Lost at sea

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

Archive for the ‘Shell oil tankers’ Category

A sailor’s life – 63. To have and to hold, Pyrula 1922

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Bert and Ena Sivell, wedding day
Staten Island 1922

The visiting tanker captains had egged him on: “Get married,” they said. “Grab the chance while you can.”

Bert Sivell, writing from the master’s quarters of his first “command” – a redundant passenger steamer serving out her days as an oil depot ship off New York in 1922 – took the plunge. “Come out and marry me,” he urged his love, far away in the UK.

The American master of the oil tanker Pearl Shell was the envy of all the Shell masters that winter. He had his wife in Philadelphia, an hour and a bit away by train from the ship, and he trotted off home every night.

“He told me I was a fool for not having you over here months ago,” Bert wrote. “He had not seen his home for two years before he came here, and had not seen his wife for eight months, although she had gone over to ‘Frisco and elsewhere in the States whenever he came to US ports.”

“Come out and marry me,” he urged. “Gossips in Ryde will be busy about conventions and rubbish, but don’t let that worry you. Trust me.”

RMS Homeric postcard, wedding card and newspaper announcement, 1922 - all very proper

So the little milliner from Ryde boldly left the town where she was born and caught the White Star liner Homeric from Southampton in November 1922, carrying in her trunk the homemade trousseau she'd been stitching for three years. Her young man gave her £60 of his savings – which was more than she earned in a year – and for half of it she shared a windowless cabin in second class with a girl called Florence Ayers. (No point paying for a port hole, Bert had said knowledgeably; at that time of year the crossing would be too rough to open it anyway…) Florence and Ena were to remain friends for the rest of their lives.

She'd thought he was day dreaming when Bert first raised the idea in February, in a throwaway line about needing a secretary for all the paperwork the Asiatic Petroleum office was throwing at him.

She had expressed pity that he was darning his own socks. "You had better come over right away, my dear," he wrote. "I have a whole pile of mending of all sorts, even my jacket is falling to pieces, but I have had no time lately."

Bert was marooned a mile off Brooklyn, pumping oil through the worst snowfall the US east coast had seen since the 1880s, and fighting for access to the motor launch which was his lifeline to shore.

New York bay 1922, Bert Sivell snowed in aboard Shell's floating oil depot Pyrula

Across New York bay the great transatlantic steamers came and went, carrying his mail and knocking Pyrula about in their wake. He had nothing much to write about except work.

“I have not been inside a picture house since Christmas, although I fail to see what that has to do with the Asiatic anyway,” he wrote, aggrieved, after rumours in the office that he spent too much time ashore or visiting other ships. “They all forget that our day consists of 24 hours and even if we are not actually working, we live in the midst of it and that is as bad. All last night I spent on deck with the worry of being helpless if she broke adrift and today (Sunday) the 2nd Engineer and I put in four solid hours in the snow cutting out the burst steampipes ready to be sent ashore tomorrow morning. If their ideas were in operation we’d need a wooden crew.”

But in March it all changed, when Pyrula was allowed to chip out her frozen chains and come ashore to Pier 14, Stapleton, NJ. Suddenly Manhattan was only a ferry ride away. They had neighbours and mains electricity and Bert was promised a telephone. He began to enjoy the job.

Out of the blue, the Asiatic announced they might be wanting him to stay on. For another year. In great excitement, he wrote to Ena.

5th Avenue, New York, - bustling Sunday morning - posted 1922

“It would be detrimental to my career in this company to refuse to stay. So, my dear, the point is this: if such an event as the postponement of my leave should occur, will you be willing to come over here and get married and live aboard the ship?”

He had it all figured out, the British consul, the ceremony. He would pay for her passage over. It would be cheaper for Ena, he said, “considerably cheaper, because you can dispense with your wedding dress…”

Bless her, Ena took it on the chin. After months planning a wedding in Ryde, checking rental properties and buying household linen, the letter cost her a sleepless night, but she was game. Her friend Vi Trent had just got married and moved to Leeds, and she’d got quite fed up of the newspaper coverage of the Princess Mary’s sumptuous wedding the previous month. She consulted a fortune teller, who saw a journey and a long life (Ena did not inquire about Bert, perhaps just as well), and then she set about acquiring a passport.

5th Avenue and Flat Iron building NY, posted 1922

Bert kitted himself out in new clothes, American style — straw hat, wasp waisted suit and new tie, and took himself off to explore the sights of New York, bombarding her with postcards. He also began buttering up the local vicar with regular Sunday church attendance.

At either end of High Street, Ryde, their parents were less happy. ”I can understand your people kicking a bit against the idea, because you are a girl and need looking after —!! (ahem! —!! don’t smack me),” Bert wrote. “But why my parents should object I don’t know. I suppose it is because I am the only one.” Bert’s dad had written an angry letter, the gist of which appeared to be that Bert had not asked his consent to marrying aboard – although it probably had more to do with them only having heard of their son’s plans from local gossip. “I wrote back and said that as I was marrying you, I considered you were the only one I should consult.”

Brooklyn Bridge and NY skyline, posted 1922

Shell too was not thrilled. The group permitted overnight visits by officers' wives in port – and their agents in New York, Furness Withy, even allowed wives (though again, only *officers'* wives) to accompany their husbands on short voyages. But Bert Sivell had grown up in sail.

Generations of masters' wives of all nations once made their homes in the saloons of their husbands' sailing ships, generally doing a lot of sewing and letter writing, but learning to take a noon sight or a trick at the wheel, just in case. They were there because shipboard discipline depended on masters remaining aloof – even from their junior officers – and because sailing ship masters were small businessmen often with a financial stake in their ship and no spare cash for idle investment in a house ashore. The wife's comfort was not a prime consideration. "I have occasionally had to hint to him that my name is not down in his ship's articles…" wrote one emancipated captain's chattel in 1873.

It seemed a matter of course to Bert that Ena should live aboard Pyrula with him. A perk of the job. Vivid in his mind was the fate of the chief engineer who had arrived in New York with him the previous year to be met by the news that his wife had died, leaving his four young children in the sole care of the eldest, aged 14. "I shall probably never get such a long spell in port again."

And he got his way. On 8th November 1922, the head office of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum company in St Helen's Court, London, cancelled the home leave due to the young officer-in-charge of the oil tanker Pyrula at the urging of its partner, Asiatic Petroleum, and granted permission for his bride to join him aboard – at 3/6 a day. "As you are aware, this procedure is not a rule of the Company and you should, therefore, regard it as a concession," said Shell, firmly.

Officers of Pyrula and Clam - with Ena Sivell, Bert right

A month later, Bert was on the quay when Homeric pulled in. By noon he and Ena were bowling down Broadway in a taxi, heading for the Staten Island ferry and the church of St John, Rosebank, where the vicar was standing by to wed them. By two o'clock they were onboard Pyrula, man and wife. Bert even organised a tiered cake, so that Ena could post slices home to her friends – proof that the proprieties had been attended to.

The wedding photograph shows a rather lumpy young woman smiling shyly in a sensible two-piece suit and a feathered hat that dwarfs her groom. Bert, ramrod straight in his best uniform, beams stiffly, his mouth tight shut on his bad teeth.

Ena Sivell, Buster and the Microbe, aboard Pyrula

They got themselves a dog called Buster and a black kitten they christened Microbe, and they made a home together at Pier 14, taking in the shows and the sights of New York whenever Bert's work permitted. Vaudeville was on its way out, elbowed aside by the flickering silver screen. But Ena loved the vast and glittering Hippodrome, on 6th Avenue – with its performing seals, midgets and minstrels, and she acquired a stack of 10 cent programmes, with their adverts for fashion houses and ice-cream and perms and even Perrier water. They went to see Hollywood's darling, the silent movie heartthrob Douglas Fairbanks, in The Thief of Bagdad at the Liberty Theatre on 42nd Street as soon as the film opened in 1924, and they made friends ashore, socialised and for almost two years just enjoyed being together.

And then, Ena found she was pregnant and abruptly the honeymoon was over. Ena packed up her playhouse programmes and her souvenir guides of New York and went home. Anglo-Saxon did not allow children on the ship and she had to go back to the Isle of Wight, to set up house and have the baby, alone. Bert had to stay. He did not see his daughter until the baby was more than a year old. Though they did not know it, most of their days together were over.

New York Hippodrome, 6th Avenue, postcard view

Every Sunday for the rest of his life he wrote to Ena, date stamping the envelopes so that she might

read the letters in order, and every year on December 9th a telegram would arrive from somewhere in the world, reading “Shimmer shine. Bert.” This, deciphered out of nautical telegraph code, meant: “Another anniversary of our marriage. How happy we have been, love”.

There was no telegram in December 1941.

# # #

Coming: Transatlantic liners, Majestic and her sisters
Previously: New York, New York

Written by Jay Sivell

March 4, 2011 at 8:02 am

Posted in Historical postcards, Isle of Wight & Sivell family, Seafarers' wives, Shell oil tankers

Tagged with 1922, Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, Asiatic Petroleum company, Atlantic liners, Bert Sivell, Ena Alice Whittington, Furness Withy, handelsmarine, Homeric, life at sea, marina mercante, marine marchande, merchant navy, New York views, oil tankers - Shell, Pearl Shell, Pyrula, Sailors wives, seamen's pay & conditions, Shell oil tankers, Shell tankers, Weather at sea

A sailor’s life – 62. New York, New York

leave a comment »

New York, Liberty by night - postcard
sent 1922

America had been “dry” for eighteen months when the Shell oil tanker Pyrula dropped anchor off New York in autumn 1921 under the stern, sober eye of Miss Liberty.

In Times Square legitimate restaurants and bars had closed, and special investigator Izzy "the human chameleon" Einstein and his straight man Moe Smith were already hundreds of arrests into their extravagant career as prohibition agents – sniffing out under the counter liquor in a variety of plausible disguises, from expansive cigar salesmen to thirsty longshoremen.

It was the age of the speakeasy, just "ask for Joe". There were several thousand underground drinking dens in Manhattan already by that winter, varying from dingy doorways behind which tired bar girls pushed illegally stilled liquor and the lure of sex, to glizy private social clubs peopled by flappers and dapper men in spats. Here, the cocktail grew up, to hide the taste of bad booze. It was the era of jazz, and racketeers and movies.

But the British crew on Pyrula were not destined to see much of the bright lights of the Big Apple. By the time the first snows fell that winter, Bert found himself moored in the open roads off Brooklyn, three miles from the nearest landing stage, as officer-in-charge on a floating fuel pump.

Pyrula was a big ship - 520ft long and "as wide as Union Street," as Bert wrote to his people back home in Ryde, on the Isle of Wight. She had started life as the White Star steamer Cevic, one of the "cattle boats" carrying livestock and immigrants between the US and Europe. She had been requisitioned by the British Admiralty in 1914 and she saw action as a decoy warship – a dummy Queen Mary, with cylinder tanks built into her holds to carry oil. The Anglo-Saxon Petroleum had bought her after the war and Bert had joined her as Mate in Barcelona in September 1921.

Shell oil tanker Pyrula 1921 - Bert Sivell collection

They were bound for New York via Tampico, Mexico, through the hurricane belt. There were 70 officers and crew aboard, all housed over three decks amidships, and his room was the most luxurious he had ever had in all his ten years at sea. It was the size of the sitting rooms in the houses along the street where he had grown up, with electric lights, a fan for hot weather and a bell to the steward's pantry.

The master was an old sailing ship man who was delighted to discover his new first officer had served his time in sail.

Captain Baxter was nearly 60 and had been 20 years in sail before he and his ship were taken over by Shell. Dolbadarn Castle had been demasted and converted to a motor ship, Dolphin Shell, and Baxter had just returned from three years' service with her in the Far East. Pyrula was his first steamer.

Dolbadarn Castle, Dolphin Shell - photo Helderline.nl

He knew the ship to which Bert had been apprenticed at 16, and had met the captain, James Donaldson, in ‘Frisco in 1893. Bert for his part had not a bad word to say about the gentlemanly old sea dog — not even when he brought aboard two tiny chinchilla monkeys, which ran amok among Bert’s fresh paintwork with dirty paws.

“Every evening after tea the old man comes up on the bridge and we have a yarn about the old sailing ship days,” he wrote home in his weekly letter to his waiting sweetheart. “He is really very interesting. Some of the places he has taken his ships need considerable skill to get in. He bought a couple of monkeys in Gibraltar. They are the queerest looking things that ever I saw, very lively and climb all over the place. One has a special liking for my shoulder and when walking up and down the bridge this little article will suddenly spring off the top of a door and land on me. They are quite small, not much bigger than a squirrel. I don’t know how they will stand the cold. We have also a couple of cats this trip, stowaways from Gibraltar.”

The orders had been to collect a cargo of oil from Tampico in Mexico and take it to New York, where Shell was keen to grab a slice of the city’s booming 796,000 barrel a year bunkering fuel market. With the US price of oil off the wharf at $1.85 a barrel, the group’s accountants had worked out that they could make over a dollar a barrel profit shipping it up from Mexico, even including freight and handling and the Mexican government’s 14 cents a barrel tax.

New York, Gay White Way - postcard sent 1922

For some time, the directors had been casting about for a site in New York harbour to build a shore depot with fuel tanks. In February 1921 proposals were “laid on the boardroom table”, as the company minutes show, to buy and develop a 22 acre site which had been found on the New Jersey waterfront opposite Staten Island. It needed dredging and a pier, and was to have cost an estimated

$665,000, but by late summer the scheme had been rejected amid doubts over the vendor's title to the land and it was decided instead to make do with a cheaper option: an elderly depot ship and a young officer-in-charge.

That August Bert was offered the job – and the prospect of a pay jump from £26 to £35 a month, which was most welcome to an ambitious chap saving up to marry his girl as soon as his first leave was due, in eleven months' time. He was 26, and had been with Shell for two years.

At home, unemployment was rising. Demand for British coal, steel and woollens slumped after the war. The empire's markets were in tatters. On both sides of the Atlantic ships were being laid up. Men were being laid off. The old industries struggled, and in the midst of it all a much younger industry, oil, grew strong.

US destroyers laid up at San Diego, california,
circa 1922 - collection Naval Research Center

In ten days after leaving Gibraltar they sighted only four ships, even along the US coast. **"***It shows that the Yankee trade depression is just as heavy as our own because in normal times this coast is alive with shipping, mostly American coastal traffic it is true but even coastal traffic means work for someone,*" Bert wrote.

Bert reported 600 vessels idle in Newport News, VA. Worse than any port in England, he said. And New York and Philadelphia were said to be the same.

The men who had deserted the Red Duster for big Yankee wages during the war were on the beach too. "*The few American ships running will only carry Americans. None of the crews of British vessels calling here ever desert their ships now, so there is no chance of the stranded ones getting away."*

He had scant sympathy. He had served the war in sail, running saltpetre from Chile for the munitions industry and Jarra wood from Australia for pit props. He had endured low pay, bad food and rough men, but it had taught him his trade and in the summer of 1919 he had been very happy to exchange his crisp new sailing ship master's "ticket" for a dry berth on oil tankers and three square meals a day.

He was a qualified captain, but it had taken him nine months to climb back to first officer. Officer-in-charge of an oil depot ship was another step up, but it was hard work.

Bustling crowds on Nassau Street, New York, posted 1920s

Some weeks Bert was on his feet for 63 hours at a stretch, taking oil from the tankers that ranged alongside them in the deep roads, and discharging it into smaller lighters that tendered among the big ships along the Chelsea piers where the White Star liners and Cunarders docked. Tossed by the backwash of the great Atlantic passenger ships that brought him his mail, far from the bright lights on shore, he watched the immigrants arriving from the old world, huddled at the railings for a glimpse of the new.

There was no telephone aboard. If he needed to talk to the agents he had to take the motor launch ashore and phone from the quay. He visited the office in Manhattan twice a week, taking in lunch at his favourite Chinese restaurant up town. It had an orchestra and dancing, which he watched. He loved jazz and occasionally took in a show or a movie. If he enjoyed other diversions, he did not mention them in the letters and cards he fired off to his fiancee, Ena Whittington, on the Isle of Wight.

Marooned on Pyrula, a mile offshore, with a mainly Irish and Scandinavian skeleton crew of fourteen, prohibition made little impression on Bert, although he was not himself was not averse to a tipple, as he admitted as he nursed himself through the ‘flu that laid waste to New York in January 1922. For several days he had lived on hot malted milk and rum — “shocking, and in a prohibition country too,” – and many a ship master shared a dram of the real McCoy with him after the oil had been pumped across, for it was a cold job.

When a Sinn Fein flag, ensign of the Irish free state, appeared on the bulkhead in the crew quarters he prudently ignored it, but when one of the firemen (stokers) succumbed to what Bert suspected were the effects of “moonshine” he had him packed off to hospital ashore, smartly. The authorities tended to ask unwelcome questions about where booze had come from. But the patient was outraged to discover his pay was stopped while he was laid up and threatened to sue. On discharge he refused to return to the ship, and he died of alcohol poisoning in another hospital two weeks later, one of thousands of victims across the US. (“So that settles his lawsuit,” wrote Bert, unsympathetically.)

Shell tanker Pyrula, master's sitting room, 1922 - time exposure with cat in foreground, probably growling

By the beginning of February the snow was 2ft deep on the deck, and all the pipes were frozen up. As the ice melted, it trickled into his rooms in 26 places. Between ships, the stowaway little black cat that had survived the hurricane was his constant companion. It followed him around the deck like a dog and sat on the safe in his room as he worked, growling at its own reflection in the wardrobe mirror.

Unable to get ashore, Bert's pay had never quite reached the £35 a month he had been promised; the ASPCo deducted meals at 3s 6d a day for each man. Overtime rates had been abolished the previous October ("though we still have to work overtime, or face the sack…") and in March, the pay itself was cut by £2 4s a month, the second time in a year. In May it was to go down a third time, they were told, by £1 2s. "We shall soon be going to sea for our health," he wrote dolefully, but to his surprise only one of his crew quit.

By now, Bert was counting the months until his leave, when he was to go back to the island to get married and set up a home of his own ashore. He had been at sea since he was 15 and never home for more than a few weeks until the summer he'd met Ena.

However, at the end of March, all his plans were thrown into the air. After months at anchor, Pyrula was moved to a permanent berth beside a pier on Staten Island. Pier 14, Clifton, had power lines from the shore and Bert got a telephone in his room. Trains and trams ran past the pier gates straight to the Manhattan ferry and the shows, and in the evenings after work, he was able to take a walk.

By late spring Bert was writing chattily home about the 25 cent movies, the talent nights at the local palais and several sightseeing trips he'd enjoyed in a friend's automobile.

Life on the pier was a bustle of activity, with "noise and all sorts of things going on" day and night. One week a small steamer turned up and discharged a cargo of cork, lemons, sardines, and almonds into the shed beside the tanker. All day the scent of lemons hung strong about the wharf. Pyrula had just taken on coal, but Bert uncharacteristically left his ship black with dust from stem to stern rather than risk dirty water running off and spoiling the fruit.

Some shore life diversions were less welcome: one night they were burgled, together with the

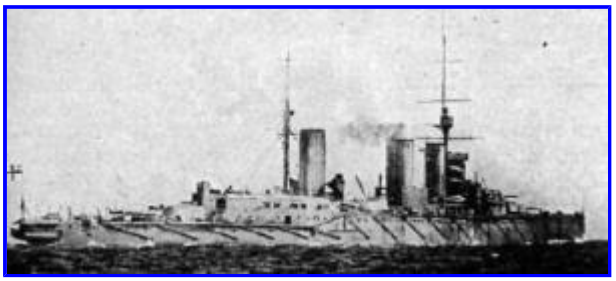
Standard Oil tanker lying beside them, and a four-masted schooner nearby. While Bert slept, the thief or thieves bypassed several night watchmen and the catches on all the doors. “When I woke up at 6am I found my room like a shambles and clothing lying around everywhere.” They had taken his watch, chain and binoculars, plus an overcoat from the steward’s room and shore-going clothes from the other tanker, but missed Pyrula’s pay roll, which was in Bert’s safe, and a gold watch he had brought as a present for Ena.

At home, Ena was busy sewing for the wedding, amid much envy and ribbing from her mates at the milliner’s in Ryde where she now worked. On Pier 14, Pyrula shifted record quantities of bunker oil, the young officer-in-charge was mentioned in letters to head office, and Bert made a momentous decision. His leave was fast approaching. He’d been away three years. He was entitled to go home. But it was rumoured that the agent wanted him to stay.

“If I am ordered to remain here it would be very unwise to kick,” he wrote. “Because I would only prejudice my career in this company.” He would lose Pyrula and his next ship might be out east, where Ena could not follow.

“Come out and marry me,” he telegrammed.

Read on: To have and to hold, Pyrula 1922-1924
Previously: Hurricane at sea



White Star Cevic, future oil tanker Bayleaf-
Pyrula, as dummy Queen Mary

The White Star steamer Cevic disguised as the battleship Queen Mary in 1914, note dummy first and third funnels with no smoke

Written by Jay Sivell

February 21, 2011 at 9:01 am

Posted in Historical postcards, Isle of Wight & Sivell family, Last days of sail, Seafarers' wives, Shell oil tankers

Tagged with Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, Bert Sivell, Cevic, Dolbadarn Shell, Dolphin Shell, handelsmarine, Izzy Einstein, koopvaardij, last days of sail, life at sea, marina mercante, marine marchande, merchant navy, New York, oil tankers - Shell, prohibition, Pyrula, Shell tankers, Tall ships, war at sea, White Star liners

A sailor’s life – 61. Hurricane at sea

with 2 comments

Hurricane damage, Tampa dock, Florida, October 1921 (Photograph: Burgert Brothers collection, Tampa)

“During the afternoon the wind increased. My word, it did howl, it just shrieked past us and the rain came down in torrents unceasingly. A mountainous sea rose and the Pyrula, big ship that she is, was tossed around like a cork. Soon after 4pm four 10 gallon drums of coal tar got adrift in the fore ‘tween deck and then the fun commenced.

“She was capering around so much that she just threw them clean out of the lashings. The bosun managed to rescue two before they came to harm, but was a bit late with the other two. The bungs came out and oh! what a mess. Coal tar spread itself all over the deck and ran out of the scupper holes from where the wind whirled flying tar all over the place. Then, a heavy plank that was chocking off some drums of red lead and other paint in the lower fore peak collapsed, while in the top peak a barrel containing 500 weight of white paint got adrift. During a mad career around the deck it spilled half its contents and collided with a 10 gallon drum of black, so there was another queer mixture.

Fallen telegraph poles, Ybor City, Tampa, October 1921 (University of South Florida collections)

“It was impossible through all that rain to see further than the forecastle head. We were nearest the

centre of the hurricane around 7 pm, after which the barometer began to rise. The sea was terrible – huge waves coming along from all sides. The vessel was buried in spray, but she did not ship a single sea until 7.30pm when she took a beauty. It came aboard practically the whole length of the vessel at the same time. One lifeboat was smashed, the galley skylight was washed off, several awning spars carried away and two beams buckled on the fore deck. To give you an idea of the size, let me say that the boats are all 45 ft above the water. A lot of water went down the engine room skylights and I expect some of the engineers thought their last day had arrived. After that things began to improve, although there was a tremendous sea running for 24 hours afterwards. When daylight came next morning I found my poor lifeboat sitting on top of a steam winch."
Bert Sivell to Ena Whittington, from the Anglo-Saxon oil tanker Pyrula off Florida, October 1921

The unnamed hurricane, a category 4 with winds of up to 140mph, landed off the Caribbean near Tampa on 25 October and swept eastwards across Florida, causing widespread destruction as it slowed, although only six people were killed. Florida was still a sparsely populated fruit growing belt. Aboard Pyrula, rolling and twisting 150 miles away in the hurricane's wake, one of the two stowaway kittens they'd picked up in Gibraltar was lost overboard.

Read on: New York, New York!
Previously: Ships that pass in the night

Written by Jay Sivell

February 12, 2011 at 3:31 pm

Posted in Historical postcards, Isle of Wight & Sivell family, Shell oil tankers, WWI

Tagged with Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, Bert Sivell, handelsmarine, Hurricane, koopvaardij, marina mercante, marine marchande, merchant navy, oil tankers - Shell, seamen's pay & conditions, Shell oil tankers, Shell tankers, Tampa Bay, Tarpon Springs, Weather at sea

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

leave a comment »

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.

Read on: Hurricane at sea
Previously: In sickness and health – Mytilus 1921

Written by Jay Sivell

February 9, 2011 at 3:09 pm

Posted in Historical postcards, Other stories, Shell oil tankers, WWI, WWII

Tagged with Agnita, Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, apprentice, Bert Sivell, Chama, handelsmarine, koopvaardij, Kormoran, life at sea, marina mercante, marine marchande, merchant navy, oil tankers - Shell, Shell oil tankers, Shell tankers, Stanley Algar, Theodor Detmers, U97, Udo Heilmann, war at sea, war reparations, WWI, WWII

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

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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 superintendant 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 Monkbarns to death by U97, lost with all hands aboard the Shell tanker Chama in 1941
blogroll

Written by Jay Sivell

February 8, 2011 at 7:21 am

Posted in Chinese seamen, Historical postcards, Shell oil tankers

Tagged with Abadan, Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, Egypt, handelsmarine, koopvaardij, life at sea, marina mercante, marine marchande, merchant navy, oil tankers - Shell, Persian Gulf, Port Said, seamen's pay & conditions, Shell oil tankers, Shell tankers, Suez canal

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 progess 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

Posted in Chinese seamen, Historical postcards, Last days of sail, Shell oil tankers, WWI

Tagged with Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, Bert Sivell, Economic depression 1921, First world war, handelsmarine, Heijplaat Rotterdam, koopvaardij, last days of sail, life at sea, marina mercante, marine marchande, merchant navy, oil tankers - Shell, Shell oil tankers, Shell tankers, The Netherlands neutral

A sailor's life – 57. The wife's tale II

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Monument to sailors' wives, Odessa

"I never liked the sea," said Dolly Thomas, daughter and granddaughter and wife and mother of

British merchant seaman, looking back over three-quarters of a century. “Even when I lived near it, I never went to look at it.”

When Dolly married 5th Engineer Jim Thomas in 1942, when she was 22, her mother had warned her: “Don’t expect sympathy. No one will understand.”

Dolly’s father was master of one of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary oil tankers that service the navy, and he used to be away for so long and so often that she did not remember meeting him until she was five years old. Jim had followed his father-in-law into the RFA and when Dolly herself became a mother his tanker happened to be in port for repairs, so he could come to her, but he was recalled to the ship within hours of the child’s birth and didn’t see his second son until the little chap was walking. “I missed our first seven Christmases,” said Jim, wryly.

Fishermen's wives memorial,
Gloucester, US

For all the years Jim was at sea, Dolly had made the decisions. She had raised the boys, managed the money, even bought their first house. Yet Dolly and Jim had been married for 56 years when I met them in the bungalow deep inland, where they had retired to live near their grandchildren when Jim finally came ashore. There was a noisy grandmother clock in the hall, and a single framed photograph of an oil tanker – Jim’s last – on the wall. All her married life, said Dolly, she had kept a suitcase packed.

The little suitcase is retired now, and Jim is dead, but for forty years Dolly kept it ready in the corner of her bedroom in South Shields, with a pressed blouse and change of clothes – all set to go to him whenever the telegram arrived saying he was in port for a day or two somewhere in the British Isles. This, and the three weeks leave every two years, was her early married life, and that of all the other seamen’s wives of her generation.

“You’d get a telegram: ‘Ship arriving so-and-so’,” she said, “and you had to lock the house up, you had to get the children all organised, and you had to get them over to whoever was having them for you. The men didn’t think, they’d just send a telegram and expect you to be on the jetty. They didn’t realise the journey you might have, or that you got there and the ship had gone somewhere else, which happened. You were always tugged both ways, you had to leave your children to go to your husband. I can remember my mother saying, ‘If you don’t go, someone else will’… It was hard on the children, but we hadn’t much choice.

Mujer Marinera Lloret de Mar,
Spain

“We were brought up with it,” said Dolly. “My uncles all went to sea. Jim’s father died at sea. That was our life. Father never wanted a shore job; he never wanted to come home. Nor did my husband.”

Jim had merchantmen’s medals for the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, Borneo and Korea, and a photograph of his men on deck with their protective gloves and geiger counters just after the last nuclear test off Christmas Island in 1958, where they were refuelling the destroyers patrolling the exclusion zone. They had been sealed in the engine room – but let themselves out after the blast because of the unbearable heat. The mushroom cloud had, he said, faded in the sky behind them. He remembered fishing in the bay for weeks afterwards, and the crew popping down to the Naafi on the island for a beer of an evening. He hadn’t suffered any ill effect, he said, though he knew of others who had.

When I met them, Jim had been retired for 18 years, and they were living near the son who had not gone to sea, collecting china together in Berkshire. “No, I never liked the sea,” said Dolly, smiling impishly at her husband across the spotless living room.

Waiting on shore, Sligo, Ireland

Did Jim miss it, I enquired. Jim grunted, and shrugged. What was to miss? As an engineer, he had spent most of his time below decks anyhow, he said. His only comment was disgust that their accommodation ashore was no bigger than it had been aboard ship in later years, when he was chief engineer. By then they’d had beds big enough for two and the wives were allowed to come with them a couple of times a year, but that was the 1970s. Things were very different for sea wives before.

“When I married Jim,” said Dolly, “my mother told me, it is no use crying or feeling sorry for

yourself, you'll get no sympathy from me. You married a sailor, you get on with it. She was a hard woman, my mother, but she was right. She was hard, because my father had had to leave her alone such a lot when she was a young wife."

Dolly's mother, Nell Card, was one of four children of a Shetland trawlerman who was knocked overboard by a ship's boom in Aberdeen harbour in 1902 when she was two months old. His body was never recovered. His oldest child was only seven. From the day Nell could hold the big needles she helped her widowed mother and sister knit the great Fair Isle jumpers that had to feed the family until the two boys were old enough to follow their dead father to sea.

Seafarer's wife memorial, Galaxidi, Greece

"That was what there was on Shetland then, knitting or the sea," said her daughter.

Nell was not yet 18 when she met a young English man from Kent, the mate of a ship that had called at Lerwick for repairs at the end of the first world war. They met at the hotel where Nell was working and he had wooed her by telegram for six months.

Nell Card had never seen a bus or a tram until the night she was wed and she set off on the long journey south to meet her husband's people. "I think she wanted to get away from Shetland," said Dolly. She was appalled, however, on arrival in Maidstone on the Sunday evening, to find her mother-in-law darning socks. Shetland islanders still kept the Sabbath. What kind of a family had she married into, Nell wondered. That was 1920.

**Names changed*

Read on: In sickness and in health, Mytilus 1921
Previously: Wives on wharves

Written by Jay Sivell

January 31, 2011 at 9:50 pm

Posted in Other stories, Seafarers' wives, Shell oil tankers, WWI, WWII

Tagged with handelsmarine, koopvaardij, life at sea, marina mercante, marine marchande, Sailors wives, seafarers' pay and conditions, seafarers' wives

A sailor's life – 56. Wives on wharves

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Wife on board (in fur coat), merchant navy, 1920s

"*I often get a yarn with the 'old man' on the same old topic – marriage. His chief argument is that marriage is no good for a man going to sea, because he is seldom home. He says it is only keeping another man's daughter, but I argue what could be better than for a man to come home from a voyage and find his wife waiting with outstretched arms to greet him, because if a girl really loves a man she is willing to put up with her man being at sea most of his time and will make the most of him while he is home. Am I not right, darling?"*
Bert Sivell to Ena Whittington, December 1919

The "old man's" view of women was jaundiced. Captain McDermid – all of 35 - had been engaged once himself, he told Bert during their first trip with the Shell oil tanker Donax. But his girl had spent her last penny to get a fur coat. When he saw that he turned her down, he said, because if she would spend her own money like that, what would she be like with his?

Shell oil tanker Donax (1919), Captain McDermid

But McDermid's bark was worse than his bite. Though unmarried himself, he was happy to wire ahead so that the 2nd Engineer's wife could be waiting on the pier head as the ship came alongside in Shellhaven on their return from the Baltic, and three days later when the tug took her and the chief engineer's wife off again as Donax left for the States, he had three long blasts blown on the ship's whistle as a farewell to the ladies. ("The tug replied by giving a series of blasts, trying to make Hip Hip Hurrah, so the wives had a good send off. There were four British steamers lying at anchor there and I expect they wondered what had gone wrong.")

London Tilbury and Southend railway pier and ferry, Gravesend, Bert's route to Ena and home

In a “home” port, like Shellhaven in the Thames estuary, Shell’s married officers – and married officers only – were permitted to have their wives living aboard with them. ”They have to pay their own expenses, but the firm makes all the arrangements, which is very good of them,” Bert wrote, enviously.

He himself managed only snatched evenings on a sofa at Ena’s digs in Tunbridge Wells, arriving at 6pm and running for the 10.10pm train for Charing Cross, Tilbury, and a midnight walk back to the ship. Once he managed a trip to his parents on the Isle of Wight. Donax had arrived at Thameshaven at 2pm, they were tied up by 5pm, he’d hailed a tug to Gravesend, and run for the ferry to Tilbury just in time to catch the London train. He had got to Ryde as the clocks were chiming 3.3oam.

Small wonder he was envious of married colleagues. ” Here is another chance you have missed,” he wrote in April 1920. ”You could have met the ship yesterday afternoon and stayed on board until tomorrow morning. A little spell like that about twice every two months and the drydocking every six months will not make married life so bad after all, eh! sweetheart, and there is always the prospect of the three months furlough.”

London docklands, undated - not always a comfy spot for the wives to hang around, waiting for their husband's ship

The cranky former RFA Oakol, latterly the Shell oil tanker Orthis, to which he was transferred that May offered even more opportunity for the men to see their wives (“… The 2nd mate’s wife was aboard almost before the anchor was down…”) due to the time she spent in Millwall dock and Shellhaven while the engineers struggled with her engines. Bert managed many more trips to Tunbridge Wells after work, and several to Ryde – taking Ena with him on the night train.

“It will be a taste of what is in store for you in future, dearest, when we are married and you have to suddenly fly off to Glasgow or somewhere else on receipt of a wire. You will get quite used to night travelling.”

Captain Harding had his own wife aboard Orthis as often as possible and was generous with time off for his unwed chief officer. The likelihood of transfer “out East” hung over them all, if not to Palau Bukom in the Singapore Straits, where the Shell group had historic concessions, then at least to Batoum on the Black Sea, where a pipeline delivered oil from the Anglo-Persian’s newly acquired Caspian wells. The cosy brief domesticity in Shellhaven or even Millwall or Rotterdam was a rare interlude, to be grabbed with both hands, spurred by the arrival of charts for Batoum that May.

Shell tanker Orthis (1920), Captain Harding

When the company tried to ban wives, the men were outraged. “There is a new ruling coming out in the firm that no wives are to be allowed on a vessel with benzine in,” Bert reported. ”Some fanatic, I suppose, thinks it dangerous, but I have an idea that rule will be broken a few times or many will leave the firm.”

And they cheered the master of a Belgian time-charter ship who let go from the wharf and anchored in the stream when ordered to put his wife ashore while loading. “The installation manager was aboard within an hour, asking him to resume and saying his wife could stay.”

Time snatched with husbands aboard oil tankers was not an unmixed blessing, at least for the wives. “They have been trying to kill us all just lately here by letting go a lot of gas,” wrote Bert from Shellhaven in August. “They purify petrol by passing some acid through it. This acid is then run into the sea and the end of the pipeline is not far from us. They run this stuff away in the middle of the night and the ‘sniff’ is thick enough to cut. Nearly all the Europeans on board are bad through it. Last night it nearly turned me up and I have been queer all day.”

Summoned by telegrams, expected to park children and leap onto trains at little or no notice, and then kick their heels on wharves in strange ports until someone had time to pick them up, the lot of a merchant officer’s wife was not as simple as it had been in the days of sail. Then, each ship was a small business venture, and it was common for a master to own a part share. Property ashore was idle money, so many captains simply took their wives with them – resulting in children born and raised at sea. As late as the 1920s, there were still wives in sail.

When Bert Sivell joined his third Shell oil tanker, Mytilus, in Rotterdam shortly before Christmas 1920, Captain Jackson had both his wife and his little daughter living on board. Bert couldn’t wait to be married himself.

Coming next: In sickness and in health, Mytilus 1921
Previously: A trip to Dublin, September 1920

Written by Jay Sivell

January 26, 2011 at 5:14 pm

Posted in Historical postcards, Last days of sail, Other stories, Seafarers' wives, Shell oil tankers

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A sailor's life – 55. A trip to Dublin, September 1920

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POBLACHT NA H EIREANN.
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on this fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms in the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government,
THOMAS J. CLARKE.
SEAN Mac DIARMADA. THOMAS MacDONAGH.
P. H. PEARSE. EAMONN CEANNT.
JAMES CONNOLLY. JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

Proclamation of Irish Republic, Easter 1916 outside the Post Office on Sackville Street, Dublin

"Dublin is a fine city, or would be if this unrest would stop," Bert Sivell wrote when the Shell oil tanker Orthis moored in the Liffey in the first week of September 1920. "I think, my dear, your fears about our safety in Ireland are unfounded. It is quite safe for anyone to go ashore as long as they keep their tongues quiet."

Dublin was under curfew. In the two years since the end of the first world war, Irish republicans had set up their own parliament, declared their inalienable right to nationhood in the face of the "existing state of war between Ireland and England" and raised £355,000 to fund the struggle for independence. Sinn Féin had 73 elected MPs and a volunteer army harrying the occupying forces. For the British, the country had become increasingly impossible to police.

In March 1920 MPs in London had passed the Irish Home Rule bill, and the first of hundreds of poorly trained unemployed ex-servicemen – known as Black and Tans for their motley uniforms – were posted across the Irish Sea to help keep order, followed the next month by the more ruthless, officer-class Auxiliaries. Searches became rougher and reprisals less discriminate, until the month before Bert arrived the coroners' courts had been suspended, because of the rising tide of verdicts

against British forces.

The assizes had failed in June, no jurors being willing to serve. The dwindling Royal Irish Constabulary, ostracised by the local population, intimidated and harassed by the guerrilla tactics of the volunteer Irish Republican Army, had been forced to pull back to the cities, leaving the IRA to torch the abandoned outposts – and 100 income tax offices. With elected Sinn Féin members in control of most councils even local taxes were not being passed on.

In the weeks before Bert's visit, dockers in Dublin had downed tools, refusing to handle "war materials", and train drivers were refusing to carry British troops. In mid August, a Restoration of Order in Ireland bill was hurriedly pushed through parliament – effectively introducing martial law.

Sackville Street, Dublin, postcard view sent after the Easter Rising but not showing the destruction

"Everything appears quite normal, but yet there is a queer expression on all the men, a kind of suspicious, sly expression," wrote Bert, on September 8.

"We wandered up Sackville Street where the Easter rioting [1916] took place and inspected some of the ruins. The Post Office, which was burned and completely gutted, was a fine stone building. It had not long been built when it was destroyed. Now only portions of the walls are left standing. After a while we boarded a car and went to Phoenix Park. This is a fine part, with gardens and all sorts. There were crowds of people out in spite of the rain.

"We enjoyed our walk and about 10pm took another car back to Sackville Street. Things were getting pretty lively then with dancing at the street corners etc. Bicycles fly round here with no lights at all and vehicles only carry the off-side light so there is some excitement even in crossing the street. We got home just after 11pm. I do wish you were able to come round with me and see all these nice places.

"Dublin is under martial law and the curfew sounds every night at midnight. No one is allowed out then until 3am except with a special permit. Needless to say we had a permit to work cargo on Monday night. They wanted us to finish about 11pm, but I was not having any. Somehow the pump would not work very fast. It is strange how these things happen when one is in a hurry. So the 'old man' and I went ashore again on Monday evening. He ordered a carriage down and we drove up in style."

It was the best port they had struck so far, he said - their moorings being only a mile and a quarter from the centre of the city, unusual for an oil tanker. "So one can't grumble."

"My dear, after what I have seen in Dublin, I shall never believe another newspaper report. They are printed to be sold and all the talk about Ireland has been well enlarged for the public benefit."

*

British troops in Dublin 1920s, collection
National Photographic Archive, Ireland

Twelve days later Orthis was back in the Liffey, having called at Portishead and Barrow-in-Furness. Even Bert noticed the change. “When we came into dock on Sunday forenoon the first thing we saw was a steamer with sentries and fixed bayonets posted everywhere. She was lying next to our berth and when we got closer we saw that soldiers were discharging her cargo. It turns out that she brought a cargo of army huts in sections from France and the dockers refused to discharge her as in their opinion the cargo was classed as munitions.

“The soldiers were working all day Sunday and a fleet of motor lorries were busy taking the stuff away. We went ashore in the evening and took a car down to Kingstown, about five miles away. It is a very nice little place. A band was playing and all the Irish beauty was out on parade. We spent a very enjoyable evening on the whole and returned on board about 11pm.

“… Yesterday the soldiers were at work on the steamer again. The lorries this time were travelling in convoys and were guarded by an armoured car. There was trouble in Dublin yesterday morning and three soldiers were killed as well as several injured. You will probably see something about it in the papers. We went ashore again yesterday evening, but the signs of unrest were quite evident. The police were patrolling in groups of three, squads of military police were out and several armoured cars were touring the streets. We saw a mob of about 300 down one street, so taking everything into consideration we decided that discretion was the better part of valour and ‘beat it’ for home. This morning the soldiers turned up to work on the steamer but the sentries have been doubled, so they are evidently expecting trouble.”

The letter is dated September 20, though evidently it was not closed until the following day. That morning 18-year-old Kevin Barry was arrested with a gun in his hand after IRA volunteers ambushed an army truck at a bakery in Church Street. Three soldiers were killed. That evening British forces – witnesses claimed Black and Tans – attacked the town of Balbriggan, outside Dublin. Houses, pubs and a mill were wrecked. Two men died in police custody.

Bloody Sunday was barely more than a month away. Bert didn’t go back.

Read on: Wives on wharves, Mytilus 1921
Previously: Flaming funnels, Orthis 1920

Written by Jay Sivell

January 24, 2011 at 11:14 am

Posted in Historical postcards, Other stories, Shell oil tankers

Tagged with Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, Balbriggan, Bert Sivell, Dublin, handelsmarine, Kevin Barry, koopvaardij, life at sea, marina mercante, marine marchande, merchant navy, oil tankers - Shell, Shell oil tankers, Shell tankers, Sinn Fein, Troubles

A sailor's life – 54. Flaming funnels, Orthis 1920

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Orthis callactis Dalman fossil,
1828

"This morning a box arrived on board marked 'fragile' and on opening it what do you think I found? A glass case containing a couple of Orthis shells mounted on a piece of pearl and the vessel's name engraved on another piece of pearl, the whole lot set off on blue plush. All the ships of the fleet have a similar case. It is supposed to be placed on the saloon sideboard, but as we have no saloon it will have to go in the messroom."

26 May 1920, Millwall dock, London

The Shell tanker Orthis started life as the 1,144 grt creosol class harbour oiler Oakol, bought cheap from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary during the oil group's post-war shopping spree in 1919.

Shell tanker Orthis, formerly RFA Oakol -
Helderline collection

Named apparently after a Paleolithic fossil by someone in the company with a sense of humour, Orthis was small and scruffy, a dwarf against the purpose-built Donax and a fleabite to the 18,000 tonners being built in the US for Eagle Oil. She was a mess, and as new first mate it was Bert Sivell's job to knock her into shape, supervising the new Chinese crew painting her into the company's livery, and scouring and steaming the tanks until they were clean enough to carry benzene.

“What d’you think to the old yacht?” the marine superintendent at Shellhaven had said, inspecting the vessel in June 1920, after a month’s hard graft. For once Bert was tactful, blandly ignoring the little ship’s tendency to shoot flames out of her funnel, fifteen or twenty feet high, which the refinery staff seemed to find unnerving.

(“The shore people will not let us run our dynamo now in case a similar thing should happen, so we have to stop pumping at 9pm before we can have lights aboard.”)

In two years flat the company was to snap up 32 surplus vessels, ranging from ex-RN oilers and dry goods carriers built for the Admiralty and the wartime Shipping Controller, to an old Canadian train ferry (Limax) and two halves of a refloated wreck (Radix). The Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co. alone bought sixteen of the 416 government-commissioned “War” range of standard ships, six of the emergency wartime construction “Leaf” freighting tankers that had had to be put under civilian management because of the US neutrality act, and several former RFA “Ol” oilers, including little Orthis-Oakol.

War Expert became Anomia

By late 1920, these ships were starting to take their places in the burgeoning Shell fleet: War African became Absia, War Expert the unlovely Anomia (“Captain Cass her skipper says he’s going to call her Amonia, it’s the only way he can remember it…”), Aspenleaf, Briarleaf, Dockleaf and Elmleaf became Prygona, Lacuna, Litopia and Meloma, – the biggest of them only 7,550 grt.

Meanwhile, Orthis’s engineers had spent the early summer twiddling and tweaking in Millwall dock, trying to tame the old oiler’s combusting engines and wayward steering gear. (Judging by the dents in her hull, a long-standing problem, Bert mused.) He didn’t repine though. Twice he managed a dash to see his parents on the Isle of Wight, once whisking Ena with him on the night mail; twice he managed a snatched evening with her in Tunbridge Wells after work, arriving at 6pm and running for the London train again at 10pm; and at Whitsun they achieved one glorious sunny weekend in each other’s arms on the cliffs at Minster, where two weeks later he was sluicing the last of a load of dirty benzene out of his tanks into the Thames in a way that would give modern marine authorities a fit.

Rotterdam postcard harbour panorama 1920

Twice Orthis went to Rotterdam too, but all he ever saw was the tanks of the installation. “There was a little village about ten minutes walk from the ship, but it was not worth while going ashore,” he wrote. “In any case, I have quite enough to do on board. I still have an awful lot of writing as well as the ordinary work of running the ship and her crew and in addition I have to look after the victualling of the ship for which I receive the large sum of £3 per month as an extra.”

With that and the £3 war bonus and overtime, he was earning per month about three-quarters of what Ena earned per year – £40 making hats. Shell paid well.

In June they went to Helsingfors (Helsinki), via the Kiel canal, still dodging sea mines even in the North Sea but now with the added hazard of the erupting funnel.

Kiel canal postcard 1920

“Just before entering Holtenau lock at the Kiel end of the canal our funnel went afire at 1am and being a pitch black night of course everything was well lit up by the glare. All the Germans in the vicinity, including our pilot, got the “wind up” badly, but we are getting used to these little happenings. They are quite harmless as long as no benzine is about.”

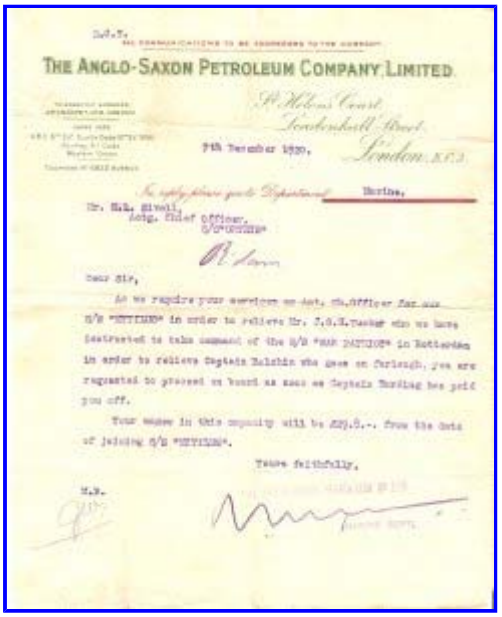
On the return journey, while navigating Brunsbuttel lock, another eruption managed to ignite one of the lifeboats. “We caused great excitement among the shore community,” wrote Bert.

After Finland, when Bert and Captain Harding enjoyed two illicit evening trips ashore together, listening to the bands in the park, visiting the zoo, and not getting back to the ship until 1am – “when it was still light enough to read a newspaper” – the real work started. Up and down they ran to Hull and Granton, outside Edinburgh; 15 hour trips, pumping as soon as they were alongside and sailing again as soon as they’d done. Bert barely got his clothes off and the overtime was ratcheting up nicely, but there were no flying visits to Tunbridge Wells, just more paperwork for dented jetties – and an inquest.

(En route back from Scotland a fire had broken out in the “European” galley, fatally injuring the Chinese chief cook. They swung the tanker into the wind to prevent the flames spreading and Bert doctored the all-too conscious victim with carron oil and opium, swaddling him in wadding, lint and sheets. But the poor man was too far gone. The tanker put back into Leith, and the cook was ferried ashore in a lifeboat, and Bert went with him in the horse drawn ambulance over the cobbles. But the doctor said it was a hopeless case. An enquiry ensued.)

“My dearest sweetheart, I am so sorry you only had one letter from Thameshaven but on these short runs I don’t seem about to fit in the time for much letter writing. We were only 15 hours in Hull and a few minutes under 24 hours at Thameshaven, so you can imagine how much spare time the ‘poor’ mate gets after he has finished with cargo and the thousand odd jobs in getting ready for sea again …

The spring-clean is going on very, very slowly. It will be some weeks before I can make this thing look anything like one of the ‘Shell’ line vessels and I expect as soon as I have finished the job I shall get a transfer to another old rattle box.”



THE ANGLO-SAXON PETROLEUM COMPANY LIMITED

Shell's (unusually chatty) official letter appointing Bert Sivell to its oil tanker Mytilus

The transfer when it came, came quickly. In December 1920 Bert was appointed acting chief officer of the 5,000 tonner Mytilus. Captain McDermid of Donax, whom he met in Rotterdam that January, took all the credit and fished out a bottle of port to celebrate.

“He told me that when I was with him he had had special orders to watch me and report back accordingly. He says Donax is altogether a different ship since I left.” Shell was negotiating the building of 40 more Donax-type ships in US, according to McDermid – on top of twenty-six (he said) already under construction all over the world. Thirteen were due for commission that year. “Think of the master’s jobs…”

McDermid predicted Bert would be master himself in three years.

Read on: Dublin and the troubles, 1920
Previously: Christmas at sea, Donax 1919

Work in progress: the book I never wrote about the sailor grandfather I never knew, from apprenticeship on the square-rigger Monkbarns to death by U97
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Written by Jay Sivell

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