

John Lott served his deck-apprenticeship with British India, and he was a cadet on *Chantala's* maiden voyage. Here, with the assistance of several of his fellow apprentices, he looks back to those early days in his sea-going career.

CHANTALA CADETS – VOYAGES I AND II
BY
JOHN LOTT

The 'Flying Scotsman' delivered the cadets from London to the arrival platform of Glasgow railway station. There we were met by Mr Tynan of Head Office who enquired if we had had something to eat. Whether we had Breakfast in the Refreshment Room I cannot remember (Food rationing was still part of daily life). Transport to the shipyard had been arranged but there was some difficulty mustering the trunks, suitcases and the odd kitbag from several luggage vans interspaced along the length of the train. I cannot recall if we were issued with any extra clothing coupons or if the regulation clothing, from Naval Outfitters, either Gieves or Miller, Rayner and Haysom, had to be purchased using the year's allowance of coupons. My BI blazer was acquired with some of my mother's clothing coupons. (Parents were required to contribute £50 when signing Indentures.)

Shipyards are fascinating places; noisy and full of activity. The background seemed to be filled by the huge bulk of a P & O liner under construction. *Chantala* lay at a fitting out berth. Easily identified by the familiar black funnel with two white bands, her superstructure paintwork shone with a hint of gloss. While boarding we noticed shipyard litter was apparent plus the smell of drying paint.

Cadet accommodation was on the Port side in the 'tween deck amidships for'd to No 1 Hold Bulkhead, access being by a stairway from the main accommodation. A series of bulkheads separated the Heads, Shower and Bathrooms, POs' cabin, Messroom, 'Community'? Room and Dormitory area. A fore and aft corridor linked these compartments. The Schoolroom was abaft No 3 hatch on the Boat Deck.

Limited locker space provided the first challenge – how to adjust to daily requirements for suitable clothing. With so much cleaning and stowing to be done to prepare *Chantala* for acceptance trials and our passage North About to Middlesbrough, blue dungarees were the rig-o-the day.

Within a matter of a day or so one problem became apparent: some of the more Senior cadets had had the services of a Cabin steward on previous ships and were aware of the place the 'Chota Sahib' Cadet occupied within the hierarchy of a ship. *Chantala* cadets were the crew and housekeeping was our domain. Some did not accept this with good grace. The disgruntled Chota Sahib perception persisted throughout the voyage. It was necessary to adopt a uniform approach to making up bunks, folding towels, stowing shoes and other personal items in a shipshape manner for ALL HANDS. Without a certain methodology living areas became something akin to a Kasbah.

One of the more humorous examples occurred when a newly arrived Senior cadet (Derek Sheridan) while climbing the gangway espied a colleague from a previous voyage wielding a broom. On exchanging a greeting the deck sweeper (Peter Clarke) called out "Get off! Get off before it's too late! This ship is like the bloody *Altmark*¹."

The choice of Chief Officer Frank Downer as Chief Instruction Officer (C.I.O.) could not have been more suitable. A gentleman with a distinguished WWII record in the Royal Navy, he proved to be mentor, father confessor and educator to thirty-one young men. Sadly, having left *Chantala*, I did not meet him again.

Chantala's Chief Officer, R Billen, was a taciturn though highly intelligent man: he did not suffer fools gladly. Possessing a slight lisp which the 'wags' amongst the cadets soon emulated, the phrase 'So-and-So, send me a Bhoys with Bwains – not a Bloody Fool' was often repeated.

The Master, Captain H F Collinson was not often seen except on Inspections of our accommodation. He possessed a motorcycle of powerful performance – always carefully stowed in the Fo'cstle, it was a matter of prime importance to the Duty Watch to ensure a soft landing at times of shore side discharge.

We signed Articles on the 1st March 1950: a day or so later *Chantala* proceeded to the Tail-o-the-Bank for trials. On a light ship draft the ship achieved a little over 17 knots but was inclined to fall away rapidly if the coxswain wasn't up to the mark. The Bridge Course Recorder (a gadget which looked like an aneroid barometer) traced a course akin to a harmonic oscillation experiment. Mercifully, we soon ran out of trace paper.

Transit of the Minches and Pentland Firth was decidedly unpleasant – many were sick. Dounreay Nuclear Power Station was under construction – I remember remarking to the Officer of the Watch (OOW) that standing on the top of the partly constructed concrete dome housing the reactor must be a hilarious experience. Pounding displaced the limbers in No 1 and some in No 2 Holds – those who were operational had the frustrating job of replacing them prior to arrival in Middlesbrough.

Chantala loaded some general cargo and a considerable number of railway rails for Sydney. I am uncertain whether *Chindwara* was close at hand, nevertheless Middlesbrough remains a memory of superb beer and a legal conviction for a 'visitor' caught pilfering on board.

Other cadets joined in Middlesbrough and soon two watches were established each with a Petty Officer Cadet (POC) in erstwhile charge plus a 'Buffer' – the Chief Petty Officer Cadet (CPOC) who was responsible for attempting to make things happen!

Two handpicked European seamen and a Bosun of wide experience assisted the more sophisticated side of ship work. The three were responsible for the paint locker and running gear for the heavy lift derricks. Cadets were

responsible for the cargo working gear including adjustments of derricks over hatchways. Some of the new chums found 'executive jargon' difficult to comprehend with occasionally spectacular results. While adjusting the position of a derrick a cadet surging the topping lift wire on a winch drum was ordered to 'walk back' – incredulously he let go of the wire and walked away! The derrick free of any constraint commenced a stately, accelerating downward arc – only the presence of mind of one young cadet (Clyde Ambrose) using a chain stopper averted a costly accident.

The Community (Common) Room – Lounge Room to some – contained a piano and happily we had some good pianists amongst us. It was a source of wonderment to many that the number of bottles it housed never impaired its performance. The room's furnishings included a pale blue woollen carpet with chair and bench covers to match. This was an unfortunate choice as any work involving oil either for operational or protective purposes immediately became apparent – footmarks on the carpet. We were constantly in trouble as tablecloths and linen came in contact with partially cleaned elbows and hands.

The Outward Passage to Australia under a P & O charter was uneventful, however, we were to experience lengthy delays in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. With Port Phillip Bay providing a rather chilly anchorage for days before going alongside, boredom became a problem. *Chantala's* lifeboats were lowered to exercise in Abandon Ship and Man Over Board procedures and furthermore, to experience how unwieldy the things were when sailing and under oars. On one occasion a challenge between two crews for the best time to the ship's falls was made – The CPO's prize to the winning crew – a glass of beer in a discrete pub at some future time (Under our Indentures no one was to frequent taverns and alehouses....and secondly, the Company's uniform was to be worn at all times when ashore). The outcome of this race was to have ramifications later in Brisbane!

In Melbourne many friendships were established – the Overseas League, Victoria League and several other organisations were particularly hospitable. Melbourne's weather was atrocious – rain frequently interrupted discharge of cargo and delayed our sailing schedule. The year 1950 was a time of shortages in the U.K. Clothing coupons were required for the ever-necessary white uniform shirt with detachable collar. When the Superior brand disposable white gloss cardboard collar arrived in the market at 2/6 per packet (I still have some) it made compelling economic sense to any Cadet on a limited income. Using a good quality eraser could extend the 'life' of one collar, however there was a disconcerting limitation to their use. The CPO and four of his colleagues were invited to Dinner in South Caulfield. Boarding a tram in a heavy rainstorm they arrived somewhat bedraggled – and – cardboard collars were the talk of the evening. Over 50 years later one collarless young man is still remembered by members of the family.

A formidable delay occurred in Sydney – three weeks of almost continuous rain and No 3 Hold tank top punctured by a sling of railway iron. Fortunately,

they didn't go through the outer shell, which would have caused serious flooding.

The ship's laundry was 'midships on the main deck and contained both Bendix washing machines and an equal number of driers. With so much humidity from the daily rain this was a busy place – little could be done to reduce the level of mould in clothing, shoes and boots but at least the working rig could be kept clean and dry. Among us was a large young man with a superb physique. He was strikingly handsome in a beautifully hand knitted woollen jumper (some adoring young lady perhaps?). In due course washing the jumper became a priority – there was one thing – this young man could not be told anything about the operation of a Bendix washing machine. In the course of minutes he proved beyond reasonable doubt a XXOS jumper can be reduced to an ideally sized deck polisher. The incredulous look as he fished the object out of the machine captured on film would have made a best seller.

Brisbane provided the opportunity to fulfil 'the first alongside challenge' in Port Phillip Bay. A distant Pub alongside a tramline was identified and a rendezvous time nominated. In due course a number of well turned-out Cadets boarded trams and departed for a pleasant afternoon. The BEER was partially consumed when – disconcertingly – who should arrive but the Chief Officer. The next morning *Chantala* very nearly had a change of 'management' – a new CPO. Billen merely remarked with something of a grin 'Choose your friends more carefully in the future'. We had a 'Mole' in our midst!

Loading in Melbourne and homeward bound, two Australian born Cadets joined to replace the two who had jumped ship in Sydney. In more recent times much discussion has taken place at Reunions in Penang, Brisbane and Auckland as to where Gavin and Davis had gone. At that time Entry and Resident requirements were almost non-existent; certainly a far cry from the bureaucratic nightmare existing today.

Chantala's last main port was Fremantle where we were to receive a previously contracted preparation of deep tanks for loading whale oil from a whaling station in Shark's Bay. Something went sadly awry with the contractors – we sailed after being alongside for less than a day, much to the indignation of cadets. Not surprisingly the cadets found themselves cleaning down and dressing the tank's surface with whale oil – the topside of the tank provided an interesting exercise in gravity defying antics, as no scaffolding was available. The combination of ship motion, heat, lack of ventilation, plus the fetid stench of whale oil was too much for many stomachs. It was an appalling job. Later, a request via the CIO to speak to the Master was granted. The CPO suggested that the financial difference between what would have been paid to the Australian contractor and *Chantala's* 'labour cost' be used to establish funds to purchase additional equipment for the ship. We badly needed something akin to sailing whalers for competitive sailing and also a locker for heavy weather gear. (Burberry's and uniform caps were useless in such conditions).

We anchored in azure blue water in Shark's Bay, loading oil from a WWII landing barge, which came from Maude Whaling Station, and had a wonderful opportunity to observe an astonishing variety of fish species. Pity knowledge of Australia's early history was so obscure – we might have been allowed to use the motor lifeboat to visit Cape Inscription where numbers of Ancient mariners had previously landed. (As a matter of interest two posts, one erected by Vlaming in 1697 and the other by Hamelin in 1801 also adorned by King in 1828, are on display in the Maritime Museum, Fremantle. The pewter relics of Vlaming and Hamelin are now in the Museum of the Institute, Paris, France, having been 'annexed' by Freycinet in 1818).

Shark's Bay to Marmagoa was pleasant sailing. There, *Chantala* loaded manganese ore for the Continent. *Chantala's* soccer team considered themselves to be very capable and a match was arranged with a local side. Much interest was created when *Chantala's* team equipped with soccer boots were piped onto the field by the skirl of Ken Nettleship's bagpipes. The outcome was a chastening experience, our team being roundly thrashed by a bare-footed team.

When not at sea, Colours were performed at 0800 and sunset by the Duty Watch and one of the two Buglers on board, David Medlicott Taylor and John Lott. We were bunkering in Aden when *Orcades* arrived at her moorings just before sunset. Orient Line maintained this traditional ceremony by using a recording and the ship's public address system – highly effective public relations! Not to be outdone *Chantala* sounded sunset 30 seconds early, the Bugler standing on the Monkey Island. Much to our delight, our much larger neighbour struck simultaneously. Later a charmingly phrased Aldis message was received from their Staff Captain.

The first edition of *The Chantalian* was printed using a Gestetner under the guidance of 'Long John?', the Purser. Compiled by Keith Wilkinson and John Young the very readable journal contained many of Keith's artistic cartoons – the quips were provided by John. A number of other cadets were involved in producing *The Chantalian*, with hand coloured covers the copies were (my memory) hand sewn. After so many years has anyone a copy of the first edition?

One last thought – I don't recall any *Chantala* cadet being ordered to – 'Man the Chains'. It was part of the 'ordinary practice of seamen' when sailing in shallow waters to have someone using the 'Hand Lead' (twenty-five fathoms of line with 10 pounds of lead on one end). I had a spectacular introduction to the art of 'Swinging the Lead' in *Mulbera* – several passengers were almost decapitated! Stewart Bolles mentions that BI Company regulations stated that the means for checking the accuracy of hand lead lines were to be marked on the bridge deck of each vessel.

Chantala provided training for a large number of cadets. Among the first thirty-one, many were later Master Mariners and one or two Extra Masters, Coastal and Deep Sea Pilots, Harbour Masters and Marine Surveyors. There were graduates in Law, Economics, Arts and Accounting, a farmer, a Lloyds

'Name' and a paint manufacturer. Others had doubtless achieved success but unfortunately contact has been lost. Can anyone say we had the proverbial 'Candlestick Maker' among those 769 Chantalians?

Footnote

¹ The German supply ship *Altmark* (Captain Dau) with two escorting Norwegian torpedo boats the *Scarv* and *Kjell* were lying within Jossingjord on the night of the sixteenth of February 1940. Despite protests from the Norwegians a boarding party from HMS Cossack (Captain Vian) liberated over 300 prisoners of war (survivors from merchant ships sunk by the Admiral Graf Spee) who were being kept under demeaning conditions.

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