

Lost at sea

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

A sailor's life – 59. In sickness and health, 1921

[leave a comment »](#)



Suez canal, postcard view sent 1921

Suez to the Shatt al Arab light vessel took the oil tanker twelve days nine hours and they arrived in the mouth of the Euphrates at 2am on 19 May 1921. "We have seen nothing but sand – mountains of it, since we left," Bert wrote, as they waited for the pilot to cross the bar. "When daylight came in I looked round for the land but failed to see any. The surrounding country is flat and swampy and the lightship is too far out to see it.

"I suppose we had been going again for an hour and a half when I looked out and saw land – and to my utter astonishment everything was green with plantations of date palms. However, as the two banks converged one could see that the green only lasted for a mile from the water's edge. In fact, at Abadan it is less than a hundred yards wide."



Port Said, northern entrance to the Suez canal, with statue of De Lesseps, sent 1921

Bert Sivell, chief officer of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum oil tanker Mytilus, was ill. For a month he had lived on beef tea and milk. He'd seen a doctor in Suez, and in Abadan the 2nd mate was sent ashore to fetch another, a dour Scot from Aberdeen, who diagnosed a kidney infection and issued the master with a letter to the Anglo-Saxon head office in London, prescribing two months sick leave. Bert's letter is sprinkled with exclamation marks, but he knew he wasn't going home. They were

three months out of Rotterdam, and relations between Captain Hill and his 1st mate were at an all-time low.

“Captain Hill has funny little ways,” Bert had commented, as they crossed the Mediterranean in vile weather. He wanted four star observations left on the chartroom table each morning, to work out the ship’s position for himself. But Bert left them with the maths done, “to show him I could.”



Bert Sivell, chief officer of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum tanker Mytilus, 1921

Then there were the charts, which Hill would let no one but himself touch. “Personally, when we are going along near land I like to take cross bearings now and then, lay them off on the chart and see if the vessel is keeping her course properly. That is as much for the safety of the ship as anything else. But the first time I put bearings on the chart I was told about it, so after that I used to call him up about twice during my watches, to take bearings. He soon got tired of that and has now given me permission to not call him unless the ship is out of position. The 2nd and 3rd have not that authority, so apparently I have scored a point.”

The Rock of Gibraltar had been invisible through the rain and the oil tanker had to heave to for 24 hours level with Malta – bows into a gale, battered by hailstones, engines on full ahead. “Talk about the blue Med...” Bert snorted. But it meant the painting wasn’t done.

In the narrow Suez canal south of Port Said, Mytilus got stuck, blown into the bank as they gave way to laden tankers coming the other way. They ran ropes ashore and tried to heave the ship off, but the wind was too strong. “After about an hour of this I got tired of it and wandered along to the bridge to suggest pumping some ballast out of one of the forward tanks, to lighten her nose and clear the bank that way. It struck me as rather strange that the order had not been given from the bridge as soon as she struck, especially as the old man has been in tankers for years...”



Postcard view of the Suez canal - 'It is nothing very wonderful after all: very narrow, two vessels cannot pass, and surrounded by low sandhills' Bert Sivell 1921

They remained tied up all night, further battered by a sandstorm. By Suez, there was a huge row. Bert was running a fever and the master said Mytilus was a “—ing pigsty”. Bert had been saying it himself for a fortnight, but he didn’t relish the reprimand. A chief officer was responsible for the painting. The tanker looked all right from a distance, he wrote, after an afternoon in the ship’s boat, teaching the apprentices how to row.

There was a strike at the refinery in Ismailia, and ship’s crews were doing the pumping. While Captain Hill and the chief engineer disappeared off to Cairo to see the pyramids, Bert saw a doctor, who diagnosed sunstroke. There were half a dozen Shell ships in port, and his old master, Captain Harding, dropped by. “It was quite like old times to have him sitting in my room for a yarn. He is so different to the one we have now. I got quite a lot of news from him.”

From Suez, Mytilus went north again, to Marseilles, another bad passage. Bert was still ill. In the desert canal all his new paint got covered with fine red sand several times and rough seas in the Med took off what was left. They arrived in France streaked with rust ...

In Marseilles the benzine pumping station they were hooked up to 500 yards away exploded in flames, killing the pumpman, and Mytilus had to be yanked off the wharf by Acasta, which had fortunately been discharging fuel oil just outside the benzine dock. Bert shut down in a hurry, disconnecting the pipes and moorings, raising steam and all the while keeping the water hoses plying the main deck, to keep the temperature down. “If we had gone on fire it would have been goodbye Marseilles, town, docks and everything.”

They shifted to St Louis de Rhone, on the Camargue marshes. It was a dead show, he said. Just a village. But then he had been discharging day and night since they arrived and had not been ashore, so could not tell. Shell’s superintendent had been aboard and complimented him on “having one of the cleanest ships in the company”, he reported wearily. He spent 19 hours on his feet on his birthday, and they were delayed again when the mistral blew them into the canal bank.

The gossip from France was not good. Bert’s pay had been cut by £2 15s a month, and the superintendent said forty ships were being laid up. Tucker, Bert’s predecessor as chief officer on Mytilus, who had left to be master of War Patriot (Adna), had had to revert to chief officer again - the second time it had happened to him. “Things must be pretty serious when a firm like the ASPCo are laying up their vessels because they have no work for them.”

He was taken bad again in Abadan, and burning up as they crossed the Red Sea heading for home again. He was still not eating, and one night the captain had to take half his watch. By Suez, Hill

threatened to put him ashore, and by Gibraltar he said Bert would never get another ship again, “in this company or any other.” Off Spain they fell out over the colour of the regulation paint.

“The men have worked well but the weather has been against me – my usual luck again when painting the ship,” wrote Bert. “Last Monday was fine, so we painted down the masts, funnel and adjacent ventilators. That was a very good stroke of work. I am afraid a present day ‘white’ crew would not do as much. Tuesday was also fine, and we painted right round the bulwarks – another splendid stroke. They lost two days to bad weather and then on Friday, being some Chinese holiday, the crew did nothing, and it was a beautiful day too. Then Saturday was a half day but I managed to get a little done and that ends the week.”

Captain Hill and his ailing chief officer parted company in Lisbon in June, Bert leaving for the UK bearing in his pocket a terse letter of “reference”. (“*Mr HS Sivell has served on board the SS Mytilus as chief officer from December 1920 to present date and is now going on leave. Conscientious in his work, his services have been quite satisfactory.*”)

He was braced for a long wait for the next ship or perhaps demotion to 2nd mate, but by August he was in North Shields, fully recovered, and signing on as chief officer with the Shell tanker Euplectela on £26 8s a month – with a view to joining the depot ship Pyrula in Barcelona on £28 12s and remaining with her to New York, where he would become officer-in-charge on £35 a month. It would be his first command.

Ya boo sucks, little Hill.

Read on: [Ships that pass in the night: Stanley Algar](#)

Previously: [Spoils of war](#)

Work in progress: the book I never wrote about the sailor grandfather I never knew, from apprenticeship on the square-rigger Monk barns to death by U97, lost with all hands aboard the Shell tanker Chama in 1941

[blogroll](#)