

Lost at sea

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

A sailor's life – 60. Ships that pass in the night: Stanley Algar

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Stanley Algar, aged 16 in 1916, the year after he went to sea

*Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing;
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;
So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,
Only a look and a voice; then darkness again and a silence.”*
- from *The Theologian's Tale: Elizabeth*,
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow 1863

In July 1921, after five months out of work, Stanley Algar of Middlesbrough got a job as 3rd mate on an elderly coal-burning steamer ferrying oil from the US to Europe and found himself in Port Arthur, Texas, gazing at a Shell tanker moored nearby. His own ship was covered in coal dust and ashes, but the Mytilus – for it was she – was spotless. “She was a picture,” he recalled, years later when he was a Shell man himself.

“All the brass work was gleaming, the paintwork was fantastically clean, the woodwork on the bridge sparkled with good quality varnish, there was no rust to be seen, not even over the side, and the wooden bridge deck and poops were as clean as a hound’s tooth. The crew were Chinese and the British officers were in clean uniforms, not shabby old lounge suits as on our ship.

“I looked at our vessel, with the ashes from the stokehold and the galley refuse stoked up on deck, and was filled with disgust.”

Stan was 23. He had joined his first ship at 15 in 1915, during the first world war. Small for his age – just 4ft 10 – the Shipping Federation office had deemed him too puny for an apprenticeship in any of the big shipping companies, so his dad found a local firm that was not so fussy and he had been packed off to sea on a dirty old coal-fired tanker to fuel the navy at Scapa Flow for £7 a year. The master drank, the mates were very old and those of the crew who had sailing ship experience were contemptuous of those who had not.

Stan’s war was in many respects more exciting than his contemporary Bert Sivell’s. He’d had to jump for his life after a collision off the Orkneys, had been mined in Swansea bay and torpedoed off Le Havre after discharging aviation fuel, all for £1 5s a month plus the apprentice rate war bonus of £1 a month.

After the armistice, they both came home to sit exams, hoping for promotion. But while Bert passed his master’s ticket and joined Shell as 3rd officer in 1919, by 1920 jobs were not so easily come by. Stan passed his 2nd mate’s ticket at first attempt and in September joined the Royal Mail – as temporary third mate on a German vessel impounded as part of the allies’ heavy-handed war reparations settlement. Stan was present when the ship was handed over to the British in Leith. “A curt naval commander, representing the UK government, made the Germans open their cases as they left, depriving them of anything that belonged to the ship,” he wrote in the copious diaries he kept all his long life. But in January 1921 that vessel too joined the hundreds being laid up along the Tyne.



Fishing fleet laid up in Milford Haven during the coal strike 1921 - from Milford Haven in Old Postcards, J Warburton

By then the pits had been on strike for three months. Unemployment everywhere was rising, and Stan was competing for ships against men with many more years at sea than he had. But his father’s pay was low and his younger brother was earning only a few shillings a week as an apprentice

engineer, so the family needed his wages.

“I called at the offices of all the local shipowners and was received with scant courtesy by junior clerks and office boys. More and more ships were being laid up,” he wrote. Men with master’s tickets were accepting work as able seamen.

By the time Stan got his first job with Shell in 1922, he had again been unemployed for some time. He was offered a berth “out East” as 3rd officer on the Adna – familiar to Bert as the converted War Patriot. “I borrowed £20 from a friend, gave my mother half, bought myself a new suit for £5 and joined the P&O ship SS Kalyan as a passenger for Singapore with £5 in my pocket and a smile on my face.”



Hilfskreuzer Kormoran - Bundesarchiv photo
circa 1940-1941

Stanley Algar and Bert Sivell both went on to careers as masters in Shell. Perhaps they even knew each other; but in March 1941, in the middle of the Atlantic, in the middle of a second world war, their stories diverge.

Twenty-four hours apart, on March 22nd and 23rd, both came under enemy attack, but while the Shell tanker Agnita encountered the [auxiliary cruiser Kormoran](#) commanded by Kapitän zur See Theodor Detmers, the Shell tanker Chama was hit by torpedoes from U97, commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Udo Heilmann. One man and his crew lived; one ship went down with all hands.

Stanley Algar lived.

For the further adventures of Gefangene 100040 in Milag Nord read [Goodbye Old Chap](#), by Stan’s son, the journalist Philip Algar, from which the above is an extract.

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Written by Jay Sivell

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