Glamorgan Council.

Wreaths were laid at the MN. Memorial by the Lord Lieutenant; Mayor; Cmdre. O.J. Lindsay President of MN Assn.(Wales); and Mr. Norton, Barry branch MN.(Wales). After which there was a short march to the Memorial Hall with Band playing and Standard Bearers the order of Procession—Mayor/Mayoress. Lord Lieutenant, Cmdre O.J Lindsay, Mr.Greenway, Revd. M. Davies, Councilor H.J.James, M.P.'s, A.M.'s, Mayor of the Barry Town Council, Commander of H.M.S."Cambria", Commander RAF St.Athen, Div. Commander Sth. Wales Police, MN Assn.Guests, Council & Other Guests. The Salute was taken as the Parade passed the Memorial Hall by the Mayor accompanied by the Lord Lieutenant and Cmdre. Lindsay. After a reception was held at the Memorial Hall. with music by the RAF Voluntary Band.

First Trip Impressions

(or, memories viewed thru' a 58-year-long telescope!)

I really look forward to each edition of "Shipmates". Like most of us, I imagine, I read it avidly from cover to cover on arrival, - even the (to me) technically obscure items concerning the engineering departments, which managed to keep us all propelled from A to B, come hell and, frequently, high water. But the one thing that impresses me most is the often phenomenal power of recollection of detail, displayed by some of the contributors. I'm afraid, in the memory department, I never had such luck. Although my memory improved with the years, it was too late to record much from my teens and early twenties years. Hence, I must warn you, gentle reader, that the title of this little item means exactly what it says, - Impressions! So, I beg forgiveness for any unintentional inaccuracies, and thank you in advance for your patience with these ramblings.

I write only of my first trip, perhaps because that generated some of the strongest impressions in my mind.

I had never been much of an academic at school. "This boy could do so much better if only he would apply himself,....." - some of you may share such a memory; but I was mad about the sea, and a keen Sea Cadet. My long-suffering father eventually succumbed to the inevitable, and finally secured for me an apprenticeship with Sir William Reardon Smith and Sons of Cardiff. This began in the early winter of 1947, a year which those of you with long memories will recall as one of the worst winters the UK had experienced in the annals of bad winters.

I was instructed to join the m/v Eastern City in Glasgow docks towards the end of January. My Dad accompanied me on the train from Bristol up to Glasgow, a journey which took 16 hours all told, and on arrival we put up in digs in Sauchiehall St. overnight, and made our way to the ship the following pm. Even at 2pm it was almost dark, snow lay thick, dirty and deep on the dockside, and the temperature was below zero. To our eyes, the ship didn't even look like a ship, - just a towering black, rust-marked wall looming above us, with ropes, wires etc., trailing down to the dockside bitts. A gangway invited us menacingly upwards, at what seemed like a 45 degree angle. Someone helped us with my boxes. Standing on the deck, to the uninitiated, was like a scene from some kind of hell. A horrendous cats-cradle of ropes, hawsers, wires, beams, hatch-boards, - all utterly meaningless and unidentifiable to us, met our eyes. Several inches of snow covered this, and the steel deck was potentially lethal to walk on. After having located and reported to the 1st Mate, and being shown to the Apprentices accomodation at the after-end of the boatdeck, my Dad started his farewells. He left the door open for me. He asked me if this was really what I wanted. Maybe he was as shocked by our surroundings as I was, but he said he would not hold it against me if I wished to return home with him. (This from a truly good man, who had served in the trenches in the Great War). My heart was in my boots. I felt close to despair, but I couldn't let him down. We said goodbye, and I watched his figure become

smaller and smaller in the snow, until he eventually turned the corner of a shed, and was gone. My first, unforgettable impression.

The Eastern remained in Glasgow for perhaps another two weeks before sailing, why, I don't know. She seemed to be virtually light ship when I joined her, so perhaps it was another of the endless dockers strikes of that period. When we finally sailed, it was a freezing sleet-driven February afternoon around five o'clock. I was posted aft, on top of the crew accomodation, and was not told to come down for about three hours, well after stations had stood down. I had no warm kit except my uniform coat, and cap, which I therefore had no alternative but to wear. I must have looked a complete wally, and was thus left up there to freeze, which I did. I was like a pillar of salt by the time I came down. It was the first of several "p--s taking" episodes which most new, green, juniors have to undergo. All that, and being "Peggy" as well.

We were bound for Galveston, and about a week to ten days out, we began to get some decent, warmer and sunny weather. The Master was Captain "Tommy" Dixon, for whom I had great respect. I think our First Mate was called Ward, but can't be sure. The Second Mate was a Pool man, a nasty piece of work who gave me a dogs life, and we soon formed a mutual loathing. My fellow apprentices were Pete Bartlett, Ralph Duggan and Bartle Lesslie, and we all seemed to rub along together pretty well. They made me feel at home, - especially Bartle, as my arrival had lifted the duty of "Peggy" from his shoulders! We became good friends then, and again in later life, - but that's another story. And on the Eastern, I met one unforgettable character, - Bosun Bob Fraser.

In ones'teens, all other adults seem old, so I'm guessing when I judge "Bose" Fraser to have been in his early fifties. He seemed a giant of a man, a big Shetlander, with a peg-leg, concealed, if I remember, by a boot of some sort. He sported a shaggy moustache, beneath which an ancient and truly revolting pipe was anchored in his jaw. A flat cap bearing the salt and grease of the years adorned his head, and his eyes, although stern, held a kindly twinkle. I have never seen hands as big, - like a couple of hams, hugely strong, yet capable of great delicacy with twine, or a sail needle. The crowd, a stropky lot, held him in respect, and jumped to it whenever he said so. His leg, (or lack of it!) was no barrier to him, and he went up and down hold ladders with the best of 'em. Beneath the gruff exterior, however, Bose seemed to have a very distinct sense of duty to us apprentices, at times, almost like a mother hen. He made sure we were well instructed in all the arts of seamanship, gently pulled our legs for smoking cigarettes, (paper pipes, he called them), bawled us out when we tried his patience too far, and, just occasionally, if we had been totally disobedient or dangerously stupid, one of those massive "hams" would give us a non-too-gentle wallop round the ear. Once or twice I have risen from the deck after one of those! But we knew we deserved it, and came to like him all the more for it. I know Bose crossed the bar many years ago, but when I remember him, it is as a kindly giant, the best seaman I ever

sailed with, and a man who knocked many rough edges off the unpromising material that was me, in 1947.

Like many first-trippers, I was amazed at the size of the ocean, and at the fact we saw so few other ships, until we were in the Gulf of Mexico. In Galveston we were to load sulphur for New Zealand. I disliked that cargo perhaps more than any other I ever sailed with. It covered the ship in a fine yellow mist, turned all our lovely brass ports to a blackish-brown, even tarnished our cap badges, buttons and lapel flashes inside their lockers! Awful stuff to breathe, too. I think we only went ashore twice, mainly because we had built up no "credit" of wages in such a short time, (I think we had about two bucks each), and the uninviting litter of streets in the dock area hardly conformed with our mental images of what "America" should be. Surrounded as we were by seedy bars, grinding out the most ghastly, maudlin country and western music, we opted instead for the drug stores, as they were then known, where we could splash our dollars on food and ice-cream. Necessary, as we all felt next to starving.

Briefly, on the matter of food, it has to be said that the grub on the "Eastern" left much to be desired. Egon Ronay it wasn't. Quantity and quality were pretty poor, so much so that, even when normally ravenous, eat anything, teenage appetites were concerned, what came up from the galley often went straight over the wall. Yes, I know it was 1947, the war was not long over, things were bad at home etc., etc., but we were still getting four dollars to the pound in those days, and most merchant ships, including ours, frequently re-victualled in ports of countries which were still enjoying peacetime levels of food availability. At least the quality should have been better. It was whispered that the Catering Department would not have survived a "snap" audit of it's books, had such a thing been possible. As we were not feeding too well, yet working hard, we were fit, but as skinny as whippets!

Moving on from that "aside", we left Galveston for Panama in due course, and docked in Colon, awaiting transit. That evening, we walked along the quay, two berths, to look at one of the large, white, (and to our young eyes) impossibly glamorous American banana boats which was loading for the US East coast. Poor, tatty ragamuffins we were, still in our working gear, standing slack-jawed watching everything, - especially the "hands" of bananas which were deemed too ripe to load, and were rejected, presumably to be destroyed. A kindly stevedore who was looking on, invited us to "bog in", help ourselves, and take a couple of "hands". No second bidding was needed. Clutching our prizes we scuttled back aboard. Ever noticed, after the seventh banana, how you can go off something? But, we reasoned, there is plenty for tomorrow, and plonking one of the hands on the messroom table, (cleaned by courtesy of yours truly), we sat round it, gazing with awe at our good fortune, - for a minute or two, anyway. Conversation stopped when we looked at Ralph, who had gone white and was slowly rising from his seat. For a split second, we thought it was the "eighth banana" effect, until our eyes followed his pointing finger to the top of the "hand".

Emerging, flexing its foreclaws, and with it's tail cocked for action was a fully mature, very large scorpion. Seen from a distance of less than two feet it looked the thing of nightmares. Panic is contagious. Picture if you can, four guys trying to get through the accomodation door simultaneously. Then, stood outside, "who's going in? - you must be joking! - not me, mate! - where is it now? - still in the messroom? - could be in one of the bunks by now! -EEEEK!!!! Fortunately, our white knight came along, right on cue. Chippie came up to the boat-deck from below, heard the tale, grabbed a sack from somewhere, and strolled in, cool as a cucumber. Two minutes later he emerged, the sack bunched up before him, (which he waved mischievously towards us, to see us scatter) and proceded to the rail where he shook our visitor out into the waters of Colon. We told him what a great guy he was, asked him to bring the "hand"out, where it was placed under a lifeboat."Can you be sure that was the only one?", he asked slyly with a wink as he left! Bunks were cautiously searched for the next couple of nights, and, if I remember correctly, once we emerged at the Pacific end of the Canal, the "hand"was lifted over the wall with a steel-capped working boot, and donated to the pelicans. Then began the long haul across the Pacific.

Chipping, scraping, more chipping, more scraping, "soojying", red-leading, white painting, black painting, all under warm Pacific skies, and the Eastern barreling along through the swells, rolling gently, reducing the freeboard substantially with each roll. This solid feeling under the feet was what she was built for, not the stressed vibrations of being "light".

We arrived in Auckland Roads and anchored, awaiting orders. After about a week we left, bound for New Plymouth to discharge. The weather in Auckland had been benign, but on leaving, things took a very big turn for the worse. By the time we were rounding the North Cape we found ourselves in the middle of a storm of huge proportions. Huge seas were breaking over us as though we were a log lying in the water. As a "new boy", I found it pretty terrifying, although I tried to disguise it. One night on the bridge, watching a distant lighthouse seemingly going from 45 degrees above my eye level, to 45 degrees below, and clinging on to anything for dear life, Cap'n Dixon read my inner thoughts, crossed the wheelhouse to put a reassuring hand on my shoulder and shouted a few words of encouragement in my ear! I shall always remember and appreciate that kindly act. In later years, all storms (bar one) caused me no concern.

I think we took a week to reach New Plymouth, instead of a few days. We crawled gratefully into the harbour and the berth, to lick our wounds. All seemed relatively calm and serene there, but perhaps our suspicions should have been aroused by the Port Authority's gigantic mooring hawsers, use of which was mandatory. Even in the berth, the Eastern was heaving and straining like a restless animal. Weather too bad to work cargo, and getting worse again. On a Friday night we broke free from our stern moorings and drifted across the harbour towards two other vessels, the Ruahine and the Waitomo. Had we gone under the Ruahine's high counter stern we should have caused heavy damage, but the Harbourmasters decision to slack off our bow moorings

deflected our (inevitable) collision to the Waitomo. We both suffered superficial damage, but the Eastern was impossible to restrain, and the decision was taken to put to sea again until the storm abated. I think we were out there another two or three days before our return. A whole story could be written about this incident alone.

Then our discharging was complete, we took up a charter to load guano at the island of Makatea, returning it to New Plymouth. I think we did two or three such return trips, each taking about two to three weeks. New Plymouth was a friendly little town, where we cadets gorged ourselves on banana splits (which the Kiwis were very good at!), and each Sunday the local populace used to visit the docks, walking up and down looking at all the visiting ships, and sometimes, by invitation, coming aboard to be shown around. One kindly couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Chapman, offered Cap'n Dixon to take two of the cadets "off his hands" for a weekend, and Bartle and I were chosen. They had a bungalow some way outside town, where we were made very welcome, given some really good food!, and they had a player-piano which fascinated us, and we spent much time playing with. (What a contrast to Makatea, where we sat between two buoys loading, with the guano blowing all over us).

Time came to go. Orders for USA Pacific coast, to load timber for UK. Almost as bad as loading grain, from the cleanliness requirement point of view. Maybe three weeks at sea, much of it spent on the spar ceiling, and eventually we arrived in Coos Bay, Oregon. When loading started, we were much impressed by the way all the stevedores came to work in big, swanky American cars, came aboard dressed in gear we would have been proud to call "going ashore gear", and wore working gloves! - we'd never seen those before. Come to think of it, the stevedores of most countries seemed to be better turned out than we found in our British home ports, - even the Japanese seemed neat and tidy! I think we went on up to Portland to top-up loading, before sailing for home. It was strange to me, having a deck cargo, but I loved the smell of the timber all the way home, so beautifully clean and fresh.

Back through the Canal, heading north and east, but where to? Finally, we got word of our discharging port, - Avonmouth! I could hardly believe my luck. I lived in North-West Bristol, only five miles from Avonmouth, so a reunion with my parents and only brother was virtually assured. Thus, some three weeks or so later, my first voyage on the Eastern came to an end. There was to be one more before I left her, for the Jersey (stand-by), the Dallas, and finally the Cornish, but memories of those other voyages are much less distinct. I sometimes wish I could get sight of all the voyage logs, just to remind myself of where I've been, and in what order! However, I must satisfy myself with these recollections, and thank those who read them for their patience. By today's standards, when cruise liners and jets make foreign travel so easy and comfortable for so many, my memories seem almost primitive; but I'm so glad I was privileged to do it the hard, not the soft way!

Colin White

"EASTERN CITY"

In Colin White's story "First Trip Impressions" he mentions that when the ship was in New Plymouth, New Zealand she was caught up in a hurricane. She broke her mooring and came into contact with another ship, with quite some damage being done to the "Eastern City". As this happened in a small sea port it was reported in the local newspaper and being in 1947/8 the history of ships was of interest. Below is a cutting from the New Plymouth newspaper about the "Eastern City" kindly sent in by Colin.

Although she had no exciting escapes from destruction or any similar adventures expected of a ship which has weathered the forces of sea and war for six years, the 5185-ton Reardon Smith Line motor ship **Eastern City** did all that was expected of her and a little more. She was a C.A.M. ship.

Those letters stand for "catapult aircraft merchantman", and mean that during the early part of her life the **Eastern City** carried a Hurricane aircraft perched up on a catapult gantry above her forward hold.

To-day there are very few signs of this war work of the **Eastern City**, and a casual inspection will reveal nothing. However, the port forward ventilator over the forecastle is slightly smaller than its opposite number, for it was over this side of the bow that the catapult ran. Immediately in front of the forward mast are signs of what was once a steel support for the catapult ramp, in the form of ridges of welding across the deck.

CERTAIN DEATH

As the aircraft was fired off the ship with the aid of rockets, the bridge was partially sheathed with an extra thickness of steel plating to take the force and fire of the rockets. This is still discernable. Extra steel was also on the bridge ends to protect the ship's boats. Whenever the plane was fired off, the terrific heat of the rockets seared the paint on the bridge and to stand on the open bridge behind the plane and its 12 rockets would have meant death.

After the Hurricane had been shot off the **Eastern City**, there was no getting back aboard, and after engaging the enemy the pilot had to either try to make for the nearest land if he had sufficient petrol or else bail out of the overran, to be picket up by a ship of the convoy.

What is now a paint locker in the starboard side of the forecastle was a few years ago the firing room where the chief officer would press a button and send the aircraft roaring off the abbreviated runaway to do battle with the Focke-Wulfs.

In 1942, however, the long range German marauding bombers, the Focke-Wulfs, were beaten and were seldom if ever seen over the Eastern

Atlantic. It was largely due to the C.A.M. ships and the later development, M.A.C. (Merchant Aircraft Carriers) that this was so.

During her North Atlantic career the **Eastern City** carried wheat from Eastern Canadian ports to the Bristol Channel. Because of her offensive armament in the form of the Hurricane she was always in demand for convoys, and consequently had a quick turnaround on both sides of the Atlantic. On the American side she would be in and out of port sometimes within 24 hours, but at Bristol it usually took up to three days to unload her cargo. This went on for 18 months with some members of her complement never seeing their families during that time.

NORTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN

Towards the end of 1942 the Hurricane and its appended apparatus were taken from the ship and shortly afterwards she was at sea steaming towards an unknown destination under sealed orders. When the orders were opened the first sentences read:

“By the time that you arrive there, Algiers will probably be in British hands. All French vessels are to be treated with the Utmost Suspicion”.

It was then that her officers knew that the **Eastern City** was on her way to take part in the now famous North African landings. When she set sail from Britain with a cargo of high octant aircraft fuel, bombs, shells, and land mines no one had the slightest idea that the North African landings were to take place.

Fortunately when she arrived at Algiers the port was in British hands and her dangerous cargo was landed.

After that trip she was kept busy supplying the armies in North Africa and has since that time wandered over much of the world. At present she is under charter to the British Phosphate Commission and has just brought a cargo of sulphur to New Plymouth from Galveston, Texas. She left Galveston a few days before the disaster at nearby Texas City.

When she has unloaded her sulphur cargo at New Plymouth she will turn her blunt nose towards Makatea, where she will load phosphate. After that she may go anywhere. She was built in 1941 at Sunderland as a tramp and as a tramp will road the oceans of the world. Her winches, etc., are electrically operated and she has all the refinements of a tramp steamer designed and commenced before the war. She is a good example of modern British tramp.

This is the first time that the **Eastern City** has visited New Plymouth but her master, Captain T.S. Dixon, O.B.E. was here in another ship about two and a half years ago.

The Truth at Last?1940

For my Seventy fifth Birthday I thought I would get myself something a bit special as a present. With the aid of a knowledgeable young offspring I bought a Personal Computer, one with all the bells and whistles, Scanner and Printer, 19 inch Screen etc. He also advised, straight faced, that I add a Beginners Course (Idiots Only) P.C..... to my list of purchases. I made mugs of tea whilst he set up the machine. It looked really wonderful, but would it fly?

An excellent course at the local Computer College taught me how to work the thing and I began on a project which had been niggling at me for years.

We lived in Southampton, in England, when WW 2 broke out..

Towards the end of 1940 my Dad opened the dreaded Telegram that told us of the loss of David, his 20 year old eldest son. He had been serving on a big ocean liner in the catering staff as a very junior Baker. She was "RMS Empress of Britain" which had been sunk off the coast of Ireland "on the 26th October 1940." That was a date etched in my memory. There was`nt much time for grieving and anyway I was soon due to join my first ship, a tramp steamer, as a sixteen year old Apprentice Deck Officer.

Over the years, at sea and then while serving in the Royal Air Force, I would see in newspapers odd mentions of the loss of the David's ship;-
 "the Empress of Britain....
 .the largest Merchant Ship to be sunk in the war at Sea "
 "did she carry five tons of gold, loaded in Durban?",
 "search for wreck" etc

And I noticed that they all referred to her as being "torpedoed on 28th of October 1940". One day, I promised myself, I would find out all about the death of our favourite brother, the sinking of the shipand in particular about that two day discrepancy in the dates .

She flew the Red Ensign of course but actually belonged to a Canadian company The Canadian Pacific Railways (CPR). They were very helpful .
 However, I found it best to go to a basic information source first, The Register of Shipping and Seamen ,part of the MCA, in Cardiff, Wales.

The good people there, and indeed all my other informants, gave a lot of assistance in my research. But as I progressed I found that there were one or two unwritten ground rules to observe in this Investigation and Research business. I pass them on to you .for what they are worth. You may, of course be well aware of them.

Be deferential at the opening of your enquiry , tho` with luck you may soon establish a first name relationship.

Do not presume that these people are just waiting there,ready to drop everything and attend to your query (no matter how vital you may think it is). Always offer to pay for any in-house search or devilling- out of information, that might be needed.

There are sometimes a formal set of Fees; sometimes they just seem to get on with it without advising charges. But I always offer payment in the appropriate currency.

Do not stint on " Thank You " for information received.

My investigation was a bit haphazard I admit. It wandered through a mishmash of newspaper cuttings, published books, reports of Boards of Inquiry, excerpts from Ships Logs, formal Recording and Documentation and just informal correspondence.

I could not give a step by step report if I tried. Suffice to say that I could not have done it without help from the good people at these places:-

Archive Services,Southampton County Council
The National Maritime Museum at Greenwich
Canadian Pacific Shipping Company in Canada
The Register of Shipping and Seamen at Cardiff
The Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Robert Seamers book "The Floating Inferno"
Gordon Turners book "Empress of Britain"
The Boston Mills Press, Ontario, Canada

There is obviously a lot more to this story than is outlined here, but I thought it worth telling, as an incentive to genealogy research in the Maritime sector. Full details of sources addresses can be obtained from the writer.

The mystery of the disparate dates was solved quite early on.

The giant liner was making a dash for a port in Scotland. On her own, not zigzagging, and at full speed, she was spotted by an enemy bomber. This aircraft was on a routine transfer from Brest to a field in Norway. The pilot describes how the cloud cover parted right below them and there she was; one of the biggest targets in the British Merchant Navy. They came right down astern of her, and flew in, straffed her with their guns and dropped two bombs. Then turning ahead of the ship they came back and repeated the low level attack. She was soon ablaze from stem to stern.

This was on the 26th October. David must have been killed then. The Bakery was on the port side aft, and at 8 am he was almost sure to be at work. That's were the first bombs hit.

She was an inferno for two days, while rescue ships got most of the passengers and crew off and took her in tow, still alight. Only 20 Servicemen passengers and 25 crew, of the hundreds aboard lost their lives

The Condor Captain Leutnant Jope had radioed a report of course. It was picked up by U32 (Oberleutnant zur See Hans Jenisch) who positioned his submarine ahead of the burning ship. He waited for the little flotilla of liner, towing tugs and escorts to approach. Then the Uboat sank the still burning liner with torpedoes.

This happened on the 28th October. The wreck lies 60 miles off
Bloody Foreland.
That's at the top lefthand corner of Ireland, as you might say.

So you see both dates were accurate after all, David died on the 26th, the ship was sunk on the 28th

This illustrates a point which I am sure many other researchers have discovered. It would be a brave investigator who claimed really to have found the true story. Newspaper reports of the time were inaccurate either simply from a lack of information, or for security; or for quite understandable propaganda reasons. There were even retouched photographs of the disaster in newspapers later. U32 was itself tracked down later and destroyed by the Royal Navy

A Board of Enquiry was convened in Glasgow a couple of weeks later in to the loss of the Empress of Britain. It was held on the upper floor of a Hotel and was well attended by, mostly First Class, passengers and Officers of the Army and the Royal Navy. They gave evidence. However, the majority of the ships crew were, of course, back at sea on other ships. Merchant Seamen were not given much time ashore (and not paid either incidentally) The Master, Captain C.H. Sapsworth CVO, and one or two Deck Officers were there. The Boards findings were, to be generous, rather sketchy.

As an addendum to my story, I found that MCA Cardiff had confirmed that I was the oldest known surviving member of our large family. My brother David's wartime decorations had never been issued and therefore could be claimed, if I wished! I was delighted to do so. They sent them to me here in Perth

Properly mounted and framed, they grace my parlour wall, a pleasant reminder of a favourite brother and a good shipmate.

Bob Britton Riverton, Western Australia.