

**5) M.V. Ivinghoe Beacon 9046 GRT R/O
Rotterdam 22/10/69 - 18/6/70 Piraeus.**



Rotterdam, via the Cape to Colombo, Port Redi (N. India), via the Cape back to Constanza Rumania and up the Danube to Galatz, then dry-dock in Piraeus Greece.

On first joining this ship, I remember meeting some technicians from Radio Holland on the bridge, who were there to repair the echo sounder transducer. This was located in the bilges under one of the cargo holds. The ship had previously carried grain. Some had fallen into the bilges and rotted. Those poor technicians were covered from head to foot in the muck. They STANK! There was no radio officer aboard so I had no hand-over, and apart from the ill fated technicians, my first memories were of a small, poorly lit radio room, with old fashioned equipment. The ship was on time charter to Van-Ommersen, a Dutch company, and had their "VO" insignia painted on the funnel.

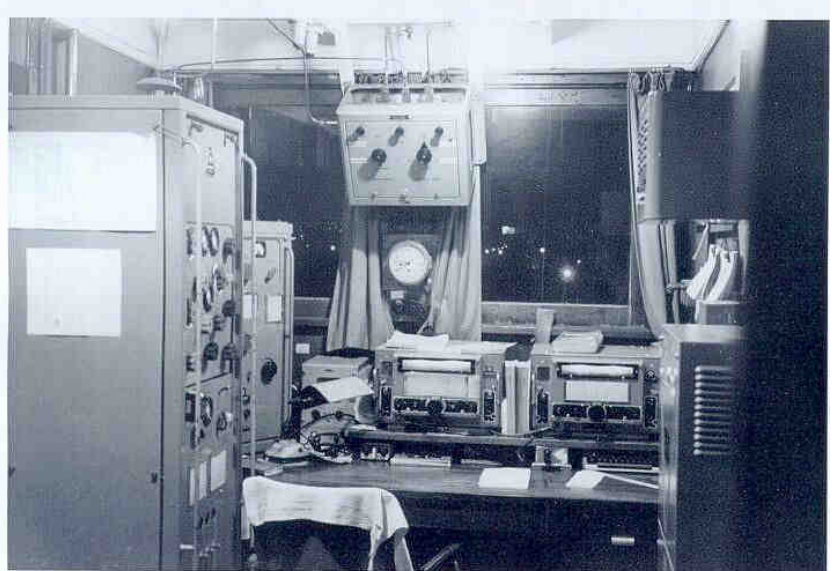
This ship had been "stretched", by addition of an extra cargo hold to upgrade its cargo carrying capacity. The engine however had not been up rated, so the maximum speed was somewhat restricted. On a good day we might manage 12 or 13 knots, on a bad day it could be as slow as 9. The ships accommodation was full of lovely red wooden panelling, heavily varnished and gave a very warm cosy impression, totally different to the last ship. As there was no air conditioning, the cabins really WERE warm in the tropics! Apart from some of the more senior officers, we were a young crowd, and got on well together. Two engine and two deck cadets completed the complement.

On a lot of ships, the gyro compass was looked after by the 2nd officer. Our old Maltese 2nd officer had no idea about how a gyro compass worked, (he had previously sailed as master, but on an old cargo sailing ship in the Mediterranean, until it ran aground and was wrecked!). I was thus asked to look after our so called "Bouncing Betty" (an old Sperry Gyrocompass). As this meant an extra 15 Pounds a month bonus, I was only too glad. I thought I could learn enough about gyro compasses as I went along. I did learn, but not without the captain helping me. The electronics were relatively rudimentary, but it contained a lot of fine mechanics, and strange things like Mercury pumps and wind vane sensors. It was a delicate

instrument and needed careful handling. Also, it did indeed bounce gently up and down in operation, hence its strange nickname.

The ship had 220V DC mains provided by two massive Diesel generators in the engine room. For starting, these had to be turned over to their starting positions by hand using a long metal bar inserted in a hole on the flywheel, and needed two strong men to do it. Once the diesel had reached the correct position, it could be started by compressed air. On this ship, we had virtually no automation, so all the valves and control systems were right beside the machinery they controlled. A hot and noisy watch keeping position.

In the radio room could be found an old Marconi Oceanspan-6 transmitter with its rotary transformer and the Mercury/Electra receivers, powered by 24 volt vibrator power supplies, or direct from the DC mains. There was also a very strange (non Marconi) mechanical auto alarm with a vibrating reed to set the speed of the mechanical timing mechanism. Lots of springs, cams, sprockets and relays. A veritable servicing nightmare! In port, all the aerials were lowered for cargo work, so I had virtually nothing to do providing all my radio gear was ok, and the various documentation had been kept up to date.



Collision

Our first port after Rotterdam was Rostock in East Germany when it was still very strongly communist. On arrival, we had to anchor to await a berth. Whilst waiting, the weather worsened, and it started to blow a gale. Our anchor cable parted under the strain, and we drifted in the high wind, colliding with a Russian vessel which was also anchored in the harbour. We hit before we could get the engine started, owing to the captain having given a 30 minute standby instead of instant standby. This meant that he had considered it safe enough to allow the engineers to do small repairs and maintenance, but the engine must be operable within 30 minutes. Instant standby meant a full sea watch was kept in the engine room and the engine could be instantly started. This would have been the case if the weather was bad, or the anchorage unsafe. In this case some inspection doors on the engine had to be closed before it could be started.

I was on the bridge at the time (and had actually drawn the attention of the Maltese 2nd mate to the fact that we were drifting... he had not noticed!). We hit the Russian ship, (very slowly, but with immense force), near their accommodation ladder, and dragged our bow towards their stern. A cloud of paint, rust, wire rope, and their accommodation ladder flew into the air. Heads appeared at windows and portholes...only to just as quickly disappear again on seeing our bow at VERY close range! Finally, after what seemed hours, the engineers got our engine started, and we backed away. We finally dropped the other anchor a safe distance away from anything, and maintained a careful anchor watch after that.

Our ship was arrested, and an inquiry was made in a Rostock court. As I was on the bridge, I was also called as a witness. All proceedings were in German, but we only had odd parts of the proceedings translated. All highly democratic! Unfortunately, this was well before I could understand German myself. The ship was fined, but as the accident was mainly due to the weather worsening unexpectedly, and our anchor chain breaking, and not our negligence (well – not much!), we were later released. Our ship had sustained only minor damage. One small hole in the forward hold above the water line, and some bent steelwork on the bow. (This later brought home to me the forces involved. The steel was over half an inch thick, reinforced with struts at short intervals. And shaped for strength. The upper section of the bow now looked like a piece of plasticine that had been pressed and deformed).

Also whilst in Rostock, the electrician was arrested for attempting to smuggle a student out of the country. A 5000 Pounds Sterling bail was paid by the company to get him released. We actually made the BBC news on this! Needless to say he never returned for his trial. (I imagine it was not expected that he did. Just a ploy to get hard currency.) I was employed as acting "Lecky" (Electrician) whilst our real Lecky was in the East German prison. I was needed to ensure the winches for our cargo work continued working. I remember Lots of "fireworks" while tracing an earth shown on the power distribution board in the engine room. This was due to old open "Knife Switches" with weak springs. The electric winches used for working the cargo drew hundreds of amps at 220V DC (with an Inductive load), and tracing earths meant disconnecting various circuits via these old switches section by section, until the earth disappeared. The weak springs made them open slowly instead of with a "snap", and caused severe arcing. I never quite got used to the fireworks when opening those switches (or the shouts of the stevedores when the winches suddenly stopped!). The switches themselves were located in the deck houses under the winches, and after every test, I had to walk down to the engine room to check if the earth had disappeared by observing the earth lamps on the main switchboard.

We transited the Kiel Canal, where the ship got invaded by some press and radio reporters because of what happened to the Electrician. He, I and a couple of others hid in an empty cabin and locked the door until they had gone, drinking beers and getting the Electrician to tell his story. He left the ship at Rotterdam, returning home. He had been warned that if he did not return for the trial, his dossier would be circulated through all communist countries. This would effectively end his seagoing career, as he could be arrested any time his ship called at a communist port. We received a letter later saying he had found a job ashore in England and had given up the sea.

Interlude in Ceylon

We loaded 18000 tons of bagged sugar at Rotterdam then sailed via the Cape, to Colombo, the main port for Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon), where we had a 4 months stay. Our ship was used as a floating warehouse, there being no storage facilities in Colombo for that amount of sugar at the time. I think it was aid for Sri Lanka, and some local official got a bit greedy, ordering far too much. Lighters used to come out to the anchorage occasionally and take a few hundred tons at a time from us as it was needed. Apart from anchor watches and general maintenance there was not a lot to do. The weather was mostly fine, and it was a relaxing time for all.

It was in fact a wonderful time for me. I became a member of the Colombo swimming club (Where Arthur C. Clark was a member for a time) and spent many happy hours in and around their lovely pool. I met a number of European Ex Pats running the railway and some other technical installations as well as their wives and families. Some of their teenage children were there too, it being the English School holidays. The club was a regular meeting

point for them and their parents. I wasn't much more than a teenager myself, so we had great fun together in and around the pool, at private parties etc. I became very friendly with a Rumanian engineers daughter, but that is something else we will not go into!

I met Sunil (a well known local radio amateur 4S7AB) who had a big party for some visiting American rocket scientists who were also radio amateurs. Sunil's father was the Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) representative at the International Court at the Hague, so he was a well respected VIP. The banquet, (for only so can it be described), contained huge quantities of delicious food. There were only about 6 of us as guests, so the remaining food (a very respectable quantity!) was given to the servants. It was how Sunil's family helped support them and their families.



I Also met Paddy, 4S7PB the Amateur radio SEANET controller at that time who worked for Shell. With some perseverance, I managed to get my amateur licence 4S7RP, and operated from Sunil's and Paddy's station. Sunil's station was CW (Morse Code) only, with a home made transmitter and an HRO (valve) receiver. His antenna was a dipole strung between two coconut palms at a considerable height. One of his servants could climb up the trees with no effort at all if anything had to be adjusted! Getting my licence however was quite a marathon bureaucratic endeavour lasting several weeks. I Had to virtually camp in the government offices in Colombo to get the licence before we sailed! The wheels there grind VERY slowly.

Whilst at anchor, it was decided to try out one of the lifeboats. This is quite a normal procedure when the ship is at anchor for a while. It was lowered into the water, the usual crate or two of beer was added, and off it set with a crew of around 6 people. About a mile or so away it stopped and we could see them through the bridge binoculars fishing and drinking beers. They slowly drifted away, and we almost forgot about them, thinking they could look after themselves. After a while however the weather changed for the worse. It started to rain heavily, and though we could see the boat on our radar, it was not apparently moving any closer.

As it was now starting to get dark, we became a bit worried, and lowered the other lifeboat, which was commanded by the chief officer. This time it was equipped with a CB walkie talkie (we had no portable marine VHF ones). It would have been a bit embarrassing to lose contact with this lifeboat too!

With the captain on the ships bridge, using our radar and the walkie-talkie, we guided it to the lost lifeboat. It was found that they had engine trouble, and though the sails worked, the boat sailed like a brick and made more leeway than headway! It was towed back to the ship and all concerned were very relieved to get back on board again. It can be very lonely in a small boat when it gets dark!

To save money, we did not often use the harbour shore launches provided. We quite often used our own lifeboat, leaving a man on guard to ensure it was not stolen. When walking into town from where we landed in the boat, we had to go around the drydock. I remember being startled by a strong smell of oil on passing one day, and looking down saw the bottom of the dock completely covered with black oil. On asking someone what had happened, I was told that a worker had opened up the wrong inspection cover under a ship, and all its bunker oil had run out, probably hundreds of tons of it! It took them a good few days to clear up that mess. As it was on the way ashore, we could see the progress they were making.

Our favourite stop in town was the Hotel Taprobane near the dock gates. It was an imposing building with a bar upstairs where we could get lovely cold beers and air conditioning. Nearby were all types of shops where we could buy our various souvenirs, and practice our mediocre skills at negotiating a “fair” price with the very much more skilled local businessmen. Needless to say, great fun was had by all!

Gold and semi precious stones were quite cheap, and I bought a nice silver brooch for my mother in the shape of a scorpion with moonstones set into it. As in India, gold jewellery was sold by weight, irrespective of the work that had gone into making it, and represented a considerable bargain.

The Colombo harbour was quite an interesting place. One could see almost everything from Indian Dhows, sailing barges, old steam powered merchant ships, and all sorts of small craft, from canoes to steam dredgers.

An old harbour tug interested me immensely. It was steam powered, maybe ex admiralty, and the bow had what looked to be a huge moustache made from woven rope as a buffer for pushing. It looked a bit like a Walrus and I think it was named “Hercules”. The crew lived on board, and obviously took great pride in their home. It was immaculate – apart from the moustache at the bow which looked a bit green around the edges, and somewhat the worse for wear. When the old boiler was fired up in the mornings, it produced prodigious quantities of black smoke until the obviously coal or wood fired boiler heated up enough to produce steam for the forced draught fans.

We finally (and for my part at least) reluctantly left Colombo, and ran up to NW India (Port Redi, a very poor area where the labourers worked under horrific conditions), to load a cargo of Iron Ore. Then back, via the Cape to Romania (Constanza, and up the Danube to Galatz. It should be remembered that the ship was very under powered, so this trip took quite some time.

I had quite a bit of time on this long trip, so being a curious, and having a few spare components, I built a sensitive audio amplifier with headphone output. My Idea was that being as we were a DC ship, there should be no AC 50Hz hum to interfere with weak VLF signals, so why not try to hear them?. The main receiver would go down to 16Khz, where I used to hear the British station, GBR Rugby, all over the world. I was interested in even lower frequencies, ones that I could hear direct with headphones and no detector. Connecting the ships antenna to the amplifier brought all sorts of strange noises, some of which I could identify as lightning, and whistlers (the noises caused by distant lightning interacting with the ionosphere), but some were totally unknown and not identifiable. It was however an interesting experiment, and kept me amused during the long quiet afternoon watches. Nights were more active as 500Khz then has very long range, and there was more to do on HF too, clearing our daily routine messages, which the captain normally finished just before supper. This sometimes kept me busy for hours .

On the way, I took part in my one and only burial at sea. This is really quite a rare occurrence, as seamen seem basically a horribly healthy bunch. In this case, one of our seamen died when we were in the Indian Ocean. We were not quite sure why, but we think it was an overdose of medicines, or various medicines and alcohol combined. He was found unconscious in the toilet, and later died without regaining consciousness, but neither foul play nor suicide were suspected. A sea burial is rather unusual, as the shore authorities normally wish to see the body and ascertain the cause of death. Our storerooms were rather small however, and unsuited to carrying the body for such a long period (it would have been a month or more), so after notifying all the various authorities by radio, the captain decided (and was given permission) to hold a sea burial. The entire ships company, apart from one watch officer in the engine room and one on the bridge was present. We all dressed in our best clothes or uniforms, and gathered on the after deck. The "chippy" (ships carpenter) had built a coffin and a ramp for launching. It was draped with a British Ensign. The captain read the short solemn service, and the coffin was slid into the sea whilst the ship was moving slowly ahead. We held a minutes silence, then it was back to normal duties, a suitable entry having been recorded in the ships logbook. It was a moving and sad experience, in which the entire crew - irrespective of race or creed – willingly took part. We had lost one of our "family".

I was made very welcome by members of the Constanza and Galatz radio clubs on arrival in Rumania. I had got the address and phone numbers from a Rumanian ship I contacted when in the Mediterranean. The operator on board happened also to be a radio Amateur. One of the club members was a merchant naval captain, and despite the fact that he should not do so, took me home to meet his wife and family. He filled me full of good home cooked food and Rumanian wine before getting a late night taxi to take me back to the ship It was a wonderful evening.

Their club had a huge military naval transmitter and receiver for its equipment, and one of the other members had an old wartime submarine transmitter and receiver in a tall 19 inch rack at his home. It used to make the lights blink over the whole block of flats when he pressed the transmit key! All rather old, but very impressive, and it worked well. The equipment was donated by the communist government, as Amateur radio was regarded as a sport, and sport of all kinds was state supported and encouraged.

The Danube at that time was badly flooded after long periods of heavy rain. The steel works at Galatz was nearly out of raw materials, and our cargo was badly needed. The trains could not get through due to the floods, and the roads were blocked or washed out. We were given three pilots to help navigate us up the swiftly flowing swollen river. I think the captain got a big backhander to get him to go up there at all, as it certainly was a risk.



I remember some people on the banks getting very upset as our wake washed over the sandbagged entrances to their homes, shouting and waving their fists at us. We navigated by the telegraph poles along the river banks, as often there was nothing but water as far as could be seen. It was like being in the middle of a large lake. The odd island of higher ground

sometimes peeked out with farm animals clustered on it. Russian hydrofoils ran a ferry service up and down the river, the passengers looking up with amazement at our huge bulk. After discharging, we had a near collision with a church on the way down river, as light-ship we were almost uncontrollable in the fast flood current and gale force winds! The church stood on the river banks ... or what were now the river banks. It may well have been well away from the river under normal circumstances! I was standing on the after deck and remember being shocked at how close our stern came to the church spire. I ran forward to a safer spot on the accommodation. This caused our pilots a few moments or near heart failure! It was not to be their last.

After another near collision with a ship coming up the river, the three pilots had a quick panic, and decided to anchor for a while to calm their nerves. This was easier said than done, and even with full astern thrust we only finally stopped by nosing the bow into the bank and dropping the anchor. The crew on the bow having to dive for cover under the anchor windlass as the bow was raked by tree branches. We waited there until the weather moderated, and eventually found our way back into the Black Sea.

On the way to Piraeus in bad weather, our radar scanner motor became defective. As a temporary emergency solution, a deck apprentice was sent up the mast and turned it by hand when it was wanted! This was all real high-tech stuff! No one worried too much about electromagnetic radiation in those days, and anyway, we really needed the radar at times. He was only told not to look into the scanner when the radar was turned on, and to keep his head down!

I sometimes wonder if his children were all girls if and when he married! We used to joke that almost all deck officers children were girls, whilst those of the engineers were mostly boys. We put this down to the radar and radio radiation effects on the unshielded deck officers, whilst the engineers were nicely protected below decks. I don't know if any serious research on this subject has been ever done, but my experience has shown it to be often true. (I myself have two daughters so maybe there is something in it after all!).

We once had a whole case of excellent Rumanian wine presented to the Chief Engineer as a thank you for bunkering with a particular oil company. (It's not as if he had an option, we were very nearly out of fuel). Using it as an excuse for a party, I and some of the engineers sat with the Chief until late. It was very nice wine, but I and the chief engineer had a very thick head next day!

Unfortunately, the Medomsley Steam Shipping Company were not very happy with their ship. It was too slow, and now, after being lengthened, was too large to enter the smaller ports. The market for general cargo was also falling off rapidly, and freight rates were dropping. Things were becoming containerised, with a lot of ports becoming semi-automated. The ship



was unable to be marketed effectively, so they finally sold the vessel to the Greeks in Piraeus.

With their low wages and cut price operating costs, it seemed as if they could still make a profit. Flags of convenience – poorly insured, shoddily run and with little or no maintenance - were starting to become common, and causing real problems for companies with well run, properly insured and maintained vessels. British flagged ships had to abide by the much stricter British shipping regulations, and thus had problems competing in the open market .

We put the ship into the dry dock, then flew home to go our separate ways. This did not particularly affect me as I was employed by Marconi, but there were a lot of sad faces among the crew and officers, who were company employed. I think they too realised that “the Beacon boats” as the company ships were called would not last very long in the intense competition starting in the shipping industry. The small companies would fold up, or be eaten by the big ones.

Party in the Captains cabin

