

Lost at sea

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

A sailor's life – 56. Wives on wharves

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Wife on board (in fur coat), merchant navy, 1920s

“I often get a yarn with the ‘old man’ on the same old topic – marriage. His chief argument is that marriage is no good for a man going to sea, because he is seldom home. He says it is only keeping another man’s daughter, but I argue what could be better than for a man to come home from a voyage and find his wife waiting with outstretched arms to greet him, because if a girl really loves a man she is willing to put up with her man being at sea most of his time and will make the most of him while he is home. Am I not right, darling?”

Bert Sivell to Ena Whittington, December 1919

The “old man’s” view of women was jaundiced. Captain McDermid – all of 35 - had been engaged once himself, he told Bert during their first trip with the Shell oil tanker Donax. But his girl had spent her last penny to get a fur coat. When he saw that he turned her down, he said, because if she would spend her own money like that, what would she be like with his?



Shell oil tanker Donax (1919), Captain McDermid

But McDermid’s bark was worse than his bite. Though unmarried himself, he was happy to wire ahead so that the 2nd Engineer’s wife could be waiting on the pier head as the ship came alongside in Shellhaven on their return from the Baltic, and three days later when the tug took her and the chief engineer’s wife off again as Donax left for the States, he had three long blasts blown on the ship’s whistle as a farewell to the ladies. (“The tug replied by giving a series of blasts, trying to make Hip

Hip Hurrah, so the wives had a good send off. There were four British steamers lying at anchor there and I expect they wondered what had gone wrong.”)



London Tilbury and Southend railway pier and ferry, Gravesend, Bert's route to Ena and home

In a “home” port, like Shellhaven in the Thames estuary, Shell’s married officers – and married officers only – were permitted to have their wives living aboard with them. ”They have to pay their own expenses, but the firm makes all the arrangements, which is very good of them,” Bert wrote, enviously.

He himself managed only snatched evenings on a sofa at Ena’s digs in Tunbridge Wells, arriving at 6pm and running for the 10.10pm train for Charing Cross, Tilbury, and a midnight walk back to the ship. Once he managed a trip to his parents on the Isle of Wight. Donax had arrived at Thameshaven at 2pm, they were tied up by 5pm, he’d hailed a tug to Gravesend, and run for the ferry to Tilbury just in time to catch the London train. He had got to Ryde as the clocks were chiming 3.30am.

Small wonder he was envious of married colleagues. ” Here is another chance you have missed,” he wrote in April 1920. ”You could have met the ship yesterday afternoon and stayed on board until tomorrow morning. A little spell like that about twice every two months and the drydocking every six months will not make married life so bad after all, eh! sweetheart, and there is always the prospect of the three months furlough.”



London docklands, undated - not always a comfy spot for the wives to hang around, waiting for their husband's ship

The cranky former RFA Oakol, latterly the Shell oil tanker Orthis, to which he was transferred that May offered even more opportunity for the men to see their wives (“... The 2nd mate’s wife was aboard almost before the anchor was down...”) due to the time she spent in Millwall dock and

Shellhaven while the engineers struggled with her engines. Bert managed many more trips to Tunbridge Wells after work, and several to Ryde – taking Ena with him on the night train.

“It will be a taste of what is in store for you in future, dearest, when we are married and you have to suddenly fly off to Glasgow or somewhere else on receipt of a wire. You will get quite used to night travelling.”

Captain Harding had his own wife aboard *Orthis* as often as possible and was generous with time off for his unwed chief officer. The likelihood of transfer “out East” hung over them all, if not to Palau Bukom in the Singapore Straits, where the Shell group had historic concessions, then at least to Batoum on the Black Sea, where a pipeline delivered oil from the Anglo-Persian’s newly acquired Caspian wells. The cosy brief domesticity in Shellhaven or even Millwall or Rotterdam was a rare interlude, to be grabbed with both hands, spurred by the arrival of charts for Batoum that May.



Shell tanker *Orthis* (1920), Captain Harding

When the company tried to ban wives, the men were outraged. “There is a new ruling coming out in the firm that no wives are to be allowed on a vessel with benzine in,” Bert reported. “Some fanatic, I suppose, thinks it dangerous, but I have an idea that rule will be broken a few times or many will leave the firm.”

And they cheered the master of a Belgian time-charter ship who let go from the wharf and anchored in the stream when ordered to put his wife ashore while loading. “The installation manager was aboard within an hour, asking him to resume and saying his wife could stay.”

Time snatched with husbands aboard oil tankers was not an unmixed blessing, at least for the wives. “They have been trying to kill us all just lately here by letting go a lot of gas,” wrote Bert from Shellhaven in August. “They purify petrol by passing some acid through it. This acid is then run into the sea and the end of the pipeline is not far from us. They run this stuff away in the middle of the night and the ‘sniff’ is thick enough to cut. Nearly all the Europeans on board are bad through it. Last night it nearly turned me up and I have been queer all day.”

Summoned by telegrams, expected to park children and leap onto trains at little or no notice, and then kick their heels on wharves in strange ports until someone had time to pick them up, the lot of a merchant officer’s wife was not as simple as it had been in the days of sail. Then, each ship was a small business venture, and it was common for a master to own a part share. Property ashore was idle money, so many captains simply took their wives with them – resulting in children [born and raised at sea](#). As late as the 1920s, there were still wives in sail.

When Bert Sivell joined his third Shell oil tanker, *Mytilus*, in Rotterdam shortly before Christmas 1920, Captain Jackson had both his wife and his little daughter living on board. Bert couldn’t wait to be married himself.