

Joined C.P. Ships as Radio / Electronics Officer.

14) D.C. Coleman (ZCAZ) 44473 NRT (120,000 DWT) 21120 BHP. R/E/O  
Tobata, Japan 6/5/74 - 25/7/74 Seven Islands, Canada.

15) D.C. Coleman Re-signed on articles.  
Seven Islands 25/7/74 - 23/9/74 Port Walcott, Australia.



At this time, the majority of C.P. Ships vessels were registered in Hamilton, Bermuda. It was a strange set up, but typical for many flag of convenience companies. There was a small Bermudan office with a staff of only around 4 or 5. The main office was in London, England, from where the orders generally came from and where I had to report to. The Bermuda shipping regulations were virtually identical to those of the U.K. but there were considerable tax advantages. Being as the ships were Bermuda registered, I had to approach the Bermudan authorities to apply for an Amateur Radiolicense to operate from the ship. The ships Captain, as well as the company were agreeable, so I applied for my Bermudan Amateur Radiolicense. The Bermudan authorities were also agreeable, so I received my amateur callsign VP9HX. It would have to wait however until the next ship to be used, as I had no equipment with me on this one.

The C.P. Ships radio installations were virtually standardised, almost all the ships carrying very similar systems. This comprised a Redifon R551 main general coverage receiver, a Redifon RMT1500 synthesised 1500 watt HF/MF SSB/CW transmitter as main equipment. Often, a Sailor HF/SSB 400 watt Transmitter and receiver was also fitted for use with telex or as a reserve HF system. It could be battery powered if required, but could not cover 500 KHz. A Redifon auxiliaries rack was also carried including battery charging equipment, antenna switching, the auto alarm for 500 KHz, and an emergency battery powered transmitter and receiver for 500 Khz and 2182 R/T distress use. Later, when it became mandatory, a 2182 auto alarm receiver was also fitted for R/T distress signals. This was usually fitted on the bridge. All ships had at least 2 VHF R/T systems. One on the bridge for navigational and pilotage purposes, one in the radio room, mainly for ship to shore telephone calls. These were Sailor 80 channel synthesized sets, and very reliable. We also had several sets of maritime VHF walkie-talkies to keep in touch around the ship. The tankers were later fitted with the maritime SITOR radio telex systems, which helped tremendously with reducing costs and time required to receive and send cargo orders. Some of these messages could be several hundred words long. Before the telexes were fitted, it was a major work-up to receive and send them.

The bridge equipment included a Decca auto pilot, a Microtechnica gyro compass, a Magnavox satellite navigation system (Navstar), a Redifon Omega navigation system, and a Decca Navigator for coastal use around the UK and Europe. A Japanese Furuno weather fax receiver, a Decca echo sounder, Marconi Automatic DF receiver, together with sundry telephones, alarm and engine movement logging systems completed the installation. Some of this equipment was new to me. The gyro for instance, was a watertight sealed hollow sphere containing the actual gyro motors which floated with neutral buoyancy in a tank of fluid. This was a solution of Benzoic acid, Glycerine and distilled water kept at a constant temperature by heaters and thermostats. Servicing it required amongst other things, that I play boy chemist with various chemical powders and fluids. I quite enjoyed it really - once I got to know how it all worked.

The radars were mostly the same on all CP ships. An older Decca 16 inch display for navigation, and a smaller more modern Marconi or Decca for general use, both being X band (3 cm) 50 KW output systems. The scanners were fed with copper waveguide and both were fitted on the very top of the main mast. They had an excellent view, but were sheer hell to service, especially when the weather was bad, or the wind blew the funnel gasses towards the radar platform. To service the upper scanner, one had to stand on the upper safety rail of the radar platform, hanging on like mad with one hand, whilst loosening screws and doing any checks with the other. Even with a safety harness, it was not a job I relished, particularly as the odd nut or screw would often be dropped, and entail a long laboured climb down to the radio shack for a spare. No matter how many types of screws, nuts and bolts one had in one's pocket, the one required would always be missing (Murphys law of displaced objects!) The HF and MF radio antennas were generally wires strung around the funnel in the usual modern ship practice. We had either wires strung to the triatic stay as receiving antennas and sometimes vertical 5 metre receiving whips. On a few ships, (notably the big bulk carriers) the main transmitting antenna was a self-supporting 20 metre high centre-loaded vertical mast. This worked quite well, but was very prone to static pick up, with the resulting noise on receive (and occasional large sparks!). Otherwise the main and reserve antennas were usually double spans of wire approximately 20 metres long, strung over the accommodation. This wasn't terribly efficient but the high transmitter output power helped.

The large bulk carriers made long boring trips with Coal or Iron Ore over very long distances, hardly touching land at all. This was the time of the Oil Crisis and mandatory economical (slow) speed steaming (around 12 Knots max) to save fuel. The profit margins for bulk transport are generally low, and every effort was made to save costs in any way possible. If the cargo arrived a few days later, it was not generally a catastrophe, and the charter was so negotiated that strict arrival times were not often required. The saving of a few tons of fuel every day, however, can add up to a considerable total saving. A 50 percent reduction in power usually only meant a loss of 3 to 4 knots in speed, but saved many tons of fuel per day.

On this ship, I had my longest nonstop trip ever at sea. It took us 63 days from N.W. Australia (Dampier) to Taranto (Italy) via the Cape of Good Hope with a cargo of iron ore. The Suez Canal was still closed, and huge bulk carriers like us could not pass through anyway. On this very long trip, we paused at Capetown for a few fresh stores and mail as usual, but we still had very little left to eat on reaching Europe. The menu became very boring toward the end, with no fresh fruit or vegetables until reaching Gibraltar. Some of the Indian crew were getting very upset as we had no salt, and virtually no Muslim killed meat. (Muslims will not eat meat killed in the usual manner, requiring it to be done according to their own customs).

As Electronics Officer, I used to spend considerable time in the Engine room, that being where most of my troubles occurred. One of the main

problems for me was the various alarm and automated systems for the main engine and ancillaries. These were usually TTL logic cards placed in one or more large boxes under the control console. Despite the control room air conditioning, they became very hot in operation due to limited ventilation, and the TTL logic sometimes used to lock up, or at least not switch correctly. The other problem was the electro-mechanical relay interface between the logic and the outside world. I was forever replacing reed relays until I modified the circuit to stop the capacity of the long leads welding the relays closed.

When I was on the Northern Star, I had met an Australian girl with whom I was still in contact. I decided to spend some time in Sydney with her when I paid off at Port Walcott NW Australia. The immigration were very understanding, and even though I had no visa for a longer stay in Australia, I was granted permission, and a waiver was put in my passport. The chief immigration officer asked me to be a good lad and not do a "runner", as he had signed the permission and would have to face the music if I "disappeared". I was also informed that if such a thing did occur, I would probably not be very welcome in Australia any more afterwards. It was all very friendly said, but the veiled threat was quite clear.

Port Walcott is an Iron Ore town in North Western Australia. It is dry, dusty, and with a deep red-brown soil. This soil is basically the reason for the town's existence, as it contains large quantities of iron. There are some huge open cast iron ore mines nearby, and the port is built to export the ore all over the world. It was chosen as it has deep water to accommodate the huge bulk carriers like the DC Coleman required to carry this sort of cargo. The ore arrived via conveyor belts, and was just poured into the holds at high speed. Loading was fast, and semi-automated, but the ships officers had to keep a close watch to ensure the correct loading sequence and quantities were put aboard. A small error was allowable, but a large one could later sink us, owing to overstressing the ship's structure. This is something to which large bulk carriers are especially prone, and some have literally broken up at sea.

There were some Aboriginal shanty towns nearby and the mine workers lived in air conditioned "containers". These were quite nicely fitted out inside, but still looked very temporary. It had a few permanent buildings, but did look a bit like a campsite, or maybe a little like the old American Wild West. There was however one very nice bar/restaurant which we used to visit. It contained a huge aquarium which made up the wall separating the bar and restaurant sections. It was tastefully lit and stretched the full length of the bar and the full height of the room. It contained all manner of colourful tropical fish and crabs, together with shells, a sunken galleon and numerous plants. It was very impressive, and made a wonderful backdrop for the bar and restaurant.

On leaving the ship, I first had to fly to Perth, as that seemed to be the only destination possible from where we could fly outside Australia. If the company had not paid for the flight to Sydney, I had decided I was going to go by train across Australia. It would have taken 3 days, but would have been an unforgettable experience. The company however did agree to fly me to Sydney and then on to London, so I never did get to see the Australian Nullabor Desert. It saved me some cash, but I was really quite disappointed.

It was a 4 hour flight from Perth to Sydney, a sign of just how big Australia really is, and I stayed there a total of 3 weeks. I visited Canberra (which was still being built at that time), the port city of Newcastle, the Blue Mountains, (Katoomba) and The Three Sisters, some small outback towns and various tourist attractions in and around Sydney. It was a very interesting and enjoyable time.

One of the most spectacular thunderstorms I have ever seen took place over Sydney as we approached the city, returning from a trip into the Blue Mountains. Blue-black storm clouds covered the sky ahead of us, and vicious lightning speared down into the city skyline ahead. Very impressive. Luckily it finished before we actually drove into the city, but the roads were still running with water as evidence of how heavily it had rained. The three weeks were over all too soon, so obeying the orders of the immigration official, I dutifully said my goodbyes to Australia and flew back to London.