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### THE STORY OF A LANDLUBBER

Yes, why not, after all those seamen<sup>1</sup>'s stories, the seafarers probably had little knowledge of what the landlubbers were doing in their Owners<sup>1</sup> or agency offices.

I started my shipping career in 1947 with VNS in Rotterdam, Westplein 2, one month after I finished High School. I remember my first day clearly because I was introduced to the staff of the freight department of the various Lines and of course with so many on the staff I forgot all those names promptly. I started as a junior clerk with Holland Brits Indie Lijn, which after the political changes in British India changed to Holland Bombay Karachi Lijn and Holland Bengalen Burma Lijn.

I had never used a typewriter and to give me some experience I was told to type pages of the freight tariff, and to "widen my shipping experience" to glue cargo manifests from the Continental loading ports in big cardboard folders as well as finding correspondence in the substantial archives of the Claim manager. Naturally my reaction was, did I spend all those years at school to do these silly jobs? The freight department handled the quotation of freight rates and I had to get used to all the names of commodities in that big book. And it goes without saying that newcomers were always the target of jokes by the staff. They would ring your phone and ask in a disguised (English) voice: "Sir, could you please give me the freight rate for horse figs?" or "I would like to have your freight rate for hot water in bottles". Strangely enough these commodities did not appear in the freight tariff.

The freight rates were quoted in shillings per ton of 40 cft or 20 cwts, in ship<sup>1</sup>'s option and of course if you couldn't find a particular item there was always the NOE (not otherwise enumerated) rate of 246/- (yes, that means shilling, does anyone remember?) W/M in ship<sup>1</sup>'s option. (and yes, that means weight or measurement). The freight department also handled Conference matters, weekly and annual reports for which the young ones acted as proof readers.

Communication with the ship was by means of telegrams using the VNS private code whereby you could use 5 letter combinations (e.g. tfxun) to express a whole sentence. Similarly the Bentley code was used to keep in touch with overseas agencies. In the evening we coded the messages to be sent and in the morning we decoded the telegrams received. Fax, email and SMS would have been so much easier, but then again, sparks wouldn't have had a job, would he?

The "lower class" were the workers in the Cargadoors department who were responsible for issuing Bills of Lading. They also worked weekends and public holidays and overtime payment in those days was non-existent. But ham rolls were provided free of charge by the

Company.

I also remember that the clauses on the B/L were crafted to the extent that they relieved the shipowner of any liability of damage and loss of cargo. The "cargadoors" also had to type cargo manifests on big machines, making 10 carbon copies at a time, so that the first few copies, full of holes, looked like shooting targets at a rifle range.

Once a week a barrel organ appeared in the side street to brighten up the place and it stayed for quite some time as the staff kept throwing money out of the window to the organ grinder, much to the annoyance of management.

One of the more interesting jobs was to allocate the total ship's cargo space to the agents of various loading ports based on their export bookings.

The first port, usually Hamburg, frequently exceeded their allotment which then necessitated the reduction of spaces in subsequent ports as the ships were always fully booked. Consequently, Genoa, being the last port, often had to substantially reduce their bookings, much to the annoyance of the agents in that port.

Cargo inspectors/super cargo in VNS employment (ex ships<sup>1</sup> officers) were in charge of loading/discharging in the Rijnhaven and they were always ready to show (off) that they knew what cargo stowage was all about.

We received the stowage plans from the homeward ships but as newcomers we had no idea of lower holds, lower/upper tween decks and these plans went straight to the cargo Inspectors. I did like the pretty colours they used to indicate the destinations in the plans. And of course we did get requests from receivers to change the destination of their cargo which we directed to the super cargo as we had no idea of reading a stowage plan.

It certainly makes reading bayplans on a container ship a lot easier.

And talking about containers, I remember my first experience in the early sixties of using a 20<sup>1</sup> CTIU container on a Holland Australia line vessel for the shipment of Time/Life books. We were trying to figure out how to use all available space in that box, most probably ignoring the max allowable weight, apart from not even considering if the ship's gear could lift it as in those days there were no shore side container cranes to lift 20 tons.

Another experience was the shipment of carbon tetra chloride as bulk chemical liquid for which the deep tanks had to be sand blasted in Hamburg. It must have been a hell of a job for those workers, considering the noise and possibly little protection. The German Authorities had to be talked into cooperating with the shipowner to make these shipments possible and management picked me to fly to Hamburg to fix it. On a Saturday of course!!

Some years later we experimented with so-called transportable deck tanks which were manufactured in Valthermond (Groningen) by Plasticlining. These tanks were coated with a special lining to enable the carriage of most bulk chemicals and that venture was quite successful.

My shipping career was interrupted in 1949 when I was conscripted into the Dutch Air Force, and yes I did have a stint as a trainee pilot on the DH 82 Tiger Moth, flew solo, did the link training (they now call it flight simulator) but with one and a half guilder per hour

danger money it was, putting it mildly, insufficient to support the family as my father passed away in 1947. Demob followed in 1951 when I rejoined VNS, the Holland Australie Lijn where I eventually became Manager of the freight department in 1963 when my boss retired.

The 12 years stint dealing with Australia and getting to know quite a bit of the country made me long for greener pastures and eventually in 1965 the family moved from Holland to Australia.

I finished up in shipping again, my first job being a cost clerk with Adelaide Ship Construction. The job also involved working out staff's wages and going to the bank to pick up the cash (in those days without any protection of course). The break came a year later when I moved to Melbourne to continue my shipping career with John Sanderson who were also acting as Agents for Holland Australie Lijn when I got to know much more about HAL ships doing the ship's husbandry and all sorts of other duties. Management also made me "do" a few Straat ships and the Van Neck.

Conventional loading improved with the introduction of pre-palletised and pre-slung cargo in open hatches and the odd container on deck when the W-kerk class (unit loaders) ships were introduced in the late 60s with Captain Rick Sombroek as the Australian promoter of this new concept. They were very efficient ships and improved the turn around time in port considerably. With the 120 tons heavy derrick Patrick stevedoring were able to load 240 bales of preslung wool from a dolley on the wharf in one go into the hatch square. It made big news in the shipping papers but the story that wasn't told was that it took quite a few days to assemble that lot with wire slings.

The hardest part of that job was to account for all the different sizes of wire slings after discharge as they were stacked on the wharf like spaghetti. And of course the sturdy 8 x 4ft pallets had to be accounted for.

The agency moved away from Sandersons to become Interocean Australia Servies as part of Royal Interocean Lines in their own office in 500, Bourke Street.

Eventually the W-kerk ships were phased out when container ships were introduced, first the ACTA and OCL Bay ships, followed by the Continental Lines and for which a new shipping agency, Seabridge, was set up and staffed by personnel from agencies which previously handled the conventional ships of the Continental Lines.

I subsequently joined Seabridge as the Depot Superintendent for LCL (Less than Container Loads) which contracted Freightbases to pack and unpack containers at their depot.

After a few years I longed for the contact with the ships when I was moved to Seatainers terminal as Terminal Superintendent for Seabridge handling Continental container ships such the French "Kangarou" which had MM (Messageries Maritmes) all over the hull and thus was quickly referred to as Mickey Mouse, The Lloydiana for Lloyd Triestino, the Melbourne and Sydney Express for Hapag Lloyd and VNS<sup>1</sup> Abel Tasman with a few charters thrown in from time to time to cope with shipping demand. One of them I recall was the Mikhail Prishvin, a Russian. I remember the early morning arrival and when I came to see

the old man, he offered me breakfast that consisted of bread slices covered with rancid butter and some cheap Russian plonk. Brrrrrrr!!!!

Another break came when Belgian shipping company (ABC Container Line - Antwerp Bulk Carriers) started looking for Operational staff in preparation of an outsider "around the world" service from Europe via Australia and the USA to break up the Conference monopoly. Their ships commenced the service with bulk carriers to cater for a large mineral sand contract from Dupont de Nemours ex Geraldton and Bunbury to New Orleans. Cell guides in the holds were non existent and two of those converted bulk carriers which commenced the service required container stowage by forklift 3 high in the fore and aft end as well as the wings of the holds. Needless to say that the operation was extremely slow and smelly (engine fumes).

My job as Owner's representative and Operations manager (no lack of titles in shipping) involved ship planning and operations for container discharge/loading in Fremantle and Melbourne and the occasional duty in Sydney when my counterpart went on holidays. Also the odd bulk loading outside the mineral sand contract such as Alumina ex Gove (N.T) and zinc/copper ingots from Port Pirie. The company never skimmed on travelling expenses for their staff because they made it clear that they felt much happier to have its own staff in attendance. This of course also meant that, if things went wrong they were able to kick somebody's behind. Luckily that never happened.

It all came to an end when at age 66 I decided to retire because my philosophy was, working an extra day for the boss meant less time for retirement.

It was a very rewarding experience getting to know the crew and officers of Belgian nationality who were very dedicated and professional in their work. I never considered Belgium to be a seafaring nation but this job completely changed my view.

Unfortunately the company went belly-up 18 months after my retirement. Not because of the pay-out for my retirement, but eventually there was no money left to pay outstanding bills for stevedores, pilots, tugs, railways etc., thus enough reason to arrest ships in various ports in the world.

Well, summing it all up, you seafarers should realise that not all office staff in shipping companies work Mon to Fri from 9 to 5. Of course 2 out of 7, ships come into port or work on a weekend.

End of story.

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