MERCHANT NAVY NEWS

Newsletter of the Merchant Navy Association and the
Merchant Navy Chapter of Forestville RSL sub-Branch NSW

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TO FOSTER THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SEA

DONALD EDWARD KENNEDY OAM
10.03.1927 - 23.11 2024

Don passed away peacefully at home aged 97 surrounded by his loving family.
A distinguished Merchant Navy Veteran of WWll joining when he was just 16.
Don then served 37 years with the Sheriff's Office of NSW as well as 15 years in the Army Reserve.
In 2020, Don was awarded an OAM for 65 years of volunteer work for Veterans and service to his community and in February of 2024 was a recipient of the Merchant Mariners of WWll Congressional Gold Medal by US Consul Sydney.
Don was a remarkable man who lived a wonderful long life devoted to family and service.
Don is survived by his loving wife of 66 of years Wynne, adored Father of Jennifer, Susan, Elizabeth, Caroline and David and six grandchildren Jacob, Maisie, Daniel, Nic, Hayden and Sam.
A detailed story of Don's amazing life will be included in later editions of the Merchant Navy News.

Seasons Greetings to All

A WORKING LIFE IN THE AUSTRALIAN MARITIME INDUSTRY

By Neil Bevis

Someone once said ‘everyone has a story in them and in some people that’s where it should stay’ but for me it unlocked a lot of things. These are a mixture of tales of my youth and adulthood in the Australian maritime industry, not just my seagoing years but also the time I worked in allied maritime parts of the industry that are equally important such as the ship berthing crew, as a ships agent, a lecturer of maritime studies and an examiner for marine certificates of competency and service in the Royal Australian Navy Reserve forces. It was never intended to be literature or scholarly but to bring back to life, in both positive and negative aspects, the memories of a life that existed, before those memories are gone forever

A VERY ORDINARY DECK BOY

Having left school at age 14 with a very limited education (mostly of my own making), it was necessary for me to get any sort of work. I knew what I wanted to do and that was to go to sea in the Merchant Marine, following in the footsteps of my two older brothers but this was clearly out of my reach just yet because of my age. An advert in the morning paper for a messenger boy at a well-established sporting goods store in the Brisbane CBD set me on the path to my first job. It wasn’t a particularly unpleasant job, but more importantly for me was that it gave me the time and opportunity to make an application for a job as deck boy with the Queensland Department of Marine and Harbours who were responsible for a large fleet of dredges, hopper barges and small tugs working along the Brisbane River. At age 14 this was the nearest I could get to work in the maritime industry as you had to be 15 to go to sea. By good fortune and the efforts of my eldest brother, some six months later I was offered a position as deck boy on the dredge “Groper” on the Brisbane River.

The bucket dredger Groper in the Brisbane River in March 1955. The 738grt Groper was built in 1954 by Fleming & Ferguson at Paisley for the Queensland Government. On 20th July 1981 demolition started on her in Brisbane.

This was a 'ladder type bucket dredge' which meant it had an endless chain of very large buckets extending from the top of a high tower down to the floor of the river. Once started these buckets travelled continuously with the empty bucket on the downward sweep into the water, scooping up a load of mud and sediment then coming out of the water on the upward travel. When the bucket reached the top of the 'ladder' it would spontaneously 'tip over' and empty its contents onto an angled ramp positioned to spill the mud into the hopper of a motorised hopper barge moored alongside. When the hopper barge was full it would be cast off and another barge would immediately take its place alongside. The noise of the grinding chain of buckets was continuous and ear splitting (no ear protectors), the mud and sediment being dredged up from the riverbed gave off a constant stink and when the mud was tipped out of the bucket onto the angled ramp some of it would splash over the side of the ramp onto the deck of the dredge making it very slippery. No Occupational Health & Safety concerns.

Early the next morning I arrived at the jetty to board the crew ferry with about 20 other seaman and be transported to the Steam Dredge 'Groper'. On arriving alongside the dredge, I had to manage to get across from the small moving tug onto the dredge without injuring my-self, a tricky manoeuvre when you have never done it before. Once onboard work started immediately preparing the officers mess room for lunch, cleaning the officers' cabins, serving the officers their meal, cleaning up after their lunch, cleaning the crews mess rooms, washing their dishes (they collected their meals themselves from the galley), cleaning the toilets and showers. Then a quick shower and be ready by 4.30 pm to jump back onto the crew ferry tug for transport back to the jetty. After 6 months of this I was 15 and ready to go to sea.

At that time the Australian Maritime Industry was heavily unionised which meant I had to join the Seaman's Union of Australia at the first opportunity. I was given half a day off one afternoon and made my way to the 'union rooms' in the Trades Hall building. I was told to have a head and shoulders photo with me. The union official gave me a pep talk about the value and importance of being a loyal union member, I took the 'Oath of Fealty' which is a medieval pledge of allegiance, in this case to the union, I paid my membership joining fee and the first quarter 'union dues', my photo was pasted onto the front cover of my 'union book', and I was now a proud member of the Seaman's Union of Australia.

Next was to the Government Mercantile Marine Superintendent (the Shipping Master) only to be told I had to have a letter from my father agreeing to me going to sea and stating my date of birth which I duly obtained.

Next was an eyesight test with the government 'shipping doctor', the standard letter test for long vision; the Ishihara colour test for red/green colour deficiencies which I passed and was given the report to take back to the Marine Superintendent. [nowadays you also have to pass a lantern test where you are placed in a dark room and red, green, or white lights would appear in various combinations that you had to identify. Gradually the intensity of the light on display was lowered until it was nothing more than a spec of light.

Finally, a medical and a chest X-Ray at a Government clinic to check for TB which was rampant through the 50's. On passing this I was issued with a card showing that my 'lung fields 'were clear. The Marine Superintendent told me to always carry it with me as it was an essential part of signing on a ship when I got a job. Because of the infectious nature of TB and the close living arrangements onboard many of the ships in that era the X-ray had to be repeated annually and a new card issued that had to be current when signing on a ship. Some years later this requirement was abandoned as it was realised that the effects of regular annual x-rays could also be detrimental to your health due to the radioactivity of x-rays.

Advancement from deck boy to the next higher rank of ordinary seaman required 12 months sea time on a seagoing merchant ship and this was the basis for most deck boys who had a job staying on their ship until 'they got their sea time in'. While there were many Australian manned merchant ships trading on the Australian coast at this time not all of them carried a deck boy as part of the manning scale. It all depended on the size and tonnage of the ship. Some would carry none, most would carry one and the larger tonnage ships would carry two. For the unemployed deck boy meant roster. I attended the engagement 'pick up Centre' between 10 and 11 am daily. At week five a job came up on the ship '*Manunda*' a large coastal passenger ship.

After I was allocated the position, the union official told me to wait while he spoke with the Shipping Master. On his return he marched me (literally) down to the street level of the building where I was told to approach the counter. Behind the counter were the ship's Captain and the Shipping Master. Behind them were several office clerks, mostly young girls, and standing behind me on my side of the counter were several able seamen who were there to sign on the ships they had been 'picked up' for that same day.

The ship's Captain and the Shipping Master looked at me sternly and proceeded to read some of the Articles of Agreement that I was about to sign. The Shipping Master particularly concentrated on the offences and penalties. When asked if I understood I gave a timid 'yes sir' and the whole audience broke into laughter. I signed the Articles of Agreement** and was told to be onboard the ship at 0800 the next morning.

***The Articles of Agreement are a standard document that links you by agreement to serve under the ship Master (the title Captain is just a courtesy title) and follow his/her lawful commands. They usually run for a period of 6 months, but you are free to 'pay off' the ship at any time during this period. Modern day Articles are much different.*

TSMV Manunda

Built as a passenger/cargo ship it was one of the largest ships in the Australian coastal passenger/cargo service at that time (1929). During World War II it was converted to a Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship (DEMS) and then as a hospital ship and saw service in the Middle East and Pacific Campaigns, specifically New Guinea as well as being bombed and damaged in the Japanese raid on Darwin in 1942. She resumed her commercial passenger duties in 1948 before being sold to a Japanese company and finally broken up in 1957.

I arrived at the ship the next morning before 0800, found the Bosun (the senior seaman rating), found my cabin, a two-berth cabin shared with the other deck boy and was given one hour to unpack and get into my working gear and start working. My shared cabin was outside the forecastle but still in the bow of the ship. It was spartan, just a bunk bed, a small wardrobe and a couple of drawers under the bunk. Other crew accommodation was inside the forecastle including the mess room, crew galley and one deck down, the toilets, showers and laundry, a fancy word for a couple of steam water boilers and water troughs for hand washing your clothes. No washing machines. The mess room had about 12 individual tables each with four chairs.

My first exposure to this strange environment was at lunch that first day. A large pot of soup sat in the middle of the mess room servery for self-serve. The main meal was served direct from the galley just inside the entrance to the forecastle. I carried my plate into the mess room and not sure where to sit I was politely directed to a chair at one of the tables. Not being any the wiser I sat in this chair. No sooner had I started eating when a figure stood beside me and told me in a very few words that I was sitting in his chair. It seems, as I was soon to find out, that several of the crew had been with the ship for many, many years and had a personal connection to their chair, some even having a name plate on the back of their particular chair. Once again this was a set-up and the person who politely directed me to this chair did so intentionally fully knowing what was going to happen. The whole mess room burst into laughter.

After lunch, work continued until sailing time at 8 pm. The role of the two deck boys on departure was for each one to work independently to heave a fender from the wharf level back to deck level using a block and tackle arrangement. The process was simple but each of these fenders was really very heavy, and I was skin and bones. When it came time for me to haul on the tackle and raise my fender, nothing happened!! I simply was not strong enough. Several adult male passengers lining the ships rail alongside me observed my difficulty and to the amusement of other nearby passengers promptly stepped in and hauled the damn thing up to deck level for me.

When this situation was told to the Bosun the next day he reluctantly accepted that the technique would have to be changed to accommodate me as it was clear there was no way I could raise the fender on my own and it was simply not an option to use passengers. Step in the union delegate. All Australian coastal ships had two seamen from the crew who were elected to be the union delegates. After some discussion between the Bosun and the union delegate it was decided that in future, after leaving the wharf the fenders were to be left hanging just above the level of the water until both of us deck boys could work together hauling up one fender at a time.

The trip down the east coast to Sydney was reasonably calm and I was happy. At last, my career was underway. I soon adapted to the daily work routine of assisting in hosing down the decks, polishing brass and painting. Passenger ships love brass, it was everywhere, even the ships horn located near the top of the funnel was made of brass and I had to polish it. It wasn't long before the quality of my work clothes became an issue. All I had was my dredging work clothes, a pair of damaged jeans, tee shirt, a short leather jacket and volley tennis shoes. Several of the crew gave me some more suitable working clothes to wear until we arrived in Sydney where I would have to buy a new rig. This I duly did with a set of 'passenger blues', dark blue shirt and trousers and flat white seamen's cap. We sailed to Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Townsville, and Cairns. The daily routine now involved learning seamanship skills, being tutored by skilled seamen, tying knots, splicing, rigging blocks and tackles, changing items of cargo gear, having to learn verbatim how to 'box the compass' (in quarter points) as preparation to being allowed to take a turn at steering the ship under the close watchful eye of the seaman watch keeper and the watch keeping officer. One hour per day was given to me for steering practice while the ship was at sea.

At some point during my time on this ship an industrial dispute developed between the union and the ship owner resulting in the union instructing the ship delegates to hold the ship in port overnight by refusing to sail. The union delegates passed this decision (refusing to sail) on to the Master who ordered that all the crew be lined up on the saloon deck. The delegates knew this would happen as the Master had no alternative but to order each person to take the ship to sea or be penalised under the terms of the Articles of Agreement. The union delegates called a meeting, and it was agreed that when ordered to take the ship to sea by the Master each individual would say 'no'. As I was the deck boy and really only on industry probation the union delegate told me to say 'yes' when asked. We lined up and the Master walked along the line saying to each 'I'm ordering you to take the ship to sea' and receiving a firm 'no'. When he got to me and said 'I'm ordering you to take the ship to sea' I was struck dumb. He hesitated and repeated the order as he had to have a verbal 'yes' or 'no' at which point the union delegate raced along the line and said to me 'say yes', as it was a legal requirement that the acceptance or refusal had to come from me. If memory serves me right the crew was 'logged' one day's pay for refusing a lawful command of the Master. The ship was delayed overnight (which was the intention) and sailed the next day. I remained on this ship from April to August 1956 and would have stayed longer were it not for catching a respiratory infection and having to be discharged in Sydney for treatment then repatriated to Brisbane. This meant I had to go back on the roster and wait for another ship.

A loyal brother came to my rescue. Knowing I was on the roster in Brisbane and knowing there was a job for a deck boy the next day in Newcastle where his ship ('*Dandenong*') was berthed, he sent me a telegram (no email or text messages or mobile phones at this time) telling me of the job and strongly suggesting that I get to Newcastle that day as the job would appear on the board at the 'pick up' the next day. I had never been to Newcastle before so after a short flight from Brisbane I booked into a seaman's hotel near the wharf, close to the 'pick up shed' and went in search of Graham's ship that I knew to be berthed somewhere in the port. By now it was dark and wandering along the poorly lit waterfront was uneasy (*wharf buildings never at any time look inviting, especially after dark)* but I found his ship only to see that it was about to sail. We had time for a quick hello and for him to give me directions on how to get to the union rooms where I had to get my name on the roster before anyone else if I was to get this job.

Alone in Newcastle in a broken-down seamen's hotel waiting for dawn to break so that I could find my way to the union rooms, it was a long night. I arrived at the union rooms at 8 am just to be sure I was first although I knew they did not open until 9 am. At 9 am with no one else in sight I had my name placed at the top of the roster. At 10 am when the 'pick up' commenced the first job to be placed on the board was 'one deck boy for the '*Bulwarra'*. I handed over my roster card to the union official, signed on at the shipping office and told to be onboard by 1300. I was onboard by 1200.

MV Bulwarra

Built at the Evans Deakin shipyard in Brisbane in 1954 for the Australian Shipping Board and transferred to the Australian National Line in 1957. Sold in 1971 and broke up in heavy weather off Keelung in 1971 [source: Flotilla Australia – Australian Shipping Lines]

In that era, it was normal practice when anyone joined an Australian union manned ship to show their union book to the ship delegate on first boarding. As it was 1200 the crew was having the midday meal, so I stepped inside the mess room and asked for the delegate. No one knew who I was but guessed that I was the new deck boy and one person pointed me to a very old short, fat Greek looking person who was sitting in a chair in the corner of the mess room asleep. I walked over to him and said, 'I'm the new deck boy' and flashed my union book. He opened his eyes, looked at me and then closed his eyes again. Everyone in the mess room broke into laughter. He wasn't the delegate, just the crew attendant. The real delegate identified himself and the ritual of checking my union book was completed and I was shown to my cabin.

This ship was different. It was a real cargo ship. No polishing brass or struggling with fenders. This ship had cargo holds, tween decks, 16 cargo derricks and one heavy lift jumbo derrick. And I was part of it, out there on deck with all the other seamen, doing seamen's work. And not on a regular run like the *Manunda*. This ship would tramp to different ports, on this voyage including Newcastle, Sydney, Esperance, Fremantle, Kwinana, Adelaide, Whyalla, Melbourne, Townsville and finally again to Melbourne in just four months when the company decided to put the ship into 'layup' and I returned to Brisbane. After two weeks on the roster in Brisbane a job came up on the SS '*Bungaree'* in Mackay.

SS Bungaree

Built by the Caledonian Shipbuilding and Engineering Company in Dundee in 1937 as a cargo vessel for the Adelaide Steamship Company and registered in Melbourne. Requisitioned as a minelayer during WW2. Sold in 1957 and again in 1960. Sank in the Saigon River Vietnam in 1966 after striking a mine [source: Flotilla Australia – Australian Shipping Lines]

I was aware that it was an old ship, but I was in for a surprise. It was an absolute wreck, and the crew wasn't much better. No one wanted to be on this ship. It really was a 'tramp' in every sense of the meaning. Although it had served with distinction in World War 2 as a mine layer under compulsory requisition to the Australian Navy it had already had a hard life before that and was nearing the end of its working life. Two-berth cabins, slow, and very uncomfortable in a seaway, living accommodation at the extreme aft end of the ship where all propeller noises and vibrations were heard and felt, steam cargo winches that would cough, and splutter and rattle when in port. Food had to be carried in bulk from the amidships galley across the open aft deck then placed in a heating oven (a 'hot press') until eaten by which time it was usually dried out and tough. I can't remember anything good about my time on this ship or even the ports we went to suffice to say that when the company decided to 'lay it up' in Sydney in March I was glad to see the back of it even though it meant repatriation to Brisbane and still several months short of my sea time.

After two weeks on the roster in Brisbane I joined the SS '*Balarr'*. A good ship and crew, trading on a regular run between Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and back and with only two months more sea time to become eligible for rating as Ordinary Seaman I was determined that this ship would see me through the last of my qualifying sea time. In fact, with things starting to tighten up in the industry as old ships were being sold or laid up and jobs for ordinary seamen were becoming scarce, I remained on this ship for an extra two months. Fortuitously these extra two months were not wasted as they were counted towards the 24 months required to the next rank (Able Seaman) meaning I now only needed 22 months.

SS Balarr

Built as a general cargo ship at the BHP shipyard at Whyalla South Australia in 1948 initially for the Australian Shipping Board but was sold on delivery to Howard Smith Ltd. It traded on the Australian coast under this name until 1960 when it was sold and again in 1974 before being scrapped in 1976 [source: Flotilla Australia – Australian Shipping Lines]

Asbestos

n the 1950's when I first went to sea, little was known about the most insidious unknown health effects of the asbestos insulation that was placed around the internal ships piping on steamships such as the above two (*Bungaree and Balarr*). Asbestos was popular among shipbuilders because it was resistant to fire, heat, electricity, and chemical damage and, most importantly it was affordable. When a ship was being built the shipyard workers would apply asbestos lagging (thick strings of asbestos) around all of the internal piping in the engine room and pipes that passed through the accommodation under the deck-head. Once the ship was operational it was the task of the ship's crew to maintain this lagging which would break apart as it deteriorated resulting in loose fibres falling like snow onto the deck and around and over the crew persons who had the job of replacing it. There were no safety measures in place when handling this product and it was not until late in the 20th century that it was identified as toxic and the cause of industrial disease and only then were safety measures put in place. But these measures came too late for many shipyard workers and seafarers who died from cancer and other lung related diseases through exposure to this deadly asbestos

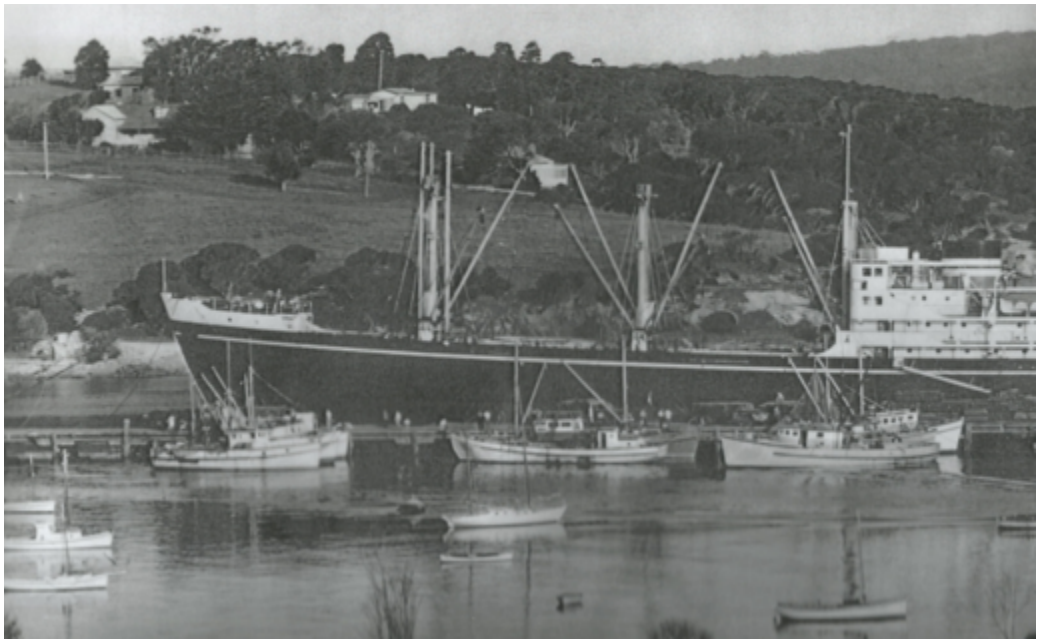
Demarcation

There was also a Deck Officer Cadet on the SS Balarr about my age. There was also a strict line of demarcation between officers and crew. From time to time there was a relaxing of this when it came to interaction between the two of us. But any interaction was still watched very carefully and never allowed to happen while onboard. We were allowed to go ashore together but only if it was to the Flying Angel Club, also known as the Missions to Seamen, a gathering place where seafarers from all over the world could enjoy some female company and dancing under the strict control of a Padre. We became friends and at a much later time we happened to meet again during a navy exercise while I was in the RANR. He was the Master on a ship, and I was the Navy Boarding Officer, the function of which was to act as a link between Navy MHQ in Sydney and the individual merchant ship master, as it was from the Boarding Officer that the ship master obtained his/her basic instructions, confidential orders, routeing instructions and general convoy and self defence guidance books.

A VERY ORDINARY SEAMAN

Having completed my sea time as deck boy on the SS *Balarr* I paid off in September 1957 at age 16 and joined the SS Denman my first ship as Ordinary Seaman in October. The next few years were uneventful, and I continued to work on a wide range of merchant ships. In 1959 both my brother and I served

on the MV 'Baralga' for what would become a unique voyage for an Australian ship as Australian shipping was traditionally coastal trade. Owned by the Australian National Line it was given a charter to deliver a full cargo of railway sleepers to Calcutta as part of some foreign aid program. Our first loading port was Eden a small fishing port in New South Wales, much too small to fully accommodate a ship the size of the Baralg*a* alongside the berth resulting in the ship having to be moored with headlines to the wharf and stern lines to a buoy with only the forward three cargo holds and the midships accommodation alongside the wharf.



MV Baralga alongside in the fishing port of Eden

The part loading was to take a couple of days and we were able to go ashore at the end of each day. The only place to get any alcohol was at the Fisherman's Club which in a small fishing port can be quite exclusive as was this one. After sailing it was a short run up the coast for a further part loading of the cargo in Coffs Harbour after which we sailed to our next port, Brisbane, to finish the full load of cargo. While the ship was in Brisbane, we were given a battery of injections for smallpox, cholera and yellow fever being hit with the lot over two days. The effect was an overall shock to the body resulting in fever, chills, tiredness, and not much interest in working. To complete the process, we were issued with a Seaman's Document of Identity rather than a passport.

After sailing from Brisbane, we continued up the coast of Queensland to the Port of Townsville where we topped up the fuel bunkers, freshwater tanks, and stores. The early part of the voyage meant passing near the Island of Sumatra. Lying to the east of Sumatra is Banka Island, notorious for the murder of Australian nurses

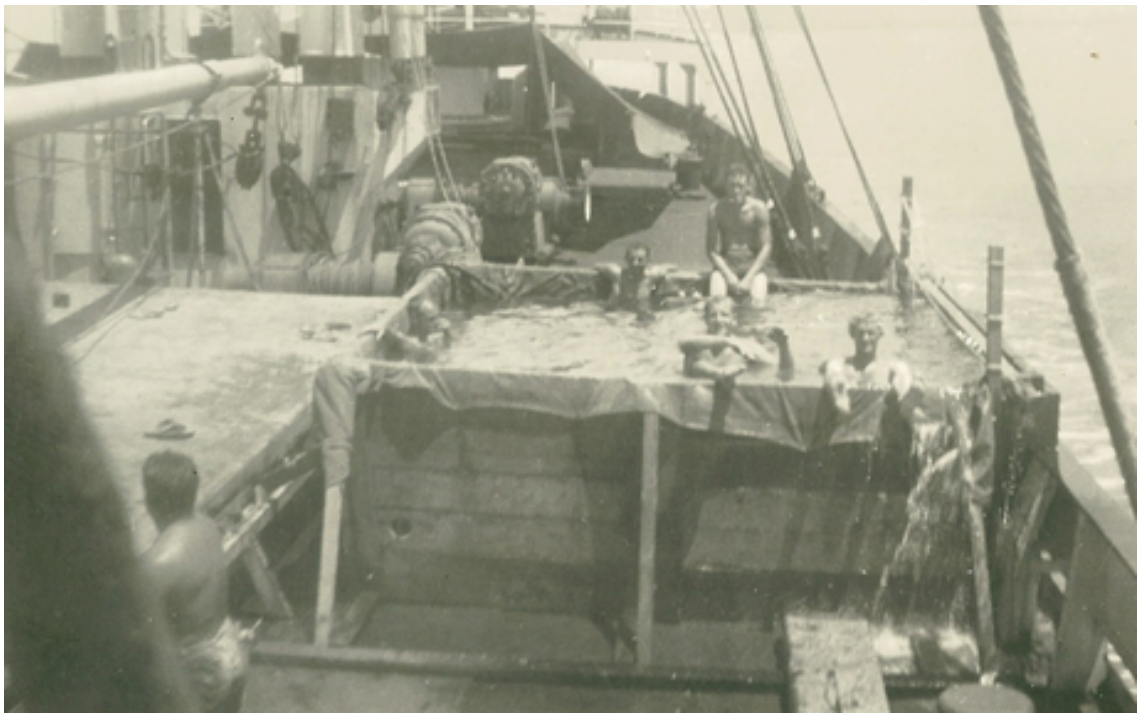
and British soldiers who were captured while attempting to flee from Singapore were murdered by the Japanese in what came to be known as the Banka Island massacre. Captured by the Japanese they separated the male soldiers and the female nurses before bayoneting the men out of sight of the nurses then marching the nurses into the surf and machine gunning them. The sole survivor of the nurses was nurse Vivian Bullwinkle who although being machine gunned and wounded in the massacre survived by playing dead. She hid in the jungle and was taken as a prisoner of war, eventually returning to Australia at the end of the war. During her time in captivity, she never mentioned that she was a survivor of the massacre for fear that if the Japanese knew they would kill her as they didn't want any evidence of the incident. Of the small group of men who were massacred, two are known to have survived. Realising we were to pass this island we constructed a cross, and shield inscribed with the words:

Australian Nurses
Murdered by Japs
Banka Island
Crew Australian Ship
Baralga
Date

With the agreement of the ships Master, and at an appropriate time when passing the Island, the ship was slowed, a short service was held and the cross lowered over the side, released and the voyage continued.

The Memorial Cross & Shield before lowering over the side

With no air conditioning other than a single porthole and a punka louvre system of air blown through a small ball for spot cooling in each cabin, the accommodation became hot. The outside atmosphere also became moist as we steamed across the Indian Ocean. After a few days of this we decided to innovate and with the permission of the chief officer built a swimming pool using some wooden hatch boards and a canvas tarpaulin. Surrounded by an ocean of salt water it was only a matter of connecting a wash down hose to a hydrant and the pool was constantly full. Care had to be taken when near the outside of the pool as it was hard up against the side of the ship.



Swimming Pool

The next 15 days at sea were without incident other than saturation monsoonal rain for several days and nights while in the Bay of Bengal, then a long run up the Hooghly River to the port of Calcutta. After clearing Quarantine and Customs we berthed, cargo commenced, we broke sea watches (4 on 8 off) and resumed 'day work' hours. Normally this would be from 0800 to 1700 but we had an agreement with the chief officer that 'day work' hours while in Calcutta would be based on a 'tropical day' of 0600 to 1300, starting work early in the cool of the day and securing for dinner in the early afternoon. Early excursions ashore were to the markets where we purchased the usual useless trinkets, but this 'tourist' activity soon became boring with the inevitable result that shore excursions quickly turned to visits to one or more of the best hotels.

After seven days in Calcutta the cargo was discharged, fuel and fresh water topped up (the fresh water had to be heavily chlorinated) and we sailed back to Australia

for our next cargo, a load of iron ore from Cockatoo Island in Yampi Sound, northern Australia. The voyage to Yampi Sound took about 15 days. The loading of iron ore involved quite a lot of work opening and closing cargo hatches and shifting the ship along the jetty to accommodate the fixed loading conveyor belt. At the end of the loading the white superstructure was covered in red iron ore dust that took endless work after sailing to try and get it off and return the paintwork to some semblance of white. Instead of going to Newcastle or Port Kembla as expected we finished up mooring to a buoy in Sydney Harbour where we cleared Quarantine and Customs. It was here that I paid off and headed back to Brisbane where I presented myself to the union roster and picked up a job as a deckhand on a trailer suction dredge the SD 'Echinese' working on the Brisbane River. This job lasted four months at which time I decided it was best if I returned to sea and complete the remaining sea time necessary to obtain the rank of Able Seaman. As jobs for an Ordinary Seaman were more available in Port Kembla than they were in Brisbane I went there and immediately joined the MV 'Boonaroo' a five hatch 16 derrick cargo ship with the rank of 'seaman', a rank that was used to enable an Ordinary Seaman with a minimum of 12 months sea time as an Ordinary Seaman to take the place of an Able Seaman if one was not available. We sailed from Port Kembla to Melbourne and then to Fremantle. On arrival in Fremantle, I had completed the remaining sea time and received the appropriate endorsement from the Shipping Master as being '*Eligible to Sail as Able Seaman'*.

A Very Able seaman

My first ship as AB was the SS 'Iron Wyndham' trading between Port Kembla and Yampi Sound. On the voyage back to Port Kembla from Yampi Sound with a full load of iron ore the ship ran hard aground at full speed on South Warden Reef in the Barrier Reef.

SS Iron Wyndham

SS Iron Wyndham

Built in Whyalla South Australia and completed in 1951, the 4th and last Yampi Class vessel for BHP. Regular service carrying iron ore from Yampi Sound. Twice grounded during her career. Sold in 1967 and again in 1978 before being scrapped in 1978

While waiting for a powerful enough tug to reach us and tow the ship off the reef we were set the task of trying to lighten the ship by discharging some of the cargo of iron ore. With the expected arrival of the tug being 72 hours, we set to with shovels and empty 44-gallon drums. Using the cargo derricks, each individual drum was lifted to deck level, swung over the side of the ship and with a rope tail attached to the bottom of the drum the contents were unceremoniously tipped into the ocean. I think I know what today's environmentalists would say about that. We worked round the clock in shifts, including during periods of monsoonal rain, until the tug arrived on the 3rd day. The combination of lightening, the power of the tug and a spring tide (High-High water) were sufficient to get us off the reef and once clear to proceed to anchor for a diver to examine the underwater hull plates to determine the extent of any damage. As it turned out there was very little damage and we proceeded on our way to Port Kembla at which point I paid off and returned to Brisbane but continued going to sea.

I next found myself on the roster in Melbourne where I picked up a job on the Melbourne harbour tug the MT York Syme. After 4 months the call of the sea returned, and I joined the SS Timbarra. We sailed for Newcastle and discharged a cargo of steel. With the ship's cargo gear all squared up we were sitting in the mess room about 30 minutes before sailing time when one of the AB's fell over and lacerated his leg. The 2nd mate (who was always the designated ship medical officer), came down with a large bottle of iodine and proceeded to lather it onto the laceration. While he was doing this another AB collapsed and crashed to the deck. The 2nd mate went to his aid and while he was otherwise occupied the AB with the laceration took a swig out of the bottle of iodine! After an examination of the collapsed AB, the Master decided to call for an ambulance. The ambulance paramedics advised that he had to be taken to hospital. As the mess room was below the main deck, we had to get him up a companionway, then along the deck alleyway to the gangway. As it was too difficult for the paramedics to use a standard stretcher, we used the wrap around 'stokes litter'. Once securely wrapped we managed to get him to the gangway with a few bumps on the way. The problem now was getting him safely down the gangway especially as the ship was in lightship condition making the

gangway especially as the ship was in lightship condition making the gangway very high, long, and steep. With one AB at each end of the 'litter' they slowly commenced to manoeuvre it down the gangway with each man having to hang on to the gangway man ropes with one hand and hold the single rope tail on each end of the 'litter' with the other hand. As a result, the litter tended to roll over requiring the handlers to stop at regular intervals. All ended well and they arrived at the wharf without further issues but I'm sure the patient was more frightened by the evacuation than he was of the complaint! We eventually sailed about 2100 and I was on the 4 to 8 watch. As I was the ship delegate, before going to bed I did a quick check on the AB who had taken the swig of iodine. He was asleep and I felt he was okay. He was on the 12 to 4 watch, so I left it at that. At 0400 the next morning when I relieved him at the wheel, I asked him how he felt. He said quite nonchalantly 'not too good'. When I told him he had taken a swig of iodine he didn't seemed to be the slightest bit concerned. He came good and was back to normal by the end of the day. Just another day of shipboard life.

By now it was 1963 and for the next 12 months I drifted between going to sea and working on the Brisbane River on a variety of different vessels. It was also around this time that I joined the MV Waiben a small coastal cargo passenger ship as bosun trading between Brisbane, Hayman Island, Townsville, Palm Island, Cairns, Cooktown, Lockhart River, Portland Roads, and Thursday Island northbound and then Cairns and Townsville southbound directly back to Brisbane.

An anecdote: Cairns or cans?

The usual practice on this ship was to take on a full load of provisions in Brisbane before sailing. This meant that on the north bound part of the voyage, we always had a good supply and variety of fresh fruit as part of our meals. But on the southbound part of the voyage as we could only provision in Cairns and Townsville the supply, and especially the variety of fruit would decline, and we were generally left with only bananas and pineapples as the availability of most other varieties of fruit was limited in these places. At some point we decided to complain and contacted the union in Brisbane. A meeting was arranged onboard between the Chief Steward, Captain, union official and the ships delegates of which I was one. I asked why we could not get a variety of fruit in Cairns and as an example I mentioned pears. The chief steward said that you can't get pears in Cairns but before he had time to explain why the union official, a fiery Scotsman shouted' of course you can get pears in can's, big cans, and little cans'. The meeting broke up in laughter and we accepted the status quo.

After paying off I joined the SS Binburra. When I joined this ship, it had just been converted into what was known as a 'semi container' ship, meaning rather

than carrying loose general cargo it now carried all cargo in containers stowed in the lower hold and on the hatch covers, and palletised cargo in the 'tween deck but still used its own conventional cargo gear (16 derricks and 2 jumbo derricks) rather than a dedicated shore side container facility and equipment. After sailing from Melbourne, we encountered quite severe bad weather on the eastward transit of the Bass Strait and the ship was rolling heavily. About 0800 there was a load crashing noise as one of the fully loaded containers on number 3 hatch at the aft end of the foredeck broke its heavy chain lashings and fell off the hatch top landing on the deck and coming to rest against the outside bulwark. It was quickly noticed that every time the ship rolled the container would move slightly and then when the ship rolled back again the container would bump heavily on the bulwark.

All the off-duty deck crew (4 remaining watch-keepers and 2-day workers) were called out and given the task of 'hardening' down the container to stop it from moving. This meant using the cargo runners (heavy wire) connected to the cargo winches to form a 'bird cage' of wire over and around the container and then heave the wires tight using the cargo winch. To do this we had to clamber around the container attaching cargo lead blocks at various parts of the container and then dragging the wire cargo runner and feeding it through the lead blocks. It was dangerous as the ship was still rolling although not as bad because the ship had been placed in the 'heave to' position with reduced speed. But each of us had to be careful and especially nimble so as to quickly step back when the container moved and only rush in when things settled temporarily. After several hours we managed to get the wire cargo runner rigged and hauled tight on the cargo winch locking the container firmly in a rested position. Once in Brisbane and with the container safely removed the hull plates and bulwark were inspected and repaired. I think we even got a photo and mention in the Brisbane Courier Mail.

Never give away a job

Because this ship was semi containerised as mentioned, the number 1 cargo hold was too small to hold more than a couple of containers, so it was converted into an area to carry bulk malt. This was achieved by lining the inside of the cargo hold with stainless steel sheeting. The cargo of bulk malt was loaded using a hose suspended by a cargo runner and cargo hook from one of the cargo derricks at number 1 hatch. The cargo would arrive on the wharf in road tankers and park adjacent to the location of the cargo hold. The loading hose would be lifted into position with one end inside the cargo tank and the other connected to the tanker on the wharf from where the cargo was pumped through the hose into the cargo hold. As the cargo hose would have to be regularly lifted above

the level of the malt as the cargo space was being progressively filled each of the crew took it is shifts to sit on the cargo winch and make these small but repeated adjustments to the height of the cargo hose. It was a boring job and after a few voyages it was argued by the crew that the job would best be done by the waterside labour and the job was given to them. I recall the Melbourne union official being critical of us giving this job away. His argument was that if you give a job away you will never get it back and it could mean you being out of a job while the other party were still employed. He made sense to me. After discharge from the Binburra I joined a large British ship the MV 'Tri-Ellis', trading from Melbourne and Geelong to Nauru, Ocean Island and New Zealand.

MV *Tri-Ellis*

Built at Harland and Wolff in 1958 for British Phosphate Commission in Australia to carry both cargo and bulk phosphate between Australia and the Pacific Islands and New Zealand. Sold in 1974 and again in 1978. Broken up in 1980

Man-over-board

All ships must conduct a lifeboat muster and drill at prescribed intervals. On this particular day the muster and drill were scheduled to commence at 4 pm. The start of the exercise was to be announced by the ship sounding the Emergency Signal on the whistle and internal bells. At about 3pm we were all sitting in the mess room just starting our afternoon coffee when the emergency signal was sounded.

Not sure if this was a mistake as it was one hour early, we responded to it as if it was an actual emergency which as it turned out it was. On arrival at my allocated lifeboat we (the lifeboat crew) were told to quickly launch the boat, board it and lower it as one of the crew had fallen over the side. We carried out the order and headed off in the direction being indicated to us from the ships bridge as the ship was now stopped, and we were too low in the water in the lifeboat to see a small bobbing head. While we were doing this a group of passengers mostly family members of public servants who worked on Nauru gathered on the upper deck watching the drama. I was later told that one of the passengers asked one of the stewards why there was someone in the ocean, to which the steward replied tongue in cheek 'we always throw someone overboard just before a boat drill' and the passenger believed him, passing the word on to the others. We quickly recovered the crew person and returned to the ship where the lifeboat was retrieved, and the crew person taken to the ship's hospital for observation. By now it was 4 pm and we thought that what we had just done would satisfy the drill, but this wasn't the case. An 'actual' scheduled regulatory drill still had to be carried out to meet legislative requirements. The rescued crew person seemed okay when we had him back onboard but hitting the water, having fallen from the equivalent height of a two-story building, would have been like hitting cement and for the next few days he was seriously unwell, badly bruised and in pain.

After paying off the *Tri-Ellis* in Melbourne and arriving back in Brisbane I worked on the Brisbane River on a variety of tugs, barges, dredges and in particular the pilot vessel and buoy tender the SS 'John Oxley'.

S.S John Oxley

A WORKING LIFE IN THE AUSTRALIAN MARITIME INDUSTRY

S.S John Oxley

Built in Scotland in 1927 and delivered to the Government of Queensland Harbours and Marine Department, where she served as a pilot boat in Moreton Bay and buoy and lighthouse tender along the Queensland coast. In the Second World War John Oxley was requisitioned for the Royal Australian Navy. She was returned to her former duties in 1946 and converted from coal to oil fuel that same year. She continuedo serve as a pilot tender, lighthouse, and buoy ttender until 1968 when she was decommissioned and transferred to the Sydney Heritage Fleet and sailed to Sydney in 1970 & became part of the SHF museum. Dry docked in 1997 & restoration commenced in 2002 and remains a very significant member of the Sydney Heritage Fleet

The main function of this vessel was servicing the navigation buoys and lights in Moreton Bay. Its secondary function was as a relief pilot vessel in the port of Brisbane when the regular pilot vessel, MV Matthew Flinders was unavailable because of maintenance, provisioning, crew leave or bunkering. I was onboard when it was acting as the pilot vessel. We would take up station off Caloundra or in the lee of Cape Moreton. If it were too rough to stay in a fixed position, we would steam around waiting for a call. The pilot transfer was conducted using a wooden, clinker-built, whale boat.

Another job I had during this period was a ‘delivery job’ taking the dredger SD Fitzroy from Brisbane to Bundaberg. One of the conditions of the ‘delivery’ was that we would receive 14 day’s pay, even though the voyage should only take about 48 to 72 hours depending on the weather, what was called a ‘run job’. This was an old wreck of a dredge and because the voyage was only supposed to take 48 to 72 hours there was no refrigeration, so all food was kept in an ice chest with several blocks of ice. I say, ‘all the food’ and by that, I mean a few dozen eggs, a few loaves of bread, some butter and a couple of pounds of sausages sufficient to last the voyage. It had limited space for coal bunkers, so a few skips of loose coal were dumped on the forecastle deck. The funnel came up through the forecastle meaning that all the smoke and soot from the coal burning fires in the stokehold would blow back across the ship smothering the person steering the ship as it had an open wheelhouse. To add to the misery of the seaman who was on watch steering the ship, the compass was graduated in quarter points. Between that and the bad weather it was a constant job trying to hold the vessel on course. There was only the captain and one officer and us four seamen. After leaving the wharf in Brisbane we managed to get as far as Moreton Bay where, because of the weather, we anchored for the night. The next day we steamed into

The next day we steamed into worsening weather and set course up the coast. We made slow headway and 48 hours later when we should have been in Bundaberg, we were still battling up the coast. The voyage ended up taking about 90 hours during which time the ice melted, the food ran out, the extra coal had to be shovelled by hand from the forecastle deck down to the stokehold. I must confess that it was an interesting experience.

THE NEIL BEVIS STORY TO CONTINUE NEXT EDITION - Autumn 2025

Australian Merchant Navy National Memorial Canberra Commemoration October 2024

Photos kindly provided by Jillian Carson-Jackson

The late Donald Edward Kennedy OAM reciting the Ode

THOSE WHO HAVE CROSSED THE BAR

COLIN COCKLEY 17/10/2024

DONALD EDWARD KENNEDY OAM 23/11/2024 WWII

THEY SAIL FOREVERMORE UNDER THE RED ENSIGN

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