

These huge ships hardly move even in the heaviest seas. With 60 or 70 feet of ship under the water, and only 6 or 8 feet above, they are like icebergs. Heavy seas tend to break right over them as they have too much inertia to rise to the waves. A tanker is a little like a submarine, and all deck entrances or other openings are fitted with heavy waterproof doors to guard against flooding if the deck should be submerged. They do not go over waves, they go through them! Tankers are built to take massive stresses, but for all that they are still delicate and loading or discharging the cargo holds in the wrong order, or with incorrect quantities could snap them like an old stick. Some nasty accidents have occurred in loading and discharge ports where exactly that happened.

Another problem is that the bow of the ship is so far removed from the bridge, and the ship itself is so massive, that in heavy weather, it is difficult to judge how much punishment the forward part of the ship is taking. The blunt bow is almost like the side of a multi-storey building being forced against the sea by a 20,000 horsepower engine developing hundreds of tons of thrust. This, plus the immense inertia of over 300,000 tons of ship and cargo moving at nearly 20 miles an hour, makes these ships the nearest thing to unstoppable moving objects yet built by man. When hit at 15 knots, water is hard, and imposes immense stresses. After some heavy weather which buried our bow a few times, we found our forward pump room full with water one day. It was caused by one of the heavily secured anchors (each weighing around 70 tons) being forced back against a massive thick steel reinforcing plate by heavy seas, and puncturing through. All we felt on the bridge was a light bouncing. Some supertankers have even had their bow and foredeck pushed in by the force of seas they encountered. In heavy weather, I have seen the bow of the ship actually moving up and down as the ship bent and flexed in the waves. Looking forward from the bridge I have also seen small ripples travelling along the deck as the steel structure accommodated itself to these movements. It was a somewhat unnerving sight.

It was on this ship that I experienced some of the heaviest seas I have ever seen. We were virtually hove to in the Bay of Biscay, a notorious area for bad weather. At one point, when standing on the bridge of the ship around 20 metres above the sea, I was looking UP at foam covered wave crests! We could see one large container ship a few miles away battling through the huge



seas. At times its bow was thrown completely clear of the water. We could see right under the fore part of the ship, then the next moment it would be completely submerged as it pitched into a wave, being covered with green water and spray almost up to the bridge. Our saloon, several decks below the bridge, had big picture windows. When sitting at meals in rough weather, it was sometimes a bit unnerving to see waves towering above you. It made eating an adventurous pastime.