

27) Fort Coulonge (ZCHA)
Wellington N.Z. 25/2/78 - 17/6/78 Kawasaki Japan.



The flight out to this ship was quite an adventure. I had to fly from Frankfurt, via London, Bahrain, Singapore, then Singapore to Sydney, then finally on to Wellington NZ. At first, all went well, then during the landing approach to Bahrain, the aircraft hit a seagull, and the cockpit windscreen was cracked. As there were no spare aircraft available, we all had to be put in a hotel for 24 hours, until the windscreen was replaced and the new windscreen sealant cured. With a fully loaded Jumbo, this took quite some organising, and was not that fast. While we were waiting, some of the passengers did some organising themselves (we had become quite friendly with the aircrew). The net result was free beer and wine and a slap up meal in Bahrain. The beer being supplied from the aircraft stores!

I was naturally late in getting all the connecting flights, and it was touch and go as to whether I would actually arrive before the ship sailed. I had naturally asked the airline to inform the agents of my later arrival. I was met, and after a high speed dash with the agent from the airport in Wellington, I arrived at Lyttleton just before the gangway was raised. There was no hand over as was customary, the departing R/O (with bags all packed and really on tenterhooks) dashed down the gangway, with a quick "Bye, - the handover notes are on the desk". Luckily, as I had been on the ship before, it was not all strange, so I just read through what had happened since I was last on board. We always kept a fault log in the radio room. This was a book in which every fault, no matter where it occurred, was entered, as well as the measures taken to find and fix the fault. It was sometimes very interesting reading, and gave a rather good insight into what sort of a person the last Electronics Officer was.

After a quick stop in Christchurch, we made the long haul across the Pacific, via Panama to Maracaibo, then Ponce (Puerto Rico) and the Bahamas. After a number of days cleaning our tanks very thoroughly, whilst floating around off the Mississippi, we travelled up the "Big Muddy" as the Mississippi is sometimes called to New Orleans. Here we loaded a part cargo of Soya bean oil for Guayabal, Cuba.

Cuban Alcohol

After discharge and cleaning tanks again, we headed for Matanzas, Cuba, where we had to load a cargo of 8000 tons of Ethanol (100 percent anhydrous ethyl alcohol). This was where the fun began! It took considerably longer than expected to do this as the cargo was still being made in small lots at a distillery, so I had an opportunity to sample the local beaches. They were not bad, with beach bars and places to eat. The only thing being that the amount of beer and food was rationed, and if you came in the afternoon, there was mostly nothing left. I managed to get permission from the Cuban authorities to travel to Varadero, a well known beach resort around 50 Km from Matanzas. This in itself was quite a problem, as seamen are not classed as tourists, and had no visas. Actually, seamen have always been regarded with suspicion by authorities everywhere. I have often had problems getting the necessary permission to go outside a certain small radius of the ship, especially in communist countries where we were looked on as the next best thing to Western spies.

In Cuba, it took about three days, and required me to present myself at the local government administration office. There I waited with several other Cubans who wanted permission to visit friends or relatives in other parts of Cuba. I had to explain why I wanted to go to Varadero, how long for, and how I would travel. With the duly signed and stamped paper in my hand I was all set.

I used the local public transport (buses), which caused me some problems as I spoke no Spanish. People however were friendly and helpful and helped me find the right route. I remember I had to change to another bus, and was standing around in a rundown village bus station for quite some time worrying if I was even going the right way.

The cargo continued to come in dribs and drabs. It was being made from fermented sugar in a factory a hundred KM or so away, and transported in railway wagons to the ship. Instead of the 2 days planned, we were there over a week.

Trouble

We became worried about the neoprene rubber valve seals being damaged by the cargo. The ship was not strictly speaking a chemical tanker, and we had little information about pure ethanol and its effects on our ship. We asked our main office in London to let us have more details of the cargo characteristics. Suddenly it seemed as if the London office woke up and started to panic. It had found out that our tank coatings (a form of epoxy paint) would not stand up to this cargo (without becoming soft and sloughing away), for more than 12 - 15 days. (We had stored cargo in some tanks at this point for a full week). The Cuban authorities refused to let the ship sail early. (We had contracted for 8000 tons, and, by God, we would stay until we had received the full 8000 tons, even if it took a month!). It eventually took 12 days. An attempt was made to see if we could tranship our cargo to one of our Chemical tankers at Hawaii, but the American Coastguard refused permission for such an undertaking.

Finally we sailed from Cuba on route to Japan, via the Panama Canal, a voyage of around 32 days. Nobody really knew what we would find when the tanks were inspected there, and the cargo had a very good chance of being contaminated by dissolved epoxy paint.

On route to Panama, the Chief Officer also found out that our protein based fire fighting foam could not be used for alcohol fires. The alcohol dissolved the foam, and the fire burned much too hot anyway for normal foams. At that point we then had a near mutiny! - us officers refusing to take the ship further than Panama until we received the special fire fighting chemicals needed. Our argument was that Cuba to Panama is almost

coasting, and within reach of land based help if we had a fire. After Panama it's deep sea all the way. The Pacific Ocean is extremely large, and we would be entirely on our own if anything happened. Because of this, the ship was delayed in Panama for nearly 2 days until the chemical drums were flown down at great expense from Los Angeles.

The trip across the Pacific was long, but thankfully uneventful, arriving in Japan around 34 days after leaving Cuba. Some tanks had contained the ethanol for over a week longer.

I then left the ship to go on leave, so I did not directly hear what happened next. On sailing with the same Captain again, later on a different ship, I heard that the cargo had indeed been contaminated, and caused a huge insurance claim and legal fight. The tank coatings were all soft, and over a week was needed with blowers gently circulating air inside the tanks before the coatings were hard again. Only cold tank washings were allowed in those tanks for quite some time thereafter. Some of the coating had blistered, allowing dampness to enter underneath, causing consequent rusting later and flaking off. Total damage and claims arising from that one mistake ran into millions of US Dollars. This was a typical example of any charter at any price, where the office people didn't really know what the ship was capable of. We often used to get telexes with strange questions about what we could or could not carry. The ship owners and operators were not very often seamen, and often didn't know the intricacies and limitations involved in carrying certain cargoes.

Christine and I got married in Chelmsford registry office on the 7.7.1978.