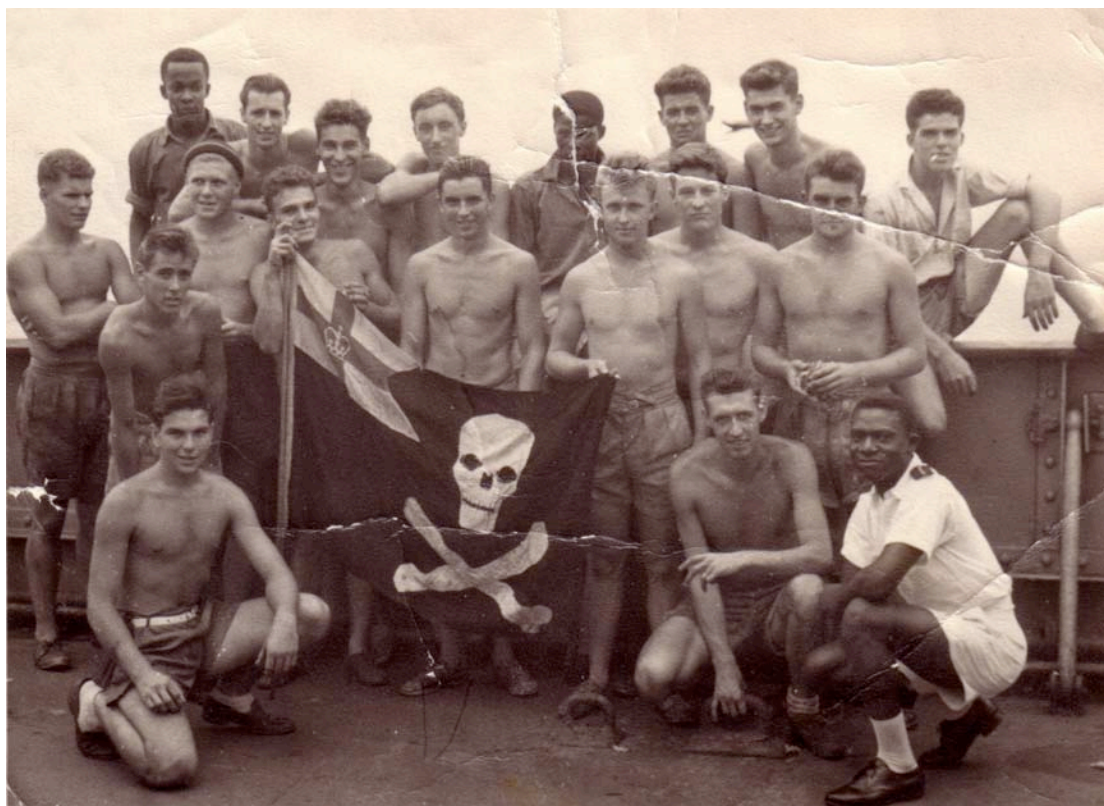


Norman Powell was an apprentice on the *Obuasi* from September 1956 to September 1957. He sent this photograph to Derek Bailey, the editor of *The Elders of Elders*, the newsletter of the Elder Dempster Pensioners Association.



The Crowd

It was taken on Norman's last trip on the *Obuasi*, and it shows him with his fellow apprentices, and it prompted Derek to refer to this group as a bunch of "ruffians". The following is Norman's amusing reply to Derek:

**RUFFIANS OR REPROBATES?
BY
NORMAN POWELL**

I was cut to the quick by your calling the *Obuasi* cadets "ruffians" when responding to the photograph I sent you which was made worse in the following newsletter when a chappie writing a letter to the editor referred to us as "pirates" just because we had a jolly roger flag. In truth, we were just a bunch of nice, misunderstood, gentle god fearing lads doing our best to adhere to the spirit of our indentures. (The part about frequenting taverns and houses of ill repute excepted of course.)

During my tenure in *Obuasi* we did not "raid" a single ship – I think it was too much trouble and we were just too lazy!! Indeed, upon reflection, the scrapes that we did get into were in the most part occasioned by penny pinching of our penurious employers.

For instance:

For some time the lads had been asking for a few fathoms of light wire for use as a bowsing-in wire to assist painting under the flares bow and stern. This request had been ignored so old backsprings left over from loading logs had to be used. Well any wire that has been used by a Takoradi log gang is not fit for further service being kinked, stranded and generally bugged but still the lads persevered in the call of duty and painted the ship to perfection, risking life and limb to an old wire that had actually parted at Matadi costing Bosun George 20 paint pots and 20 ten ounce round brushes lost into the Congo.

The ship was in an uproar when I boarded. The lads were mustered on deck while “suits” from head office (including head cadet Millard) and the staff of the rigging loft were tearing the ship apart. Apparently the riggers had brought onboard all the “necessaries” to secure some deck cargo and then gone ashore for their cup of tea. The lads swore that they saw the turnbuckles, shackles and clips, etc., but that coil of lashing wire must have gotten lost somewhere as it was just not onboard. Needless to say that the coil was not found – at least until it became time to paint overside when a brand new coil of lashing wire appeared.

Another incident:

Paint rollers were a fairly new innovation and when we saw them being used on other ships we asked if we could have a few. The Mate, (Jerry Crangle) duly requested them and it was refused – to this day and after a lifetime of marine operations I cannot understand the thinking behind that decision!! Anyway, it came to pass that we dry-docked before the start of my second voyage in *Obuasi* at Newport, Monmouthshire, as it was then.

The shipyard gang were very efficient and showed up with rollers to paint the anti-corrosive and anti-fouling paint – they too knocked off mid-morning for a cuppa. They were not gone long but when they returned – all of their rollers had disappeared!!! All hell broke loose but of course, us cadets knew nothing. You never saw so many innocent faces, but they did re-appear during our passage to the States when we were blessed with 14 days of wonderful weather – *Obuasi* never looked better. In fact, I was on the wheel when we picked up the pilot entering Norfolk on a summer evening. We were heading directly into the sun and the fore deck was dazzling. The pilot looked around at the holystoned decks, beautiful varnishwork, etc., and said to Captain Brookes “Say cappy, what sort of ship is this?”. Capt Brookes was a little nonplussed and said it was just an ordinary cargo ship. The pilot then responded with an element of disgust: “It looks like a goddam yacht”.

Another thing we asked for trip after trip was a swimming pool and trip after trip we were declined. Well we were always instructed to use our initiative so we did. The tarpaulin was left laying around by a Palm Line ship, and the baulks of timber came from some pier repairs. Chippy and Bosun George helped although we had to swear that they did not know anything about the scheme. Anyway the pool was pre-fabbed and everything made ready so

that, on a Sunday afternoon after a good lunch and when everyone was having a snoozy, the pool was assembled and filled on the port side of the afterdeck.

I took the helm at 4 p.m. Shortly afterwards Captain Brookes came on the bridge. “Bit of a port list Jerry?” Mate Crangle mutters something about engineers and tanks and telephones the engine room apparently without getting much satisfaction from the second – finally says: “yes, you can knock off the fire pump – who the hell asked for that on a Sunday afternoon?”

Captain Brookes leaves the bridge for a stroll along the boat deck and reappears a few seconds later telling Jerry: “they've got a swimming pool, go look”. Jerry goes down the ladder and re-appears a few seconds later and agrees, commenting that the passengers were also enjoying it. The conversation was then taken to the bridge wing where I could not hear but the upshot was we were allowed to keep our pool until the deckspace was required for logs.

Upon reviewing the foregoing and remembering some other incidents not mentioned perhaps you were correct after all, in your character assessment – but we did show initiative!!

I would be remiss if I did not mention that Captain Brookes, Chief Officer Crangle, 2nd Officers Parnam and Biel and 3rd Officer Gibson were absolutely the correct choice for such a ship as *Obuasi*. They had a sense of humour, set a fine example, let us get away with a lot of things but were firm when they had to be and never lost control. Similarly, Bosun George had just the right touch in dealing with a bunch of “ruffians” (he used to call us reprobates) and Chief Steward Killick was also the correct choice.

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