

CHAPTER FIVE -- JEEPS AND SMALL SHIPS

The Dunmore Head was a much smaller ship than the Ramore Head. It had been built during the Second World War in the Great Lakes. Because of their size, they were small enough to sail out of the Great Lakes complex and into the open ocean. As with their big sisters, the Liberty ships, many of these ships were put up for sale at the end of the war. They were given the generic name of "Jeeps."

The Head Line used these ships -- they had four, to great advantage. They had been built as "coal-burners." Some companies converted them to the modern system of oil-fired boilers, but not the Head Line -- and for good reason. Their normal run was to load coal in the UK, and to discharge it in Denmark. Once the coal was discharged, the holds were swept out and hosed down -- by the cadets of course. This was done while the ship was in transit to Sweden or Finland to load timber for the UK. Because timber is light, and ideally shaped for carrying as deck cargo, we would carry the timber stacked so high that it was almost level with the bridge, once the holds were filled.

It was not an uncommon sight in the past to see ships with a timber deck cargo coming into harbour with a list to one side or the other. As oil-burning ships burned the fuel oil that was contained in tanks at the lowest part of the ship, it would reduce the ship's stability -- because weight was being taken away from low down in the ship, making it slightly top heavy. This would make the ship unstable, until it found a new stable waterplane area -- hence the list. This condition could be further exacerbated by having sea water break over the deck cargo. Because it was wood, it would absorb a considerable amount of water, thus increasing its weight and making the previous condition worse -- or even dangerous.

By retaining the original configuration as a coal-burner, the above situations were not experienced. The coal bunkers were stowed high up in the 'tween decks, and as such the coal was always being trimmed downwards towards the stokehold, where the coal was fed to the boilers. As you burned fuel, this meant that the ship's stability was always improving. These ships were ideal for the role for which they were being used. That is the end of my physics lecture in this chapter.

I couldn't get away from the name Stark. Stanley Stark, Norman's older brother, was Master of the Dunmore Head. While he had many of the features of his younger brother, he was not the vicious, vindictive person his brother was. The Mate was Cyril Pringle, who had been the Second Mate in the Ramore Head -- a breath of fresh air.

There were only two cadets on that class of ship. Shaw Heddles,

the other cadet, was an easygoing, casual, friendly person. Nothing worried him, and we became good friends.

I was now seeing many new places, both in Britain and northern Europe. We would often load our coal cargo in a small village near Edinburgh, called Methil, in the Kingdom of Fife. It didn't take very long to load, so if you arrived first thing in the morning you would probably sail again that evening. If we managed to get a night in, we would descend en masse to the nearest pub, "The Brig Tavern."

There we would spend the evening knocking back pints and having sing-songs. Stanley Stark was occasionally "bounced" from The Brig because he had become drunk and obnoxious! I visited the same Brig Tavern in 1993, and told them that the last drink I had there was 41 years earlier. I didn't have to buy a drink all evening!

When you were loading coal it didn't matter how hard you tried to seal your cabin to make it airtight, the fine coal dust particles would get into everything. Sometimes it wouldn't be obvious until you moved something in your cabin, only to notice that there would now be a clean spot where it had been. It even got into the clothes that were in your lockers. It was a very dirty cargo. Needless to say, cleaning the holds was not a job we enjoyed.

The homeward bound cargo from northern Europe was always some form of wood. We brought back everything from dressed lumber, to pit props. We even brought back telegraph poles from a place called Onega, in northern Russia. Onega was a town totally enclosed by a wooden wall around it, to keep out the wolves! It was a very basic town -- but we were still invited to the local ballet. In the evening we would watch the gazelle-like ballet dancers (the only entertainment in town) -- and during the day we would watch amazon women with bulging muscles throwing telegraph poles around just as though they were little sticks. Definitely a town of contrasts.

I enjoyed life in the Dunmore Head. I think that being in a small ship with a small crew, had a lot to do with it. Years later I think that it may have played a small part in my decision to go into submarines. On that same subject, one day while we were in Cardiff discharging pit-props, I bought a book called, "One of our Submarines." It was written by an Edward Young, Commander, RNVR, who, prior to the war, had been a publisher. His book, with its descriptions of his life in command of submarines, was the biggest single factor in interesting me in submarines.

After reading the book -- I couldn't put it down -- I was enthralled by submarines. I mentioned earlier, that as a teenager at school I had no burning ambition to go to sea, which was true.

But after reading that book I couldn't get submarines out of my mind. It lit a fire inside me that was never extinguished. When I read that book in 1952, little did I realize that I would actually meet, and in one case, become a good friend of one Lieutenant Miers, Victoria Cross, mentioned in the book, but more on that subject later on. I have that same book on my bookshelf at home. However, again I am getting ahead of myself.

When we weren't on the northern Europe run, we would occasionally make a trip to the Mediterranean. I enjoyed these trips particularly, because it meant that I could finally get away from the rough and foggy North Atlantic, and the grey short winter daylight hours of northern Europe. Sun at last!

Sailing down the coast of Portugal and Spain was particularly enjoyable, using my binoculars to peer at the clumps of white houses that were dotted all along the coast. Then finally, before entering the Mediterranean, we would pass close to Tarifa, and then through the Straits of Gibraltar.

For me, there has always been a sense of anticipation and excitement when you were waiting to make a landfall, or the sighting of a specific headland or navigational aid. I never lost that feeling of excitement throughout my life at sea, almost willing the object, or piece of land, to peep over the horizon. You knew that what you were looking for would eventually appear, but there was that sense of anticipation and excitement, while you were waiting. The Rock of Gibraltar was an ideal place for making a landfall, because of its shape. Little did I realize at the time how familiar Gibraltar would become in the future.

It was about this time that some of the North African countries were flexing their muscles about their independence. In Sousse, near Tunis, we woke up one morning to the sound of small arms fire. The ship was berthed very close to the main square of the town -- just below the Casbah. The Casbah, or the Arab quarter, was where the unrest always started. Occasional shooting, mainly sniping, continued throughout the day. It didn't seem to disrupt too many people, as we continued loading esparto grass, without any interruption.

A curfew had been imposed by the local military authorities, but it didn't effect Shaw and me. We had met some French Foreign Legionnaires the previous day, and they had invited us to go ashore with them to explore the town (bars) that evening. So there we were, going from one bar to the other with an escort of heavily armed Legionnaires -- not the sort of people that most civilians would want to upset. It was just one of the many interesting experiences that happened to me over the years.

Occasionally, on the way down to the Mediterranean, we would call into Lisbon to load coal bunkers. It was carried out in the most basic fashion I have ever seen. It was loaded on an assembly line arrangement -- only the assembly lines were women. Women would walk up one gangway with huge baskets of coal on their head -- tip the contents into the bunker hatch, and then go down another gangway to pick up another full basket. This process took many hours to top up our bunkers.

Years later, when I wanted to "one-up" some young naval engineers, who were waxing eloquently about their new gas turbines and cruise diesels, I would ask them what they knew about coal burner

ships. During the silence that usually followed that question, I would then go on to explain how, when I was a cadet, we would trim coal from the bunker space down to the stoke hold. You could tell, that in their eyes, I must have been a lot older than they originally thought, because I was only one step away from sail -- which in effect I was.

It was sometime during my time in the Dunmore Head that we heard about the death of Norman Stark in the Ramore Head. There were various theories attached to his death, but the story that was the most accepted was the following one.

The story goes that he sent someone up to paint around the radar antenna one morning as they were steaming up the St. Lawrence. When the weather deteriorated Stark started the radar, forgetting the man on the mast. The man fell to his death after being struck by the rotating antenna.

This apparently played on Norman Stark's mind, and next trip on the way up the St. Lawrence, while he was on watch, he left the bridge to go down to his cabin. When he didn't return the cadet on watch raised the alarm. The ship was turned round and a long search took place, without any success. It was assumed that he had jumped over the side because he was still depressed about being responsible for the death of a sailor during the previous voyage.

There were many people who did not subscribe to that conclusion. Norman Stark was a hated man, by most people. At sea, in a small cargo ship with very few people around at night, it is very easy to throw somebody over the side, particularly when it was dark. There was a strong suspicion that he had upset someone once too often, and that he paid for it. His body was never found, so the truth will never be known.

One of the things that the Head Line did, was to take senior cadets and appoint them as Third Mate as they went into their fourth year. While this provided excellent experience before sitting for your Second Mate's Certificate, it was not done for that reason by the company. They would have to pay a certificated Third Mate about twenty-eight pounds a month, whereas an uncertificated Third Mate need only be paid fifteen pounds. However, as a fourth year cadet, fifteen pounds a month was a lot better than the eight pounds I would receive as a cadet. Everybody was happy.

I wasn't transferred to another ship. Instead, I became Third Mate of the Dunmore Head on 25 November 1952, approximately three years after I first went to sea. I took down my lapel patches and had a stripe sewn on my sleeve instead.

As Third Mate I kept a standard watch between eight and twelve, both morning and evening. I thoroughly enjoyed navigating the ship.

It was much more interesting navigating around the coast, with its tides, lights and headlands, than spending five or six days on a North Atlantic crossing, taking the occasional sight (when you could

see the sun or the stars). Because we didn't have radar, we used all the basic principles of navigation, which were being used a lot less in some companies, which had up-to-date electronic aids.

The Third Mate on entering and leaving harbour was like a one-man-band. He took the wheel -- he wrote the log -- he operated the telegraphs -- he sounded the whistle, and manned the phone to the engine room. Years later, when I was part of the vastly overcrowded bridge team in a warship, I often felt like telling people about my tasks on the bridge of the Dunmore Head, but I didn't -- because I don't think they would have believed me.

Once, leaving Dublin, the Master, Stanley Stark, was drunk as we sailed. Cyril Pringle, seeing the state of the Master, remained on the Bridge for the departure. As the one-man-band, I was supposed to take my rudder and speed orders from the Master. Had I done so we would have been aground within minutes of sailing. The problem was solved by the Master shouting his orders at me, and the Mate whispering the correct ones in my ear. We left Dublin safely, and Stanley Stark probably thought that he had made another successful departure!

In Londonderry one day I received a letter from my mother telling me that she had heard from my father, saying that he would not be coming home again. After he had gone back to sea, he spent a lot of time around the coast of Australia. Sometime during this period he had found himself a job as a Superintendent Stevedore in Cairns, Queensland. The last thing I had heard from my mother was that he wanted her to come out to join him there, so it was quite a shock to receive this letter saying that he had changed his mind, and that he didn't want her to go out there, nor was he coming home.

I managed to get a few days special leave. She was dreadfully upset. Although she hadn't spent a great deal of time with him since the beginning of the war, she obviously still loved him.

I remained in the Dunmore Head until June 1953, when I was told that I was to join the Delgany in Dublin. Who, or what was the Delgany? All our ships were named after headlands around Ireland.

The ss. Delgany was a ship owned by a company in Dublin that was a subsidiary of the Head Line -- Palgrave Murphy. They needed a Third Mate -- and I was selected from a host of non-volunteers.

The ship itself had been built in the mid-twenties. Tonnage-wise it was about the same as the Dunmore Head. The officers' cabins had beautiful wood panelling. It had also carried passengers during its early days.

We were still carrying passengers after a fashion -- at least, warm bodies. Our cargo was a mixture of horses and cattle that were to be unloaded in Antwerp, with the abattoir as their final destination. The horses had been shorn of all hair, as the shipper could probably make some money out of the hair, before he shipped them.

The people who loaded these animals had an agreement with the union that required them to travel with the animals, "to look after their welfare." It also meant that they remained on board for the remainder of the voyage with nothing to do, except get drunk and start fights ashore in Antwerp or Rotterdam. In fact what happened, was that the company paid these men their wages, on condition that they did not make the voyage. It was easier to pay them, than have them disrupt the voyage. They all belonged to a gang in Dublin, called the "Animal Gang." They knew they were on to a good thing.

The round trip was from Dublin to Antwerp, then to Rotterdam, Cork and back to Dublin. It only took twelve days in all, but the experience of the transits up and down the English Channel, with its heavy volume of shipping traffic, was invaluable.

By August 1953, having met the minimum sea time requirements to sit for my Second Mate's Certificate, I came ashore and started my studies at Belfast Technical College.