

Lost at sea

Tales my grandfather would have told me. A sailor's life 1910-1941

A sailor's life – 48. Oil tanker apprentice, 1919

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Tilbury docks, 1920s. Collection: National Education Network

Most of Britain's sailing ships had been sunk or sold by the time Bill Jefferies was old enough to go to sea in 1919. So he signed on with the British Tanker company and became devoted to oil tankers instead. ("Remarkable ships, in many ways" he murmured, half to himself, as he committed his memories to a tape recorder at the end of his life.)

He remembered the "lovely women" who had brazenly boarded his ship during the month he as a "first tripper" had spent in Trinidad in 1919 waiting for cargo. The crew had dropped lines over the side to haul the girls up, and sold the shirts off their backs when their money ran out. By the time the ship got to [Port Arthur, Texas](#), where the Americans inspected every man jack of them, there were less than a dozen men aboard who had not got VD, he recalled.



Oil tanker in channel outside Port Arthur, Texas, undated

The captain had forcibly seen to it that the three apprentices kept their noses, and everything else, clean. "He put his big fist under each of our chins and shoved our heads back. And he said, 'If I catch any of you boys going with any of these women, I'll smash your faces in so your mothers

never recognise you...” Then he took them to the hospital and made them look under the dressings at the ulcerated, seeping genitals of a seaman he knew who was dying there. Bill said: “I told my mother seven months later, when I got home, and she said Thank God for that captain.”

Bill’s mother was a doughty woman who had signed her younger son’s indentures and paid the bond as soon as shipping firms began to recruit apprentices again after the war. Bill’s brother Alf had been an apprentice on John Stewart’s barque Lorton with Algie Course and was one of the crowd of boys in Newcastle NSW with Bert Sivell in September 1913, revelling in the tennis, tea dances and charabanc trips organised by the mission while their ships lay along the Dyke. Bill recalled the excitement he had felt as a ten-year-old being rowed out to his brother’s ship at Tilbury when a wave splashed over him, and the burly seamen nodded sagely and said “that means you’ll go to sea too, lad”.



Apprentices from the sailing ship Lorton, Sydney 1911 - including AG Course, second right, front. From *The Wheel's Kick and The Wind's Song*, by AG Course

When Lorton was “sold foreign” in 1914, Alf transferred to the barque Edinburgh. But in 1916 she was captured by the raider Möwe. The Germans had hauled out the crew and two live pigs and sent the old barque to the bottom of the sea with all sails set. The tropical night had been so clear, Alf Jefferies used to claim, that they could see her canvas shimmering whitely under the water after she’d vanished. Even the enemy commander was supposed to have sighed “Beautiful even in death”. Among the prisoners below decks, the squeals of the pigs being hoisted aboard the raider were reported to have given rise to the rumour that the Edinburgh’s captain had his wife with him, and that she was hysterical.

By the time Bill Jefferies went to sea, it was a much lonelier life than Alf had sketched. The old square-riggers’ crowd of apprentices had dwindled to just three on Bill’s oil tanker, and even before these greenhorns reached their ship a plausible bloke posing as the shipping agent managed to relieve them of their luggage so they had to be kitted out from the slop chest. Once underway they got seasick and the mate, an old sailing ship man, sent them down the hold to scrape paint pots while the tanker heaved and plunged in a south-westerly gale. After they’d been sick, to windward — another mistake they did not make twice, he ordered them to shift stores. For two days they were kept constantly on the move. But it worked. Bill never suffered sea sickness again.

“They really were a motley crowd, seamen of all nations except our enemies,” said Bill aged 90, remembering that first ship in 1919. “We had a British bosun, a Belgian carpenter – a tall man with fierce whiskers who used to cause a lot of trouble when he was drunk. We had Latvians and Estonians, two Chinese cooks, and a Dutch chief steward. The average seaman in those days was either very old or a foreigner.” The fierce Welsh captain who kept his apprentices out of trouble had

been torpedoed five times, or so he claimed.

But by 1920, US production of gasoline (petrol) alone was [116 million barrels](#) (42 US gallons per barrel) – from less than 7 million barrels in 1901. Across the world the oil industry was booming.

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