

Stories

The new crew had arrived - some fresh from the backwoods of India. After inspecting their cabins they settled in. One enterprising young man, seeing all the wire strung up between the masts of the ship, thought it would make a wonderful antenna for his short wave radio. He climbed up a mast, and carefully connected his radio antenna to the nice thick copper wire already there. His radio worked a treat. It was brand new, and All-India Radio came in clear as a bell.

The ship leaves port, and the departure message must be sent.

"That's funny, the transmitter doesn't seem to tune like it used to. Let's give it a bit more oompf" - "Ah, that's better", and shortly 1500 watts of radio frequency energy are announcing our presence on the world's oceans.

An hour or so goes by, then a very apprehensive young sailor comes up to the radio room door. Could I possibly have a look at his radio? It was working great, then suddenly stopped and clouds of smoke came out the back! He held it out. A faint smell of burnt insulation and toasted circuit board wafted out.

A look inside was enough, it was beyond all earthly help. It took quite some time before I could convince him that the ship's main transmitting antenna is not perhaps the ideal place to connect his transistor portable!

We had a new Communist Chinese crew. It was an experiment by the company to save money. They had been trained at a Chinese sea school, but were inexperienced, and many had never been outside mainland China. It was breakfast time, and several of us were sitting down for the first meal with the new cooks and stewards. The table was beautifully laid, and the steward hovered nervously over us. Everything was fine, and we ordered eggs, bacon, toast and some coffee. The eggs and bacon arrived, as did the coffee. We were happily chatting so it did not immediately click that we had waited inordinately long for the toast. The Captain reminded the steward, and he assured us in broken English that it was coming. Sure enough, a few minutes later, 4 slices of toast arrived. We immediately asked for more, much to the consternation of the steward. Ten to fifteen minutes went by, and still no toast. The Captain had had enough of waiting and stormed into the pantry where the toaster was kept, to find out what was going on. There, neatly lined up ON TOP of the industrial sized toaster were 4 slices of bread, very slowly turning brown in nice neat stripes where the slots to insert the bread were. The stewards had never seen a pop-up toaster before, so they thought you put the bread on top, and the heat from the slots did its work there. No wonder we had to wait for ages! They were very surprised when we showed them how it was REALLY done!

A cocky, know-it-all first trip cadet had been given the job of washing down the monkey island, and generally cleaning up. It was his first look at the large ceramic insulators poking out of the deck, surrounded with a strong wire safety cage. The "Danger - High Voltage" signs and heavy insulators supporting the various transmitting antennas aroused his curiosity, but not taking it all seriously, he happily cleaned in and around the area without notifying anyone what he was doing. It was after all only radio aerials.

He came to me with his question, why all the big insulators and safety cages? Surely, it cannot be that dangerous.

I took a very large screwdriver, and earthed the shaft with a wire to the transmitter cabinet. I turned on the transmitter and tuned it to 410 KHz full power (well over 1Kw output). On placing the screwdriver near the antenna, I drew a nice fat noisy 9 - 12 inch arc from it. The cadet's face became white with consternation as he remembered what he had been doing just shortly before.

He was very careful in future always to notify me when he was working near the radio aerials. They really WERE dangerous.

"Hey, Sparkie, can you have a look at the microwave in the pantry?" These few words heralded the start of an interesting next few hours. The question itself was innocuous, incorporating as it did the everyday knowledge aboard ship, Sparks can fix anything (well almost). My query as to what was the problem, was answered with a short, fairly typical, "It doesn't work". This of course was obvious, I never get called to look at anything that's working. The microwave was an essential bit of equipment, enabling the officers coming off watch at night to make a hot meal, or heat up something left in the pantry fridge. If it didn't work, people got unhappy.

After finishing my watch, I packed my portable tool kit and traipsed down 4 decks to the pantry. My first impression was a sort of faint burnt plastic smell as I entered the pantry. Fearing the worst, I inspected the equipment as requested. On opening the microwave oven door, the smell hit me full force, and half the door fell off onto the deck. It bore obvious signs of arcing and burn marks on the melted plastic parts of the door. It was quite obviously beyond repair, and actually dangerous to use.

It was a large commercial American model of 1200 watts which without a well fitting and correctly functioning door seal, would happily cook anyone standing in front of it. I disconnected it to be safe. Whilst I was working on it, the new Indian Chief Steward poked his head around the door asking if it could be repaired. The short sharp answer he received had a very strange effect. He ran off to his cabin, locked the door and was not seen again all day. Nobody seemed to know how the damage had been done, but from his reaction, it was fairly clear that he did.

For a few hours, the ship's rumour mill was very active and we were trying to work out how it could have happened. When the Chief Steward finally surfaced, he was called into the Captain's cabin for a quiet talk. As we were told later, this was his story.

The man was from India, and had been trained at a cookery school there. He had served on a number of Indian vessels, but lacked experience. He had never seen a microwave oven before, and did not know how it should be used. He and a couple of the galley staff had been having a social evening, and it was thought some baked potatoes would go down well. Our Chief Steward knew all about how to make them fast. One wraps them in aluminium foil and pops them in the oven. Rather than turn on the galley range, he thought the microwave would do just as well. An oven is an oven - isn't it? Four large potatoes, nicely wrapped in foil were carefully placed inside. As it said on the recommended cooking time, the timer was set for 10 minutes at full power, and the oven turned on. The Chief Steward then went back to his cabin, to return 10 minutes later.

It must have been quite an eventful 10 minutes for the poor microwave oven! The entire 1200 watts of high frequency energy were reflected by the aluminium foil without being absorbed. Even low loss plastics have their limit, and after a while, the weakest spot around the door seal started to heat up, arc over, and burn. Once started, it could only get worse - and it did. By the time the poor man returned, the door was well cooked - but the potatoes were still stone cold!

Not really knowing what he had done wrong, the potato evidence was quickly removed, and a very frightened Chief Steward crept back to his cabin, locked the door, and for all we know, hid under the bed.

All's well that ends well. The steward was carefully instructed on the do's and don'ts of microwave cooking, but he never trusted himself to use the microwave oven again. The Captain authorised a new one to be bought at the next port. This was partially due to the fact that he sometimes used it for a warm midnight snack too, and started to miss it. I took the old unit

apart and salvaged a nice high voltage transformer, a powerful blower and two powerful magnets to play with. I still have them!

I never realised that giving instructions for a simple job could be so exacting. The main and emergency transmitting antennas were kept up by wire ropes, which were run over pulleys on the top of the masts. These wire ropes must be kept greased to prevent them corroding. I instructed our Indian Serang (who was in charge of the deck crew) to grease the antenna downhauls. "Atcha Sahib" was the reply, which roughly translated means "understood Sir, it will be done". I then forgot all about it. A few days later, I saw the crew busily climbing up and down masts with big pots of grease and remembered what I had asked them to do. It was beautifully done, each wire downhaul evenly coated in thick grease. Again, I forgot all about it, seeing as the job had been done.

It was a week or so later, late one evening. I was having problems tuning up the main and reserve transmitting antennas on 500 KHz. The effect was similar to that which occurs when the insulators are wet with salt spray. I could not get them to resonate and the transmitter output power was only a small fraction of what it should be. I checked the transmitter and the deck feed-through insulators, but all was ok. I was mystified and decided to check further the following day. The next morning, our 3rd officer pointed to the tops of the transmitting antennas. "Sparks, should your insulators be that colour?" The usually bright white ceramic insulators were totally black. Puzzled, I lowered down one set of antennas, whereupon the answer was obvious. Not only were the wire downhauls well greased, the insulators, and even the antenna wire itself was covered in a thick layer. The grease had trapped all the soot from the funnel gases and thus built up a lovely conducting layer across the insulator. I spent the next 4 or 5 hours of my free time with the very messy job of cleaning off all the lovingly applied grease on both antennas.

I had forgotten that although it was obvious to myself, and all the deck officers, I had not specifically instructed the Serang NOT to grease the insulators and the antennas themselves. There is a nautical saying - if it moves, grease it, if it doesn't, paint it. The Serang lived up to the best nautical traditions. He got the crew to do a first class job of greasing EVERYTHING - whether it moved or not!

There is always friendly rivalry at sea, whether it's between people with-in a ship, or ships within the same company. Sometimes it can even be between Captains. The company senior Captain - sometimes called the Commodore Captain - always wanted any new innovations to be on his ship. He commanded the biggest ship in the fleet, a 280,000 ton super tanker. At that time it was the biggest motor tanker in the world, and he was very proud of the fact. I was aboard a small products tanker, and in our daily tanker skeds found out we would pass very close. On informing our Captain



of this fact, I could see wheels beginning to turn in his mind. What have WE got, that he hasn't? We all put our heads together, and came up with an idea. Satellite TV! We didn't have it either, but the Commodore Captain didn't know that.

I was sworn to secrecy, not to divulge a whisper on our regular contacts.

As we got closer plans were formed, and the day before the meeting we sprung into action. An outdated inflatable 20 man liferaft was bodily heaved up to the top of the mainmast. There the Chief and Second Officers inflated it and carefully lashed it down on the port side clear of the radar scanner, where it could be clearly seen. We had previously worked out on which side we would pass. A couple of white sheets were thrown over it to give the correct



colour. Even from quite close it did look amazingly like a radome for a large satellite antenna. From a distance it would be the real thing!

Our usual intership communications continued normally, with the odd, seemingly off hand, mention of how good the weather was in Wimbledon and how good certain players were playing. It had all been worked out beforehand. Both Captains were firm tennis fans and this served to set the stage that we had some form of visual information not available to the other ship. Our news actually coming from the BBC World Service radio of course, and not any TV. The time came, and the huge tanker loomed out of the haze ahead and passed on our port side about 5 miles away. We could almost feel them scanning us with their binoculars. The first contact - "What's that Bl--- great thing on your mast?" Our Captain then did his acting masterpiece. "Its our experimental Satellite TV antenna, we were just watching Wimbledon" We had the Wimbledon finals running softly on the Radio, and he did a superb job of pretending he could actually SEE what was happening on the centre court, being helped by the commentary on the BBC. The Commodore Captain was sorely miffed and held only a very short terse conversation before retiring to lick his wounds.

Everyone played their part until the various intership chat had finished. I, of course, was blamed for not telling them of the installation, and their Electronics Officer started to ask all sorts of embarrassing questions. I managed to evade most by saying it was still very experimental and a bit of a company secret. I was not supposed to say anything to anyone.

It was a complete success, and we did not doubt they all believed we really had a satellite TV installation. Our Captain was really pleased to have one up on a rival. We later heard that a somewhat angry telegram was sent to the company by the Commodore Captain, asking why HE was not chosen for the satellite TV experiment. What the reply was is sadly unknown, but it was probably a bit mystified. A few hours later, the raft was deflated and removed from the mast, and our satellite TV sadly became a thing of the past.

Not quite though. Occasionally, years later, I was asked by a few officers on various ships if I knew what had happened to the satellite TV experiment the company was supposed to have carried out!

In the vast calm silence of the South Pacific, there is nothing better after the 8-12 evening watch than to grab a cold case of beer and go out on deck near the bow with fellow watchkeepers for a chat, a drink and relax. On a clear night the sky is literally ablaze with stars, and if the ship happens to be carrying timber as deck cargo, the various tropical scents are almost intoxicating. At the bow, the engine noise, vibration and drone of the ventilation are gone. All one can hear is the quiet swish of the low Pacific rollers against the bow. The gentle swinging of the Milky Way can be seen above, blazing brilliantly with a million stars. It was one such night when I and the off duty 3rd Officer and 4th Engineer clambered over the deck cargo, lighting our way with a small deck torch until we found a good spot to settle in, up near the bow. The beers were opened and conversation flowed well.

After a while we spied a light low on the horizon and wondered who it could be, so far away from the normal shipping lanes. "Here Sparkie, call him up" said the 3rd Officer handing me the torch. Visual signalling is not something taught in radio school, but it's something picked up very quickly at sea. All deck officers should know how to do it, but frequently their knowledge of Morse is somewhat lacking. Very often, it's the Radio Officer who gets the job. The signalling protocol is simple and messages usually short, sometimes only 3 letters if the other ship is not up to it. "VHF" meaning basically "let's use the radio"!

"OK, let's give it a try" - but without much hope of success as the torch was a bit dim, and we were right at the horizon - A A A (The call) then consternation, "I just got a T, he has seen us - he must have a damn good watch!". All this, it should be remembered, without the benefit of binoculars! Then the usual query from us "What ship, where bound" The other ship began to reply, but because we were so low, his reply frequently got occluded by the swell on the horizon and became unreadable. Now, the 2nd officer on watch from the bridge had also seen the signalling ship, but not us calling it, so was somewhat mystified as to whom the ship was talking to. Eventually he caught on, as other than us, there was not another ship within 1000 square miles of ocean, and carried on the conversation using the big bridge signalling lamp. I was blamed later for giving the 2nd Officer "extra work", but it was only friendly banter as both he and I were amazed at how far a small two cell hand torch can be used for signalling. He said the ship was over 20 miles away on the radar at the time I called it up.

Whilst on the subject of visual signalling, I was once on one ship fitted with two admiralty pattern 18 inch signalling projectors. These were really fun to use. The lamp was a huge 1 KW bulb at the focus of a superb mirror. In front were spring loaded shutters which blocked off the light for signalling purposes. The keying lever was light and easily used, situated on the side of the housing. The beam was perfectly parallel and extremely powerful. We could use it as a searchlight, for illuminating the clouds or it was easily capable of illuminating a ship at 8 miles. It was in fact too bright, frequently almost blinding the ship we were trying to talk to. We used it mostly to draw someone's attention. It was after all, impossible to miss the fact we wanted to talk to them!

According to the International radio rules, the radio room had to be connected to the bridge by a nonelectrical means of communication. This could be a sliding hatch between the radio room and the bridge, or, on ships where this was not possible, it was a speaking tube. This was a tube, a little like a vacuum cleaner hose, connected between the bridge and the radio room. The cover contained a whistle, so if you removed the cover and

blew, the whistle on the other end would sound, and one could speak and listen through the tube. It worked really well, but was sometimes misused!

It was not unknown for the person at one end to purposely blow down the tube with all his might, at which the cover on the other end would emit a short loud shriek, then fly off at high velocity making a loud banging and clattering as it bounced off any intervening objects. This was even more effective during the long night watches, when the officer on watch was probably nicely relaxed. Then with a nonchalant "Oh sorry, did I wake you up" some routine question would be asked. I must admit, I was guilty of playing that trick too. Of course, this did not go unanswered. The deck officer, awaiting his chance for best effect would quietly blow huge quantities of tobacco smoke into the tube. As the tube in the radio room of this particular ship was clipped on the bulkhead behind the receiver, the net result was that it appeared the receiver was on fire. It looked really spectacular, and certainly gave one quite a fright to start with!

I think a lot of seamen are overgrown children. Nothing delights them more than a simple trick or an interesting toy. The Japanese, of course, are masters at mechanical toys, so it is a virtual certainty that when Japan and seamen get together, something interesting will happen.

The ship was at anchor off Kobe, and discharging was by barges alongside the ship. There were some boats going ashore, but they were infrequent and many were happy to stay aboard after a hard watch. The Japanese are excellent business men, so knowing that a lot of seamen would not come ashore, they went out to them. We had several boats alongside selling all manner of things. One of them sold nothing but toys - big boys' toys. Radio controlled planes, boats, cars - in fact almost anything a 15-year old would give his heart for.

That night in the bar was somewhat out of the ordinary. Large powerful racing cars zoomed up and down the passageway. Robots (yes even then!) stalked across the bar carpet, and then, when everyone had settled down to the main business of drinking, there came the powerful low throb of some large motor echoing down the alleyway. It got quickly louder, until the snout of a large cannon, carried on a huge model Sherman tank poked around the door. There was a loud bang, followed by a large puff of smoke from the barrel and a thud from the bar denoted a direct hit.

The Chief Officer poked his head around the door, grinning like a Cheshire cat. He then proceeded to run his tank over the model cars, and knocked down the robot, first with a cannon shot, then (adding to the insult) ran it over.

It was then of course a free for all, and a great evening was had by everyone. The bar was littered with overturned cars, and if it wasn't for the fact that the model planes were too large for the room, I am sure the air force would have been called in for support too.

For a long time after that, we used to be occasionally surprised by the tank (whose sound could be turned off so it could be quite silent) creeping up and letting off a shot when no one suspected. It was quite an effective way of grabbing someone's attention!

I have no idea how the chief officer got it home, but I bet his children were the envy of the neighbourhood - that is if he did not monopolise it for himself!

The faces of the customs officers when he declared it would have been interesting to see too.

Even at sea, very much the same things occur as on land. One of the more mundane things is of course that one's hair grows. On land, this is no problem, one waits for the weekend and visits the barber's (or if you are bit more up-market, the hair salon). This is all very well ashore, but these are difficult to find at sea - unless one is lucky enough to be on a passenger liner. Cutting your own hair is possible, but the results are sometimes interesting to say the least! So one is virtually obliged so seek out another solution.

On board a ship, there is normally at least one who fancies himself as an amateur hairdresser. These somewhat elusive people sometimes even bring their own instruments of torture - hair clippers that are seemingly designed to pull while cutting, especially sharp scissors and generally a comb chosen to have sharp teeth, and made of metal. They wait until one is in dire need of a haircut, then pounce with glee. The need for their services is generally signalled by general flagellation around the ears when standing on the bridge wing, peering out against the wind. A few terse comments may perhaps be made by the Captain, and this must taken as a general hint, before something more unpleasant happens.

The name of the person who is the self-appointed barber is given, and the word goes around that the operation will take place and when. Sometimes it takes place in an empty cabin, so the evidence can be swiftly cleared away after the dire deed has been done. At other times, if the weather allows, it may even take place on deck out in the open. At the appointed time and place, one meets one's torturer and is invited to sit. The instruments of torture are produced, and the operation commences. Strangely enough, one quickly collects an interested audience, beers quickly appear as if from nowhere, are opened, and all settle down to hurl ribald comments at your expense.

The best that can happen is the drawing of blood by some incautious scissor snip, or the ship's sudden movement at an inopportune moment. The victim's yelp of pain is generally greeted by cheers and laughter. Even the Captain may take an interest, and join in the fun.

All too soon it is all over. Your crowning glory lies at your feet, or is blowing out over the ocean. The fee must be paid in the general ship's currency - beers or cigarets, and the



instruments are packed away until the next victim.

Later, when one meets ones colleagues, there are unkind comments generally asking if one has been run over by a lawn mower.

I personally used to try and get my hair cut at the beginning of a long ocean passage. We had a saying, "The difference between a good and a bad haircut is about six weeks"! At the end of a 4 week ocean passage, one generally looks acceptable when one goes ashore, irrespective of how the haircut progressed!