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Back then German Beer was still a Winner

In February 1965, the German Liner company Hamburg Amerika Linie ordered me to join a ship sailing from Europe to Australia. After nearly four years 'before the mast' as deck boy, junior OS and AB, I was recently promoted to Officer Apprentice. Due to the usually 4.5 months long round voyages, I was not too happy but had no choice.

When joining the general cargo liner "Wolfsburg" in Hamburg, I found out that quite a big percentage of the 46 person strong crew not only stayed the normal two round voyages on board (about 9 months) but three and even four trips, unbelievable. I should find out why ...

After loading in northern Europe and two ports in the Mediterranean, we passed through the Suez Canal, stopped for bunkering and some cargo discharge in Aden / Yemen and then headed straight for Fremantle. A long sea passage and a hot one as well – and no air condition in those years !

Approaching Fremantle on an early afternoon, the pilot station confirmed by VHF the boarding arrangements and time, pilot on arrival. Our Captain Peter Mueller, a well experienced Master in the US trades, turned to the Second Officer and asked him : what have they said, I couldn't understand most of it ?! The heavy Aussie accent was too much for our Captain, it was his first trip to Australia as well.

Like most ships in those days, we had a soccer team on board and tried to play in most of the ports of call. No worries about the time, ships stayed always between three and eight days alongside. And here we were invited by a University team, well trained and sportive guys which demolished us somewhat like 12 : 2 goals. But the biggest question mark for us first timers to Australia was the concrete "runway" in the middle of the soccer field, very strange. Who had ever heard about the sport Cricket ??

First port, and the supplied telephone on board hardly stopped ringing : is Peter / Walter / Klaus etc still on board ; will we have a party on board or ashore and so on. And these phone calls arrived in each port along the coast; and slowly but surely I could understand why so many of the crew stayed extra voyages on board.

Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane followed on the discharge leg, before turning back heading south again. In Newcastle the agent invited our 'holy three kings' and the top ranks of another vessel on board of his yacht for a day of sailing. It seems as if too many licensed navigators and engineers have been on board of that boat because they run aground on one of the few shoals in the harbour – much to the delight of us crewmembers.

Brisbane brought us a stay of ten unexpected days over Easter, a bit of a quarrel between the wharfies and the port over extra payments created for us five days without cargo operations but nicely moored alongside downtown. One day the lifeboat drill was extended to an eight hour exercise with river navigation, landing manoeuvres on a beach, chasing of cows to secure our BBQ spot and at the end a fire fighting drill to douse our BBQ.

Too much time had been spent in port, the round voyage would now last more than 4.5 months. And as we on board could see, all the following Sundays along the coast would now be spent in ports, not just what we were looking forward to, especially having those long port stays anyway. The German Seaman's Tariff in 1965 gave us for each Sunday at sea one extra paid vacation day at end of

contract, and that was quite important for us because the 'normal' assigned tariff vacation was not much.

Come Friday noontime, the agent boarded and Captain Mueller and the Cargo Officer, 2nd Mate Helmuth Stradt, discussed the cargo progress and the planning of another gang for Monday morning. On Saturdays cargo operations usually ceased at noontime, overtimes until 5 pm were only possible if the ship completed operations and sailed same evening. If unsuccessful and cargo was still left, the ship was penalized on Monday morning as "new arrived ship" with the result of no stevedore gang that day, a horror scenario in liner business.

Our cargo officer Mr. Stradt was of the opinion that we could complete before 5 pm on the Saturday and after long discussions with the Master and the agent, it was agreed to take the risk and not order another gang for Monday.

During Saturday afternoon operations slowed down a bit and it looked quite questionable if we could complete cargo in time. Only cars were left in Hold No. 3, stowed –as in those years quite common- in the wings of the tween decks on top of bagged cargo, a wooden platform built with dunnage below the wheels.

Shortly after 3 pm the Cargo Officer called me, his Officer Apprentice, and told me about his worries with the remaining time frame. And his idea to rescue the situation sounded really unique to me : go to the Chief Steward, get two cases of Beck's Beer on ship's account and bring them on deck. He, the Cargo Mate, would climb down into Hold No. 3 and I had to lower one case of beer to him. He stopped the workers, opened a stubby for each of them and explained to the foreman and the other wharfies the situation he was in because of his decision. Meanwhile I was walking down the gangway with the case of German beer in my arms, heading for the stevedores on the pier. Same procedure as in the cargo hold : opening a beer for each of them and explaining the situation we were in. And to my surprise, after about ten minutes the stevedores put the beers aside, on the pier as well as in the cargo hold and told the 2nd Mate not to worry, they will complete the vessel in time.

A few minutes before 5 pm the union representative arrived telling the wharfies to stop now; two more cars had to be discharged ... Work continued, the union man didn't seem to be too impressed - and 3 minutes after the normal closing time the last car was discharged, the stevedores left smiling the ship and the pier (with the remaining Beck's Beer of course) wishing us a good trip. On the boat deck the Captain and the agent were observing the whole situation, shaking their heads.

Result for all of us on board : all following Sundays during this voyage were spent at sea, giving us extra vacation days. And the complete round voyage took just over 4 months, the shortest so far we were told at the end. Everybody was happy - what else you are asking for ??

German Beer was still highly appreciated in the Australia of 1965 ; try something like that nowadays and you will most probably receive only raised eye browses.