

Captains

He was short and rotund. So short indeed that he could not look over the bridge wings properly without a wooden box to stand on. He was bald, but with a thick bushy beard. He was nicknamed the man with the upside down head! He was very petty, the smallest thing getting him angry and upset. Predictably, he was not well-liked.

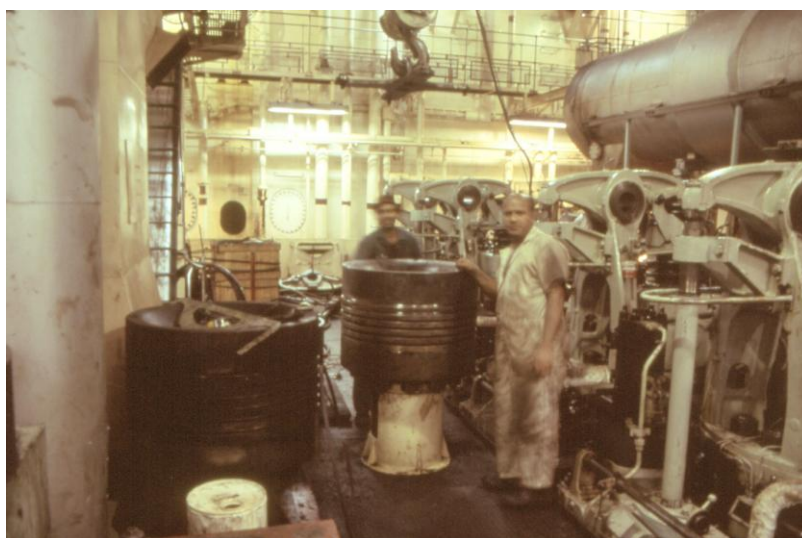
The ship was having a lifeboat drill. Part of this practice was the "Man Overboard" manoeuvre. An empty sealed oil drum had been thrown overboard. We had to turn the ship around using a procedure known as the "Williamson turn", which enabled the ship to turn back exactly on a reciprocal course and pick it up again as quickly as possible. It had been one of those days. The Captain had been getting on everybody's back. Now, standing on his box, looking out at the rapidly disappearing oil drum, he was displeased at the apparent lack of speed of people's reactions. "Come on, come on, man overboard... that could be me floating about down there, what would you do about it?" We all looked at each other and grinned. Then one bright spark piped up "We'd all move up a cabin"!

He had told us of how coming home after a six month voyage, he had unlocked the door of his house to find a stranger in his kitchen. "What the hell are you doing in my house?" demanded our irate Captain. The stranger replied "No sir, what are YOU doing in MY house. I have just bought it." - The Captain's wife had sold the house and moved without telling him!

He was at a party in the bar. Although he was Captain, it was usual to ask before coming into the officers' bar as a matter of courtesy. He did not. He was holding forth at great length on how he could solve the problems of the world single handed. No one was listening. His speech was getting more and more indistinct, but he could hold his drink like no other, and was not drunk (he said). A few moments of silence ended with a thump as the great man fell off his stool on to the deck. A few ineffectual struggles, then he gave up, falling asleep on the bar carpet. Talk and laughter billowed around him as the party continued. He was ignored and was left to sleep it off. Maybe he was not the most popular man on the ship.

The engine room on a ship is its heart. The watch officers there are all-powerful. They can make your life a misery by forgetting to turn a valve or a switch. It does not do to make them angry.

Our Captain was unhappy. There was never enough water pressure for his liking. The toilet would not flush properly, and the shower was just a dribble. Living on the upper deck as he (and I) did, any weakness in water pressure was immediately apparent.



It takes considerable effort to push water up to our deck, around 60 feet above the water line.

Our Captain was a moaner. He complained to anyone that happened to cross his path, me, the chief engineer, the deck watch and he also telephoned the engine room watch. This last was his downfall. At last, pushed beyond endurance by the telephonic barbed stabs from the Captain, the engine room watch officer took his revenge. It should perhaps here be explained that the water pressure was regulated by a compressed air pump, the air acting

as driving force and pressure buffer for the water. The pressure is normally controlled, but we had been having some problems with it. The enraged engineer turned the pump full on, and left it until the pressure was high enough for a world record fountain, then quietly waited.

Our unfortunate Captain was feeling the after effects of a particularly strong curry the previous night. After finishing a session on the toilet, he leaned on the flush lever, expecting the usual faint trickle.

Driven by around a hundred pounds to the square inch of pressure, the water hammered into his loo with tremendous force, throwing everything it contained violently in all directions. To the unfortunate man, it must have seemed like his toilet exploded! Shaken, soaked and somewhat smelly, he staggered into the chief engineer's cabin with his tale of woe. He was greeted by a laconic Scots "That'll teach ye to complain,- did ye hae enough pressure?".

The lesson was learned, our Captain was reformed - (well, let's be truthful, partially reformed), but the tale of the exploding "bog" insidiously permeated throughout the fleet. Not even the names were changed to protect the innocent!

It was around 3am, when the telephone rang. "Sparks, the radar is not working." The grating voice of the Captain informs me that I must climb out of my nice warm bed, and perform some electronic miracle on the totally blacked out bridge. We are under pilotage, and although the pilot doesn't actually need it, everything must be seen to be on. "OK, I am coming", and a few minutes later I gingerly feel my way through the bridge darkness. The Captain says he had tried the radar, but nothing happened. Sure enough, everything was dark. I politely enquired if he had turned it on. (I had previously tested the equipment the evening before and everything was fine then). I was informed in no uncertain tones that he wasn't stupid and knew how to turn on a radar, and would I just get on and fix it. I tried the main on/off switch. Lights, sound, action! It's amazing how some Captains are trusted to navigate a multi-million dollar ship around the world but are unable to switch on a major navigational aid. I loudly voiced a few choice words to that effect and stormed out. (To be truthful, this particular Captain couldn't navigate himself out of a paper bag, but that's another story!)