



Vagaries of a First Command

By Geoffrey Walker

Now in my more senior years, I frequently ponder over some lifetime events, characterized by nostalgia, that warrant remembering. What follows is one of those such occasions, indelibly logged in my memory bank. Now wheedled out, a wistful affection from, a nevertheless gushing but now sometimes fogged memory, makes it seem it all occurred only yesterday, despite the passage of time.

My ship was secured at the Typhoon Buoys in Victoria Harbor, Hong Kong. We had only just commenced loading a combination of general cargoes for Bangkok, Singapore, and Rangoon. After having been on deck most of the day I was sitting in my cabin late in the afternoon enjoying a cold beer. Suddenly there was a knock on the door – “hello Mr. Mate” a voice said from behind the drawn door curtain. It was the Master. I quietly greeted him with the respect his position required and gestured for him to take a seat, at the same time offering him a tin of iced San Miguel beer, from my fridge – which he readily accepted.

I had been Chief Officer on the “**Hoi Wing**” for eighteen months. The ship was an ex-British built tramp, previously owned by a Newcastle outfit, twenty years old, but as stout as a drum, she had no vices and was a typical old “Hong Kong Dustbin”. Dustbin referring to the all - black funnel, sported by most Hong Kong registered tramp vessels of the era. I had joined because of the trade in which the ship was engaged - mostly tramping throughout the Far East - Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Borneo, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan with occasional calls to mainland China. A rewarding employment and salary package also sweetened the pie. I had lived in Hong Kong most of my life, considered it to be my home and really knew no other abode so I guess it was natural that I followed a career path in my own back yard so to speak. The shipboard conditions were good and the owners’ professionals, who knew what they were doing in comparison to many other Far Eastern shipping concerns around at the time

The “Old Man” came straight to the point – The Owners think you have done a reasonably good job so far and they are enquiring how you would feel about being promoted to Master. I was taken aback – I had expected this in about a year or so but not quite so soon. I instantly gathered my thoughts and knew what my response must be – one seldom gets asked or offered this type of opportunity twice at such a young age as I was still only in my early 30s. I took a deep breath and long swig of my beer and responded, “fine when do I start”. The “Old Man” grinned and shook my hand. He explained that the

Marine Superintendent would like me to go to the office the following morning, where I would receive all the details. The Agents launch would be alongside about 9 am, so I could take that ashore and whilst I was away the captain would keep an eye on the cargo operations.

The 1960s and 1970s was a time when old tonnage was cheap and readily available on the market. Many rich Asian businessmen were very astute and wished to become ship - owners' so they bought these ships in abundance and became ship operators overnight. Some were good but most of them not so good, most of their ships being placed under a FOC but operated from Hong Kong or Singapore by a specialist ship manager. Anyway, in my case I was fortunate as our management team was sound with mostly expatriates in senior positions who were well experienced and acquainted with shipping operations and management. All twelve of our ships were well maintained and manned by properly qualified and experienced officers and crew, and operated to what was considered an above average standard for the time. The captain finished his beer and went about his business, leaving me alone in my cabin to reflect. Frankly, I was stoked at the prospect of my own command and tried hard not to show my happiness too outwardly. I quickly opened another San Miguel and decided not to say anything until it had all been officially confirmed by the Marine Superintendent the following day, and I was privy to all the details.

I found it hard to sleep that night with all sorts of strange ideas going through my head – what if, I ran the ship aground, or was involved in a collision, or the like! Maybe they would change their mind! I soon dismissed all these follies as I had confidence in myself and drifted off to sleep. The following morning, I briefed the 3rd and 2nd Mates on the day's cargo operations and what I expected of them. I explained I needed to go ashore to the office urgently but did not expand on the reason why. I hurriedly donned a suit and tie, clambered aboard the Agent's launch, and headed off towards Hong Kong Island and Queen's Pier.

I was somewhat apprehensive, arriving at the Company's 10th floor offices at 9.45am. I was expected and greeted by the Marine Superintendent – an Irishman with a strong accent who was an ex Irish Shipping Company Master. He wore a white, long sleeve shirt and a blue tie with a club or society crest on it – I knew him already, so the atmosphere was quite relaxed and cordial considering the matter at hand. He commenced the conversation by telling me that I had done a good job on the “**Hoi Wing**” and received good reports and recommendations for promotion from the Master.

He informed me the Company had just acquired an ex Australian multi-purpose cargo vessel of about 7,000 Goss Tons and were about to take delivery in Hong Kong with the intention to introduce her in support of the “**Hoi Wing**” in regional trading. The ship was being delivered with an Australian crew, (who would sign off and be repatriated immediately upon arrival in Hong Kong). Once we had taken delivery the ship would be manned with Hong Kong Chinese crew. The ship was expected to arrive in Hong Kong in about 3 weeks. She was to be renamed “**Hoi Hing**” (loosely translated means Sea Prosperity) and placed under the Panama Flag. Therefore, I would need to apply for a Panama License (a formality) which would be issued on the strength of my own National Certificate. I would have European senior officers; the Junior Officers would be either Hong Kong Chinese or from the Philippines. This satisfied me totally as I had no concern about the vessel being placed under Panama flag because I knew and trusted the owners and their high standards of ship management.

During the lead up to the ship's arrival I was to prepare a good handover for the new Chief Mate on the “**Hoi Wing**” and stay with him a few days once he had arrived until he was fully familiar with everything.

The 2nd Mate on the “**Hoi Wing**” had not been promoted on this occasion even though he held a brand spanking new Mate’s Certificate. He was highly regarded by the Company but was considered a little too young for the role of Chief Mate at only just 24 years of age – his time would come in about a year or so. My replacement as Chief Officer was about 28 years of age, a Portuguese Chinese from Macau and going by his resume, reasonably well experienced, and well suited for the task. It was expected he would join in 2-3 days

Prior to her first voyage the “**Hoi Hing**” would go into Dry Dock for pre-purchase survey and maintenance, the ship being no stranger to the shipyard as she has been re-engined there some years earlier when her main engine had been converted from steam turbine to motor but retaining steam auxiliaries. In an effort, to extend her competitive working life, she had also been retro fitted with on deck container fittings and two 36ton SWL deck cranes, which were electric powered. This all sounded great to me and as soon as the conversation ended with the Marine Superintendent, I was taken around the office to meet everyone and introduced as the new Captain of “**Hoi Hing**” – I felt elated and much elevated indeed. Obviously, never having been called “Captain” before, it would take some getting used to it. Upon my arrival back at the “**Hoi Wing**” the news of my promotion had spread like wildfire – I was congratulated by everyone and must admit to feeling a little embarrassed by it all. The ensuing days were busy for me preparing the handover for my relief and at the same time watching cargo proceedings.

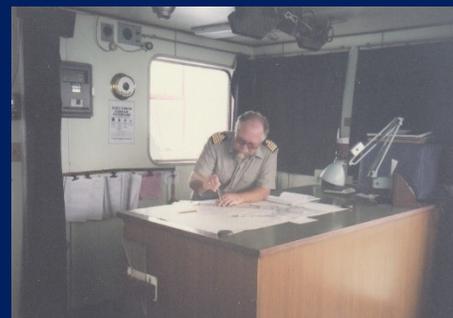
A few days later my relief, Tony Robero, arrived on board and the handover began in earnest. Tony was a nice chap with a good sense of humor, he lived in Macau although he had been born in Hong Kong and had taken all his qualifying examinations in Hong Kong. He soon settled in and took control of the daily management of the ship, at which time I bowed out and went ashore to my home to visit my parents and convey my good news.



At my office desk



Noon on the Bridge



Charting Noon position

The 1970-80s saw the pinnacle of change in Hong Kong and its establishment as the financial center of Asia. It seemed no matter what venture Hong Kong embarked upon the outcome turned into pure gold for the then, colony. During this period there were many new developments such as Ocean Terminal, Extension of Kai Tak Airport and Cross Harbor Tunnels, significant increases in local manufacturing and exports, massive low-cost housing projects together with new skyscraper buildings erected at a rapid pace, not to mention a boom in tourism as Hong Kong had suddenly become more accessible by air and was adorned with an abundance of world class hotels, as well of course as being renowned for shopping. The Hong Kong skyline was in a state of continuous motion – buildings that had been around for ages were suddenly demolished and immediately replaced by super high-rise structures. The shanty huts and

squatter areas were cleared, and their residents rehoused. This prosperity created wealth the likes of which Hong Kong had hitherto never experienced, society was becoming more affluent, which was a marked contrast to the previous decades.

Meanwhile, time had passed quickly for me and the 1970s had well arrived. Since completion of my apprenticeship some 10 years earlier, I had continued to reside in Hong Kong and roam the oceans on a variety of ships whilst consolidating my sea service in order to finally qualify to present myself for examination for my master's certificate. Most of the time was engaged sailing between East and South Africa to the Orient. I steadily progressed through the various ranks of 3rd Mate, 2nd Mate and Chief Officer, concentrating on sailing exclusively within the Asian region, which was my passion.

Vacancies for qualified deck officers during these times, throughout Asia were plentiful and to a degree one could pick and choose in which trades and on what ships one wished to sail, so one tended to become very selective as for whom one was working. It was an important issue because with the expansion in shipping during this era, Asia had amassed its share of clapped out or decrepit tonnage. Also, emerged a number, of very "shonky" operators who usually placed their vessels under the Panama, Liberia, Somali or similar, non-descript Flags of Convenience (FOC) as it was much cheaper to do so. It would be true to say that many of the new ship owners were only interested in the cheapest of the cheap, keeping operating costs for their ships to the absolute bare minimum with the view to turning a quick buck, thus avoiding as much as possible, the significant costs associated with operating ships to decent international standards. However, having said that, it did not apply to all Asian Owners, some of which were excellent in every way. The Hong Kong British Flag was most respected, as it assumed most of the same standards as for the United Kingdom. Singapore and Malaysia also followed similar regulatory standards.

However, many of the shady owners tried to entice good quality officers and crews with the promise of highly inflated salaries – unfortunately, there were the gullible, resulting in many instances of crews being owed wages or not getting paid at all. For owners who fell into this category it was not uncommon seeing their ships under admiralty arrest rotting in some Asian backwater whilst the crews desperately attempted to recover what they were rightfully due and get repatriated, or in extreme cases, even get victuals on which to survive. It was not unheard of that some of the less trustworthy FOC operators emptied bank accounts, and closed down their office, literally overnight, leaving their ships and crews stranded, the owners having absconded with the funds, never to be heard of again. Such was the sad lot of some seafarers about this period.

A good percentage of the newly established owners operating under Flags of Convenience were front companies for Communist countries such as Mainland China, Indonesia (Communist regime at that time), North Korea as well as Formosa (Taiwan) because of its conflict and trading restrictions with mainland China. This enabled these operators to earn foreign exchange as most shipping transactions were conducted in USD. Needless, to say, the shady and less scrupulous outfits did not last long and soon collapsed – besides the word soon got about, and decent qualified officers and crews refused to sail on their ships.

After a week or so at home my new command arrived in Hong Kong and went straight into the dry dock. I joined soon after and was welcomed by the outgoing Australian Master who signed off the same day along with all his fellow Australians. I suddenly realized the responsibility of command – I was on my own and it was up to me to manage, and operate, the vessel in all respects. At least I would have a little

time to settle in as the ship was scheduled to be in dry dock about one week during which time the remainder of my officers and crew would join. I was accommodated ashore close to the shipyard whilst awaiting my crew to arrive, although I did manage most evenings at home. A day or so later the vessel was refloated and shifted from the dry dock to a lay by berth at the shipyard. It was then that I, along with all officers and crew signed on ship's articles.

My Chief Officer, Les Barnes was English, from Liverpool minus the accent. An energetic little man, and a newcomer to our company. Les had been sailing as Chief Mate for just over two years. He was a couple of years my senior but that was of no consequence, and he held a Masters' Certificate. The 2nd Mate was from Newcastle and an ex-Chapmans man, whilst the 3rd mate was a young Filipino who went by the flowery name of Jesus Jose Catalan Empleto.

On the engineering side, the Chief Engineer was a New Zealander, as was the 2nd Engineer, both heralding from Taranaki, whilst the 3rd and 4th Engineers were Geordies from the Northeast part of the UK. The remaining Junior Engineers, electrician and fitters, being Hong Kong Chinese. Our Radio Officer was a very brogue Irishman from Belfast. This was his first trip to the Far East, and it was not difficult to ascertain his sense of excitement and awe at being in a new and unfamiliar environment. He was very industrious and even before unpacking his bags, he set about testing his Radio equipment and monitoring the installation of a newer model Radar unit which was in the process of being fitted by the shipyard technicians. We would end up with two sets, as the older one was still in good working order and usable so was not being removed. Our Chinese crews were all experienced and a thoroughly reliable crowd, some of whom had sailed with me previously on other vessels. Hence, this was my ship's complement, and I was determined to make it all work and not let down the Owner's (or indeed me) at having been given this opportunity.

The "**Hoi Hing**" lay at the shipyard for another few days during which time everyone was kept busy settling in and taking over the ship. She was given a fresh paint job and new names painted on bow and stern with port of registry "Panama" also featuring prominently on the stern, below the name. She looked very trim indeed, and I was quietly satisfied by the entire chain of events since my unexpected promotion only a few weeks earlier.

It was only now that I had time to truly discover the ship. She was a 12-year-old lady, but had reasonably flowing lines, streamlined accommodation and upper works, a standard tween decker, with the usual five holds and five hatches along with a set of twin deep tanks. The two late addition deck cranes did not look out of place. The funnel was slightly raked and painted the usual black as was the hull, whilst Masts, Sampson Posts, Derricks, and deck Cranes, were all buff in color. The accommodation was spacious and comfortable and had obviously been well cared for by previous Australian crews.

My quarters were large and occupied an entire deck below the Bridge deck. I had a Day Room, adjoining Office (complete with large desk and conference table with six chairs), Bedroom and en-suite Toilet, Bath and Shower facilities. The bulkheads were a darkish veneer and the curtains and seat coverings, supplied by the new owners, were nicely color coordinated to afford an appearance of comfort. The decking consisted of beige vinyl tiles which had been buffed to a high gloss finish, which added to the air of grace and composure. There were four forward facing windows in my Dayroom and Office, two side windows in my Bedroom which overlooked the sea and a frosted window in my washroom. A short distance down the alleyway to starboard I had a private Pantry, large refrigerator and cooking hot plates (in case required). On the port side of my deck was situated a small single berth Pilot's Cabin which had

seldom if ever been used by the look of it, other than as storage space. All things considered, not a bad layout.

My Deck Officers, Radio Officer and senior Engineer Officers were housed on the deck below. All having similar style accommodations, albeit not quite as large and spacious as mine, but nevertheless quite comfortable. The junior Engineers and catering staff were located on the deck below that, whilst the deck and engine ratings were all situated aft in the Poop accommodation, which was also quite acceptable. The ship's complement was 32 all up which included 2 Chinese fitters for maintenance of the cargo winches.

Our Chief Steward Purser along with the catering crew set about scrubbing out all the galleys, fridge rooms and dining areas, public rooms, and alleyways. An abundance of new stores and provisions arrived even though many of the provisions and stores were carried over from previous owners provided they were within the use by date. Similarly, our Bosun and his sailors attended to the array of deck stores that the company delivered on board, a standard issue, for any new ships they purchased. Within a week we were ready to go, when required.

Eventually, after a couple of days I was given order to shift from the dock yard to one of the Typhoon Buoys not too far distant from Stone Cutters Island. The harbor Pilot arrived on board at 7am and we cast off, moving slowly through the harbor traffic to the designated Compass Swinging area for periodic adjustment and check of our Magnetic Compass, followed by the issuance of an updated Deviation Card provided by the Compass Adjuster himself. Then on to our buoy where we moored using our anchor chain and slip wires. One of our anchors had been disconnected from the chain and hung off so that we could shackle the anchor chain direct to the buoy. It was a simple exercise to reconnect the anchor later, after departure.

Soon after our arrival at the mooring buoy I received a visit from the Marine Superintendent. He was accompanied by the Engineer Superintendent who came to inspect the vessel and have discussions with my Chief Engineer. I received the usual "Pep Talk" from my Irish Boss, being a newly promoted Captain, along with a variety of instructions including details of our imminent cargo fixture. I recall very clearly his parting words to me "remember...obtaining command is easy ...maintaining it is harder". Very sound advice for a fledgling Captain.

I learned that we were to take a cargo of semi-refined bagged sugar from Hong Kong to Singapore. The bagged sugar, in heavy duty paper bags, would be loaded ex lighter at the buoys rather than at the usual Taikoo Sugar Refinery wharf situated quite close to the dock yard from which we had just shifted. It seemed the Sugar Wharf was booked already by an inbound ship arriving with a full cargo of raw sugar from Mauritius. Following discharging in Singapore it was likely that we would proceed to one of two destinations which was yet to be finalized, namely, some Indonesian river Port to load a cargo of dressed logs for Japan or Bangkok to load a cargo of bagged rice for China. I hoped for the latter rather than proceed to some upriver jungle logging camp to load logs – personally I dreaded the thought of anchoring in some desolate place like Paia Inlet or Umuda Island located in the steaming river estuaries, infested with mosquitoes, at the head of the Gulf of Papua. Loading logs into a tween decker in locations like that, could take weeks.

Our chartering department would pass on information to me once all had been decided. However, I had enough information to be going on with, to ensure our 2nd Mate ordered all the required Admiralty

Charts, and Sailing Directions, for the entire Southeast Asia region. The ship had only been delivered with limited chart folios for Asian waters, only sufficient to cover her delivery voyage to Hong Kong, as she had been engaged for many years operating around the Australian coast. In any event most of the charts remaining on board were either outdated or in desperate need of replacement. It was recognized that correcting and updating the existing charts on board would be a mammoth task for the 2nd Mate, not to mention most of the charts looked as if they had been used as tablecloths, being full of coffee and tea stains, or torn. Hence it was agreed with Owners we purchase new charts, and we build our own chart folios, afresh.

As it would be a day or two before we commenced loading, we were to bunker Fuel Oil and Lubricating Oils in drums. Soon after therefore, the Bunker Barge came alongside to replenish our tanks with 550 tons of bunkers as by now our reserves were quite low as the ship had been delivered to us with minimal quantities remaining on board.

We used the waiting time to check all the cargo winches and cargo gear. The ship, being steam auxiliary, was fitted with steam winches which could be operated fast when handled by expert stevedore winch operators. The recently installed deck cranes were electric. Some replacements were made to cargo runners and derrick head and heel blocks as well as a few guy ropes. Eventually, I was able inform the Owners we were fully operational. Cargo lighters and barges used in Hong Kong are frequently owned by the families that operate them – not only do they handle all the cargo, barge winches and derricks themselves but also live on board with their family members, including small children, dogs and cats etc. Occasionally large stevedoring concerns would own a fleet of barges, but this was not the norm. Hence the cargo barges were immaculately maintained and expertly operated.

The time arrived when the barges were towed out to us in mid-stream and moored alongside, one for each hatch. Without delay our union purchase gear, and cranes, started the long task of transferring the slings of bagged sugar from barge to ship's cargo hold where stevedores set about stowing it in rows and tiers. Barges were replaced immediately once they were emptied. Fully laden barges promptly replaced them. This went on for seven days around the clock until the last sling of sugar was loaded. Hatches were full and were then battened down and the ship made ready for sea.

The agent came on board with the Cargo Manifest and Port Clearance, soon after the harbor Pilot who would guide us towards Green Island and the Sulphur Channel then towards Llama Channel as we were departing towards the Southwest. I gave my fist order "Stand by Engines" the telegraphs rang out and was instantly answered by the Engine Room indicating all was ready. Upon the advice of the Pilot, I ordered that we disconnect the anchor chain from the buoy. Soon after (and having taken a deep breath) let go your slip wires....we were free and underway. As we cleared the buoy I gave the order "slow ahead, port twenty" and slowly felt the vibration under foot as the engines worked up and the ship gained momentum. It was comforting to hear the slow "Thump, Thump, Thump" of our Doxford main engine as we glided slowly through the water towards the Pilot disembarkation point just clear of the Sulphur Channel. As soon as the pilot was clear I ordered a progressive increase in speed until some 15 or so minutes later when reaching more unrestricted waters, and clear of conflicting traffic, I instructed the 3rd Mate to ring down to the Engine Room "FAOP – Full away on Passage" indicating to the duty Engineers they could now assume full sea speed.

I stood on the starboard bridge wing for a while with the sea breeze blowing through my hair, passing the occasional course adjustments until we were well clear of all other shipping and fishing boats. With

the “Hoi Hing”, well established on her course by this time, the auto pilot was then engaged. I remained on the bridge for a good half hour checking all was well and the courses were accurate and most importantly our young 3rd Mate was comfortable and ready to take over. Once I was satisfied we were on track and well clear of any potential hazards I left the Bridge and handed over to the 3rd Mate (trying as I may to make it sound as if I had done it a thousand times before...) making certain he fully understood he was to call me without hesitation if I was needed, he was ever in doubt, or the traffic volume increased.

I went below to my cabin, trying to hide the slight tremor in my hands caused by the excitement of the moment. After about an hour, and not before numerous interim glances through my forward - looking cabin windows, I returned to the Bridge to check all was well and we were on track. The 3rd Mate was doing the right thing by taking frequent Radar Fixes to check our position as the outlying Islands of Hong Kong slid into the haze over the distant horizon. We were dead on course – I expected nothing less. During this lapse in time, Les our Chief Mate, had reconnected the anchor to the anchor chain and housed it properly in the Hawse Pipe.

As Noon approached our 2nd Mate appeared on the bridge, he handed me the “Noon Chit” which indicated, Noon Position, Sea Speed, Course, Distances covered and remaining to destination, Propeller Slip, Daily fuel Consumption up till Noon since departing Hong Kong and tentative ETA Singapore Eastern Pilot Boarding Ground. I in turn extracted all the data, compiled a telegram with all the information and passed it to our Radio Officer for relay to our Owners. We were now truly on our way and the ship’s destiny firmly in my hands. So, my course had been set and it was now a case of ensuring I lived up to the responsibility and job to which I had been entrusted over the ensuing years.

So, began 12 years in command, visiting ports throughout Asia, Pacific, Middle East, and Africa. They were not without their challenges, but fortunately trouble free.

Below, a more relaxed moment, contemplating the day ahead. Taken in the chartroom, which was my first stop every morning at 5 am when at sea . I was always greeted with a bottomless pot, of freshly brewed coffee, to kickstart the day ahead.



For some unknown reason, within our company, I earned the nick name of the “Party Captain”, mainly because whenever there was any function or entertainment of port dignitaries required, it often so happened, I was around, and it was held on my ship. This was not too much by design but rather co-incidence, it was not a burden since my catering staff had developed into excellent organizers, besides we all enjoyed a good party, and I always ensured a few cases of beer and extra refreshments found its way to the crew mess.

Spicy hot Curry lunches, Indonesian Rendang, Satays and Nasi Goring, as well as onboard cocktail parties were a favorite, attracting many guests. And, before anyone asks, yes - safety briefings were held for the visitors and extra LSA placed on board for the events.



Party Time – Author second from right.

End

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