



## A LIFE AT SEA or MUM'S GREY HAIR!!!

The first of the autobiographies of MHA members is from Rod Dickson, President and recently retired sailor.

I went away from Melbourne in 1956 when ships looked like ships and not the square, ungainly, unsightly floating blocks of flats that one sees in the ports around the world today. My first ships were crude oil tankers of the STANVAC fleet, the first was the *Stanvac India*, (1954) 13 months, and the second was the *Stanvac Australia*, (1954) two trips of 13 and 14 months duration. These ships traded from the Persian Gulf to mainly Africa, Australia, India and Europe. The last was the *Stanvac Nairobi*, ex *Jame J Maguire*, (1938) 12 months. She was a white oil or refined product tanker and traded mainly to the Far East, Australia, India and New Zealand. From these I went to dry cargo vessels such as *Lodestone*, (1938) and *Cape Horn*. The latter carried phosphate from Christmas Island when I was on her. I ended up in Fremantle and joined a whale oil tanker, the *Norwhale* on a voyage north and then joined the *Point Cloates* a whale chaser, boys own stuff on that one, and a job I am extremely proud of being a part of.

After a bit of fishing for crays and prawns and hunting turtles I went back deepsea on the *Rhodesia Star*, paying off in KG V docks in London. Part of the cargo we carried in No. 2 hatch was premium Aussie wines, some of which, by some mischance, seemed to end up in the crew's quarters almost every night, which caused some horrible heads in the mornings. We also, on the way "home" called at Aden and transferred the gold from the banks there to the Bank of England in London due to the transfer of power. The strange thing about that was that when loading it was guarded by half the British bloody Army and yet at London there was only ONE London Bobbie to supervise the unloading.

After doing a bit of the touristy things in and around London I joined the British Post Office cable laying vessel *H.M.T.S. Monarch* for a voyage to the Far East. On this trip of five months we laid a section of the COMPAC undersea telegraph cable from Guam to Madang in New Guinea. On our return to England she reloaded with more cable and after three months we sailed for Madang again and laid the cable from there to Cairns in north Queensland. Interestingly this particular vessel carried a large number of pink silk parachutes as standard equip-



ment. They were used to lower the repeaters to the seabed slowly as the cable was payed out over the stern. We also repaired broken cables on the way back to England, such as the one from Jeddah to some other port on the other side of the Red Sea. When I paid off in Belfast at the end of the voyage I was boarding with a mate and his family at the top of the Falls Road and some of the parachutes found their way there to be turned into dresses for the youngsters!!

Across the fitting out wharf at Harland and Woolfes' Belfast yard was a brand new ship painted Admiralty Grey. She was the Royal Fleet Auxiliary *Regent*, a 26,000 ton ammunition ship. I was one of the first six AB's to join her and on our first day we were given a job in the focsle sewing canvas. We were sitting on coils of new rope sewing away and gasbagging when all of a sudden we heard Whoopa Whoopa, just like the dive signal used in subs.



Never having heard the noise before we ignored it. A little later, the mate, red faced, burst into the focsle abusing the hell out of us for ignoring a fire signal. It took a little while but we finally made it clear that we weren't aware of Navy type signals that were different from the normal bells of Merchant ships. Later when the vessel was fully operational and loaded with lots and lots of things that go bang in the night there was no way that we could ever ignore that noise, drunk or sober!!!

Being an Aussie on Pommy ships I was always the odd one out and I doubt whether most of the crew even knew my name as I was always called Aussie, the kangaroo kid, or, by a particular 4th mate, that Colonial Bastard. And I didn't do nuffink, your honour!!!

On the *Regent*, probably because nobody knew what to do with me, I was sent from Belfast to *H.M.S. Phoenix*, a shore training establishment at Portland to partake in the Nuclear, Bacteriological and Chemical Defence course run by the Navy. This was great fun, especially the fire fighting drills, shipboard, helicopter and fixed wing aircraft dummies were set alight in great blazes just so that we could attack and extinguish the fires. The C.P.O. in charge was a bloody pyromaniac and set off some of the best fires I have ever seen and run away from, along with the rest of the class. I could go on for ages about the "school" but best leave it to memories.....When I returned to the ship I was made Chief Fireman on the flight deck as we had our own helicopter on board and we had flying duties virtually every day. In port I was the liberty boat coxswain and ran either the 36 footer for the crew or the Captain's gig when he had official engagements ashore.

I spent a couple of years on the *Regent* sailing through the Faroes north past Jan Mayen to the Arctic Ocean, to the Med to de-store Malta and carry the ammunition back to the depot in Loch Long, Scotland. South about Africa, via Sierra Leone, where I acquired some souvenirs from the local "navy", Capetown and one of my favourites, Port Elizabeth, (girls, beer and sports cars spring to mind) and north to Aden, back to Mombassa, across to Gan and down to Mauritius and then up to Singapore. Many exercises off the Malayan coast and I finally paid off in Singapore when offered a better job!!

I was given a plane ticket to Bangkok and a railway ticket back south to Surot. Then came a short bus trip to the coast at Surot Thani. Two days there and a ferry ride out to Ko Samui to join the *Mediterranean Seal*, an American flagged seismic survey vessel. She was working for Philips Petroleum in the Gulf of Thailand. The Yankee skipper was a bloody lunatic, when sober he was continually bible bashing and preaching about the evils of strong drink and loose women, (what else did seamen live for???) and yet on his own leave he was completely drunk for the whole time. After ten months and many madcap stories I finally left and flew back to Australia, supposedly on my way back to Melbourne, but once again the grog got me and I ended up with another job in W.A., this time at Barrow Island on the landing craft running from the Island to Onslow carrying the supplies and anything else needed. In 1974 came an interesting job on one of the barges, the old *Tern*, renamed *Ternable*. This was the very last explosive seismic job in the world. In a matter of 6 months we exploded 32,000 50lb depth charges no more than 50 metres from the stern. Every week we had to beach the old girl and reweld the hull and change propellers as we "blew" a number of blades off them. I have a favourite slide from that era in which a shark is shown 40 feet in the air having stupidly swum over the top of the charge just as it was detonated. We also had fun with the silver gulls, chuck a bit of garbage out to drift astern just as the first bomb went off and the gulls would be seen heading south at a rapid rate of knots!!!

Three years went by in a haze and then I joined my first State Ship the *Wambiri* and from that time on I was on the "Coast" so to speak for the rest of my career. There were seismic jobs, oil rig tenders, oil rigs and tugs for the next ten years and then I joined the *Australian Achiever*, a B.P. crude tanker running to the Persian Gulf for oil to Australia. This was at the time of the Gulf War, (between Iraq and Iran) and inside the Gulf we were only allowed to steam during the hours of darkness. During the day we were supposed to anchor in a safe anchorage away from bombs and missiles. It was pretty hairy being on watch at night as a lot of the tankers were running around up there with all lights extinguished which made them very difficult to see.