

34) M.V. G.A. Walker
Maracaibo Venezuela 27/3/81 - 25/6/81 Cape Town.

Still a couple of weeks of leave left, and enjoying every minute. Suddenly the phone rings - oh-oh! An E/O is sick and cannot go out to a ship, can I fill the breach at short notice? Within a few hours tickets have been arranged, and I fly from Strasbourg to London, then on to Miami and Maracaibo, Venezuela. My wife Christine joined me later in Norfolk, Virginia whilst we were at an unplanned drydock due to an apparently banana-shaped boat! The ship had gone aground on a bank approaching Maracaibo due to Pilot error shortly before I joined, and had vibrated so much getting itself off that the engine bed plates were bent. In the drydock they jacked up the engine, then poured epoxy resin on the engine foundations so they were exactly flat again. We then had to wait 24 hours with absolutely no work being done on the ship at all (to prevent vibration) whilst it hardened. The engine was then lowered and bolted onto the new flat engine bedding.

There was also a Radio Survey whilst in the drydock. Prior to the survey, a radio technician came down to see all was ok. If there was any problem then he had repair it before the survey took place. He did not have much to do as I had kept it all pretty much in top condition, but we strung up a new main antenna just to be sure and checked all through. Our surveyor was called Cecil (but pronounced Ceecil), an absolutely huge overweight guy straight from the FCC (Federal Communications Commission). I thought the ladder would break as he came aboard...(it ran from the drydock edge to the ship, a drop of around 60 feet straight down and bent alarmingly when he was on it), he was puffing and blowing so much, I thought he would die of a heart attack before he made it up the stairs as far as the Radio Room. He made a very thorough check through everything, though. All was ok, and we passed survey, much to my relief.

The Coastguard also inspected all the navigational aspects, a whole crowd of them descending on the ship before we left the drydock. I think they used it as a training opportunity, as there were a lot of cadets in evidence. We were not all that far from their training school. Again no problems. The friendly radio technician had previously told me what they looked for. I had then made very sure that particular distant targets could be clearly seen on both radars.

In the neighbouring drydock was a large tanker. At first I thought she was being repaired after a collision, but then I saw the name. It was the Manhattan, and she was being modified to do a trial run through the North West Passage carrying oil from Alaska to the US East coast to test its feasibility. It was thought that a large enough ship, especially strengthened, could manage this on a regular basis. The North West Passage is a sea route through the Arctic Ice north of the Canadian mainland, which though in existence, is nearly always covered in thick ice. The American government sponsored project was strengthening the hull of the Manhattan with a thick steel corset, and the ship was being fitted with an immense reinforced steel icebreaking bow, containing alone over 3000 tons of steel, and would be filled later with concrete to add even more weight. It was shaped so the ship could run up on the ice and crash through it with its weight. It was a most interesting (and expensive) project. She certainly made a very massive impression, the bow section being an immense web of heavy steel girders.

The ship did in fact later do several successful runs, although never actually filled with oil. It was decided, however, that it was too expensive to be commercially used. The trial voyages apparently took very long, and although the ship was never actually stuck in the ice, it sometimes took days to travel a few miles through 15 to 20 foot thick sea ice and floes.

I rented a car and toured around Virginia with Christine for a few days when all my work was finished. A really nice area, Williamsburg, Luray Caves, Blue Ridge Parkway Drive and some very nice old plantations (with plants dripping sap!). Christine left before we flooded the dock and proceeded on our way. Just prior to leaving, the Chief Officer found some "Grass" (Cannabis) stashed in an air vent, probably by some dockyard workers. We quickly threw it over the side before the customs did a rummage! That sort of thing could delay us for days!

There were times when the company definitely took risks. The ships were getting old and more difficult to charter profitably. Anything which came along that smacked of good profit was taken - even if on the edge of legality.

We were ordered up to the Gulf, and loaded a cargo of petroleum products for a place to be named after sailing. This is actually quite a usual practice, the cargo being sold and resold maybe several times before we discharge it at some totally different port to where it was originally consigned. In this case we were told after we had cleared the Gulf area, that our goal was Durban. Before we could get too excited however, we were told that we would be discharging at night at a single buoy mooring several miles from the coast. The reason was the international oil embargo against South Africa. Whilst it was not exactly illegal to trade oil or products with SA, it was certainly severely frowned upon. This was an attempt by the rest of the world to alter South African political policies concerning apartheid - the segregation of blacks. Any ship trading oil to SA was paid a premium price, but it all had to be very circumspect. We had to cover the name of the ship when discharging, and the discharge had to be done, if possible, under darkness at a place which could not be seen from the shore. No agents were informed, and only the company knew the ships whereabouts. We discharged without any shore contact, coupling up to the buoy and discharging almost without help, and as quickly as possible. We also had as few deck lights on as possible and did not report our arrival and departure. It was all very clandestine, and a bit nerve-racking. We then continued on our way, as if nothing had happened.

I was relieved on passing Cape Town together with a couple of other officers. This took place whilst we were still nearly at full speed about 12 miles off Green Point, Cape Town. It was very nerve-racking, jumping on to the boat when leaving the ship on a pitch black night with a 12 foot swell and a gale!

There are certain things which stick in my mind like snapshots. I remember the launches masthead light bobbing and weaving alongside, the launch itself sometimes being almost at deck level, then only seconds later, many feet below. The glare of our deck lights on the wet decks and the crew lowering our baggage down with ropes, very carefully so as not to get our cases wet or squashed between the launch and the ships side. I remember feeling very nervous about the entire procedure. We then had to climb over the side, and half way down a rope ladder, hang on like mad facing the ship's side until one of the boatmen shouted to jump. One had to literally leap backwards into the dark, almost like sky diving, trusting the boatman to catch you. He did, every time, but it was just a little bit worrying!

Then suddenly, I was looking up at the huge wall of steel and glaring lights high above as it slipped past us. The ship continued without pausing, the boat having brought out the relieving officers, mail and a few urgent supplies. As we watched, the deck lights winked out, and only the navigation and steaming lights were to be seen. We heard a quick farewell blast of the ships whistle, the ship itself a dark shadow, rapidly disappearing behind the South Atlantic swells.