

Lost at sea

Tales my grandfather would have told me. A sailor's life 1910-1941

A sailor's life – 52. War and peace: Donax, 1919

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Shell oil tanker Donax, about 1919, from Bert Sivell's collection

The first world war was supposed to be over by the time Bert Sivell set off across the Atlantic from Holland in his first oil tanker in September 1919. But the young wireless officer tap-tapping away to invisible ships in his cubby hole on the monkey island reported different.

There were sea mines everywhere. Great iron beasts – allied and enemy – ripped loose by gales and left drifting, like lethal horned slugs, just below the surface of the shipping lanes. Emerging from the English channel, Donax had to change course to avoid one sighted south of Land's End. "It seems the war has not finished with us yet," he wrote.

In the US, he passed a mammoth shipyard in the Delaware river, churning out ships half a dozen at a time to replace the vessels lost.

"There is no doubt about this country being go-ahead," Bert wrote from Philadelphia that autumn. "Just below where we are now lying is what the Yanks claim to be the [largest ship-building yard in the world](#). There are 50 slips in a row on the river bank and each one is a steamer in the process of building. They turn ships out like Ford cars, and probably about as much use. The Americans are making a great shout about there being no more war, but I notice they have an immense dockyard here building all classes of warships and also making very large drydocks. That looks like no more war, does not it?"



Hog Island shipyard 1919.
(JD Andrew jnr)

He had joined Donax in Rotterdam, where a little German steamer flying an ensign as big as itself tempted him sorely as he navigated the busy waterway. ("I would very much have liked to have run

him down, only it is not worth risking my ticket over it.”)

From Philadelphia they returned to Europe laden with oil for Finland, passing through the North Sea and over the top of Denmark and the site of the [Battle of Jutland](#), the largest naval clash of the first world war. (“Of course there is no trace of it now,” wrote Bert, although they did come upon a Norwegian steamer piled high with timber impaled on a wreck south of Copenhagen.)



500lb 'horned' sea mine sunk by HMS Violent off Reval in 1921. From naval-history.net

Almost every day the new wireless brought reports of drifting mines, punctuated by an occasional SOS. All the way up the Baltic they zig-zagged between minefields, and lying at anchor between the snowy islands in the Gulf of Bothnia overnight that November, waiting for a pilot, they listened to the boom of loose mines exploding around them against the rocky islets.

“We have had six reported to us from different sites today, and this afternoon we passed a big one,” he wrote. “The ‘old man’ was up on the bridge potting at it with his revolver, but the bullets were not heavy enough to explode it.”

Copenhagen had been like a British naval depot, he said, and there were British destroyers too in Reval (now Tallinn) where Britain was backing Estonia’s fight for independence, and Helsingfors (Helsinki, in the newly independent former Russian grand duchy of Finland). “Apparently a large portion of [the British fleet is knocking about](#) up this way. They have been having a go at the Bolsheviks,” he wrote. And that was it.

The politics being played out around the Baltic following the Russian revolution, the bitter struggle for Estonia, even the deadly civil war between [“white” and “red” Finns](#), he did not mention it.



Postcard view of harbour at Abo, in Finland, sent by Bert Sivell 1919

“It is the custom in this country to have women working on the wharves handling cargo etc,” he wrote from Turku in Finland, which he knew as Abo. “A crowd of girls and women were at work unloading wood off trucks right alongside us, so of course some of us could not resist the temptation to pelt them with snow balls. They replied with ‘rapid fire’ and we had a pitched battle there for about twenty minutes. It was great sport. I went up town yesterday afternoon and was shaved by a lady barber. That is another novelty of this country.

“We left Abo this morning and got about 30 miles on our homeward journey when we had to anchor for fog and there we are till morning. We are coming along a different route now, so as to cross the Gulf of Bothnia and strike the Swedish coast. We are still amongst islands, but tomorrow will be amongst mines again. Sounds cheerful, does not it, dearie?”

It was -8C (18F) and the oil tanker and the world around it were a mass of snow and ice. All the deck water pipes were solid and in port they had to keep the winches running, and the windlass and the steering gear and blow their whistle every hour or so to avoid icing up.

It was so cold his face almost froze off but he loved Finland, and the landscape of little rocky islands close enough to step onto as Donax threaded through them at 11 knots (13mph). He loved the summer residences under their wintry blanket, and the dormant boat houses, and the noise as the tanker crunched through the sea ice. “I can understand why people take their holidays cruising around the fjords (mind your jaw) in this part of the world. The scenery is grand now with everything covered with snow, but it must be ten times better in mid summer. When I get my shore berth we will have to spend a vacation over here, what say you, dearest?”

A shore berth was by now looming larger in his plans. After nine years trotting off to sea without a backward glance, there was now a girl to be home for. By early December, when Donax docked back in Shell Haven, Essex, Bert had decided to quit. Notwithstanding the pay, the disadvantages of the oil trade had begun to tell: the lack of time in port – pumping as soon as the ship was alongside, and sailing again as soon as they’d done; the ban on wives if the ship was discharging benzine; and the chance of a lonely posting “out East” for two years or more.

He liked his fellow officers and meals were “one roar of laughter from beginning to end”, but as he motored Captain McDermuid ashore to collect the mail Bert told him his bags were packed. He had decided to put his name down at Trinity House for the London pilot service.

It never happened. By the time the master came back, Bert had been promoted. To 2nd Mate, with immediate effect. On £21 10s a month, with war bonus and overtime “thrown in for luck”.

Bert thought about it for several hours and capitulated. He would stay with Shell.

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