

Lost at sea

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

A sailor's life – 58. Spoils of war, 1921

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Shell oil tanker Mytilus, 1921

Bert Sivell saw in New Year's Day 1921 in drydock in Rotterdam, as officer in charge of the Shell oil tanker Mytilus – surrounded by the company's new "war" boats having their names changed to shells.

Absia was there (ex War African), and Anomia (War Expert), and Marinula and Melania, and the four-masted Speedonia. The War Rajput (soon to be Conia) was due in and War Matron (Acasta), and his first ship, Donax. His last one, Orthis, had just sailed.

"There's a big slump in cargo steamers just now and many are laying up, but ours cannot get around fast enough," he wrote. In Britain, a national [coal strike](#) had erupted in October.



Rotterdam postcard view, sent 1921

"No dear, the coal strike will not delay our docking," he had written to Ena when it started. "It has done something far worse: it has driven the job out of this country altogether. Did you read in the paper a day or so back about a big ship repairing contract being transferred from North Shields to Rotterdam? That was this firm. They had five Monitors at Shields, being converted into tankers*, but owing to labour troubles in the ship yards and coal mines they towed them over to Rotterdam to

finish converting. Think of the amount of work going out of the country, and the money..."

Britain had emerged from the first world war [millions of dollars in debt to the US](#) and with its overseas markets in tatters. Pent up domestic demand masked the damage briefly, but as the men poured home to their civilian jobs, suddenly there were too many men and not enough jobs. Wages began to slip. During a flying trip home in January with the ship's accounts, Bert passed down Oxford Street on the breezy top deck of a double decker bus and noticed various groups of unemployed ex soldiers including a band of veterans busking for pence outside Selfridges. Trade was bad, he noted.

But out along the Heijplaat in Rotterdam business was booming. Tiny neutral Holland had emerged relatively unscathed from the war between its big neighbours - give or take the thousands of Belgian refugees and the rationing and the Spanish 'flu.



Heijplaat, Rotterdam - "Half garden city, half dockyard", opened in 1920 with 400 homes, three churches, a public bath house and a 'dry' cafe (Photo 1960s)

Bert had arrived in the Netherlands aboard Orthis in December, still dodging sea mines and funnel still sparking "like a Chrystal Palace display". He saw in the new year from a pontoon in the Maas, on the wrong side of the river from the centre of Rotterdam. The Dutch kept up new year properly, he reported, all work having stopped at 1pm and not due to restart until Monday. Cafés, bars, picturehouses and theatres were all open, however, and there were lively crowds on the streets, including several fights, which he dodged. "I did not fancy a night in jail." He did not like Rotterdam, nor the Dutch much.

Within weeks, however, the harbour was heaving with Shell ships and Bert found himself surrounded by new ships and old friends. "I have just had one of the best weekends since I have been in Rotterdam," he wrote.

"In my last letter I told you that the four-masted barque Speedonia belonging to this company had arrived. Naturally, being fresh out of sail myself, I was interested in the vessel, so on Saturday afternoon I went round to her. I just drifted aboard casually and saw a man holding up the cabin doorway. It struck me I should know him so I started to yarn, and in the course of our conversation I tumbled to where we had met: he was 3rd mate of the four-masted barque Grenada and we were

[together in Newcastle NSW](#) in July and August 1913, and again in Gatico and Tocopilla (Chile) from October to December of the same year. I had not heard anything of him since. We went ashore together on Saturday evening and I piloted him round the sights.



Shell oil carrier Speedonia,
one of six sailing vessels in
the company's fleet, 1921

“Sunday morning I was busy doing accounts when the Donax appeared on the scene. Naturally there was no more work that day and after dinner [lunch. Ed] I dressed and went round to her. She was lying at the installation, only about a mile away as the crow flies, but five miles when one has to walk it. It was a lovely day and I quite enjoyed the walk. I got round about 3.15pm and strolled along to the messroom, where I found the chief engineer playing draughts with the Marconi operator. He was very surprised to see me, because they all thought I was still on the Orthis. We adjourned to his room and give each other all the news and then the Chinese boy came in with the chief’s tea. He nearly dropped the cup when he saw me and got a ‘ten cent’ wriggle on to bring me one. After about an hour with the chief I blew along to see Captain McDermid.

“When passing through the saloon I ran into my own former boy. His face broke into a big oriental smile immediately and he started bowing and saluting alternately. It was really very amusing. Then I got into the old man’s room and his first question was if I was married yet. We had a long yarn about everything and he fished out a bottle of port.”

Captain McDermid said Shell was negotiating building forty more Donax-type ships in the US (“just think of the masters’ jobs”) on top of twenty-six already under construction at yards around the world. Thirteen were due to be commissioned that year, he told him.

McDermid was senior Shell man and he predicted great things for Bert; the company’s eye was on him, he said. Sailing ship qualifications were the golden ticket.

But Bert’s rapid progress had not passed unnoticed lower down the pecking order either. The 2nd mate on one of the other tankers challenged him to his face: why was Bert chief officer on a bigger ship after only 18 months in the company?

By late February, when Mytilus’s new master Captain (“Little”) Hill stepped aboard, Bert had been in Rotterdam for four months and he was ready to go, but it was still a shock when the orders came

for Abadan.

Read on: [In sickness and health, Mytilus 1921](#)

Previously: [The wife's tale II](#)

**Renamed Anam, Ampat, Delapan, Doewa, Lima, [Tiga](#), Toedjoe and Satoe*

Written by Jay Sivell

February 6, 2011 at 6:53 pm