

- 6) S.S. Hemitrochus GCDH (Shell Tankers) 12265 GRT 7500 SHP R/O
Manila 3/9/70 - 26/10/70 London. Re-signed on articles.
7) S.S. Hemitrochus (Shell Tankers) R/O
London 27/10/70 - 29/3/71 Singapore. (Fire)



This was one of my first long distance flights, and going out to a place many could only dream of. I flew London-Paris then via Tehran, Bangkok, and Pnohm Penh (Vietnam) where I had to catch another flight to Hongkong and Manila. It was typhoon time, and the area had narrowly missed being hit. The place was lashed with rain which had caused some landslides. From the aircraft window I could see flooded fields and roads as we landed. Then I remember a very wet taxi ride to the hotel, and later back to the airport again. Arrival at Manila was rather disappointing. It was hot but very wet and humid, with heavy cloud cover. The ship was there a few days whilst discharging, so I could do a bit of exploring. Some of the other officers introduced me to the girlie bars in the Manila "red light" district, but I could not afford more than a beer or two! Even then, the dollar was all powerful. Some of the signs outside the bars made one think twice about going inside anyway. "Check in all guns and knives before entering" was written beside a kiosk barring the entrance to one bar! Also just outside were various clinics offering help combating some of the more unfortunate social diseases! I was impressed by the colourfully decorated "Jeepneys" (jeeps and trucks used as small busses or collective taxis) of all sizes, as well as the apparent cheerfulness of people despite the poverty, mud, puddles and rain.

On this ship, I travelled 3 times around the world carrying lubricating oils from the big Shell oil refinery at Curacao. The route was generally Cape Town, Northern India, Singapore, Bangkok, Japan, Panama then back through the Canal to Curacao. The ship was one of the older Shell tankers, with split accommodation. Engineers, crew, bar and saloon aft, Deck officers amidships. It was a steam turbine driven ship, which made for a very quiet vibration free ride. When fully loaded in heavy weather however, the trip aft could be somewhat "interesting", as waves washed over the deck, even reaching the raised catwalk at times. All the Shell tankers are named after a particular type of sea shell, some of them quite rare. Every ship has an example of the shell it is named after, in a display box, sometimes tastefully lit, at some prominent point within the accommodation. Our one was displayed in the officers' bar. It was in an illuminated display case, set into the forward bulkhead. The ship was sometimes affectionately nicknamed the "Hemifoofoo" or sometimes just the "Trochus". The radio equipment included a Commandant 400 watt SSB transmitter (which had recently replaced an Oceanspan 7), and the ubiquitous Atalanta main

receiver. The standard Marconi reserve receiver, transmitter and Auto alarm etc. were of course also present. The antenna was however good. Like all split accommodation tankers, the radio room is amidships, and the antenna was rigged from the foremast to the after mast. We therefore had a wonderful high T antenna, the downlead to the radio room coming from the middle.

We used to load in Curacao using a small hose leading into open deck inspection hatches to prevent contamination of the highly refined lubricating oils in the ships own pipelines. It also allowed us to load several grades simultaneously. All valves were kept closed, and at least two valves must separate various grades. It was quite a slow process taking several days. The cargo was very valuable, so great care was taken to see it remained absolutely pure. This was why the "over the top" loading method was used instead of the much faster method of using the ships own pipeline manifolds. "Over the top" meant we took hoses from the shore connections directly into the tank inspection covers, thus preventing any possibility of mixing. We carried up to seven different grades in various tanks. I carried a few samples of the cargo in the radio room for various oiling purposes. One was very thin and clear like water. Another was a thick green coloured "gunk", plus a few inbetween! The big workup really occurred after we had discharged, and all the tanks had to be cleaned. This was a major undertaking, with firstly a hot wash with almost boiling sea water fired at high pressure from rotating "guns" placed in the inspection hatches. Then followed a cold high pressure wash with sea water. Afterwards the crew would climb inside and use fresh water hoses to wash down the tank walls. Finally all traces of water would be mopped up by hand until the tanks were totally clean and dry. Before loading, each tank would be inspected both by us and the oil company, to check it came up to the high standards of cleanliness required. At the end, you could literally have eaten your dinner off the tank bottom - provided you cleaned up your mess afterwards!

I met a friendly radio amateur in Curacao who also had a private pilot's licence. He knew I loved flying, so he offered to fly me over to Aruba in a small Cessna. We landed quickly, so I could get off, then while he took a photographer around for aerial views of Aruba, I had a wander around the small island and a beer at the yacht club. The photographer didn't want anyone else in the plane who might obstruct his views whilst photographing. Aruba is small but picturesque with wonderfully clear water. It is a diving paradise, where many come to visit the reefs and see the beautiful marine life. The photographer was left on the island, so just myself and my friend the pilot flew back. It became rather interesting as my friend wanted some fun. On the way we "wave hopped" flying only a few feet above the sea, having to pull up to fly over the ocean swell - we were that low! On approaching Curacao we had to actually climb up over the low cliffs! It was really a very exhilarating flight. Some people having a picnic on the cliffs were somewhat surprised as we roared low overhead.

As Salty seamen, we sometimes visited some very interesting night life areas in Curacao when having an evening ashore, places the average tourist never gets to see and very rarely even hears about! As we got to know the locals, they gave us plenty of pointers where to spend our money! Even on a small island, you can sometimes experience things not to be found even in big cities. (Further descriptions deleted by the censor!)

Despite the huge oil refinery operated by Shell, there were some wonderful beaches on the other end of the island. Quite a number of tourist hotels did a good trade, and the main town of Willemstadt itself was very picturesque, clearly showing its colonial Dutch heritage. The refinery was on the opposite side of the island, a very rocky area with no beaches. We used to swim in a bay fenced off from the sea to prevent sharks or other undesirable big fish from entering. The water was wonderfully clear, warm and with lots of small fish swimming around the coral on the sea floor.

This pool could only be reached after a bit of a scramble over some pretty rough rocky areas, but even so, beers were carried to ward off the pangs of thirst! These were then put in the sea to keep cool. The taste of a cold beer with a slight tang of salt on a hot day was marvellous!

Fire

At the end of my last voyage on this ship we experienced a serious boiler fire whilst alongside in Singapore. It was around 2pm in the afternoon, and most of the crew were ashore, when suddenly sparks started to fly from the funnel. Within a few minutes it grew until it looked like a huge Roman Candle. Lots of Singaporeans fishing from the quay just suddenly and quietly melted away! I was just packing for pay-off when the fire alarm sounded. At first I thought it was a mistake, until looking outside I saw our firework display from the funnel. My normal duty station was in the radio room or on the bridge, but as we were alongside, this no longer held true. Due to the shortage of manpower, I ended up playing fireman with a high pressure sea water hose spraying over the rear accommodation and outside of the funnel to keep it all cool and prevent the plentiful sparks igniting anything. I was told not to put water INTO funnel, as our small amount of water probably would not cool the fire enough. White hot iron would just decompose the water into hydrogen and oxygen and possibly even make the fire worse. The shoreside fire brigade couldn't or wouldn't help (The excuse was that they couldn't get their fire engines up the jetty). We finally ended up with a large harbour fire monitor alongside us, with three fire cannons pumping thousands of gallons of water per minute high up into the air and letting it fall into funnel. It looked really spectacular. After about 2-3 hours of this, the fire was out, and it was all cooling down. The apparent cause was the engineers failing to wait long enough before opening the firebox door for a boiler inspection. It seems that soot in the uptakes was still hot enough to burn, and fresh air from the open door caused it to ignite. Next day, I was told that the particular boiler concerned was just so much solidified junk! Luckily, the ship had two, so it could still continue the voyage, and limp along until the boiler could be re-built.

I was totally wet and filthy dirty, so even though I should have flown home that afternoon, I told the Captain I could not pay off before my gear was dry and clean. Luckily, despite his other problems, he saw the point, and arranged that I had a few days in the Cockpit hotel at Singapore before coming home. It was lucky the cargo was relatively non-inflammable lubricating oils, but it still played havoc with my adrenalin levels! Fire at sea is the dread of all seamen, as a ship has so many points where things can so quickly go very wrong indeed. The engine room contains many tanks filled with inflammable fluids, so if a fire does once get out of control, it is usually a major catastrophe.

The ship left to make its slow way to the next ports. Eventually, the boiler was repaired, and the ship could run at its normal speed again. After a few days in Singapore, I flew back to England to have a well-earned leave.