

THE DAY THE LIGHTS WENT OUT

It was a strange twist of fate back in 2005 when attending the funeral of the wife of a former ship mate that I should hear a voice from my seagoing past in the person of Ian Endersby. We had sailed together as sea cadets in the Eastern & Australia Steamship Company Ltd and had not made contact for 43 years. Our conversation almost immediately went back to our time in the Far East and one particular day, Sunday, the 2nd September 1962 in Hong Kong. What a day and what a storm!!

The ship we sailed together on during that fateful day was named "Eastern", a steam vessel of gross registered tonnage of 9,896 and 500 feet in length. We were but one of 132 merchant vessels in Hong Kong Harbour preparing to exchange cargo, either at anchor onto barges or alongside the docks at Kowloon.



We were lucky enough to be alongside No. 2 Wharf exchanging cargo when the No. 10 storm signal was suddenly hoisted. This signal gave a warning that the storm was very close. There was every indication that this was a typhoon. The word typhoon means "No. 1 wind" and is the name given to tropical revolving storms in the China Seas. The name of this particular TRS on the 2nd September 1962 was called "Wanda".

The master of "Eastern" was Captain Bernie Dun, one of the company's most distinguished seafarers and probably our greatest asset in everyone's survival that day. He had already lived through being a Japanese prisoner of war. Captain Dun decided to leave the cargo berth at Kowloon and make the vessel secure to a special typhoon buoy in the harbour. All seemed peaceful, however, everyone was totally oblivious to the size and intensity of "Wanda" which was about to be unleashed. All arrangements securing the vessel such as lashing of cargo derricks, ballasting all empty tanks were carried out and we sat calmly yawing by cable to the buoy.

The main visual sign of impending doom was the vivid orange colour of the skyline accompanied by gusts of wind steadily increasing in intensity. As lowly cadets we were thrilled at the prospect of being part of an extremely exciting adventure.

In the wee hours of the 2nd September the wind speed increased to over 100 knots with gusts of over 175 knots recorded and the visibility reduced to nearly zero. On the vessel's radar screen the movement of other vessels that had broken loose appeared like pawns on an electronic chess board flying everywhere. The "Eastern" then broke her port anchor cable which in the process peeled back the hawse pipe plating like the lid of a sardine can and we joined the rest of the flying ships at the mercy of "Wanda".

On the bridge Captain Dun gave double rings full ahead and hung off the starboard anchor - it was all we had left. We cadets manned the phones on the bridge and even with the two layers of visibility, zero below 50 feet and mystically clear above, we still felt we were part of a huge movie set with nothing being real.

In the middle of all this confusion "Eastern" with a potential speed of 30 knots hit a tug "Dorothy" which disappeared as fast as it had appeared. Then through the mist the Hong Kong Power Station came into view dead ahead. Our engines were now full astern and the starboard anchor was let go in a last ditch effort to hold our position. Without warning and as if directed by a higher being the anchor miraculously held. Using our engines for the next four to five hours we retained our position until the fury of "Wanda" abated.

At 7 o'clock on Sunday morning we lifted the anchor and to everyone's amazement found we had six power cables attached to it. Divine providence had intervened. The missing six power cables were the reason why part of Hong Kong Island had been blacked out but had in fact played a major part in saving all our lives.

Incredibly we had survived one of the worst typhoons on record and even the unsolicited comments by our shore shipping agents "We were tossing coins as to where you would finish up" could not dampen the feeling of euphoria we all felt at that time. Remarkably within a few days our vessel was not only seaworthy but already back on schedule as if nothing had happened.

Such is life at sea!

Charles McArthur
10 December 2012