

## ALL AT SEA.....

I was re-reading Lois Haime's fine article on her journey to Russia. Like all travel stories, one starts to remember the personal journeys and the enormous good luck that counters enormous stupidity. How must of us survive excursions to foreign countries still mystifies me.

My travel story started in late 1972 when I had an urge to go back to the old country. I had been actively urged to do so by many people since arriving in Australia in 1966. I was never sure of their motives. This is the story of how I got on the wrong ship going to the wrong country.

My first act of stupidity was to think that making my own way to Perth from Sydney would save me money. After all, wasn't Perth closer to London by 4,000 km? Five days of hitchhiking and a near death experience in a runaway truck found me in Perth. I stayed with some old mates who had mastered time travel, making Sunday sessions last for a fortnight. During this time travel experience, I had managed to register my name at the Department of Shipping and Transport as a workaway on a ship. This allowed practicing idiots like myself to travel on a cargo ship being paid one shipping per week in exchange for passage.

Within a few days, a bulk carrier at Fremantle needed me to replace men who had jumped ship. This should have been my second wake up call but my mind was still focused on a cheap trip to London. I signed the "Articles" assuming it was just a technical legality for this trip only. Mistake number three.

As the 60,000 ton bulk carrier thumped its way out of Fremantle into the night, I asked Mick, the Irish steward, how long it would take us to get back to London. He looked at me as if I had been on a fortnight of Sunday sessions and said with a malicious smile - "We're not going to the UK". I suspected that Mick had lied to me purely because he could but as we headed across the South Atlantic for the eastern seaboard of the US, it became apparent that London was getting further away by the day. The bright news was that I was being paid a wage and not a shilling a week! In addition, I was even allowed to play with the steering wheel for ten hours and get my steering certificate. The crew also treated me to hours of maritime horror stories eager to scare the village idiot on his first voyage out. I hid in my cabin when we crossed the equator.

Our first cargo of mica sands was unloaded in Baltimore, Maryland and I headed straight for a shore 'phone to ring the British Consulate in Washington. I explained that I was a workaway and if I wasn't repatriated to the UK, then the crew would go on strike because I wasn't a union member. I indignantly maintained that I was being detained against my will!

The consulate official was diplomatically patient with my description of my personal shipping disaster and then explained the implications of the "Articles" that I had signed. I had signed on for two years, had been paid full wages

been automatically enrolled in the seamen's union. That, to me, was the true meaning of being sunk.

Nevertheless, by the time we had unloaded our last cargo in Mobile, Alabama, our crew were informed of our impending rotation back to the UK. Unfortunately we were also involved in the biggest British seamen's strike in recent history and the company had arranged a multi-airline exit designed to deceive the union bosses in London. The union had dictated that any British ship rotating crews during the worldwide strike would be blacklisted when returning to home waters. I have never boarded so many different aircraft in 48 hours and I was petrified they would route us through a Botswana Airlines DC3. We passed our incoming crew at O'Hare in Chicago and they looked decidedly wild eyed. Eventually we arrived at Heathrow where a smiling West Indian born immigration man surveyed my passport, questioned my entry and asked me why I didn't have a suntan. It seemed that everyone wanted to be a comedian.

This is a two-part story about my maritime career on another ship but it is even more embarrassing than this one. Some people say that if you were never young, you were never stupid. However, good luck still favours the stupid.

*Keith Crane (WA Buicks)*