

**44) M.V. W.M. Neal (ZBML)
Rotterdam 14/12/84 - 12/5/85 Ulsan South Korea.**



Shortly prior to joining this ship, its main vertical antenna had been struck by lightning and totally destroyed. Storms at sea are not unusual, but a direct strike is quite rare. Only a short stub was left remaining from what used to be a 20 metre high 30cm diameter centre loaded fibre glass vertical. The rest was showered like snowflakes all over the ship. The Main transmitter had 3 of its 4 power amplifier valves destroyed, and one or two metres of 20 cm wide copper earthing strap was blown free from the radio room bulkhead by the ensuing magnetic field. The radio officer on board at the time was just leaving the radio room when it happened. He wrote about it in the fault report book. He was apparently just in the radio room door, when there was a huge bang, and a dazzling blue flash lit up the radio room behind him. He shot out onto the bridge, where everyone wondered what was going on. They had just seen the lightning flash and heard the thunder directly overhead, not knowing it had actually hit. He wrote a list of things that had been burned out or damaged, then at the bottom "Radio Officer... in need of a stiff drink but otherwise unharmed!" Wire antennas had been rigged to allow radio operation until a new antenna could be provided.

This particular ship had been chosen to try out a new automation system, direct bridge control of the engines. This in itself was not new, but this ship was never intended to work like that, and neither the engines nor bridge were fitted for it. The heart of the system was a new analogue computer fitted in the engine room. This was connected to various sensors and additional bits of engine hardware to enable it to control the speed, record various parameters and instigate alarms if things were outside those parameters. Data was taken from the existing engine room telegraph for engine orders. Various failsafe systems were fitted, so that it was impossible for instance to go from full ahead to full astern without going through stop first. (If such a thing were tried without the safeties, the engine would probably disintegrate with some very loud and expensive accompanying noises!) It was a very interesting few days with the German installations engineer, who instructed me on the working and maintenance of the system. It worked fine, but we never trusted it. The engineers were always there for manoeuvring, just like before. It was not so responsive as driving by hand, and the Captain was used to the old system. It had the advantage however that we had an unmanned engine room at night. The duty engineer had all the remote alarms and various switches in his cabin. The

engine room door was actually locked so no one apart from him and the Chief Engineer could go below. If anything went wrong he could call for any necessary help, or decide it could wait until the morning. This part of the automation was quite popular. The engineers could drink in the bar until late!

Life at sea is generally uneventful, sometimes however a number of things seem happen almost at once. One day, the fire alarm rang, and clouds of smoke issued from the engine room skylight. There had been a crankcase explosion in one of the diesel generators. The inspection covers had been blown off, one piston and liner damaged and the crankshaft as well. It would need a complete strip down to reach the crankshaft, which would have to be replaced. The piston and liner would also have to be renewed. All in all, a rather expensive repair. We had an oily mist detector to prevent such a happening in the main engine, where it could be disastrous. Prior to an explosion, a hot bearing gives rise to an oily mist or smoke, which can be detected, and the engine stopped before an explosion takes place. The generators, however, were not fitted with such a system. We had three, and could run the ship with one generator, but needed two for running the ballast pumps. Things were going to be tight. A day or so later, the new radar stopped. This was a Krupp Atlas self-plotting radar, with all sorts of Star Wars gimmicks on it. At first the problem looked like a simple blown fuse, but turned out to be the main switch mode power supply for the display. This was of course never expected to go wrong. It was a complete module from Coutant, and impossible to repair on board. Score so far, one generator and one radar down. A few days later, another generator started to overheat, and had to be stopped. Now we were down to one from three. When the week's tale of woe was telexed to the head office in London, it would spoil the day for a number of people. We were becoming a bit anxious, but the remaining generator worked well. Only our one remaining radar gave cause for anxiety, as it too began to play up. It never completely packed in however, so we kept going until the next port.

Arriving at Kaosiung in Taiwan, we were berthed opposite a ship scrapyard. Taiwan is a favourite country for scrapping, probably because the regulations are not as rigid as other areas. I could watch as whole sections of a ship's superstructure were cut off and lifted clear before being cut into small sections on the ground. The people doing it had virtually no protective clothing and no protective footgear (they seemed to be wearing sandals - whilst wielding a gas axe!!). An entire ship could be cut apart in an amazingly short time, its valuable parts either re-sold or separately processed for precious metals or spare parts. Various items were sold locally such as old ship's compasses or brass navigation lights and ship's steering wheels and bells. It was also a place for pirated goods. By pirated I do not mean stolen from ships, but illegally copied commercial items such as books and (even then) computer software. It looked just like the real thing, shrink wrapped with official logos and everything.

We discharged, then three days later headed for Ulsan, South Korea for drydock. There, the various damaged items were repaired, the ship re-painted and generally brought back into shape. I received a new Vertical antenna, so could remove the unsightly temporary wire antennas. It also brought home how cheaply life and personal safety is viewed in Asia. Two workers were inside a water tank on board. The one below was painting, the one



above was welding. The inevitable happened, and the inflammable vapours from the paint ignited, and the resulting explosion injured them both badly. They were pulled out of the tank and two other workers were instructed to continue. The injured men were taken outside the drydock gates to await the ambulance. According to the drydock company, there may be a few accidents but NEVER serious injuries or deaths INSIDE the drydock, those all happen outside. Apparently, the injured are taken outside the dock gates to await the ambulance in case they die! The drydock company is not then responsible for supporting the families of the workers. Apart from a few hard hats and safety belts, protective clothing is almost unheard of, and work takes place under quite hazardous conditions - as noted above.

We visited the town quite often, but it was not very inspiring. I walked through the market a few times, which was quite interesting, especially trying to guess what was in the various things offered to eat at various stalls. Once, I was a bit hungry, which made me brave. I found one stall selling what looked like rather nice cakes - they looked a bit like coconut. I bought a couple and took a big bite out of one, only to find to my horrified amazement that it contained - FISH! A total surprise when one expects to eat something sweet. I dumped the second example in a convenient rubbish bin. Another item I wondered about was a white milky drink being offered, but which had a most unpleasant, pungent, penetrating odour. I used to hold my breath when passing those stalls! I was not courageous enough to try that!