

20 years before the (Antenna) mast

The story of a maritime radio officer

By Roy Philpott



My merchant naval history or 20 years before the (antenna) mast.

Introduction

To most people, it is an established fact that they use large amounts of imported items in their daily lives. No thought however is given as to how these goods are brought to them, very often from the other side of the globe. One sees huge road trucks and rail containers every day, but only those perhaps living near a port have an idea of how much we actually rely on the sea as the major transport medium. Modern aircraft are good for fast deliveries, but they are too expensive (and to be truthful still too small) for the large quantities required by modern society. Here, there is still nothing which can replace a ship.

Ships are unseen, and thus apart from the odd cruise liner or major shipping accident, virtually forgotten by the public. They move silently, well out of sight of the average seaside holidaymaker, but they, and the people that man and service them, are of extraordinary importance to the very survival of an island nation, and also to the smooth functioning of the entire world business community. These floating Goliaths, some of them being the largest moving objects ever constructed by man, sail the oceans of the globe, largely unseen and unknown by the average person.

This work was primarily written as a way to preserve my own personal memories, but I hope it also gives a look into the everyday life on board a merchant ship, some of the technical expertise that goes into keeping them running and of the people who serve on them. I make no apologies that I go into technical details which may not be of interest to some people. This is because a modern ship lives on technology. Without its technical systems, a modern ship could not function. It is thus an inescapable fact that technology (and its offshoot, repair and maintenance,) become a major part of the daily life of all those who live and work on board.

The main part of my life at sea revolved around communications, electronics and engine room automation, together with navigation. These things were, and still are, some of the most essential shipboard systems. I feel privileged to have been one of the few – the radio and electronics officers - who have helped to keep these systems running. We, together with our marine engineer and electrician compatriots were sometimes the only people standing between a living functioning ship, and a dark inert hulk of metal, at the mercy of the ocean.

It must be stressed that this has been written entirely from memory. There may well be errors in various stories or information given. If so I apologise, but that is how I remember it.

If someone gets pleasure out of reading my reminiscences, then I am delighted to have helped pass a quiet and hopefully informative hour or so.

Roy Philpott
Offenburg Germany 06.11.05