

THE LAST 'SAMBOAT' UNDER THE RED ENSIGN

I had not long completed my apprenticeship with Bank Line and I had not yet turned 20 years of age, so I did a trip as uncertified 3rd Mate with a Hong Kong shipping concern, but trading around Asia was not conducive to saving money or devoting time for study, especially being a young man. Hence, I required to top-up my finances so that I could consider going to college somewhere in the UK. Being a permanent Hong Kong resident attending college in the UK for a few months would prove quite expensive for me.

My time of arrival in the UK was unfortunate because the Seaman's Strike was in progress so jobs were not that plentiful. Nevertheless I went to the London Shipping Pool and was offered a short three month voyage as 3rd Mate. Little did I know what I was letting myself in for!

The ship was supposed to do a single voyage to Argentina for a cargo of bulk grain then back to the UK. She was owned by a company called Headlams whose headquarters were in Whitby. A short three month trip suited me well and fitted with my future plans, however things were not to be.

I was provided with a ferry ticket to Rotterdam where I was supposed to locate and join a ship called the Sandsend. Having arrived in Holland, with no Agent to meet me, I jumped into a taxi and headed off in search of the ship. The Pool officials in London had informed me that that they had not much information about the ship, so I had

no notion of what to look for, but after an hour touring the docks and having almost exhausted my Dutch Guilders, I was no closer, and on the verge of telling the taxi driver to take me back to the Ferry Terminal. Suddenly, the stern of a rust bucket appeared from behind a dockside warehouse. I could just make out a faded "END" and below "BY" painted on her stern. I had found the elusive ship, Sandsend, Port of Registry, Whitby. She was a "Sam Boat" and the only clean thing about her was her Red Ensign fluttering in the breeze.

As my taxi drew alongside the gangway my heart sank and I immediately knew I had been sold a 'pup'. The ship was of old WWII vintage, dirty and very rundown in appearance compared to the type of ships I had been used to sailing on previously. There was little I could do about it so I paid off the taxi, collected my gear and strode up the gangway. By this time it was about 9pm and try as I may, I could not locate anyone onboard. Eventually, I found an empty Pilot's cabin with an unlocked door so decided to park myself there for the night. With no bedding and cold conditions my first night aboard is best forgotten!

Early next morning, I woke with the sun and set about finding the Master or Chief Mate. I started at the top and knocked on the Master's cabin door. The Master appeared, half asleep, a big man and dressed in his pyjamas. He seemed not to be expecting me but was not the least bothered when I

explained I had joined the previous evening and was unable to find anyone onboard. I later discovered he had been Master of the ship since her building in 1944 as Samindoro.

From the outset the ship was a disaster. The accommodation was of typical WWII standard, bare steel bulkheads and deck heads, all in need of a good soogieing and paint. My cabin was like a box, quite large but empty except for a small bunk, desk and chair. There was also a locker but the hinges needed replacing so the doors could close properly. The only redeeming feature was the cabin had a large porthole. I stood in the middle of the room, my heart somewhere down by my feet and feeling like a 'Shag on a Rock'. I was very depressed to say the least, and hungry to boot.

There was no wash basin, or toilet facilities in the cabin. The Deck Officer's ablutions were a communal affair just down the passageway from my cabin. The toilets were in a row with half height swinging doors rather like a saloon of the old west days. One looked under the door to find a cubicle with no feet in view. There were a few wash basins with cracked mirrors and two Showers, both of which produced little if any water pressure. The pale blue paint scheme added to the triggering and onset of a bad headache.

I signed the ship's articles, which incidentally I was very hesitant to do right up until the last moment. This was mainly due to them being of the 'Two Year' variety, con-



The 7,210grt Sandsend was built in 1944 by Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard in Baltimore as the Samindoro for the British Government. She joined Headlam & Son in 1947. On 5th December 1967 she arrived at Kaohsiung to be broken up by Nan Feng Steel Enterprises.

(Ken Fletcher - Trevor Jones collection)



trary to me having been guaranteed only a three month trip. However, because of the Captain's sincere assurances of a single voyage to the River Plate, and because of the prevailing Seaman's Strike in the UK, I reluctantly agreed to sign.

The Master had been quick to get the sign on completed, probably in case I changed my mind, and assured me what a solid ship the Sandsend was and that he had been Master of her for the past 22 years (from which you can estimate his age) and that the Owners were a very fine traditional shipping company. I was later to learn that not only was he a big man in stature but also a man of great integrity with a big heart, as well as being a very fine seaman.

My first stop was the dining saloon. After much questioning by the Chief Steward as to whom I was, I eventually got something to eat. The eggs floated in oil and the bacon was one of lean and two of fat variety, not the least appetizing. I gave it a miss and stayed with the toast and marmalade. This was another good start and an indication of things to come, I pondered to myself.

The Mate turned up for breakfast, reeking of last night's alcohol and still exhaling strong fumes over everybody. He was from somewhere in Scotland and in his late fifties. The 2nd Mate was a nice guy from London, seventy two years of age, an ex King Line man so he said.

Our Chief Engineer wore glasses with lenses like the bottom of beer bottles and was well into his seventies. The second and third engineers were Geordies and in mid forties, seemingly quite decent types. I was instantly on my guard with the 4th Engineer, also a Geordie, but right out of the Royal Navy. He gave the impression of being very self opinionated and what he didn't know wasn't worth knowing anyway. He sported longish sideburns and a quaffed hair style, rather spivvy in my personal opinion. The 'Sparks' was Irish and of late middle age, he spoke with a strong Irish accent making him hard to understand.

The entire deck and engine crew were of West Africa origin, but all residents of Cardiff. Since in the past I had always sailed with Asian crew this was a completely new learning curve for me.

The crew were very argumentative, often over the most minor of issues, as I discovered during the course of the voyage. They always appeared to do everything unwillingly and as if doing a favor. They appeared an unhappy lot and on the verge of conflict, although no such events ever took place. Nevertheless, I was always on my guard, especially during my night watches and never really felt comfortable when they were around.

I was informed by the Captain our first leg of the voyage would be to Safi, in Morocco, to load a cargo of Phosphate for Cape Town. This would be via a bunkering



The Sandsend

(FotoFlite)

stop at Las Palmas in the Canary Islands. I therefore immediately knew it would be very unlikely that the voyage would be of three months duration, despite various assurances I had received. It was becoming clear that I had been "Shanghaied".

We departed Rotterdam and headed off down the English Channel. The weather was rough. My first sea watch was an education. The ship's original wheelhouse was next to the Master's cabin but was not used. Instead it was designated as a laundry for the Master with clothes lines strung everywhere and storage for a large collection of junk that the Master had amassed during his many years of tenure on board. Such items as reels of fencing wire, bundles of tomato plant bamboo stakes and the like. The magnetic compass and radar had been removed as had the steering pedestal and Engine Telegraph.

Instead, a timber 'Chicken Coop' had been constructed on the Monkey Island at some previous time, by the ship's carpenter. I was told by the 2nd Mate the Master had supervised the construction. The 'shed' was quite rough and every time the ship rolled, so the structure moved about 6 inches port and starboard. The windows were ill fitting and frequently, they would drop out and make a loud clatter. The deckhead leaked like a sieve during rain showers. The 2nd Mate went on to say that the windows were taken from derelict WWII Italian lorries, reportedly the Master having procured them years earlier when transiting or anchored in the Suez Canal or the like.

The ship had been requisitioned by the MOT, during the 1956 Suez Canal crisis. She reportedly did play some sort of an active role in the emergency.

The Radar had been connected professionally as had the manual steering arrangement, ship's telegraph and magnetic compass. There was no gyro or automatic steering of any description. Steering was therefore continuously by hand. There were no intercom or phone connections with the Master's cabin, only to the engine room. In the event it was necessary to call the Master one used a small cowl ventilator, situated outside of the

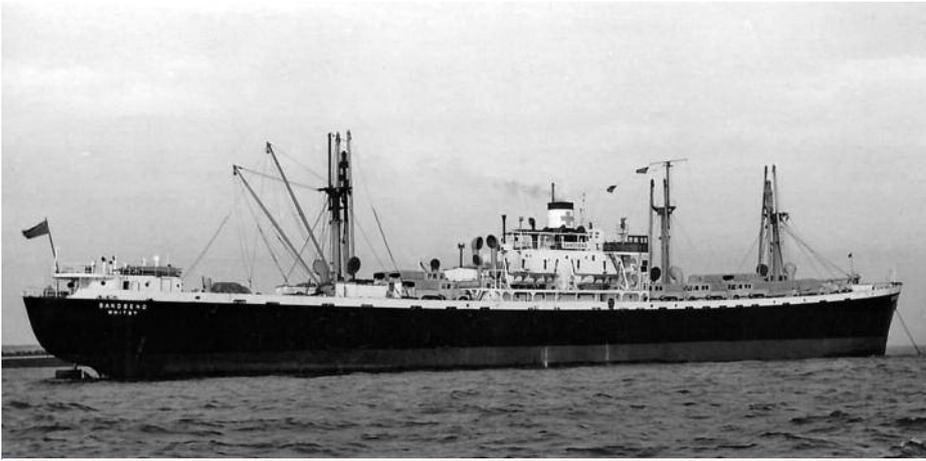
'Chicken Coop' wheelhouse, and yelled in a loud voice.

The 'Chicken Coop' was a nightmare, as it was so cramped it only allowed for a small folding chart table, but also because it was so hot. Being a steamship the funnel was immediately behind the structure causing much heat to be generated. Also, if our illustrious engineers failed to inform the bridge when about to blow tubes, thus allowing time for the duty Mate to take the ship out of wind, one would instantly be choked by the smoke and soot which penetrated everywhere. There was no room to swing a cat, when a duty mate and helmsman were on watch together. It was reported in earlier days, there had been cabs on each wing of the Monkey Island deck but these had been partially removed by the time I joined the vessel.

Loading a full cargo of Phosphate at Safi was uneventful but dusty, and was completed in a few days. We then headed off southwards towards Las Palmas for bunkers. By the time we reached the latitudes of Las Palmas the weather had become very tranquil and pleasant. Although my disappointment in the vessel remained, a routine was established, the best average speed the ship achieved for a day's run was 9.8 knots during the passage to the Canary Islands.

The night after following our departure from Las Palmas, I was woken by the quartermaster about 6.30am asking that I quickly go to the bridge. The dawn was just breaking. I arrived out of breath to find a large Russian ship crossing our bows from port to starboard. Our unsupervised helmsman had started to turn our ship to port, entirely the wrong thing to do. I still had enough sea room to counter this and alter course to starboard to go full circle and pass the stern of the renegade crossing vessel. It was a close encounter because had the Russian ship obeyed the Anti-Collision Regulations by correctly deciding to make a late alteration of course to starboard in order to give way to us. A very serious situation could have arisen.

I asked the helmsman as to the whereabouts of the Chief Mate and was informed he had left the bridge about 15 minutes after



A stern view of the Sandsend showing her port of registration as Whitby.

having taken over the watch from the 2nd Mate and never returned. I went looking for him, fearing he may have met with some sort of accident. Upon entering his cabin through an alcoholic haze I found him somewhat intoxicated, so I let him be and returned to the bridge to stand the remaining hours of his watch.

I discussed the problem privately with the 2nd Mate and we reached the decision that we should report the matter to the Master since it involved ship's safety. As it turned out we did not need to because about 9am the Master went to visit the Mate about something and found him in his cabin in exactly the same state as when I had last seen him. The Mate more or less drifted in and out of an intoxicated condition until we arrived in Cape Town.

The Master requested I accompany him to search the Mate's cabin for hidden booze, but it was fruitless as there was no additional alcohol to be found. A couple of months later we were informed by one of the quarter masters, that whilst in Las Palmas the Mate had purchased a significant amount of duty free 'Dry Sack Sherry', which he had given the crew for safe keeping and which could be supplied to him as he requested. He did attempt to shower, shave and sort himself out for our arrival at Cape Town, but unfortunately for him he tripped over a deck Ring Bolt in the vicinity of number 2 hatch, causing him to fall and badly injure his face. He was significantly concussed and out of action again for more than a week.

Upon completing discharge of the Phosphate in South Africa, we thoroughly washed down our cargo holds before departure in preparation for our next destination, which we discovered was to be the River Plate, to load a cargo of bulk grain in Argentine ports for Europe. For my part I hoped 'Europe' would mean the UK. However, first we were required to cross the South Atlantic during the late southern winter, light ship, which was a daunting prospect. Our ocean route would take us well South, passing close to the remote and mountainous Island of Tristan Di Cunha, located in the

mid South Atlantic Ocean.

The old Sandsend labored continuously throughout the entire endurance of the passage. We encountered rough weather most of the way coupled with force constant force 5-6 westerly winds. The best the old lady could average was about 7-8 knots for the most part. Despite maximum seawater ballast the ship remained like cork on the sea and therefore was susceptible to making quite significant leeway, requiring constant remedial course adjustments.

Our Ocean route took us well South, passing the remote and volcanic Island of Tristan Di Cunha, by some 60 miles distant. Also, the continuous overcast weather made taking sights very challenging. Our passage across the South Atlantic Ocean of some 4,000 nautical miles spanned some 23 days. Our landfall off Isla de la Lobos in the estuary of the Rio de la Plata was one made in dense fog, and an occasion not to be forgotten. The restricted visibility dictated our speed and progress was slow, although our Master knew these waters very well. We were almost deafened by the continuous fog signals from our steam whistle located on the funnel so close to our 'Chicken Coop'. The radar was of a very primitive variety, way before ARPA, so I was occupied with the radar plotting.

Nevertheless, we were almost run down by an errant Panamanian tanker steaming at full speed. It was only because of the Master stopping our engines in good time, that we narrowly avoided disaster. The rogue tanker crossed our bows from port to starboard at high speed, and at close quarters. This implanted firmly in my brain, for the remainder of my seagoing years, the absolute importance of observing the anti-collision regulations, especially those applicable to navigating in poor visibility.

Following a three week passage across the South Atlantic and prior to our arrival time in the River Plate, our Chief Mate once again lapsed into occasional alcoholic indiscretions. This was despite receiving a serious dressing down from our Captain. Under the guidance of the Master the 2nd Mate and I

loaded the ship to grain capacity, firstly at Buenos Aires then upstream at Rosario. Our passage to and from Rosario had been a real eye opener for me, especially as to the unreliability of some of the River Pilots. I was warned of this tendency by the Master, from whom I learned much during these times.

Once loaded, the time arrived to depart from Argentina. My heart sank again when I learned our orders were to proceed in the direction of the Straits of Gibraltar for orders. Our destination could yet be the UK for discharge, so I could sign off, but if the UK was intended, why not stipulate Lands End for orders?

We had been experiencing problems with our magnetic compass when crossing the South Atlantic, not helped by the fact that the taking of 'Azimuths' was very restricted due to the heavily overcast conditions we experienced most of the way, so before departing the coast, the Master swung the ship and drew up a completely new Deviation Card. He had obviously conducted this exercise many times beforehand, because he completed the task so quickly and expertly.

Contrary to our passage across the South Atlantic from South Africa, we experienced very good sailing conditions from the River Plate as we slowly progressed northward towards the Canary Islands and Las Palmas, where we would once again replenish bunkers. Our Chief Mate had been warned off any repetition of his previous recklessness, otherwise he faced the risk of being replaced.

We were only about 4 or 5 days steaming from the Gibraltar Straits, when the Master received a cable instructing that the ship proceed to Civitavecchia then Livorno, in Italy, for a two port discharge. I was overcome with disappointment since my worst fears had materialized. Despite my personal grievances our stay in Italy was like a holiday with beautiful sunny days and surrounded by charming people, good food and wine. Unfortunately I met with an accident whilst working on deck which necessitated me being hospitalised for a while to undergo surgery on my knee. During my absence the good ship Sandsend sailed without me, working various cargoes in the direction of the Far East.

In retrospect, I can say although the Sandsend had long since seen better days and at the time of my departure from her, she only had a very short time remaining before meeting her demise at Taiwanese ship breakers, I found her Master to be a superb seaman and a man of very high character and integrity. I also had no complaint about the owners whom I concluded were very decent employers.

Looking back through the mists of nostalgia, I now consider the voyage to be one worth remembering, and perhaps in retrospect, like most things when one is young, was not as bad as it appeared at the time.