

The Life and Times of Ivor Taliesin Lewis

When in school one of my worst subjects was writing essays. The first three or four lines I used to attack the page with a velocity of a space rocket. After that I would look around the room for inspiration, but there was none to be had. I would end up having to do a hundred lines as a punishment for not putting enough script on the paper. In spite of this I am attempting to write a story of my life from the end of my schooldays.

I should have stayed in Townhill School and not gone to a school where all the lecturers (not teachers) wore silly gowns and caps, and the headmaster was to be known as the PRINCIPAL. His favourite phrase was “is it not?” (this was a phrase he used to confirm what he had just said). I was very fortunate in not having to stay an extra year when I passed the interview for a job as office boy with I.C.I. Landore. My father had to see the Principal and, under the threat of having to pay the cost of my schooling if I left early, signed me out. After twelve months nearly all the office boys went on to have an apprenticeship with the company. It was like most firms of the day - if you had a relative working in the firm you had a better chance of being kept on. My uncle worked for the company and that certainly helped.

My five years with I.C.I. flew by and during this time I developed a love of motorbikes. I did what many who bought a motorbike did, start off with a 125cc and very soon after passing my driving test bought something with a bit more power. Like everyone who owned one I thought there was no way I could make a mistake and end up in the back of an ambulance. One wet and windy morning, however, I was on my way to work when I skidded into a wall. I landed up in hospital with a cracked vertebrae in the neck, a broken shoulder and a collapsed lung. I lost in total three months work and the Company extended my apprenticeship by three months.

At the end of my time I ended up with a City & Guilds Certificate – this was the minimum requirement the company expected you to achieve. At the end of each term a personnel officer came down from Birmingham to interview every apprentice to check his or her results. Knowing I wished to go to sea they agreed to let me leave any time during the extended period if I was offered a ship. It was always my ambition to go to sea. A rough crossing to Ilfracombe on the Paddle Steamer when I was a schoolboy did not dampen my yearning. On a Friday morning with less than a month to go of my extended apprenticeship I was requested to go to the main office.

When I got there a taxi was waiting to take me home to pick up my gear, and then take me to Barry Docks to join m/v Graigfelen, one of Idwal Williams' fleet of cargo vessels.



m/v Graigfelen

There was little time to say goodbye, the ship was sailing at 3pm and if I had missed it I would have had to fly to Antwerp and join her there. Wanting to go to sea and actually going to sea are two options and the thought of leaving home was quite emotional. If it wasn't for the fact the other option was National Service I may not have gone. I said goodbye to my wife Yvonne and my daughter Sheila and left in a hurry. We made good time and reached Barry just before 3pm. I signed a receipt for the taxi driver and made my way to the vessel. She had let go all the ropes and was slowly making her way out to sea. There was a pilot's ladder hanging over the side and a rope was thrown down to me to tie my case on and, making sure it was tied on securely, I started to climb the ladder. She was a light ship and it was a long way up. They shouted down from the deck to only use the ropes on one side of the ladder and, by the time I climbed half way there was only water below me, but the thought of falling off the ladder spurred me on. Somehow I made it to the top and two seamen dragged me over the handrails.

I had only been on board a short time and, as we were clearing the channel to Barry Dock and were heading down the Bristol Channel, one of the engineers asked me to take a generator off the board. I went down the engine room and found the main distribution board. I could see two main circuit breakers, No.1 and No.2. On each breaker there was a tripping handle. I asked the engineer which generator he wanted to shut down. He said No.2 and, not being all that certain of what to do, I pressed a button with the word TRIP on it and the voltage and current meters both went back to zero leaving only one generator in use. Not known to me the Second Engineer was watching what was

going on and was ready to step in if needed. They had been informed that this was my first trip to sea and that I had been set up, so it must have been a disappointment when everything went OK.

The Second Engineer was from Cardigan and with that one action I went up a few steps in his opinion of me. I was overjoyed. From that time we got on well. He was a short stocky man with jet black hair and carried a comb in his overall pocket. He used it frequently and always looked well-groomed. He had signed on again and so he was familiar with the ship. He told me there were three electric motors driving pumps and oil purifying equipment that were not in working order. They had been left like that by the previous electrician who had been unable to repair them. There was no time to send them ashore for repair so he asked me to see what I could do. He gave me a hand to lift the motors off the machines and on to the deck.

I was on my own now, and any decisions to be made were up to me. As an apprentice you did what you were told to do, but now I was in charge and there was no one else to turn to. I felt elated. In the electrical stores aboard there were all the spares required for all the electrical equipment. At the end of the week one of the motors was back in running order, another gold star for me. I now had the respect of all the engineers and two motors to go.

The Graigfelen carried five engineers (Chief, Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth) plus one Electrician. There was the Captain, three deck officers and one apprentice. There were also three donkey men (they looked after the boilers) and three cleaners working in the engine room. The crew consisted of a West Indian carpenter, a Malay boatswain, and Somali sailors. The catering staff were from up north. There were also two cabins for accommodating passengers. My cabin was on the starboard side main deck looking forward, so when the porthole was open there was always a breeze flowing through. On the first morning one of the stewards came with a cup of tea and made my bed and gave my cabin a clean. At first I felt embarrassed but after a while I got used to it. He would also do your washing and there was unpublished list of the charges for the various items of clothing. They were not paid a lot and it was a way of making a little extra.

Sailing light out of Barry we arrived at Antwerp to load steel for China. I must say it was pretty rough going around Land's End and I missed breakfast that morning. The cup of tea the steward gave me was gratefully received. We loaded using quayside cranes and, apart from removing the derricks clear of the loading area, the ships winches were only used for a short time. All the winches and capstans were electric and were looking a bit on the rough side. It took about four days to load the ship and every evening we all went ashore to sample the local ale. It was totally different to the beer I was used to and the inevitable

happened and I ended up not knowing my right foot from my left (i.e. pissed). Not a good impression but I think it was some kind of baptism and maybe I was the fall guy.

The following nights ashore were quiet and uneventful, I had learnt my lesson. The hatches were replaced and battened down and we set sail for the Suez Canal. What struck me when we left was that, apart from meal times, there was nobody around. The Engineers who came off the 4 to 8 watch after breakfast turned in and caught up with some sleep, and the 8 to 12 watch was busy in the engine room carrying out repairs and checking various items of equipment. The 12 to 4 watch would be getting ready for an early lunch to allow the 8 to 12 man to come off watch and get changed for lunch. I myself worked day-work 8am to 4pm. Breakfast aboard could be eaten in the mess room which was handy for the engineers coming off watch at 8 am, as it meant they did not have to change to eat in the dining room. Everyone dressed for dinner and it was the one time when all the officers were together. The stewards dressed in white jackets and there was always a choice of meals on the menu.

The voyage across the Bay of Biscay was very rough, and sailing through the Mediterranean Sea seemed to last forever. The 2nd Engineer suggested we delay repairing the other two motors until we reached the Mediterranean Sea as the weather would be a lot calmer there. It would have been too dangerous to try and repair them with the sea conditions as rough as they were. The evenings were cold, and after dinner the engineers on the 12 to 4 watch caught up with some sleep. Apart from reading a book from the ship's library, there was little else to do. The ship was pitching and rolling, and one moment the sea rose high above us and the next we were looking down on it. We passed some Spanish trawlers fishing there, and they were being tossed about like corks in the water. We finally sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar and by next day the weather had improved. It was getting warmer and I managed to repair the two motors and fit them back on their machines. After what seemed a lifetime we arrived at Port Said.

The temperature had gone up and during the day it was really warm, but during the night time it was quite cold. In those days Port Said was full of small boats with the occupants selling their wares, and the owner of one came aboard with a bunch of flowers for the Captain. A barber also came aboard and anyone with long hair was followed all over the ship until they finally gave in and had a haircut. The Egyptian traders would be paid by the Captain who would take the money out of our salaries. Although they would steal anything that was not bolted down, they only asked the Captain for the money you had agreed to pay. They would spend an hour bargaining on a £2.00 item, and if you paid twice the odds it was your own fault.

The passage through the canal was a bonus for the electrician who had to control two searchlights on the bow of the vessel so as to illuminate the banks either side of the canal. Being on B articles meant all the engineers and myself had to be paid overtime after they completed their watches. On A articles you only got paid your monthly salary. Sunday at sea was counted as an extra day's pay. During our passage through the canal I noticed there were many deck lights and mast floodlights not working, so I made the most of the warm weather and put new lamps in or repaired the fittings as required. Halfway through the canal our convoy anchored in what they called the Bitter Lakes, waiting for the north-bound convoy to pass through before we headed for Port Tewfik and then into the Red Sea.

After passing through the canal and into the Red Sea we headed across the Indian Ocean bound for Singapore to take aboard bunkers and fresh water. The chief asked me to have a look at the Captain's desk light. Apart from mealtimes, the Captain did not appear on deck all that often, so I knocked his door and went in only to find him knitting a jumper. I took the light down to my workshop in the engine room, re-wired it and returned it as good as new. As well as the air conditioning equipment there also were individual cabin fans. These were a constant source of trouble, and there was always a number needing to be repaired. This consisted of fitting new carbon brushes and cleaning the dust from the motor. There were plenty of spares in the stores plus a number of new fans.

The sunsets in the Indian Ocean were beautiful. The whole of the horizon glowed, with the setting sun the centre and all the colours of the rainbow emitting from it. The time it took for the sun to set was very short, one moment it was daylight and the next it was dark. Arriving at Singapore we had time to go ashore and it is there I purchased a Japanese tea set which we still have today. We were tied up ahead of a Blue Funnel vessel and all the officers from that ship were dressed in whites and carried umbrellas. I later found out why. I have never seen it rain so heavily – three seconds and you were soaked through to the skin.

Having taken on bunkers and fresh water we put to sea and headed for Northern China, hoping to discharge, load and be on our way home before Christmas. On the way orders were received via the wireless operator to call in to Shanghai for cargo, and this was to make big changes to our schedule. We loaded the Shanghai cargo and were again on our way bound for Tientsin. There we would discharge our cargo of steel and load a full cargo of soya beans for Denmark. We arrived at the Tientsin anchorage in a thick fog and all the anchored vessels were sounding their gongs at regular intervals to make other vessels aware of their presence. This, coupled with the radar screen, helped the officer on watch ensure no vessel came too close to us.

By morning the fog had lifted and there were at least 20 ships at anchor around us. To make matters worse the sea was starting to freeze and an ice-breaker was busy keeping the channel to the port open. With a number of ships before us we were still at anchor on Xmas day, and with the sea temperature dropping daily the cooling water for the generators had to be transferred to the cofferdam – a tank the full width of the ship. We had a Chief Engineer who had not been to sea for a number of years and he was continually checking temperatures and checking the toilet overboard discharge outlets. To see these he had to lean over the handrails. He also checked the cooling water for the refrigeration plant which was still on the sea inlet to the pump. The outlet for this was on the stern of the ship. Talking to the Third Engineer in the engine room one day he told me he did not fancy what was for lunch, so he was getting himself on the outside of a beef sandwich. He referred to this as 'playing a banjo', a strange term to use for eating a sandwich. Later that day the Chief asked me how I was getting on with the different terms which were used at sea. I mentioned the Third was 'playing a banjo', and the Chief replied "Does he play it well?"

Every morning after breakfast I would meet the Chief in the fridge control room to make sure the condenser was operating and being kept cool, and that the gas pressures were OK. One morning he failed to turn up and by lunch time there was still no sign of him. The Captain ordered a full search of the ship but we never found him. One can only speculate what had happened to him. He was never seen again. Officials from the Chinese Authorities came on board and spoke to all the crew members and reported the incident. The atmosphere aboard was eerie as everyone was expecting to find him aboard somewhere. Because I joined the ship so quickly I had no papers and so a Chinese document was issued in my name and, worse still, I had to be vaccinated for smallpox. I had a sore arm for weeks.

Finally we docked, discharged our cargo and moved to the berth where the soya beans were waiting to be loaded. The loading process was very slow. A tarpaulin sheet was laid on the ground and the dockers shovelled the beans onto the sheet which had ropes with eyelets attached to each corner. These ropes were gathered together and slipped over the winch hook to be hoisted aboard. This was lowered down into the hold and half the ropes were removed from the hook, allowing the beans to drop into the bottom of the hold. Prior to loading we had to have shifting boards fitted to stop the cargo moving from side to side when we were at sea. The boards divided the hold into chambers and took some time to install.

The Chinese work force were amazing considering the air temperature was below freezing. The ship's winches were used for the loading and there were a few breakdowns. The covers of the main panels were held on by 20 x 1/2" bolts. I was given a tip by the Second Engineer – once the cover was removed, put just two bolts back in for safety purposes and set the rest aside to put back in after loading. This was a good tip as, if you had another fault on the same winch, only two bolts needed to be removed to gain access to the control panel. Once the cover had been removed, the Chinese workers were always keen to have the winch working again as quickly as possible. and it could be quite a job to keep their hands off the panel as I worked on it.

There was a large shed on the wharf which served as a shop, restaurant and bar. It was well decorated inside and we spent a few evenings in there. The only beer on sale was onion beer, and it made the hairs on your arms tingle with every mouthful. There was a games room and they did sell a good cup of coffee. The food aboard was always lacking in fresh vegetables and, although there were some in the cold room, the chief steward insisted on saving them, serving us tinned beans instead. Walking on the deck he happened to step on a pile of soya beans, fall and break his leg. The Third Engineer said "I always knew that beans would be his downfall!". He was taken ashore and that's the last we ever saw or heard of him.

Homeward bound we called into Singapore for bunkers and fresh water, and we also picked up a replacement Chief Engineer. He had been the previous holder of the post but had been on sick leave, and he had been flown out to meet the ship. I purchased a short wave radio and, with a short length of cable as an aerial, I could pick up the BBC overseas broadcasts. Most of the crew had a radio of one type or another as it was something to listen to in the evenings. Mine worked quite well. The top record of the day was Cliff Richard singing 'Living Doll'.

On the homeward journey there was plenty to do. To illuminate the deck and holds during loading, light clusters of 12 x 100 watt lamps were used and all reflective surfaces were painted white. When discharging, the clusters were thrown around, some of the cables were cut, and they were all thrown into the fore-peak locker after use. When the weather warmed up I spent hours fitting new cables, changing all the burnt out lamps, testing them, painting them and stowing them away carefully ready for their next use. I managed to complete this before the weather got too hot, as there is not a lot of shade on the deck of a ship.

Again we entered the Suez Canal but this time two Egyptians were put on board, complete with a rowing boat, to operate the search lights and, if we had to stop in an emergency, to take the ropes ashore. I was still asked to stand by in

case of any problems so it made no difference to me. During their stay on board they took all the half empty tins of paint from the fore-peak locker plus anything they could get their hands on. We sailed through the Canal into the Mediterranean Sea, across the Bay of Biscay and proceeded to Land's End for orders. We were told to set a course for Copenhagen.

Arriving at Copenhagen we were directed to a berth equipped with suction grain unloaders (large pipes which worked like giant vacuum cleaners). As we had too much draft to approach the allocated berth, it was necessary to lighten the ship. This took only a few hours and we were then moved up the harbour to our berth. At first everything went well, but as the level of beans in the hold got lower, the stevedores found they couldn't make enough money. So after a disagreement with the agents, they went on strike. At that time the union was very strong and the engineers aboard were only allowed to run a generator for power, and no repair work was to be carried out to anything aboard. The strike lasted nine days, and during that time all we could do was have a stroll around Copenhagen. As we could not afford to go out every evening, we concentrated our attention on cultural tours of the City.

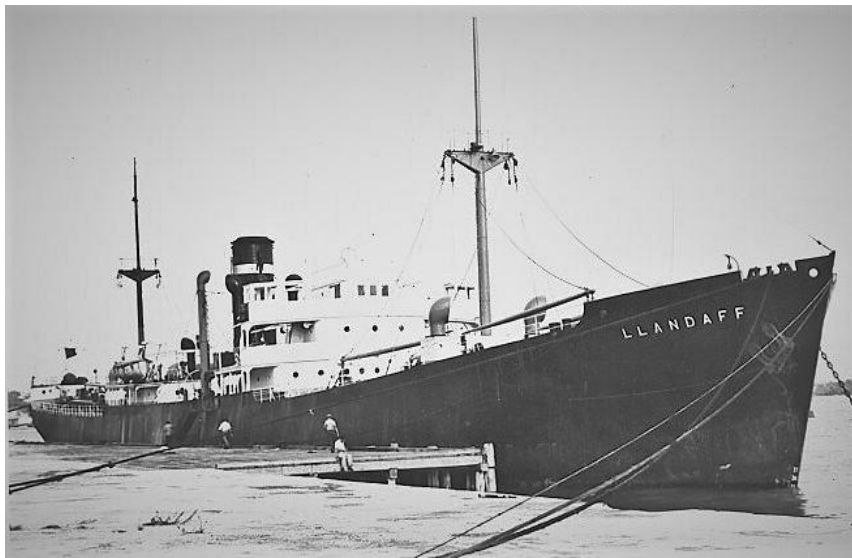
Finally our ship was unloaded and we left Copenhagen, stone cold sober, bound for Immingham where we were paid off. The engineering superintendent commented on the light clusters and asked me to sign on again for another voyage but I turned it down. The Shipping Master paid us out and issued our rail warrants for the journey home. Because it was cheaper to go to Victoria Station via York I had to pay extra to go via Cardiff. At least I had company all the way to High Street Station.

I was now a merchant seaman. When I arrived home I reported to Trevor Morgan at the Mount Stewart Shipping Office and sorted out my identity card and my discharge book. I also had a medical examination to see if I was fit. I was ready for my next ship. The voyage had lasted six months.

After being on leave a little longer than I should have been, I rang the shipping office to let them know I was looking for another ship. I did not have to wait very long and was told to report to the Three Nuns Hotel in Aldgate, London (all expenses paid) and wait for the mv Llandaff, one of Evan Thomas Radcliffe's Tankers. She was docking at Thames Haven and the nearest rail station was Stanford-le-Hope. The taxi driver who picked me up at Paddington Station said 'are you going to Nelson's Column?', 'no the Three Nuns Hotel' I replied. 'Oh I thought you said the three ones, (one eye, one arm, one a**e hole)'. Most of the London cabbies were always ready with a joke or a story. The Llandaff was four days overdue and I met up with three others who were also due to join the ship. With a free bar in the hotel and all our meals paid for, none of us were worried. The free bar ended after the first complimentary drink.

With the price of beer in London being a bit expensive, we remained sensible. At least we were being fed.

On day three the agent arrived with our joining instructions and we managed, with an element of dramatic skill, to get our out-of-pocket payments refunded. We now had money for a drink but no time to enjoy it. A taxi took the three of us to the station where the train left for Stanford-le-Hope, and another taxi took us from there to the Thames Haven Oil Jetty. We climbed aboard the Llandaff and, after putting my case in my cabin, I changed into my working gear and explored the ship.



m/t Llandaff

One of the engineers who had travelled with me had misgivings about joining, muttering ‘she’s a five legged Doxford’, which meant nothing to me but it clearly upset him. He explained that the ship's engine had five cylinders with two pistons in each. The pistons were opposed, meaning the two came together in the centre of the cylinder to fire the fuel. The pistons were water cooled with flexible hoses, and these hoses were prone to breaking. In short, he said they were hard work. I gave a nod of understanding but it all went over my head. However, once I'd examined the engine I could see what he meant.

Looking around the engine room I wondered why they needed to carry an electrician. All the winches and capstans were steam, the auxiliary pumps in the engine room were steam, and so were the cargo pumps. Apart from two generators, all that was left was the lighting and the engine turning gear (an electric motor which could be coupled via a gearbox to the crankshaft in order to turn the engine for maintenance purposes). There were already some engineers aboard who had signed on again, plus a pump-man to discharge the

cargo. I thought the ship can't be all that bad if people are re-joining. I had no option anyway and so I signed on. The first two or three days were spent discharging the ship's cargo and then we set sail for Balikpapan in Borneo. There we were to load a cargo of slack wax for Port-de-Bouc in France.

The trip across the Bay of Biscay wasn't a pleasant one. Our accommodation was aft and when the ship was pitching and rolling it felt as if I was being being forced through my bunk. The propeller was rising out of the water and the tremendous shudder when it went back in made you wonder how much more could the ship take before something fell off. I didn't feel all that well but was not sick. Going into the Mediterranean, things improved – the weather was warmer and the sea was calm. I recall the Second Mate who was from North Wales saying 'this is the weather we signed on for' Living aft in bad weather is a lot different to living mid ships, when the ship is pitching it's surprising how much she rises up and down. Even those who have been to sea for years are affected by bad weather. It's a constant battle to stay on your feet and you have to learn to go with the motion of the ship.

During our passage through the Mediterranean the Chief Officer started cleaning the cargo tanks. He used a high pressure hose with a rotating nozzle and blasted the tanks with a mixture of steam and water. This equipment was known as a Butterworth tank cleaner. All the sludge and dirty oil was pumped into a separate cargo tank to be pumped ashore when we finally berthed. To look into the tanks he was cleaning he used a mirror to reflect the sun so it illuminated the inside of the tank. He told me it would be too dangerous to use a torch as the slightest spark could blow the ship sky high. No one mentioned this danger to me before, but from that day on I made sure when renewing lamps that the fuses were removed beforehand.

There was also a danger of being overcome by fumes in the pump room. There was always a strong smell when I went into it. The pump man would let me know if any lamps needed changing and accompanied me while I was renewing them. All the fittings were intrinsically safe and the covers were attached by eight screws. He had a lot of spare time and was only busy when we were loading or discharging cargo. He helped me quite a lot during the day – it was just like having an electrician's mate.

When we arrived at Port Said a shore-gang was standing by ready to come aboard to clean the boilers. Our next cargo (slack wax) needed to be kept hot due to its low viscosity, and the boilers needed to be up to the job. The cleaning involved removing the boiler manhole covers to clean the inside of the boiler, and opening the fire doors to clean all the fire tubes. It was a dirty job but they seemed to know what they were doing. During this cleaning, all the

cabin portholes and cabin doors had to be locked to prevent anything 'walking' off the ship. While having the boiler cleaned I bought one of the best and simplest water jars you could imagine. It consisted of a porous jar holding three quarters of a gallon. This was heavily wrapped with a straw jacket about two inches thick. The idea was the water would soak through the jar very slowly and dampen the straw. It was hung up in the sun so that the heat would evaporate the moisture in the straw, and in doing so, it cooled the water in the jar. Filled up every morning it would last all day. This idea must date back hundreds of years.

Finally we were under way and, as before, two Egyptians (plus rowing boat) were hoisted aboard to operate the searchlights and to carry out rope-handling duties. Once again I was once again asked to stand by to deal with any problems that might arise with the searchlights. Leaving the canal behind we entered the Red Sea where the weather was so rough that a section of the flying bridge handrail was washed away. This was undoubtedly the worst weather I had ever experienced. I missed a few meals with sea sickness and hoped there was no more to come. We called into Aden for spares which had been sent out for the ship, and I think this must be the hottest place I have ever been. Leaving Aden we set out across the Indian Ocean. It was calm and once more the sunsets were amazing. We also had a few tropical storms and the sky lit up with lightning flashes – not fork lightning, but lightning that lit up the whole sky.

It made a pleasant change from the weather we had just left behind, and every evening we would gather at the stern of the ship and listen to tales and jokes, and have the occasional drink. This became a regular thing in the warm climate. The jokes were often repeated over and over and eventually they dried up. The 4th Engineer who came from Derry had the one joke he would repeat every night, and all the crew would wait for the punch line, have a laugh, and then in seconds everyone would be gone gone. The joke: During Sunday Mass a naked woman ran up the isle to the altar. The priest said 'if anyone looks at this woman, may God strike them blind'. Paddy turned to Murphy and said 'I think I'll be risking just the one eye'.)

We called into Singapore for bunkers and set course for Borneo. As we entered the harbour at Balikpapan I remember seeing the partially-submerged wreck of a Shell Tanker (*possibly the San Flaviano that was bombed, allegedly, by the CIA in 1958*) The official exchange rate was 84 rupees to the pound, but ashore you could get 2000 rupees to the pound. But having learnt from the 'experts' that cigarettes were the best currency for bartering, we bought a few packets out of bond during the voyage and they did indeed prove their worth.. We were berthed on a jetty with nothing else in sight, the area around it being full of vegetation – in short, a jungle. At the end of the jetty a rough road led to

the local bars and the village. The bars consisted of wooden sheds with no front, and several shelves containing a variety of bottled beers. There were a few tables and chairs which would be better suited to the local rubbish tip. The only thing that could be said in their favour was that the beer tasted OK.

In the evening there was a bus service running from the jetty to the village. The buses were ex-American Jeeps converted with seats in the back and painted in various colours. As they say, a second-class ride is better than a first-class walk. The loading went well and, once completed, we set sail for Port-de-Bouc. Not far from our plotted course were German mines left over from the war. These were marked on the chart and were to be avoided at all costs. Luckily the 2nd officer did all the navigating and he was very competent, so we had no worries there. The trip across the Indian Ocean was perfect – not a wave to be seen. The sea was so calm that, if there had been a pool table aboard we could have played. It was like a mill pond and the evening sky was beautiful.

We called into Colombo, Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka) for supplies, and we did manage to enjoy a night ashore. On the jetty were several people dressed in white, carrying umbrellas and notices saying OFFICIAL GUIDE. We hired one and he beat off all the beggars trying to get money out of us. When we went into a bar he would remain outside until we came out. One of our crowd suggested he was waiting for us to get drunk and then rob us. At the end of the evening he accompanied us back to the ship and we all put a few bob together for him – he was well pleased. Once more we were heading for the Suez Canal. The weather in the Red Sea had been good so we arrived safely at Port Tewfik, proceeded through the Canal, and headed for Port-de-Bouc.

When we arrived at Port-de-Bouc our ship docked on a jetty that was miles from the town. Fortunately there were telephones on each jetty which linked to a local taxi firm. They were a bit pricey and so we went ashore in groups to keep the cost down. A few of us went into the village for a glass of wine and a meal, but on returning to the ship after the taxi had dropped us off we were almost eaten alive by mosquitos. In the morning there were lumps all over our faces. The following evening we went ashore to visit a club and outside there was a motorbike lying on its side. Myself and one of the engine room cleaners lifted it up and put it back on its stand. This coincided with the arrival of a police car, and the two of us were promptly arrested. We spent the night locked up and were released only after the owner confirmed our story. He must have been drinking, hidden from the police, and rang them in the morning after he had sobered up.

On completion of unloading we had orders to go to Abadan and load crude oil. Once again it was a trip through the Suez Canal – it was becoming a regular occurrence. Turning from the Red Sea we entered the Straits of

Hormuz. The mountains on the port's coastline looked huge, but it wasn't until you scanned the horizon and saw a ship in the distance appearing so small that you realised quite how high those mountains really were. It was one of those sights I will never forget. We carried on up the gulf, reached Abadan and, after a number of manoeuvres, we berthed alongside, bow out, ready to sail once loading had been completed. There was no security and we were overrun with people who had nothing to do with the loading, just looking for anything to steal. There were security guards on the ship's gangway but they only stopped people leaving the ship, probably having a share of whatever it was they had managed to steal.

Prior to our arrival everything was under lock and key, including the engine room. No one was happier than me when we finished loading and the telegraph rang out for standby. We must have set a world record in turning on all the cooling water pumps, the oil pumps, sea water pumps and putting two generators on the board in case one failed. The captain rang dead slow ahead and we gradually pulled away from the berth and headed out into the Gulf. If I had to choose one place in the world to go on my 'never return to again' list, it would be Abadan. Our ultimate destination was unknown as Company's instructions simply stated Land's End for orders. Upon reaching Land's End, we received orders to proceed to Rotterdam.

After discharging our cargo of crude in Rotterdam, it was back out to Mina Al Ahmadi and, yet again, after loading there it was destination Land's End for orders. This was a bit disappointing, being so close to home and yet having to go back to the Gulf for another cargo. I had a feeling they could do this for ever. When you sign on it's for a two year period, and if you don't dock in the UK after the two years the company has to get you home, either by sea or air. When we were loading in Mina Al Ahmadi, one of the engineers who had joined the ship with me tried to change a flood lamp over the main engine himself instead calling me out, He slipped and was badly injured, so an ambulance was called to take him to hospital. The chief asked me to go with him, so we packed all his belongings and I went in the ambulance to the hospital. It must have been a good ten miles from the ship and, when we arrived, an American doctor came out to examine his injuries. He had broken a few bones but it was not as bad as we first thought. The one consolation for him was that he would probably be home before any of us.

Setting sail for Land's End once again to get our orders, we were all hoping for a UK port. The wireless operator came to see me with a smile on his face and gave me the good news. We were docking at Swansea and then, after unloading, going to the Mount Stewart tank cleaning wharf in Cardiff. This would take five days. There was a surge in activity, with everyone packing their

suitcases ready to leave as soon as the ship docked. As the third engineer pulled a bundle of clothes from his wardrobe, a bottle of wine fell to the deck and broke. Looking at the wine running all over the deck he said, 'the next time I buy a bottle of wine to take home I will drink it straight away'. He had purchased the wine in Port-de-Bouc and it certainly wasn't cheap.

Myself and a few other engineers considered signing on again, but around this time there was a downturn in British shipping, making it harder to find a job. But this was an opportunity to have some leave and still be paid. However, when we returned aboard the Chief told us that everything had changed, and that he, like ourselves, was also out of a job. The ship was to be taken to Swan Hunters Dry Dock at Newcastle upon Tyne to be cut in half, lengthened and converted into an iron ore carrier. This came as a big disappointment but I stayed with the ship up to Swan Hunters where I was paid off. At least it was one more pay day. I now had to find another ship. Including my trip to Swan Hunters in Newcastle the voyage had lasted seven and a half months.

When I arrived home I rang Trevor Morgan looking for another vessel and the news wasn't all that good. Many ships were laid up, as could be seen at Barry Docks where a number of redundant vessels were berthed. This trend was happening to the whole of the British merchant fleet, so it looked like the end of the road for me and the army were likely to pounce. One night I went out with my cousin to the Windsor Pub and met up with Tommy Hayes the skipper of the coaster Averity. The ship was looking for a second engineer so I told him I was an electrician. He said 'don't worry, anyone can turn a few valves and start an engine'. He signed me on and, luckily the ship's Chief Engineer, Harry McKiernan from County Antrim, was quite happy to give me the chance to prove myself.

There was an automatic boiler in the engine room that proved tricky to operate as it would only work manually, and the relief valve kept lifting so it was difficult to maintain the correct operating temperature. So I had a look at it and, with the instruction book in hand, put it back into good working order. That was me hired. Harry rang Greenhythe and spoke to the Engineering Superintendent to confirmed that I had been signed on. There were no certificates needed – if you were able to do the job, that was good enough. Today you would need to have a 2nd Engineers Certificate. After loading at Swansea's Queens Dock, the Averity would sail up-channel delivering bunker fuel to ships in other South Wales Ports, and to Gloucester & Sharpness, and to the Republic of Ireland. (the Averity was built in 1944 as a bunkering vessel for the D Day landings)

The skipper I'd met in the Windsor Pub left the ship and another skipper by the name of Bob Sharp replaced him, so I never did sail with the skipper that signed me on. There was always a conflict with the Agent about sailing as, even when a gale force wind was blowing, the Agent would be pushing the skipper to sail. Contracts were thin on the ground and the company could not afford to upset the charterer for fear of losing business.



m/t Averity

I spent some time on the Averity and there came a point where I wanted to take some leave. This coincided with her starting another charter in which she would be based in Plymouth. I was to ring the office when I was ready to return but, during my leave an advert appeared in the local paper looking for electricians to work in the mining industry. I applied, had an interview, and started work all within two weeks. At the very first day I could see it was not the job for me and it's the only time I dreaded going to work. I had already informed the company that I would not be returning, which proved to be a good move. They just said give us a ring if you change your mind. (I lasted just three months in the mines.)

I rang the shipping company to see if there were any vacancies and was told to report to the main office in Greenhythe, Kent. On arriving I was given bedding and told to go aboard the Alchemist (one of the few ships with a name not ending in ity), find an empty cabin for the night and report to the office in the morning. This I did and was told to join the Azurity in the Old Railway Dock in Southampton. She was based there bunkering the Channel Island Ferries, and loaded every week at Fawley Oil Refinery. The local pub was the King Canute and it was only a short walk from our berth. I settled down to the routine and after six months I took some leave. During this time another person

took my place and so, when I was ready to return to work, I was offered another ship. Amazingly it was the Averity. The Azurity was leaving Southampton and the Averity had arrived to take her place. I was instructed to join her in Plymouth, but when I arrived there was no sign of the Averity. I contacted the Pilot House and they called her up on the ship-to-shore radio and found out that she would be docking early next morning.

They now knew I was waiting there for them, so one of the Pilots recommended I stay at a local pub called The Jolly Sailor, which I did. They gave me an evening meal and later I had a drink in the bar only to discover the pilot in there as well. It was his local. Next day the Averity arrived, so I settled up with the landlord of the pub, a Mr. Quirk who was born in Swansea, and he very kindly offered me a lift in his car to the ship. I thanked him for the lift and offered some reimbursement before going aboard, but he would not accept any payment. Later on our paths were to cross again but that's another tale...

We set sail and headed for Southampton. The weather was a bit choppy and I was seasick for a while but with the aid of some cream crackers inside me I quickly got over it. We loaded a full cargo at Fawley Oil Refinery and berthed in the old Railway Dock. It was if we were home again. We continued to bunker the Channel Island Ferries, and in addition to that we had to top up the passenger ships on the trans-Atlantic run to America. The m/v Esso Pool filled all the main fuel tanks and we had only to top them up. I was now nearly 26 years of age and, with the leave I was due, it was time to call it a day. By taking extended leave plus my sea-time I had finally reached the age of 26 and was now clear of national service.

As I was now out of work I set about finding a job as a contracting electrician. A new bakery was being built in Fforestfach and, although there were no vacancies there, the site foreman fixed me up with a job in Birmingham. One of the mates Gerry Morgan, who was also out of work came with me. The job was OK, money was good and it lasted a little longer than planned. We had lodgings in Grange Road, Small Heath. They were pretty basic, although bus drivers from the Midland Bus Company also used to stay there. For a packed lunch we were given banana sandwiches. One evening when we arrived home from work the landlady told us she was going to do something she had never done before, she was going to give us a key.

That evening we went across the road to the Lord Nelson for a pint and, on returning, used our newly acquired key to let ourselves in. In the morning we went to work and when arriving back we couldn't find the key. Both blaming the other we decided to go to the Lord Nelson and consider what to do. With a few beers inside us we would be in a position to face the Dragon. Eventually we

ended up knocking the door. The reception we had was not for publication, but we had to grin and bear it. That night when I took my shoes off I found the key in my shoe. When we told her what had happened and showed her the key it was snatched from my grasp. When the Xmas holidays came along we managed to find new digs, although we told her we had finished the contract rather than say we had found more suitable lodgings.

Early in the new year we returned to Swansea and found find the new bakery almost completed, but in all fairness to the foreman, Bob Chicken, he did give us four weeks' work. During this time there was a big expansion going on in the I.C.I. Aluminium Works (the place in which I served my time). Billy Lloyd, the site foreman for the I.C.I contract, came onto the bakery site to see if any of us were interested in joining him. Initially we all refused, but eventually decided that, as we had a good negotiator (Albert Willet) we would leave our jobs at the bakery the following day. The bakery site foreman was a little disappointed but as he said 'it's the name of the game'.

As I already knew my way around the I.C.I plant and had also worked on the furnaces, after working on the contract for a month or two I was given the job of inspecting all new wiring and connections, and testing all the new circuits. Mr Hardman, the electrical engineer, saw me working on the plant and after a long conversation offered me a job back with the company. It was shift work which did not suit me and I only stuck it for a short time. My next job was with Thorpe & Thorpe wiring the new student flats in Swansea University. The contract was almost finished, but while it lasted it brought an income in.

It was during this time I had to go into hospital with a growth at the back of my leg. I had spent several months having all sorts of tests but to no avail. In the end I had surgery to remove it and had skin grafting over the wound. The doctor said if I had been working in the London docks the nurse would have been able to treat it as I had picked up a germ from imported timber. This must have been during my time on the m/v Averity. After the operation they sent me to the convalescent home to recover. At the same time my wife Yvonne was in Fairwood Hospital having our second child Angela.

My next employment was with a construction firm which had contracts at the Abbey Steel Works. My uncle who previously worked in I.C.I. was a clerk in the office there and made me aware of the vacancy – small world! My job was to look after the welding sets (mains operated and motor driven) plus all the portable tools and, in all, I worked for them for 13 years. The owner of the company had a motor yacht which needed some attention, and we were tasked with taking the engines out, sending them back to the manufacturers and, after they had been overhauled, putting them back into the yacht. He also decided to

have the yacht's compass recalibrated, so I went aboard to wait for the compass adjuster to arrive. When he did it was my friend Mr Quirk, the landlord of the Jolly Sailor pub in Plymouth (small world!). As well as running the pub he was a qualified compass adjuster. He told me that there was plenty of work for him there down on the south coast .

The company I was working for was having difficulties and it looked like it would not be able to carry on trading, so I applied for a foreman's job with a local authority and came second choice. But the person offered the job decided not to take it, and it was now offered to me. I worked there for a while and came to the conclusion it was not for me. There were a few reasons for my decision but they will have to remain private. With the pending birth of our third child Sandra I could not afford to be unemployed

Once one door closed another one always seemed to open. I have been very fortunate and was never long without work. A friend who was running a plant hire firm wanted a bit of wiring done and this proved a stop gap until I found something else. Next would be my final employment. It was a place I would never have thought of but it was the best move I ever made. I was a member of a social club and one of the members Terry Williams worked on Swansea Docks as an electricians mate. We were both on the committee and he mentioned that the docks were looking for an electrician to fill the post of someone who just had left. That person had worked with me in the University but had had to finish through ill health. As it happens, another member of the social club was the port's Marine Engineer, so I had two people on my side. I filled in an application form and sent it in. They asked me to come to the main office where a young lady called Miss King took all my details. I then had to attend an interview with the port's Electrical Engineer and Electrical Foreman. (The foreman I knew previously from my days with the construction company). I received a letter the following day with a date for a medical examination and, if I passed that, a starting date. This proved to be the last and the best job I have ever had.

On my first day the workshop, charge-hand Fred Tong took me on a tour around the docks and I was surprised by the heavy-duty electrical equipment to be found there, such as high-voltage substations and Sulzer high-pressure impounding pumps for maintaining the level of water in the dock. Furthermore, all the companies and businesses within the dock estate were supplied with electricity from the docks' own electricity ring main. I thought "this is a place I should have been working in years ago".

For the first few weeks I was sent up to the eastern end of Kings Dock, looking after the cranes on M Shed Wharf, No.4 Quay and F Shed Wharf.

There were already two electricians based there and I just attended any breakdowns with them and assisted in servicing any cranes that were not in use. All the electricians were on a rota for stand-by duties if the cranes were working over a weekend or on evening shifts. Once I had settled in, one of the foremen, Trevor Owen, put me on a job to find out why the new lighting installation at the coal hoists was not working. This involved climbing a 40 foot pole so, rigged up with a safety harness I climbed the pole but I have to admit that, until I got used to it, it was a bit frightening. I found the source of the trouble and was glad to go on to another job. After a few months I was put on C Shed Wharf and D Shed Wharf to maintain the cranes there, and to attend any breakdowns that occurred.

Terry Williams became my electrician's mate and we both got on well together. Terry was very good as a mate and was quite capable of repairing breakdown faults. This was very useful if there were two cranes on stop. Apart from the work, the scenery was changing all the time. Different ships would come and go, the tugboats were busy docking oil tankers, and with all this we were paid as well. The Irish Ferry was running at this time and there were two electricians working on the Ferryport Terminal looking after the linkspan bridge. At the weekends the dredging fleet docked and there was always a list of items that needed maintaining. The dredger Baglan which had electrical propulsion always had some problems to be corrected.



Suction dredger Baglan

On one occasion Don Pritchard, the on-board electrician, fell between the jetty and the ship and so one of our electricians, Paul Smith, sailed on her for a week in his place. Paul was on holiday the following week and, as Don was not

yet fit to start work, Newton Thomas the foreman asked me if I would sail on her for a week. It was unexpected but there was no way I was going to turn it down. Chris the Chief Engineer and John Meers the Second Engineer made me welcome aboard. It was like going on holiday. After I had been on the docks for 18 months Fred Tong, the workshop chargehand, retired and one of the chargehands from the inspection team moved into his post. So when the post of chargehand in the inspection team was advertised, I applied and was duly appointed. I was the only applicant as everyone was satisfied with the job they were already in. Most of the staff had their permanent part of the docks to look after and were happy with things as they were.

Sadly, as time went by the level of trade through the dock declined, and the maintenance of plant & equipment was about to go out to contract. Voluntary redundancy was offered to anyone who asked for it. Meanwhile the company had purchased a new dredger, the Swansea Bay, and I was asked to go to Barry Dock to look her over and talk to the engineers aboard to see what the maintenance requirements were. It was to be the first and last time I ever went aboard her. Eventually I was left with only two other electricians on the dock as most of the work we had done previously was now being done by the new private contract company, although another electrician was employed when Trevor Owen, the Electrical Supervisor, retired and I had been appointed as his replacement.

Graham Green, the Electrical Engineer, asked me to attend a course on the operation of high-voltage (11000 volt) switchgear with the principal Supply Authority Engineer and, after answering his questions, operating the switchgear and writing out permits, he issued me with a Senior Authorised Persons Certificate. This allowed me to issue permits to the contractor who was servicing and testing the port's HV switchgear, although I still had to ensure that everything was isolated and earthed down. The day-to-day maintenance of the power supplies to the quayside cranes and all the other supplies was carried out by the remaining three electricians. Unable to maintain all the electrical equipment with such a small staff, we employed a contractor to look after the road lighting at Swansea and Port Talbot. They also carried out installation work on both daywork and tender.

From time to time we were required to carry out an inspection of all the portable equipment on the docks, and on one occasion we failed the electric iron that Jill the nurse in the Medical Centre was using. Because it was cheaper to buy a new one than to repair the old one we purchased a replacement. When the next inspection of the equipment was carried out the iron failed again. This time the rules had changed. The in-house electrician could no longer inspect the portable appliances, it had to be an independent body, and the work went out to

tender. Graham Green, the Electrical Engineer, received all the paperwork and he called me into his office to find out how a 'new' iron could have failed the test – a mystery that has never been solved. (Only Jill and I knew the answer)

Jill always had a cup of tea ready for anyone who called into the Medical Centre, and the visiting Doctor was quite partial to a wagon wheel biscuit. As was I, so I always kept a few in the fridge for myself. Someone once made a comment that if you are looking for Ivor, try the Medical Centre. One thing about the docks was that, if anyone slipped away to attend to some business off the dock, within an hour everyone knew about it. We used to say if you were going to go off the job, tell everyone first and then there would be no comments. The old iron was repaired, passed the test and no more was said about it. Eventually the medical centre was closed and any future injuries were attended to by a team of certified first aiders.

In 1989 Margaret Thatcher ended the jobs for life that the dockers had previously enjoyed. They were given a choice of either taking a lump sum payment (severance) or returning to work on the following Monday, but under new conditions of work. They all decided to take the money, so the port's engineering staff were invited to attend a meeting in the boardroom where the manager said we had two options - either we agree to load and unload the ships using the port or the port would have to close. We all voted to work the ships, and over the next few weeks we were trained to operate forklift trucks and quayside cranes, and drive articulated lorries.

The Swansea-Cork Ferry had started to run again and to replace the dockers, three gangs were formed to man the Ferryport and to load and unload the roll-on roll-off freight traffic. The three engineering supervisors, electrical, civil and mechanical, each headed a team and each team worked every third week. The ferry would arrive at 07.30 in the morning and sail at 09.00 in the evening.

After almost ten years after the dockers had gone, and after twenty-one years of working on the dock, a voluntary severance scheme was introduced and was open to anyone who applied. I decided I would take it as I was now 63 years old and had only two years to go before receiving my state pension.

After I retired, a few of us met up for lunch and decided to meet up once a month to visit various places of interest. There were nine of us at that time and we held our first Xmas dinner in the Cape Horner. We were also joined by Jill, the docks nurse. The following year 22 people turned up, and every year since we have held it in the Ship Inn. At about this time I bought a computer, and someone suggested keeping a record of our visits by setting up a website,

so we began by using the free site available with NTL World. This carried on for a number of months until sadly one of our group passed away. To keep his memory alive we changed the focus of our site to preserving the history of the ports of Swansea & Port Talbot. We were lucky in acquiring the distinctive domain name www.swanseadocks.co.uk for the new website which we set up via a professional web-hosting company. Over the years the site has grown in size and it is being regularly updated and archived by the National Library of Wales.

While setting up the docks history section of the website in 2008 we came across several photographs taken by well-known local photographer Gareth Mills, and so we tried to contact him for permission to use them on our site. Gareth had been a regular visitor to the Harbour Office and we can all remember him coming in with the book he had published in 1994 called 'On the Waterfront'. After several attempts to contact him we received a call from his daughter Sue who told us that Gareth wasn't all that well and was in a local nursing home. She added that their garage was full of boxes of photos and the family didn't know what to do with them. Ian and I visited Gareth at the nursing home to explain what we had in mind and he was clearly delighted by the idea, saying said that all he really wanted was for people to be able to see his photographs. So we cleared all the boxes out from the family's garage (several journeys in both cars) and stored them in my garage for safe keeping.

There were so many boxes of all shapes and sizes, but we had no idea exactly what they contained, so we decided to go through every single box, mark each one with a number, and compile a detailed inventory of its contents. There were so many items to list including stories Gareth had been working on, photographs, various books, magazines and shipping agency brochures, 35mm negatives, glass plate negatives, maps, press cuttings, various flags etc., so the job took some considerable time. When the site was ready to go on line we took my laptop to the nursing home so that Gareth could see his photos as they would appear on the website. He was absolutely delighted.

After copying many of the photos of the docks and ships that Gareth had taken over the years, Ian and I met up with representatives of Swansea Museum to discuss the Mills family's wish that Gareth's entire collection should be gifted to the Museum. So arrangements were made for the boxes to be transferred to the Museum's storage facility in Landore and, on the day, the quantity of material in my garage was such that it completely filled the back of the Museum's transit van. A little time later Sue contacted us again to say she had found more boxes of photos, so we collected those on behalf of the Museum and this time they only filled half of the van. It really was quite an amazing collection.

On our subsequent visits to see Gareth we would show him how the website was developing, and he was able to tell us where and when the photos had been taken. The collection must have amounted to many thousands of images, many of them in negative form that had never been developed. Sadly Gareth passed away on the 31st March 2011. I remember him giving us a tip. He said to always leave a space around the subject, it helps when you are looking at it to see where it was taken.

After almost fifteen years the website is still receiving e-mails from all over the world and we always do our best to respond to everything that comes in. It is now called the Swansea & Port Talbot Docks History Website, and we are still using the original domain name www.swanseadocks.co.uk.