

Lost at sea

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

A sailor's life – 53. Christmas at sea, 1919

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Traditional Christmas pudding

Christmas dinner 1919 aboard the Shell oil tanker Donax was a feast beyond the wildest imaginings of a boy from a windjammer, raised on the regulation pound of salt gristle and pint of stewed peas.

The previous year, Bert Sivell had been in the tropics, a very young and rather uncompromising mate under sail in the Indian Ocean aboard the old three-master Monkbarns.

Christmas dinner then had been half a dozen Australian chooks, picked up by the “Old Man” in [Bunbury WA during the Armistice celebrations](#) and eaten three to a bird, with plum duff for afters and an impromptu concert on the foredeck as night fell. Among the teenage apprentices – for whom Bert made Christmas eve hideous by setting them the filthy chore of “tarring down” the rigging – the memory of their subsequent slap-up Christmas day “feed” had glowed undimmed and still written about fifty years later.

On Donax, Christmas began at 11am in the middle of the cold grey Atlantic, when the captain mustered them for port wine and cake in the saloon. Officers only, of course. Bert did not record what libations were offered to the Chinese crew. In the saloon there had been toasts to the king and to “our loved ones at home” – with much sly winking at Bert, newly engaged with a framed photo of my grandmother shyly smiling on his desk which they’d all been to inspect.

Christmas dinner *à la* Shell had featured hors d’oeuvres, soup, fish, lamb cutlets and peas, chicken and boiled ham, plum pudding flaming with brandy, and fruit, all washed down with claret, beer, stout or lemonade.

“After dinner we all sat around smoking. The old man was a little merry and gave us two songs, the Bandoliers and Land of Hope and Glory. It would have been better had he had a voice...” wrote Bert. By 10pm the party was over and everyone was back to work. As 2nd mate Bert’s watch was midnight till 4am.

Bert, then 23, had joined the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company in September 1919 as 3rd officer, notwithstanding the crisp new master's certificate in his pocket, but by Christmas nine weeks later he had been promoted and a new man fresh from the Royal Mail Steam Packet Co. had moved into his old quarters. The new junior was three years older than Bert with only a 1st mate's certificate "and a steamship one at that", wrote Bert, smugly. "He's a bit swanky, but he'll soon lose that in a tanker."



Nautical charts

As 2nd mate, Bert was now in charge of the tanker's charts - inking in the Admiralty's monthly list of corrections to lights, rocks and shoals on any of the 1,000 maps Donax carried. But the years in sail had taught him skills the more pampered steamship men could only gape at. He became the ship's unofficial barber ("Europeans only"), and drew regular audiences too as he stitched up a rip, darned a sock or patched his boots.

When the 3rd engineer banged his head and went into violent convulsions in Helsinki, Bert had been the only officer aboard with first aid training and he nursed the injured man on the messroom table for five hours (!) until the Finnish doctor arrived aboard. ("The 1st and 2nd mates both lost their heads, so I kicked them outside for a start, and put the chief engineer out in the snow also as he wanted to faint.")

When the patient was ordered to hospital ashore, Bert and the 4th engineer gleefully obliged. It was the first time they'd set foot on dry land since leaving the UK, as they'd been too busy minding the pumps during the oil tanker's brief dockings at Philadelphia, Copenhagen and Reval (Tallinn). On the way back to the ship in the taxi, they treated themselves to a sneaky detour. "It was fine walking on the crisp snow. There were plenty of one-horse sleighs plying for hire, and all the boys had their toboggans. I saw some beautiful shops, but neither of us had any money."

Only later did they discover how badly ill the 3rd engineer was. His sea career was finished. "He can never take charge of running engines after having fits," wrote Bert. The man was only 26 and married.

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Bermuda Tamarind Vale postcard 1920 -
unscheduled stop due to engine trouble

Donax spent New Year 1920 in Louisiana, rattling the ship's whistle into the empty night 35 miles up the swampy, flat mosquito-plagued Mississippi, where a handful of wooden houses clustered round a general store near a single oil well on the edge of a large sugar plantation. Bert knew it as Good Hope, but it was to become better known as [Norco](#) – today an oil town of 4,000 souls still labouring under the unlovely acronym of the New Orleans Refining Co.

From Louisiana the oil tanker set off back into the Gulf Stream bound for Europe, laden with best quality Water White kerosene for Sweden, but the engine trouble that had dogged Donax since they left Rotterdam struck again.

Although the company was already experimenting with ocean-going diesel engines, seven-year-old Donax had oil-fired steam reciprocating engines, and Bert wasn't impressed. ("We were stopped an hour and a half while the engineers were tinkering up the machinery to make it go," he wrote, less than a week out. "It's not all honey apparently in a steamer.") The breakdowns continued the whole trip, averaging about once a week, "and always on my watch," Bert noted, dourly.

Then a boiler split. It was the disadvantage of oil-fired steamers, or so he said. The bunker oil picked up in the US burned hotter (280F) and less uniformly than coal and cooled dramatically each time pressure was lowered for the many brief ports of call, causing the metal to crack.



Stockholm harbour 1920 postcard with airship -
or 'dirigible' as Bert Sivell knew it, writing
home that February

One day out of New Orleans they were "leaking like a basket". When the second boiler came out in sympathy five days later off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, the Old Man and the chief engineer held a council of war. Limping back to the UK for a week of repairs and a spot of unscheduled home

leave was no longer an option. The master decided to head for Halifax, Nova Scotia, 450 miles north, and whistled up his 2nd Mate to dig out the charts.

“My job was soon over,” wrote Bert, Halifax NS was one of the very few places in the world the tanker did not have charts for, but as he arrived on the bridge to report, he found the Old Man and the chief engineer still calculating headwinds and fuel consumption.

Sail-trained Bert was amazed. It seemed immediately obvious to him that the limping tanker would do better to head not north towards the Arctic against the winds but south with the swell behind them, aiming for Bermuda – 300 miles back the way they’d come, but with fairer weather all the way. Being Bert he also said so.



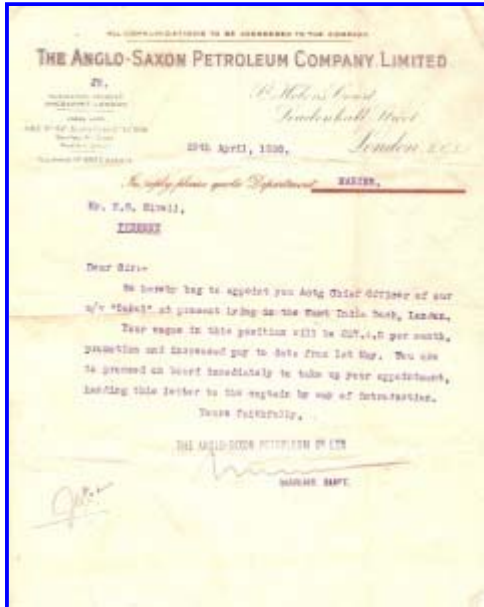
Port Arthur Texas, 1920 - on a rare trip ashore that March, Bert found prohibition had struck and the bar, pictured left, was dry. Instead, he attended a jazz exhibition at the fire station. "A terrible row..."

“I nearly had to laugh out loud at the look of amazement on their faces. They had not thought of that. We had been steering for Halifax for half an hour by then, and immediately the vessel was turned round and course set for Bermuda. Fancy the 2nd mate of a vessel telling the captain where to get his repairs done, and engineering work at that.

“So now we are crawling to Bermuda at about 6 knots. We are unable to go faster because we cannot keep steam, the boilers are leaking so badly that cold water has to be constantly pumped into them to keep them full...”

Captain McDermuid was suitably grateful: after one more trip to Texas and back, Bert was promoted – to another ship.

McDermuid had served in sail himself, a single year in the four-masted Juteopolis (later Garthpool), but it cut little ice with his snippy 2nd mate. (“He’s a steam boat man,” wrote Bert, “although he would like you to believe he had been years at sea in sailing ships. He often tries to tell me how things were done in sail, but he gets very muddled. He was never there long enough to learn anything...”)



Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co letter
promoting Bert Sivell to the former
RN oiler Oakol - about to be renamed
Orthis

On arrival in London a letter from the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co. was waiting.

Dear Sir,

We hereby beg to appoint you acting chief officer of our MV Oakol at present lying in the East India dock, London. Your wages in this position will be £27 4s a month, promotion and increased pay to date from 1st May. You are to proceed on board immediately to take up your appointment, handing this letter to the captain by way of introduction, Yours faithfully, etc