



CHAPTER V

Caribbean Ferry

A FAMOUS British statesman has expressed the opinion privately that, had the Germans been able to put Curaçao out of action, the Allies might have lost the war. For Curaçao, situated in the Dutch West Indies and lying about thirty-eight miles north of the coast of Venezuela, is one of the most important oil refining and shipping centres in the world.

The island is roughly forty miles long and about eight miles across in the widest part, with a total area of 374 square miles. Except for twelve small hills it is comparatively flat and indented by bays and lagoons which, it is said, afforded shelter to Black Morgan the pirate. Whether the liqueur known as Curaçao was concocted there is doubtful, but the name was derived from a peculiar native variety of orange, *citrus aurantium carassuviensis*, the peel of which was shipped to Holland where the liqueur was made.

The capital, Willemstad, is picturesque, and remarkably clean for a tropical port. Built mainly in the Dutch style, the gabled stores and dwellings, predominantly yellow and pink in colour, have a pleasing old-world air. The channel of Santa Anna harbour, flanked by ancient forts at the entrance, cuts through the business sector of the town, but its navigation is impeded by a pontoon bridge which has to be opened to permit shipping to reach the deep-water lagoon beyond, known as the Schottegat. Here there is ample berthing for both ocean-going vessels and tankers engaged on the Caribbean ferry service.

Little colour bar exists in Curaçao's democratic community. Key positions in the Government and the oil industry are held by the Dutch, but considerable scope is afforded the coloured inhabitants. Educational facilities are good, and pay is high compared with the West Indies as a whole. The currency is the

guilder and, at the time of writing, the rate of exchange is unfavourable to Britain at 7 guilders 60 cents to the pound sterling. Many of the Curaçaoans speak Dutch fluently, and a proportion is versed in English, Spanish and French as well. For everyday intercourse among themselves, though, the labouring classes use a dialect called *papiamentu*, consisting of about six hundred words, a hotch-potch of all four languages. Wherever the common notice 'Ta taha pa huma' is displayed along the harbour or in the refineries zone, the locals understand it to mean 'No smoking'.

The modern importance of Curaçao arose primarily from its geographical position, for it has no natural wealth except phosphates. Sites were needed for the refining of the oil found in eastern Venezuela and under the waters of the Maracaibo Lake, and the development of Curaçao by the Shell Group, and of the neighbouring island Aruba by the Standard Oil Company (New Jersey), was due to the convenient position of the islands close to the source of supply. That the oil products of Venezuela are not refined in their country of origin is due to navigational problems. When new regions in Venezuela were explored intensively in the First World War, and when the first wells of the Mene Grande fields started production in 1917, outlet for this oil was at San Lorenzo in the Maracaibo zone, but it was impracticable for vessels of deep draught to gain access to San Lorenzo from the Caribbean through the narrows leading to the lagoon.

These narrows from the Gulf of Maracaibo to the lagoon, despite constant dredging of the traffic channels, are still unnavigable for ocean shipping, and for this reason it has never been possible to ship the crude oil directly from the fields to refineries in America or Europe. It was also impracticable to build refining installations close to the eastern Venezuelan oilfields.

The problem was solved for the Shell interests by the selection of Curaçao with its natural deep-water harbour formed by the Schottegat beyond the narrow Santa Anna channel. Around this, and near the region known as Emmastad, refineries, storage facilities and pipe-lines were established, together with loading berths both for ocean-going tankers and the so-called lake steamers used to ferry the crude oil from the fields to the refinery.

A secondary reason for the selection of Curaçao was the climate, which is healthy for Europeans and, although hot during two or three months of the year, is less humid than that of New York in the summer. Mosquitoes and sandflies exist, but are not unduly troublesome, and there are no mosquitoes of the malarial variety.

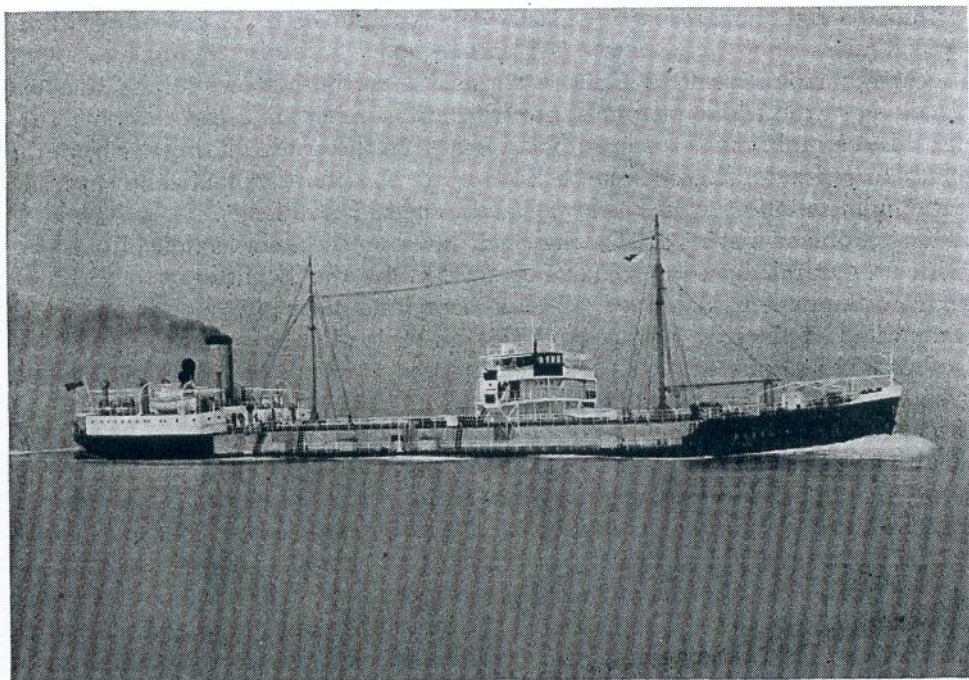
Seafarers who have visited Curaçao only during the long dry season are likely to remember the place as a skeleton-grey island bathed in almost perpetual sunshine. But when, in September, the dry trade winds cease to blow and the rains come, a surprising change of scene takes place. Then, for a few months, a green mantle of tropical vegetation is draped over the barren plains and hills.

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Stand anywhere along the shore near Willemstad today and it is likely you will see one or more tankers. In all probability, too, a plane will be overhead, bound from the Hato airport to La Guaira, Trinidad, Miami or possibly to Amsterdam. And always rolling to leeward over the island is the broad column of smoke from burning waste products of the refinery, scarcely more than a bronze-hued mist by day, reddish at nightfall, bearing the aromatic, faintly antiseptic breath of oil.

Life in Curaçao flows to the rhythm of oil pumps. Oil is the *motif* of an industrial fantasia conducted against a futuristic setting of towers, stacks, tanks and pipe-lines. The daily bread of thousands is dependent on oil—oil mainly from Venezuela, refined on this island—the war-winning oil that put little Curaçao large upon the military maps.

Just as in Canada the visitor becomes involuntarily familiar with the initials C.P.R., so in Curaçao he quickly notes C.P.I.M. and C.S.M. C.P.I.M., Curaçaosche Petroleum Industrie Maatschappij, is the great Dutch-controlled company responsible for the work of storing and refining the oil, and storing and shipping the refined products. C.S.M., Curaçaosche Scheepvaart Maatschappij,



ROSALIA, a 'lake' tanker, used to ferry crude oil from Maracaibo to Curaçao.

is no less famous, being the transportation concern whose large fleet of shallow draught tankers ferry the oil from loading points on the fields border Maracaibo Lake.

C.S.M. came into being on 21 July 1917, with only two sea-going tankers and two lighters which had a carrying capacity of 300 tons each, and the route Curaçao-San Lorenzo-Curaçao took seven or eight days, depending on weather and other factors. These and early additions to the fleet have been sent annually either to Trinidad or Panama for dry-docking and refit, but this was continued after an abortive trial of the nearer port of Puerto Cabello where facilities were found to be inadequate.

A rapid extension of the Lake fleet between the two World Wars demanded a radical change from this system, which was uneconomic because it kept many vessels out of service for lengthy periods. So, in 1926, the C.S.M. obtained a 3,000-ton floating dry dock called the Koningen Wilhelmina Dok, built in Holland, and three years later the 4,000-ton Juliana Dok, designed to meet the requirements of the Lake tankers. In the critical period of the Battle of the Atlantic, plans were made for relieving Britain's heavily overtaxed shipyards, and the Beatrix Dok was constructed—a concrete graving dock which could accommodate ocean-going ships up to 600 feet in length. The fleet, combined with Venezuelan ships and the Creole (formerly Laguarda) of the Standard Oil Company, bringing crude oil to the Aruba refinery, combined to make the area one of the largest oil-refining centres in the world. Immense quantities of gasoline, lubricating oil and other products were exported from Curaçao and Aruba combined. The thirty-two shallow draught tankers of the C.S.M. have taken 12,000,000 tons of crude a year—3,000,000,000 gallons as measured in black oil—to the Curaçao refinery. One or two of the larger ships of the R class, such as the *Rufina*, of roughly 4,000-ton capacity, each delivered full cargoes every three days to a total of 500,000 tons of oil in a working year. This work continued throughout the war years by shallow-draught steamers, manned by Dutch officers and Chinese crews, running the gauntlet past U-boats in the Caribbean time and time again.

The Curaçao refinery of the C.P.I.M. dealt with all these cargoes as well as those from elsewhere, producing aviation spirit, motor gasoline, lubricants and other refined products in immense quantities. To state baldly that in 1944 an off-take from this refinery was 10,000,000 metric tons gives no real idea of the Dutch island's achievement in production and trans-shipment. This represents 3,000,000,000 gallons, which, in terms of petrol or motor oil, would keep a 12 h.p. car on the road doing 200 miles a day for a million years!

Surprisingly, the Germans made no attempt to block the narrow entrance to Willemstad, which might have been done by daring enterprise, or to close the refineries when the island had no effective means of defence. So far as it



enemy submarine entered the Caribbean until the United States came into the war, and the only attack ever made against Willemstad was when two torpedoes were fired at the harbour entrances and hit the foreshore without causing any military damage.

In 1940, after the Nazis had over-run Holland, five tankers of the C.S.M. fleet, degaussed but unarmed, were assigned for service in European waters and proceeded independently and unescorted across the Atlantic. They were *Leticia*, *Lucrecia*, *Lucita*, *Liseta* and *Juliana*, the last-named under the command of Captain Boothby, a British master of long and honourable service with the S.M. Two of them, the *Leticia* and *Lucrecia*, never reached port. They were torpedoed by a German submarine, whose commander aided several survivors and, most remarkably, told them the names of all five Lake tankers making the transatlantic voyage together with their sailing dates from Curaçao. Nevertheless, his boast that he would wipe off the lot was unfulfilled.

Beside this contribution in ships for service off their regular run, the C.S.M. supplied many officers and men for the ocean-going tankers, and a number sacrificed their lives on the high seas. On the other hand, at a critical period when U-boats transformed the Caribbean into a danger zone, a proportion of British officers went as replacements to the Lake tankers and remained until the war ended.

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There is no record that any hostile submarine penetrated to the great lagoon, bordered by the oilfields, which is marked Lake Maracaibo on the map of South America. To have done so would have required perilous navigation through the Bajo Seco (outer bar) and Tablazo (inner bar) of the narrows leading from the Gulf of Maracaibo. Even with the improved conditions after May 1940, when two better channels had been dredged, known as the Zarapita and Larrayabal, a severe test of seamanship was imposed on the Venezuelan pilots at the inner bar and on ship masters taking their shallow-draught vessels through the outer bar.

The Germans, in the tradition of the buccaneers, ranged the open sea and, in some instances, surpassed Morgan's piratical crews in foul deeds. By 1942 their hunting-ground was the area between Curaçao, Aruba and the Paraguana Peninsula. On one night, 14 February, in this zone they sank no fewer than seven ships of the Standard Oil and Gulf fleets. On the same night Captain Boothby, in command of the *Rufina*, loaded 1,500 tons of aviation spirit in the Schottegat and was scheduled to proceed to Bullen Bay about twelve miles westward along the coast to take the balance of his cargo. He wisely decided to delay sailing until daylight, and in all probability the *Rufina* was saved by the decision. That night a U-boat was lurking outside, and the incoming *Rafaela*, with a full load of heavy oil from Tia Juana, was torpedoed off Willemstad. This was the first casualty of the C.S.M. fleet in home waters, but fortunately the tanker did not catch fire. No lives were lost and salvage was achieved successfully.

The work of ferrying the oil proceeded with little interruption, in defiance of the enemy's under-water patrols. There was no interference with the loading at the various points down the 100-mile long Maracaibo lagoon—Cabimas, Tia Juana (Aunt Jane), Lagunillas, Bachaquero and San Lorenzo on the eastern shore, Boca at the southern end, and Punta de Piedras on the western side. To Curaçao from Maracaibo port, where the pilot is taken aboard, is a distance of roughly 230 miles. The convoy system was adopted, and from five to ten Lake tankers would proceed to Amuay Bay on the Paraguana Peninsula to wait until midnight before proceeding in company to a rendezvous out at sea. Here they were met by escorts, at first only two or three whalers armed with small-calibre guns and depth charges, but, later, United States Navy patrols that afforded excellent protection.

In this manner immense quantities of crude Venezuelan oil for the Allies were conveyed safely through the Caribbean to the refineries, whence the gasoline (petrol) and various other fuels and lubricants were sent to the European, Middle East and other combat zones. And all the work of the Lake fleet was accomplished without further serious incident until 27 July 1943, when the C.S.M. suffered its second and only other casualty in home waters.

This was an incident of a more serious nature than the *Rafaela* affair, involving the s.s. *Rosalía* with a full cargo of 4,000 tons of crude oil from Lagunillas in

her tanks. Of her Dutch officers, one British engineer officer named Dawson, and a mixed crew of West Indians and Chinese, only thirteen survived, and among those who perished in the ship, which became a total loss, was her gallant master, Captain J. van der Linden. What happened is best described from a first-hand account given by Chief Engineer C. G. Parmentier, of twenty years' service with the C.S.M. fleet, who escaped after being trapped in his quarters when the ship became a blazing inferno.

The *Rosalia* was unescorted on the last leg of her voyage to Willemstad and came abeam West Point, Curaçao, toward ten o'clock, in darkness hardly relieved by the few stars. The sea was calm, the ship rolling to a swell, the aftermath of a wind stronger than usual. Black-out conditions prevailed—conditions that were extremely hot and uncomfortable for the crew in the tropical summer and none too pleasant even on a February night.

Parmentier was in his day-cabin enjoying a leisurely chat with Second Engineer van Mechelen. The deadlights were down over the ports. Both men were in the usual light tropical rig in an atmosphere made stuffier owing to the nearness of the cabin to the engine-room. (In the *Rosalia*, and other Lake ships, only the Captain lives in the amidships accommodation; all others live aft.)

The Chief's quarters were on the port side and consisted of day-cabin, a night-cabin and bathroom in that order fore and aft. Outside was a narrow alleyway between other cabins and the engine-room leading to the small stern deck.

At ten o'clock the ship staggered to the shock of a violent explosion, followed by a second explosion that plunged Parmentier's room in total darkness and flung a radio set and other objects against a bulkhead. Parmentier steadied himself and reached for his life-jacket. He heard van Mechelen exclaim 'The door is jammed!' Looking through the open doors between the cabins the Chief Engineer saw an orange glow from the bathroom port which he always kept open in case of emergency.

The ship was on fire. He turned and informed the Second, who had the mosquito door open and was trying to force the outer door leading to the alleyway.

This alleyway offered a likely means of escape and also gave access to the engine-room, which the Chief wanted to reach if possible. So he assisted van Mechelen to kick the door open, and immediately saw that the wind, which was on the port beam, was driving sheets of flame through the starboard alleyway, where all on that side must have been killed in a matter of seconds.

Once outside van Mechelen rushed aft calling on the Chief Engineer to follow. That was the last seen or heard of him.

Parmentier paused momentarily, an emulsion of oil and water swirling over his bare feet. He saw the bridge burning and the pump-room in flames. He took a few steps and looked up through the galley skylight, thinking that perhaps

he could reach and close an emergency valve to shut off steam on the engines. But the boat deck was also on fire and he had to abandon the idea.

Concern for Fourth Engineer Dawson and others on watch took him to the engine-room hatch, but it was impossible to go below owing to rushing water and blowing steam mingled with smoke. No one could be living down there, and it was obvious the ship was sinking.

Third Engineer J. de Beer came into the alleyway, and the Chief urged him to go through his bathroom and out of the open port, as now the fire was sweeping over the stern deck. De Beer protested that this could not be done and hung back.

There was not time for argument. Parmentier went to the bathroom port and wriggled out head first. It was an acrobatic feat for a man fifty years of age, six feet two inches in height and two hundred pounds in weight, to get through a fourteen-inch port. By grabbing the edge of the boat-deck with his fingers he accomplished it, and while freeing his legs noticed that the tackles of the port lifeboat were burning and there was imminent risk of the boat falling on his head. Below him the sea was covered in fuel-oil glowing like molten copper in the light of the burning ship, but there were no flames on the water. Still clutching his life-jacket, he dropped overboard and began to swim.

Eventually, Parmentier was followed by de Beer, who was saved, but Parmentier saw nothing more of him for many hours. When the Chief looked back he saw that the ship and the sea to starboard were aflame, and that fire was spreading rapidly over the water toward him. The stern of the *Rosalia* had lifted and the propeller still turned, threshing the sea into foam like blood froth. Dread of the surface fire overtaking him goaded him to superhuman effort to get clear, and he swam frenziedly, whilst retaining his life-jacket which he had had no time to put on properly.

At a safe distance he trod water to adjust this jacket over his oil-covered body. Instead of a red lamp, this life-jacket was equipped with a white electric lamp which automatically lighted on contact with the water. This white lamp caused him no little anxiety. Not long before, a cargo-carrier had been torpedoed in the Caribbean and survivors were butchered by machine-gun fire by the U-boat's crew. Parmentier remembered that incident, and his main concern for a time was to keep the white light under water lest it should be seen.

The enemy submarine kept out of sight, and when it seemed likely to have moved on the Chief became obsessed by dread of sharks that infest those tropical waters. Long after the *Rosalia* had burned out and sunk he swam alone in the darkness, never free from apprehension that, having escaped the flames, he might become victim to the sharks.

A Dutch torpedo-boat came from Willemstad and cruised round picking up survivors over a wide area. Almost exhausted, the Chief finally attracted attention by using the whistle attached to his life-jacket and was the last man

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to be rescued. He celebrated his fiftieth birthday in hospital at Curaçao and then returned to duty with the Lake fleet, in which he is still serving.

The hazards of this western zone are exemplified also by the case of the 12,000-ton *San Eliseo*, attacked off Barbados in May 1942. One torpedo struck under the bridge accommodation and sent a column of foam mast-high; a second one missed the stern, lashed into the tanker's wake and spun off its course. Captain Peter Johnston, who subsequently received the O.B.E. and Lloyd's War Medal, took prompt measures to deal with the situation. Eight 4.7-inch shells were fired at the U-boat's periscope, and the last three shots fell so close that probably damage was done to the enemy. Another gun was turned on the torpedo running wild on the surface, as there was still every possibility it might take the wrong turning and hit the ship. Meanwhile the *San Eliseo* was brought on an even keel by topping-up the port tanks from the sea.

Speed was reduced from thirteen to eleven knots, and the ship proceeded on a zigzag course for several hours. That night, at about eleven o'clock, Captain Johnston, talking to the Officer of the Watch on the bridge, remarked: 'That U-boat must have thought us a hell of a ship to take a torpedo and steam on.'



SAN ELISEO in dry dock at Barbados, May 1942.

Almost immediately another torpedo struck the *San Eliseo* about twenty feet aft of the damage caused by the first, and by amazing fortune, there still were no casualties.

The submarine remained unseen in the darkness. Captain Johnston took evasive action, but, whereas full power was maintained on the engines, the ship's speed was reduced again owing to another great cavity in the hull. Slabs of concrete from the protective 'armour' were strewn all over the upper bridge, and as both compasses were broken, navigation on eccentric courses had to be done by judgment based on the stars and the direction of the wind.

For three hours the Master evaded further trouble, trying to anticipate every move of the U-boat, which he expected would attempt to position itself for another torpedo attack. All the advantage was with the invisible foe, and at two o'clock in the morning the *San Eliseo* staggered to yet another terrific explosion. This time the heavy deck plating was rolled back like a carpet, tank-lids and valve-wheels skimmed skyward, and a rain of scrap metal and broken glass clattered down.

No one imagined the ship could survive this last blow. The engines were stopped and all preparation made for abandoning her. There was no confusion or undue haste; all orders were carried out in a coolly disciplined manner. Then, despite the adverse signs, Captain Johnston decided to make one more attempt to save the ship. The Chief Officer opened some of the port-side valves, and an inrush of sea to the tanks brought her again on an even keel. The Chief Engineer and two of his junior officers went down into the engine-room, whence there would be hardly a dog's chance of escape if the U-boat attacked again, as seemed possible.

After several nerve-racking minutes the main engines were started, and the *San Eliseo* resumed evasive steering at the slow speed of five knots. This continued till three-thirty a.m., when the sinister track of another torpedo, racing toward the port bow, was seen from the battered bridge. A shout was raised—'Here comes another one! Keep your heads down!'—and then the 'fish' lashed across the bow, missing by inches, and, skimming the surface at fifty knots, vanished to starboard in the night.

Shortly afterwards, a large submarine surfaced four points on the port bow about half-a-mile distant, to finish the ship off.

The *San Eliseo* had been slowed, but she headed straight for the foe. Doubtless the U-boat commander had expected her to turn away and resume evasive steering, but Captain Johnston was in no mood for orthodox manœuvres. This Master, who had seen his ship mangled with little chance of retaliation, now closed with the enemy determined to ram, if possible, and exact due vengeance.

Five knots is poor speed for action of this kind, but there is no shadow of doubt that the German was startled by the manœvre. The *San Eliseo* loomed large in the darkness and her speed could hardly have been estimated with any

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inty. Preparations to shell the tanker were abandoned hastily; there was a hasty retreat through the conning-tower and gun-hatches, and the U-boat dived amid a grey flurry of foam.

The *San Eliseo* was not molested again. She reached Barbados after many long hours, during which air pressure was kept continually on all compartments in the vicinity of the damage by the compressed-air salvage equipment developed by Mr. W. Lynn Nelson. That system helped to save this ship and many others, but no technical means could have availed without the high courage and discipline of men who, in the darkest circumstances, resolutely refused to admit themselves beaten.