

AROUND A BIT OF THE WORLD IN 105 DAYS

Ever since we were married in 1971, Alan had tried in vain to persuade me to go to sea with him, but I'd steadfastly resisted. Three years later, however, endless work on our first rather ramshackle house and a boring job in a finance company finally wore me down. One cold, snowy Sunday afternoon on Dartmoor, I suddenly capitulated, much to my own surprise. In due course Alan went for an interview in London to work as a freelance Radio Officer for a company called Nera and was accepted.

Several months later, after working out the notice for our jobs, Alan received a telegram from Nera to say he had been assigned to the MV Orange in San Francisco, California. It sounded so romantic and exciting! This feeling was short-lived, however, as he received a further telegram to say the assignment had been changed and he was now to join the MV Glasgow Clipper at Long Beach, California. This was not nearly as romantic, but it was still exciting. Thus, when Alan was 24 and I was 22, we set off on our travels – the idea was to stay at sea (with some jolly excursions ashore in various interesting countries) for two years, by which time we should have saved enough money to pay off our mortgage.

Wednesday 20th November 1974

As I sat rigidly in my seat while the 747 bumped and jerked around in winds of 120 miles per hour, I confess that I questioned the wisdom of our decision. It was my first flight and Alan said later that the turbulence had been extreme. It was the genesis of the aerophobia that has remained with me ever since. When we finally landed at Los Angeles airport, I could have knelt down and kissed the ground.

Although a tediously long queue meant that we didn't clear Immigration for two hours, I remained euphoric at still being alive. This continued even when the driver who met us said that he had bad news. I wondered vaguely what this could be, but was too bone weary to care – the warm dusk of a late November afternoon in California was soothing and the driver's accent was interesting – besides the bad news was only that the Glasgow Clipper wouldn't be arriving at Long Beach until seven that evening.

It was dark by the time the 40 minute drive was over and we were deposited with our cases at the dockside. There was an armed security guard on duty and several dockers began to arrive. A lone figure carrying a suitcase became visible and my anxiety levels rose sharply as he approached us – this was America after all, where gun crime was rife. The figure stopped as it reached us and a pleasant English voice asked us if we were joining the Glasgow Clipper. He introduced himself as Bernie, the 2nd Mate.

"I'm the new sparks," replied Alan casually, "and this is my wife, Kay." There were handshakes all round and the two of them began talking about sea life and what the Glasgow Clipper would be like. Bernie, it appeared, had been on a Clipper ship before with his wife and little girl. He regaled us with tales of how the stewards had been so dreadful that they were consistently hungry and one night when his wife had decided to raid the larder and make their daughter a jam sandwich, all the officers had looked at it enviously. He went on to say that the accommodation wasn't all that special and the ship rolled like hell. Thanks Bernie!

I didn't say a word, but began to wonder what I'd let myself in for. However, the arrival of the ship itself was a relief because as it slowly approached the berth and was eventually tied up alongside the wall, it looked quite big. We had to wait for the ship's personnel to be cleared by the Customs and Immigration official, but as we sat waiting on our cases, a young black guy left the ship and as he passed us said pleasantly that if we were joining, it was now OK to board. He was Don the 3rd Mate and he seemed understandably eager to go ashore and sample the delights of Long Beach.

Bernie led the way to the ship, while Alan and I struggled with our cases. I managed to hump mine up the gangway, but was unable to manoeuvre it over the first doorway. Alan had disappeared ahead of me, but rescue soon came in the form of an Able Bodied Seaman, who carried my cases inside. I had no idea where to go, so stood by the door like the unable bodied

woman I was at that moment. Fortunately, Alan soon came running down some stairs and told me to follow him as he carried the rest of our cases up three flights of stairs to our cabin.

A young man was inside throwing things into a bag – he was the Radio Officer Alan was relieving and he rather worryingly looked highly relieved to be leaving the ship. As I stood by the doorway feeling grossly out of place, he took my mac and told me to sit down, then started talking to Alan about the radio equipment. I sat down and looked around the cabin. It was bigger than I expected, but there was only one single bed with a notice above the doorway that said: *Certified for one seaman*. Hmm. There was a desk next to the bed with two bookshelves above and opposite the bed was a red simulated leather couch with a coffee table and two chairs in front. A small cubicle led off from the room, housing a shower and wash hand basin, but it seemed the toilet was somewhere else. Oh dear. It turned out to be next to the radio room, which was opposite our cabin. Next to the toilet was the ‘wheelhouse’ or bridge, which meant that it was actually the bridge toilet, used by those on duty on the bridge.

The relieved young man disappeared with Alan into the radio room, while I surveyed the scene. Several pairs of heavy footsteps came up the stairs just outside our cabin, but thankfully they went into the radio room. However, they shortly entered the cabin along with Alan and the relieved young man.

I don’t know who they were, but a big fellow sporting white shorts and knobbly knees said, “Would you like a sandwich, Kay?” in a very posh accent. Rather overwhelmed by the fact that he already knew my name, I was overcome with shyness at meeting some of the officers so soon and politely declined, trying to smile in an engaging manner despite being too tired to think, let alone speak or eat.

They left with the relieved young man, leaving Alan and me to our own devices. Alan was too excited to sleep, so took me down to the bar, which was surprisingly empty apart from someone who introduced himself as Al the Chief Officer. He kindly poured us a drink, a beer for Alan and a Coke for me. As I looked around the room, I tried not to stare at the nude poster on the door – I was going to have to get used to such things, as I’d learned I was the only woman on board. There were other posters in the room, the most eye catching one being of a very pregnant girl with knee length socks and pigtails, her finger in her mouth to create a pseudo innocent look, with the slogan *Be Prepared*.

Bernie came into the bar then and he and Al started to talk about their jobs. Alan excused us and I was so thankful to be able to escape up the three flights of stairs to our cabin. After a quick unpacking of suitcases to find nightwear, we literally fell into bed and sank into a deep sleep – which is no surprise considering it was 05.00 in the UK.

Thursday 21st November

Alan woke first and dressed for breakfast, which was at 08.00. It was strange to watch him putting on a white short sleeved shirt, white shorts, white knee length socks and white shoes – and even stranger when I got out of bed to find the floor sloping away from me, as the ship was listing to starboard while its cargo was being unloaded. The 7,742 ton MV Glasgow Clipper is a refrigerated cargo vessel, normally used for transporting fruit.

I couldn’t face going down to breakfast, so Alan brought me a cup of tea, which I gratefully sipped until I noticed it had a very peculiar taste – but it was better than nothing. I spent the next hour or so unpacking, while Alan familiarised himself with the radio room. As the morning drew on, I began to feel sick with hunger and jet lag, so was forced to open the emergency box of Maltesers I’d brought with me for those emergency ‘missing chocolate’ moments. They did the trick and I felt much better (if not somewhat nervous) by midday when I went down to the dining room with Alan for lunch.

To my vast relief, there were only two other officers there and they were seated at other tables than ours. In fact there were just three long tables – I don’t know quite what I’d envisioned, but it vaguely concerned a crowded dining room with a horribly formal seating arrangement, whereby I would be expected to make intelligent conversation with the Captain

and officers. To my further relief, lunch consisted of omelette and chips rather than some dubious unknown concoction and it was served by Charlie, a short, smiling, chubby Maltese man with dark curly hair.

During the afternoon, the phone in our cabin rang – the Captain wanted Alan and me to sign the ship's articles. The Captain's quarters were one flight of stairs down from ours, so we quickly obeyed orders. The Captain looked about 50, with greying, wavy hair. He was very polite when he told me that he knew Alan was my next of kin, but he needed another name and address, just in case. *Just in case?* Just in case of what I wondered – and the answer came to me at the speed of light – just in case I was lost at sea, of course, or washed overboard in heavy weather, or in case the ship caught fire, or collided with another vessel in dense fog, or we had to abandon ship and I failed to locate my lifejacket. I managed to reply calmly that my father was my next of kin, but was already imagining him receiving a letter to say his daughter was missing, believed drowned. The thought crossed my mind that nobody would gain much by way of insurance...

After this sobering encounter, I ventured into the radio room with Alan and straight away noticed two orange lifejackets in the corner and a rectangular yellow case that said *This Will Float*. Alan informed me it was the emergency portable lifeboat transmitter receiver. This information did not help a great deal, as my confidence about ever returning to England alive was disappearing by the second. However, there was no going back, so I resolved to keep myself busy and thereupon returned to our cabin to write a letter to my mother to describe the horrors of my first flight.



Alan sporting 'whites' in the radio room

Alan returned after a walk around the ship with some snippets of information, having met some more officers. The Captain had only joined the ship early that morning and there was trouble with the engines, which meant we would be staying at Long Beach for another day or two. Bernie the 2nd Mate had asked if we wanted to go into Los Angeles with him the following day to do some sightseeing and Alan had agreed.

That evening, we went down to the bar and met more officers – Bill the Chief Engineer, Bob the 2nd Engineer and Chris the 5th Engineer. The Captain and Al the Chief Officer were also there. As I sipped a 7-Up, Bob (who was tall, fair haired and probably in his early thirties) asked me in a Geordie accent if I'd like to take over the bar, as it was a nice job. Bill, older and greyer but still very attractive joined in with another Geordie accent, saying that I could order all the booze and do the accounts, while someone else could do all the heavy work.

I had no desire whatsoever to become involved with bar duties and politely declined, but Bob was carried away with the idea and told me I could dress up as a bunny girl and wait on them all. My ire began to rise, but then I noticed the twinkle in his eye. Bill told me to let them know if I wanted the job, but all the attention was overwhelming and I felt myself blushing furiously.

To make matters worse, someone from the cluster around the bar asked me if I wanted a drink. I replied in the negative, but was then asked why I didn't want one. The only reply that entered my head was that I wasn't thirsty, which sounded incredibly lame with a 7-Up already in my hand. The voice told me that I would definitely be thirsty where we were going, followed by chuckles all round. At this, I gave Alan an intense pleading look and he must have taken the hint, because we left the bar soon afterwards and went to stand on deck for a while in the warm air of a November evening in California.

Friday 22nd November

I went down to breakfast with Alan and met our table mates, Al the Reefer and Peter the Chief Steward. Al was a short, dark fellow with a moustache and beard, while Peter was older, stouter and had a frightfully posh accent – and had probably been the one who'd offered me a sandwich the first evening. As usual I didn't say much, but listened avidly. It appeared we were to go down the coast to Corinto in Nicaragua to collect bananas that we would take back to Long Beach. The trip was only about five days each way, so I was relieved that my first voyage wouldn't be too long – I still had recurring visions of the yellow *This Will Float* box.

Straight after breakfast, Alan and I met Bernie and walked off the ship on to the dockside. Bernie had been to Long Beach before, so knew the way into the centre. As I walked along the warm, dry roads wearing sunglasses, sandals, carrying a camera and holding Alan's hand, I felt suddenly elated and immensely glad that I'd broken free from the daily grind of life in England. What lovely blue skies and magnificent palm trees ... and as we approached the centre, what tall buildings and wide roads! So this was America and how fortunate I felt to be walking along on its thoroughly American ground.



Free!

As we walked, Bernie told us about his previous visit to Long Beach, when he'd brought along his wife and little girl. They'd gone to Disneyland and Bernie suggested we might like to visit there too. Alan had drawn a 'sub' from Peter the Chief Steward, who was also the Purser and Medical Officer, so we were sorted out financially. We readily agreed to Bernie's suggestion and headed for the nearest Tourist Information office.

We reached the centre and were about to cross the road when Bernie pointed to the *WALK – DON'T WALK* signs for pedestrians, which were far more to the point than the road crossings at home. Inside the Tourist Information office, the smart, middle aged lady behind the counter was very helpful and told us that although we were too late for Disneyland, we might enjoy visiting Universal Studios instead. So, armed with information about how to get to Los Angeles bus station and what number bus to catch, we left smiling at her cheerful parting wish that we "Have a good day!"

Thus at 10.00 on a sunny Friday morning in Long Beach, we sat on a wooden bench by the bus

stop, watching the streamline American cars flashing by along the wide roads edged with palm trees. On the other side of the road a cinema stood next to a dingy looking shop advertising *Live Nude Models* – fascinating! The streets were fairly busy with people in summer clothes, their faces sun tanned and looking as if they were constantly on holiday. I wondered if it ever rained on that favoured, sun-kissed land.

Our bus (that would have been classed as a coach in England) arrived and gave us a pleasant drive into Los Angeles, past numerous garages filled with new cars and trucks for sale and through streets full of gaily coloured advertisements, shop and restaurant signs. It struck me that a lot of older women I'd seen had wrinkled faces, presumably because of all the sun.

We arrived at the huge LA bus station and from there managed to find our way into the city. Our tour bus wasn't due until 14.00, so we had a few hours to kill. Walking along the numbered streets with tall buildings either side, I drank in the city atmosphere, absolutely thronging with life, pedestrians and cars. I was quite surprised to see signs in many shop windows saying *Hablamos Español* (We Speak Spanish) and people of many different nationalities. In fact I definitely felt I was in foreign territory until I saw *Woolworths*. We were strangely drawn into *Woolworths* and also explored a few other shops to see what was on offer. In most shops, many articles were reduced in price, but were largely comparable with prices in England. There were electrical goods in plenty, with most of the radios on sale playing Spanish music.

Stopping at a likely looking café for refreshment, we were surprised to be served a glass of ice cold water with our coffee. There were some delicious looking salads, desserts and cakes for sale, but sadly we had to economise. Our feet then led us towards a vast market, where Alan and I were amazed at the displays of fresh fruit, meat and food of every variety, size and colour. There was a kind of fruit I'd never seen before and my eyes widened at the sight of such enormous strawberries, tomatoes and oranges. Alan was delighted with the reasonably priced, wonderful food and declared that he could quite easily live within buying distance of such luxury. As it was, he succumbed to some succulent grapes and delicious looking apples.

We returned to the bus station to realise a snag – our tour bus for Universal Studios was leaving from a different bus station. As there was still time to spare, we decided to walk, but Bernie and Alan became rather anxious after we'd been walking for half an hour and seemed nowhere near our destination. They decided to ask for directions, but although the man they stopped was very eager to help, he didn't know where the bus station was either.

"I'm from New York," he said, chewing gum vigorously. "Where you from?" When we replied that we were from England, he said, "Hey, that's something. I've a brother in Surrey. Well, nice to meet you, sorry I can't help. Must go now, bye folks!" With that, he was off with a smile and a cheery wave of his hand.

As delightful as the encounter had been, we were no closer to the bus station. Bernie and Alan were becoming desperate, so decided to hail a taxi. We'd seen lots driving around all morning, but now we wanted one there were none to be seen. We walked on, frantically looking for a stray one, when Bernie and Alan saw two driving past in different directions. They both ran after a taxi each, leaving me stranded and not knowing which way to turn. As I gazed to the left of me and then the right, I saw Bernie had been unlucky, but Alan had bagged us a taxi.

As we piled in, Alan asked the driver to go to the bus station in question as quickly as he could. Although the driver didn't say much, he certainly hurried and five minutes later, we arrived. We almost ran to the information desk, afraid that the bus had already left, but to our relief we were told that there'd been a delay and the bus would be leaving in half an hour. Even America seems to have its transport problems.

We sat down and ate grapes until the bus arrived – or should I say streamlined coach – classy! I sat next to Alan and Bernie sat behind us, next to an attractive, talkative girl. Alan and I sat comfortably quiet, listening to the American accents all around us in fascination. They seemed so drawingly calm and self assured.

It was a very pleasant drive to Universal Studios and a welcome rest after all the walking. The driver introduced himself through the intercom and gave us a running commentary about the countryside we were passing. There were a great number of palm trees and it felt most exciting to join the 6-lane freeway and drive underneath large signs to Hollywood, Santa Barbara and other exotic names. We passed by a lake and a stretch of land covered with palm trees that the driver told us was often used as a South Sea island in films. Later on, our attention was drawn to a house shaped like an umbrella high on the hilltop that was built so it could turn around in accordance with the sun.

On arrival at the famous Universal Studios, we disembarked from the bus and were shown into *Glamor Trams* that would take us around the studio sets. There was a guide in each pair of trams and after a spot of technological bother with the microphone in our tram, we set off. We hadn't gone very far when our guide, a pretty, vivacious young woman, seemed to take a fit and told us in a quaking voice that some boulders were tumbling down the hillside on our left and heading straight towards us. Everyone looked up at the hillside in amazement, which quickly turned to horror when we saw the guide was correct. The driver stopped the tram and we all sat there in frozen disbelief while the boulders came tumbling down the hillside straight towards us. Then, at the last moment, they disappeared into a trench in the road and we all laughed with embarrassed relief. The guide told us that the boulders were made of a special featherweight material.

The next dirty trick played on us came as we were approaching a bridge. Our guide told us seriously that the bridge was dangerous and indeed, as we were about to cross it, the bridge slowly collapsed. It was just as well that we'd been prepared by the boulder incident, or some poor, unsuspecting soul (like me) might have had a heart attack. Before we continued on our way once more, the bridge slowly reconstructed itself.

We stopped on the Front Lot to look at Lucille Ball's dressing room and saw other dressing rooms and offices scattered around the area. The guide kept urging us to look around in case any 'stars' were loitering in our vicinity, but sadly there were no sightings of Clint Eastwood or Paul Newman that day.

Leaving the *Glamor Trams* behind for a while, we were taken into an indoor stage where *Ironside* was filmed and let in on some 'secrets' behind the horror screen, such as how blood appears from bullet wounds and other gory details. Then we returned to the trams and travelled through the Back Lot, which is made up of hundreds of buildings representing locations from all over the world – such as a European street, an old Wild West street, a typical modern American street and many more – all consisting of a front façade only.

We witnessed the parting of the Red Sea and even went through it ourselves, watching the waters close in again after us – an electronic miracle! We were attacked by a torpedo, caught in a storm and a hurricane and had an avalanche rushing towards us. In quieter moments, we gazed in wonder at snow covered houses next to a tropical jungle, at a house that was burning but never consumed and other wonders courtesy of Special Effects.

We sat in an open air theatre and watched a trained animal show and then a stunt show, which involved several professional actors knocking each other about, falling out of windows and diving off the top of a building. Then at last, as darkness fell, we returned to the bus and were driven back to Los Angeles through brightly lit streets and freeways full of cars with their lights blinking red or white as they passed by.

On arrival at the bus station, we had to wait 20 minutes for our bus to Long Beach. We all felt far too tired to walk from the bus station at Long Beach to where the Glasgow Clipper was berthed, so splashed out on another taxi. There is a time to economise and a time not to economise!

Alan and I were invited down to the bar that evening, where there was supposed to be a party, but all we wanted was to eat something and then sleep – which is precisely what we did, after declining the dubious delights of the "rave-up at the bar."

Saturday 23rd November

During breakfast, we found out from Al the Reefer (whose job was to look after cargo refrigeration) that we were due to leave Long Beach in the afternoon. Al also asked if we were interested in going to Disneyland with Don the 3rd Mate and himself. We were happy to do as much sightseeing as we could, so at 09.30 we all clambered into a taxi, armed with cameras and sunglasses. Yes, it was another gloriously sunny day in Southern California!

The young woman driving the taxi was very friendly and the journey passed quickly. "Oh, there's the Matterhorn on the left," she announced suddenly, "we're near Disneyland now." For a moment, with yesterday's illusions still in mind, I fully expected to look up and see a snow covered mountain amid the palm trees – which is precisely what I did see, of course, as where Universal Studios is full of illusions, Disneyland is full of make believe. As we turned into the huge Disneyland car park, I didn't know quite what to expect, as the taxi driver encouraged us to "Have a good day!" I was really impressed with how Southern Californians seem to be exceptionally polite, friendly people.

At the entrance we each bought a book of tickets that would enable us to see several of the attractions. Following the crowd, we found ourselves in Main Street, where a band was playing in the square. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck were walking around, stopping to talk to excited children underneath a clear blue sky – the atmosphere was definitely conducive to happiness. We tried not to behave like excited children ourselves and must have adopted a somewhat condescending air as we walked around, secretly enjoying it every bit as much as the children.

As we had to be back on the ship by 15.00, we consulted the guide book to see how we could best use up our tickets. First of all we took a horse-drawn carriage to Adventureland, where we saw the Swiss Family Robinson tree house, before going on a jungle river cruise. Then it was on to New Orleans Square, followed by a voyage through a fascinating display of moving, singing models of Pirates in the Caribbean.

Our next visit was to Frontierland, where we took a ride on the Mark Twain Steamboat, followed by a trip to Bear Country and a somewhat twee, but embarrassingly entertaining Bear Jamboree. Following this we high-tailed it to Tomorrowland, where we went on a flight to the moon. Anything began to seem possible in that crazy place, so it was no real surprise that we next went on an adventure through Inner Space and then took a ride on a monorail train. Finally, having used all our tickets and realising how tired and thirsty we were, we took a taxi back to the ship.



So long, Disneyland!

As I sat in the cabin looking at the postcards we'd bought, I felt as though I was living in a different world to the one I'd known all my life. The misty, rainy days ... the narrow country lanes with their hedges and clean, fresh smell ... the fish and chips from the corner shop ... all

these had given way to a strange land where the sun seemed to shine continually, where there was plenty of space, plenty of high rise buildings and palm trees, where there were fantastic places like Disneyland and Universal Studios where nothing seemed quite real and where fish and chips had given way to hamburgers, French fries and ice cream sodas.

Alan was in the radio room, preparing for his first watch. He had to work eight hours of watch keeping a day, two hours on and two hours off. The time of the watches would change as we travelled through different time zones. At present, he was on the 8 to 10 watch.

He came into the cabin at 16.00 and told me the Captain had said I could stand on the bridge to watch the ship leave port if I wanted. I declined the Captain's generous offer, as although I was interested in watching the ship's movements, I was afraid to look on as our last link with the land was broken – I was afraid to think of myself on a ship heading for the open sea. Maybe I would have felt differently if Alan could have been beside me, but he was on watch. So, I just sat in the cabin writing postcards and not looking out of the porthole as the engine started and I knew we were underway.

At 18.00, just before we were going down to dinner, I stood up and looked out at the sea. It was calm and the ship was steady, but my heart quaked at the vastness of the deep blue water. However, I went down to dinner calmly, suspecting some of the officers expected me to feel seasick because they knew it was my first voyage – they certainly looked up with interest as I entered the dining room. That did it! I was absolutely determined to be carefree, happy and well. I managed the third option with no trouble, but I'm not so sure about the first two...

When Alan was on his last watch of the day from 8 to 10, I sat in the radio room with him. I just couldn't bear to sit alone in the cabin with all that sea so close. Thus my first night at sea arrived, as I tried to combat my underlying fear of no longer being on terra firma and tried not to keep listening to the constant throb of the engine all night long!

Sunday 24th November – Tuesday 26th November

The next few days dawned sunny and bright and the sea was calm. My confidence grew as I looked out of the porthole and watched the ship move through the blue water. I stood out on deck with Alan when he was off watch, leaning on the blistered paint of the rail, fascinated to see the wake we left behind us. While there was nothing except sea on our starboard side, the coast was still visible on our port side, which was a definite comfort – as were the sea birds that sometimes flew along with the ship.

Alan quickly became aware that most of the radio room equipment was faulty, which probably explained the rather hasty departure of the previous Radio Officer. He seemed to spend most of his watches repairing faulty or part-working equipment, managing to repair all but the weather forecaster (fax) receiver.

While he was on watch, I usually sat in the radio room with him, reading a book or writing letters. I was able to wash our clothes in the sink in our cabin and hang them up to dry in the shower compartment. I found out that the bedding was changed each week, so I didn't have to worry about washing sheets. As time passed, I would soon be accustomed to being given sheets with dubious stains, torn and frayed pillowcases and pillows that had seen better days.

Our single bed was causing us some concern. One or two nights squashed up close and personal is intimate and friendly, while three or four nights is a challenge. After that, it's sheer discomfort and cause for insomnia. As much as I liked sleeping with Alan, his knees, elbows and backside jamming into my back or front night after night was beginning to wear on my good nature. Alan felt the same way about my knees, elbows and backside, so he consulted Al the Chief Officer, who told him to ask the chippie if it would be possible to extend the offending piece of furniture. The chippie duly appeared to inspect our bed and said he would certainly be able to adapt it as soon as he had time.

Every morning at 10.00, Charlie the Maltese 1st Steward would bring two cups of coffee to the radio room and every afternoon at 15.00, two cups of tea. With all due respect, the coffee and

tea was hot, but at times quite undrinkable. It had an extremely strong, tangy taste, which was no doubt the milk – so why we didn't opt for black coffee and tea, I have no idea (except that it was usually so strong, I half expected the cups to start disintegrating). I often surreptitiously sneaked into the bridge toilet to dispose of the lethal liquid.

The bridge toilet – yes, the bridge toilet that was also our toilet – what can I say? When we'd arrived on the ship, the flush hadn't been working, so we'd been obliged to throw buckets of water down the bowl in an effort to flush anything away. Unfortunately, whoever was on duty on the bridge would also naturally use the toilet and some of them just walked out again. Thankfully, one day not long after leaving Long Beach, I was highly delighted to discover that the flush was working, which inspired me to clean the whole toilet cubicle. I used so much cleaning powder that I nearly gassed myself – but better that than being gassed by what was there beforehand!

As the days passed, I gradually became able to recognise the different officers. Peter the Chief Steward seemed concerned with my welfare and asked Alan if there was anything I wanted. Alan later turned up with a bowl of fresh fruit, a tin of biscuits and a bottle of lime squash, all of which I was extremely thankful for.

It appeared that Peter was a cause of some controversy amongst the personnel of the Glasgow Clipper. He was very proud to be British and spoke his mind about everything under the sun. Unfortunately, his loud, ultra posh voice seemed to upset a lot of people. To me, though, he was always polite and kind – he was a bit of a mystery to Alan and me, we just couldn't fathom out who the real Peter was.

While we were at sea, Alan and I didn't normally go down to the bar, mainly because Alan was on duty a lot, so I didn't get to know any of the officers very well. I wasn't particularly bothered about that, because I'd come to sea to be with Alan and to see the world, so I was quite content to sit with him in our cabin when he was off duty, playing cards or reading. For the first few days at sea, therefore, we gradually settled into an 'at sea' routine and the whole experience began to lose its frightening strangeness. I even became accustomed to the constant throb of the engine all throughout the day and night...

Wednesday 27th November

The fourth morning dawned bright and sunny once again, but just after breakfast, the ship started to roll from side to side. By 10.00, the movement was so violent that everything in the bathroom cabinet shot out and across into the shower, smashing two bottles of deodorant. The chairs fell over and it became a great effort to walk from one side of the room to the other without crashing into furniture on the way. I was quite petrified at this sudden change and was sure the ship would roll over altogether. I just sat on the floor in the cabin (it was easier sitting there than trying to stay seated in a chair) and when Alan came in from the radio room and said it was time for lunch, I burst into tears. "I can't go down there and face all those men feeling like this!" I cried.

After finding out that I wasn't feeling sick, but merely frightened for my life, Alan said the reason for the rolling was because we were in the Gulf of Tehuantepec, which was often a bit rough. He told me that we would be past it in a few hours and that I really needed to eat, so I gathered my wits together and followed him down to the dining room.

I needn't have worried about 'facing all those men' because there were only two at lunch besides us – Don the 3rd Mate and Chris the 5th Engineer. We found out that while Chris was of Indian descent, he'd lived most of his life in England. For some reason, though, he and Don (who was black) never seemed to hit it off and Alan and I were often witnesses to nasty, niggling little arguments.

The entrée and main course that day were tripe and liver, both of which I detest, so I ended up with just a bowl of tomato soup. It was no mean feat trying to drink the soup without spilling a drop, because not only did I have to contend with the soup bowl itself, but it was also very difficult to keep my chair from sliding across the room.

Alan was off duty, so we popped into the bar to see if anything was going on. Peter was there, sipping whiskey and water. "Hello-o Kay!" he boomed. Then he put his hand on my arm and looked at me seriously with his dark brown eyes. "How are you? Have you been into lunch?"

"Yes, I had some tomato soup," I answered cheerfully. Just then, the ship gave a massive lurch to the right and I found myself staring out of the porthole and into the heaving sea. Everyone had been thrown across the room and Peter, after refilling his glass of whiskey, picked up the phone.

Someone must have answered and Peter said loudly, "Hello bridge, that was a good one! What are you trying to do to us?" Whoever it was on the bridge must have apologised, because Peter retorted, "I should think so!" and slammed down the phone. He then grinned from ear to ear, turned his attention to me once again and asked if I had a camera. I replied that I did.

"Good," he said, "because there are some volcanic mountains at this place we're headed for. If you go into Managua, which is the capitol of Nicaragua, they say it's quite interesting ... but what for, I wouldn't know. Would you like a drink of something stronger? Gin is just the thing for this kind of weather." I politely refused.

"No?" he confirmed, raising his eyebrows. "Well, I'll have another one. I suppose I'd better ask that husband of yours if he wants one." Alan also politely refused, explaining that he had to go on duty soon.

I spent the afternoon in the radio room, helping with the radio accounts. It would have been easier to do them when the sea was calm, but I wanted something to take my mind off that frightening swell in the Gulf of Tehuantepec. The accounts hadn't been done properly for two or three months, so we spent a few hours trying to get them in order.

While we were still thus engaged, the Captain came into the radio room with some messages for Alan to send. "He's got you working, I see," he said to me. "Doing the accounts?" I replied in the affirmative, but could think of nothing else to say. Every time the Captain had spoken to me, it had been the same. Witty replies – or indeed, any replies at all – seemed to be completely beyond me. I wanted desperately for the Captain to like me, but I couldn't rid myself of the feeling I'd had at school when called into the Headmistress's study for a chat. Bill the Chief Engineer affected me in the same way. I liked both of them, but somehow just couldn't overcome my shyness.

We finished the accounts by 18.00 and as I stood up, I glanced out of the porthole – the sea was miraculously calm! I'd been so involved with the accounts that I hadn't even noticed when the ghastly rolling had stopped. I sauntered down to dinner soon afterwards with a light heart, feeling like a woman of the world who has lived through a rough sea. It only occurred to me as I lay uncomfortably in the single bed that night that after we'd collected the bananas from Corinto, we'd be taking them back to Long Beach, past the Gulf of Tehuantepec once again!

Thursday 28th November

As I looked out at the distant coastline the next morning, I could see mountains that were probably the biggest I'd ever seen. In the early afternoon when we were almost at our destination, Alan and I went out on deck. The Corinto sun burned fiercely on our backs as we leant over the side, watching some flying fish skim over the water.

"I can smell that land," said Alan solemnly, sniffing the air. I had to concede that he must possess a more acute sense of smell than I have, as I couldn't smell anything except the heat of the sun burning down on the paint and metal of the ship.

As we approached the land, the ship slowed down and drifted around in circles while waiting for the pilot to come and guide us into harbour. The Captain was on deck in his 'whites' with Don the 3rd Mate, looking through binoculars. I felt quite sophisticated standing on the deck of the Glasgow Clipper waiting to enter harbour in Corinto, Nicaragua. Not many people in my immediate circle of family and friends were ever likely to set foot on such distant shores.

The pilot came on board and our ship slowly moved past a small lighthouse and into the harbour. There were several other ships there and we learned that we would have to 'swing on the pick' or drop anchor while awaiting our turn to enter the banana loading berth. There was a long strip of land on one side of us graced with hundreds of palm trees. On the other side was a beach and a banana loading station. Behind that was the town of Corinto – a tall, thin pale green building with a faded red ball on top was apparently the centre piece of the town. It had a clock and was lit up by night, but it just looked like a phallic symbol to me.

After dinner, Alan and I stood out on deck. The air was still hot from the day's sun and the other ships around us with their lights twinkling in the darkness seemed romantic. I decided that I'd much rather be where I was in these strange surroundings than home in currently cold, wet England, living for the weekends.

Friday 29th November

The day dawned bright and sunny. Alan decided to work on an aerial on the monkey island, at the very top of the ship. I went up with him to do some sunbathing, but I'd only been standing there for five minutes or so watching him, when I began to feel faint. I'd missed breakfast that morning and presumed that with the unaccustomed heat of the sun, it was just too much for my unsuspecting body, used to English weather and regular meals.

I sat down in the shade, but my head continued to throb. The heat seemed to be thick, so that it felt possible to reach out and touch it. After ten more very uncomfortable minutes I was forced to leave Alan at the top of the aerial in order to seek out the coolness of our air conditioned cabin.

After lunch, we decided to see about going ashore. The ship was still at anchor, so we had to rely on small boats that called at each ship every so often to ferry people to and from the shore. There was apparently one due at 12.30, so we hurriedly threw swimsuits, towels and books into a bag and rushed down to the gangway. There were a few small boats lazily floating on the calm, blue water, but no boat came our way and by 13.00, Alan had given up hope. We went to our cabin and after a despondent half hour, idled away the rest of the afternoon by playing a game of Scrabble.

That evening we went into the bar and had a drink or two. Don the 3rd Mate was deciding whether or not to go ashore to sample the delights of a Friday evening in Corinto. He finally left at 20.30 amid various remarks about Corinto women, most of them unrepeatabe.

Saturday 30th November

Another bright and sunny day anchored off Corinto, although Alan had found out we are due to go to the banana berth at 04.00 tomorrow. He decided to have another go at getting ashore and at 12.30 we struck lucky. A small, wiry man the colour of Cadbury's chocolate (that I was already missing so much) came along in his little motor boat and nearly passed us by, but Alan solved the situation by suddenly thrusting two fingers in between his teeth and giving an ear piercing whistle. We clambered aboard and were the only passengers until the boat called at another ship, where several men joined us. They were Scandinavian, but some of them spoke English and Spanish. Again, I was the only woman on board.

It was a short ride to the shore, but when I saw how we had to climb onto the quayside, my heart sank. There was a short flight of seven or eight wooden steps leading from the water up the wall to the top and they were absolutely vertical. Alan went first up the steps, while I thanked my guardian angel that I'd put on trousers that morning. I then took a deep breath and attempted to climb nonchalantly up the wall. I could feel the eyes of all the men on me, but when I reached the top without mishap, I held on to Alan's outstretched hand and achieved terra firma.

After gazing around at our surroundings, we walked towards the town, guided by the phallic symbol with its faded red ball. The streets were hot and dusty and people stared at us as we walked along, especially the women and children. Alan said they probably hadn't seen many white women before. Maybe so, but I wished they wouldn't stare!

As we approached the centre, we saw trays of articles for sale on the pavements. A small boy came up to us proffering something that looked like a box of matches, but we had no change at all. People continued to stare, so we didn't stop to look at what was for sale, but headed straight for the beach. Alan informed me that my face was rapidly becoming red and sunburned, so we walked along the beach in search of a shady tree.

We seemed to walk for miles, becoming hotter and sweeter with each step, but finally found an overhanging tree in front of an expensive looking chalet style house. We'd noticed several such houses along the edge of the beach, with Spanish type music emanating from most of them – either from a radio or a record player, I presumed. These houses obviously belonged to the more privileged people of Corinto.

We spread a towel on the greyish, gritty sand that was strewn with leaves from the trees above and immediately stripped down to our swimsuits. Alan stretched out on the towel and sunbathed, but I sat in the shade with my sunglasses on reading *Gone With the Wind*. At least, I tried to read, but the sights and sounds around us were too distracting, so I just sat and watched everything with fascination.

There were plenty of people on the beach, most of them at the water's edge, dressed in summer shirts and shorts. Much to my amusement, they were splashing in and out of the water fully clothed, swimming or just playing. They obviously didn't see the need for swimsuits and who could blame them! They were all deeply tanned and seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely. Several times a young boy rode up and down the beach on a motorbike, but nobody seemed to take any notice.

There were lots of small pieces of almost transparent stones where we were sitting, almost like crystallised drops of rain. I spent at least 15 minutes collecting some of the better specimens in the cup of my bra (which I was not wearing) as a cheap souvenir of Corinto.



On the beach

At about 16.00, the beach became less crowded. Alan noticed a white woman swimming in the sea – she was the only white woman we'd seen since leaving Long Beach. After taking a few photos of each other and the overhanging palm trees, we were both tempted into the inviting blue water to cool down. Although the water was very warm, we both felt refreshed after our dip into the Pacific and walked back along the beach in our swimsuits, letting the sun dry us. After five minutes or so my swimsuit was completely dry, so I put on my trousers to avoid getting sunburned legs.

As we walked back through the dry streets, we tried to identify the smell in the air. It wasn't unpleasant, but the nearest description we could arrive at was the smell of many oranges and lemons exposed to the hot sun.

We reached the small quayside, using the red faded ball as a landmark and noticed a girl at a stall selling Coca-Cola. As we were desperately thirsty and there was no sign of a ferry boat, Alan bought two Cokes with an American dollar and was given one Nicaraguan córdoba as change. The drinks were served in large jam jars with straws and several chunks of ice. As we stood there sipping gratefully, a man of about 30 came along, bought a drink and started to chat with Alan.

He asked if we were from one of the ships and said he was from an American sub that had just come from Long Beach, pointing to where there were queues of people waiting to go on a tour around a submarine. After talking for a while about the delights of Long Beach, the American started to talk about himself. He was from San Diego, was an Electronics Petty Officer on the submarine and was one of the men in the ship that had been caught spying off North Vietnam and had subsequently spent a year in a Vietnamese prison camp. He did indeed look as though he'd been through a harrowing experience – his eyes were dull and cloudy with bags underneath and he looked too old and tired for his years. Maybe it was just the effect of being cooped up in a submarine, but somehow I didn't think so...

Alan suddenly caught sight of a small boat preparing to leave the quay and once again he hailed it with an ear piercing whistle. To my relief we didn't have to descend the vertical steps, but found our way into the ferry boat by stepping over other boats packed closely together.

As soon as we were back in our cabin, I examined myself in the mirror and had a nasty shock. My face was bright red apart from two big white patches where my sunglasses had been. I plastered my face with cold cream, hoping for a miracle, but although it cooled my face, the redness remained and I could almost see myself glowing. My arms were in a similar state, but I wasn't worried about them so much because I could cover them up.

I didn't want to go down to dinner in case the officers laughed at me, but hunger eventually prevailed over vanity. Nearly everyone I saw asked the same question, whether I'd gone ashore and been in the sun. I gave them all the same answer – a "yes" and a grimace. The Captain was one of those people.

There was a film shown in the dining room that evening – *Up the Front*. There had been several since we'd joined the ship, but Alan's watch keeping had coincided with a lot of them, so we'd only seen a few, including *Shaft*, *Such Good Friends* and *Compañeros*. The crew and officers would take turns in having use of the projector, so there were usually three or four films a week, viewed as a welcome break from routine.

During the changing of the reels, the Captain spoke to Alan. "Make sure you ask Peter for some calamine lotion for your wife's face, or she'll suffer in the morning." I overheard and if blushing could have made my face any redder, it would have done so. When the film ended, I sneaked out of the door and up to our cabin, while Alan obeyed the Captain's orders and returned with a huge bottle of calamine lotion and some cotton wool.

Sunday 1st December

We already knew the ship was due to enter the banana loading berth at 04.00, but although it didn't directly affect Alan and me, we were very much aware of it. We were sleeping cosily cramped up in our single bed when the unmistakable sound of the fire alarm rudely awakened us. It gave three or four short blasts and the noise seemed to come from somewhere very close. Later on in the morning I went in search of this wretched alarm and indeed found it right outside our cabin – funny I hadn't noticed it before!

As it was, we just lay there with hearts thumping (well, mine certainly was) completely unsure whether we should be following the fire practice procedure. Or maybe it wasn't a practice – maybe there was actually a fire? Everybody might be leaving the ship right now, leaving us to frazzle. It's amazing what images your mind can conjure up in the small hours of the morning.

However, I then heard the telephone ring on the bridge just across from us, followed by the now familiar calm voice of Don as he answered it. The engine had started and it felt as though

we were moving. Alan told me everything was OK, turned over on his side and went back to sleep. I tried to follow his example and was just beginning to doze comfortably when another ear splitting noise shattered the peace.

This time the ringing actually came from inside the cabin, from the bell on the wall above our bed. Alan sat up quickly and said, "It's the auto alarm!" He then shot out of bed, quickly put on his trousers and dashed into the radio room. I knew vaguely that the auto alarm had something to do with distress calls – I had often been in the radio room with Alan when he tested the alarm each day. I later learned that it was actually an automatic signal that preceded a distress call.

The ringing stopped and five minutes later, Alan returned to the cabin, took off his trousers and got back into bed. When I asked him a little testily what the trouble had been, he told me it had been interference, before he turned over and promptly went back to sleep. Interference? I lay there for quite a while, considering the interference to a good night's sleep I'd endured from a dreadfully cramped bed and now strange alarm bells that had frightened the living daylights out of me!

Later on in the morning, Alan found out why there had been a fire alarm – it appeared that it had been the engine room fire alarm, which went off if there was trouble in the engine room in order to let the bridge officers know there was something wrong. If there was to be a fire drill, the alarm would ring continuously, rather than in short bursts. The auto alarm, on the other hand, had gone off because of noise from other ships and shore stations that had combined to give the effect of a distress signal. If there was a power failure, that would also apparently set off the alarm. All this kaffuffle about alarms was really quite ... alarming.

The day passed unremarkably and after dinner that evening, we stood on deck watching the palm trees by the beach turning from dark green to black silhouettes as the sun set and darkness fell. We watched as the faded red ball of Corinto lit up and the banana loaders came back on the ship to work. They had worked all morning, but had disappeared in the afternoon – for a siesta, I presumed.

In the distance a welder was working, causing many sparks to light up the darkness (I had thought it was fireworks until Alan put me right!) It was one of those snapshots of time that you feel you will never forget – standing on the deck in the warm, fragrant evening air, with the generator throbbing rhythmically all the time, watching the boxes of bananas moving along the conveyor belt from the shore depot down into the holds of our ship. The two holds, fore and aft, were nothing more than big refrigerators, as I had been reliably informed. This was life and I was living it, alongside the handsome guy standing with me at the rail (which did happen to be Alan!)



Bananas from shore to ship's hold, Corinto

Tuesday 3rd December

The banana loading had continued all morning and evening the previous day, but early this morning before Alan and I awoke, the Glasgow Clipper left Corinto and started its way up the coast to Long Beach. I know that a ship is usually reverently referred to as *she*, but something in me steadfastly refuses to go along with this.

Wednesday 4th December

We approached the dreaded Gulf of Tehuantepec not long after I awoke and the ship began to roll noticeably from side to side. I feared a repetition of the previous violent thrashing around we'd had to endure, but this time the rolling was almost bearable. I immersed myself in the writing up of accounts all morning and by lunchtime the ship was steady once again.

After lunch, Alan and I were sitting in our cabin playing Chinese Patience, when we had an unexpected visitor – the chippie had come to extend our bed. He did an admirable job, too, but there was the small problem that we needed to overcome of only possessing a single mattress. So we found all the spare towels, bedclothes and even underwear that we could lay our hands on and stuffed them down the space between the wall (I'm sorry – bulkhead) and the edge of the mattress.

Unfortunately, as soon as Alan lay down on the improvised mattress he sank down two or three inches, but he didn't seem to mind. Al the Chief Officer had promised us a double mattress from Long Beach when we arrived there – and what if Alan did wake up with an indentation around his middle? The fact that we could turn over without having a wrestling match (and also the fact that I didn't have to sleep on the funny bit) far outweighed the pernicky mattress problem...

The rest of the voyage to Long Beach was uneventful. My days were spent writing letters, washing, knitting and on this occasion making little cardboard boxes. Alan wanted some boxes in which to put various fuses and I was allotted the task of making them. It took me almost two days ensconced amid cardboard, staples and scissors to create a hundred of the things and by the time I went to sleep after the second day, I had little boxes on the brain. A labour of love, methinks.

Sunday 8th December

We arrived at Long Beach at around 19.30, but by the time we were cleared by the Customs and Immigration official who'd come on board, it was too late to go ashore. Each one of us had to show our documents to him (usually Seaman's Identity Card, but in my case passport) whereupon he checked our names in his book of undesirables and then stamped our shore passes. I had been put down on the list of ship's personnel as a stewardess, having been told that this would save a lot of bother. I didn't mind, as long as I wasn't expected to carry out any dubious stewardess duties!

We'd been hoping to receive some mail at Long Beach, but there was nothing for us. I knew that our parents would have written to us by that time, so disappointedly had to resign myself to waiting until our next port of call.

A few days previously, Alan had received a telegram giving the Glasgow Clipper's next instructions – we were to leave Long Beach on 9th December as soon as the banana unloading had finished and return to Corinto for another cargo of bananas that we would bring back to Long Beach by 22nd December. After these bananas had been unloaded, we were to take a cargo of citrus fruit from Long Beach to Japan. So although our present stay in Southern California was a very short one, we would have a longer stay next time that coincided with the Christmas period.

Monday 9th December

Alan had to work on fixing the radar for most of the day, but we managed to sneak out for a quick walk along the dockside, where we bought a good supply of chocolate bars (sadly Hershey rather than Cadbury's) to sustain us throughout the coming trip to Corinto. Although it was a warm day, there was quite a lot of fog around – the famous fog of LA, no doubt.

In the afternoon, a cheery American guy of about 35 arrived on the ship – it turned out that Alan had called him in to fix the radar, but it ended up with Alan fixing the radar using the American guy's tools. He sat in our cabin enjoying a chat for quite a while, talking business with Alan, discussing life in general and asking how we liked Long Beach. He even offered us a trip to Marineland of the Pacific in his car if he was around next time we called – but then said he probably wouldn't be around, as he was taking his family on vacation to Europe soon.

After dinner that evening, Alan and I decided to be sociable and went into the bar. Geoff the 3rd Engineer was there. He was an uncomplicated, friendly type of guy in his early 30s and asked what I thought of sea life. I replied that it wasn't too bad, whereupon he asked me if I'd been bronzing. I looked at him questioningly until he told me it meant sunbathing.

"Oh ... yes, but not very much after the last time in Corinto!" I replied ruefully. Actually, it hadn't been all that bad (maybe the calamine lotion had helped) but it had been a salutary lesson in the strength of the sun in these foreign climes.

The three of us decided to play a game of Scrabble – there were several games in the bar, including Monopoly, chess, darts and several packs of cards. At around 20.30 when the game finished, Geoff excused himself, saying that since he had to be on duty at midnight, he'd better go and try to get some sleep.

Ten minutes later, the Captain popped his head around the bar, where Alan and I were the only occupants. He told Alan that as we'd be leaving Long Beach at around midnight, he would want some messages to be sent and would therefore be knocking on our cabin door to get Alan out of bed. "Oh, that's a nasty thing to do, sir," replied Alan, who got along very well with the Captain.

"It's what you're paid for," said the Captain, grinning. He then turned towards me. "It's all right for you, you can just turn over and go back to sleep!" We all laughed and the Captain left. Alan decided that as we'd be having a disturbed night, it would be a good idea to go to bed right away.

Tuesday 10th December

He was called out of bed at 01.00 and came back to bed two hours later feeling very sorry for himself. "It's what you're paid for," I reminded him, but he wasn't amused like he'd been at the Captain's remark and pushed me over, tickling me so hard that I cried out involuntarily. I often wondered if the men on the bridge heard us when we laughed, or sang loudly sometimes (we didn't often scream). We often heard voices from the bridge, so it was quite likely that they did hear us, which was more than mildly embarrassing.

The five day voyage to Corinto was mostly cloudy, but the sea was fairly calm, even when we went past the Gulf of Tehuantepec, so I wasn't complaining!

Saturday 14th December

We arrived at Corinto during a brilliantly sunny afternoon and when we went out on deck, the heat seemed to hit us forcibly. There was the familiar faded red ball on top of the phallic symbol and the row of palm trees by the beach. There was the banana loading berth and further along were the mountains, one of them said to be volcanic. Two or three small boats were rowing along slowly across the calm, blue sea, some of the occupants trailing their hands in the water. All these now familiar sights evoked a strange feeling of warmth within me that was nothing to do with the unremitting sun. So this was faraway Corinto, where a great deal of the population was poor and lived in wooden, tumbledown houses – but they nevertheless seemed quite content with their lot.

We had to anchor off like the previous time, to await our turn at the banana loading berth. In the evening, a film called *Willard* was shown in the dining room. It was a hideous story about a colony of rats that eventually killed their keeper by biting him to death. We certainly had watched some peculiar films since joining the ship – I hoped there would be a better selection the next time our current supply of films was exchanged with another ship's.

Sunday 15th December

We both felt too lazy to catch a boat ashore and passed away the hours playing cards in the cool of the cabin, while periodically going out on deck. During the mid-afternoon, we were playing Rummy when there was a knock on the door. It was Al the Reefer in swimming trunks, with a pair of binoculars slung over his shoulder.

"Hello there," he said in greeting. "That volcano looks as if it's smoking, I've been looking at it through the binoculars – thought you might be interested." We certainly were, so Alan borrowed another pair of binoculars from the bridge and the three of us stood gazing at the mountain. It looked to me as if there was a cloud hovering above it, but it could have been smoking for all I knew. I just hoped it wasn't about to erupt.

We stood looking around us at the other scenery with the aid of binoculars when Al exclaimed that he'd seen a turtle. Sure enough, there was the shape of a turtle as it disappeared below the surface. We spotted it again a few minutes later, looking much bigger than I'd expected.

That evening there was a surprise event – a barbecue on deck. We all assembled dutifully outside in the hot, dry evening under the Corinto stars. Although darkness had fallen, everyone was still in short sleeves. I had a quick vision of people at home dressed up in coats, scarves, gloves and wet weather gear, battling against the elements of an English December and I suddenly felt incredibly fortunate.

Bob the 2nd Engineer managed to start the fire and the first steaks were put on to cook. A wonderful aroma pervaded the evening air and people looked longingly towards the fire. Peter came over to me carrying his usual glass of whiskey. "Let me take your cardigan, Madam," he said, beaming his best 'lady-killer' smile for my benefit. Then Bob came over carrying a chair and placed it by my side. I thanked them both.

"Eee, us lads is nice!" replied Bob with a grin and resumed his position at the fire. So there I sat in the privileged position of being the only female on a ship full of males and whether I liked it or not, I was receiving a whole lot of attention. I can't deny it was rather pleasant, though, being handed a delicious steak burger, hot dogs and fresh fruit, while sipping a large rum and Coke!

Two crew lads came over, one of them standing next to Alan and the other one next to me. He was called Dave and had been in the radio room a couple of times to send a telegram. He was wearing an open necked check shirt, shorts and a cowboy hat. "Hello there, Mrs Sparks," he said in a slow, loud, drawling voice. "How are you?" I replied that I was fine. "I haven't seen you out on deck sunbathing. Half the lads don't believe there's a female on board, they haven't seen you yet."

"They haven't been looking in the right place, then," I replied a little uncertainly. He laughed and started to talk about himself. From the slur in his voice, I could tell that he was rather drunk. He told me that his sister lived in Los Angeles, he was married with kids and he had lots of problems. When I replied conversationally that we all have lots of problems, he continued in a different vein.

"I tell you what, if your husband over there," – he pointed to where his friend was in earnest conversation with Alan – "if he ever hits you, come and tell me. Don't tell the Old Man, tell me." I looked across to where the Old Man (Captain) was standing only a few feet away and smiled tensely. I began to wish Alan would come to bail me out. I looked at Al the Reefer and smiled invitingly, but he didn't take the hint. He was probably enjoying the situation, like everyone else.

"I've got money," continued Dave. "I only have to work for six months of the year and the other six months, I can do what I like." He went on talking about his money, his sister, his mother and various other people, before he suddenly stopped. He looked towards Alan. "Sparks over there talks a lot," he said. "Don't forget, if he gives you a hard time, come and see me."

I smiled and at last caught Alan's eye. He came over with Dave's friend, Roger. "Sparkie, you don't half talk a lot," said Dave. Alan replied that somebody had to do the talking (probably referring to me) and our two companions drifted away. Roger looked very young, was slight, good looking and seemed as if he needed protecting.

Someone brought me over a hot, baked potato on a plate. I tried to eat it, but it was rather hard. Al the Chief Officer, who was then standing next to me said, "I don't think your potato is cooked properly. Here, take mine." He deposited his hot potato on my plate – I certainly was in favour.

Bill the Chief Engineer, passing by on his way to the fire said, "I bet you've never seen the moon that way up before." I looked up at the quarter moon and saw that it was horizontal. I was delighted by this phenomenon and wrote about it in future letters home.

Much to my disappointment, the barbecue ended without a friendly sing-song or stories around the camp fire. Instead, we all tramped into the dining room and watched a boring film called *Vanishing Point*. However, after the film had ended and Alan and I were in our cabin preparing for bed, he decided to enlighten me on a few points.

"By the way, that guy Dave you were talking to and his friend Roger, who I was talking to, live together on the ship as a couple. I'm surprised that Dave was so nice to you, I've heard that he can be a bit bitchy to women." I was then able to enlighten Alan about Dave's wife and children! It was only later that I overheard some of the crew referring to Dave as Miss Moore...

Monday 16th December

The ship moved into the banana loading berth early in the morning, but there was no outbreak of alarm bells, much to my relief. As Alan had nothing to do, he went to see if anyone was going ashore. Five minutes later he came back to tell me that we would be going on a visit to a banana plantation in Managua that Al the Chief Officer had arranged.

At the appointed time of 14.00, Don the 3rd Mate, Al the Chief Officer, Al the Reefer, Al the Sparks (!) and I left the ship and spotted the truck that was waiting for us at the dockside. I must have been in an adventurous mood, because I climbed into the back of the truck with Alan and Don, whereas the other two sat inside with the driver. There was nowhere comfortable to sit in the back, it was therefore easiest to stand up and catch hold of a rail. I noticed that there were two crates of milk cartons beside us in the back.

Needless to say, we were stared at by all and sundry. As we moved off with a hefty jerk and went careering over the bumpy road, my flimsy red smock top flew up around my neck, giving everyone due cause to stare. I was in a dilemma – if I let go the rail to tuck my top in, I would probably fall and hurt myself, but on the other hand I didn't much enjoy giving everyone a free show. Thankfully, my problem was solved when we suddenly slowed down and stopped at a kind of check-point. The man on duty there argued a little with our driver, who didn't become at all upset. He just turned the truck around and went back the way we'd already come, before driving down a different road. Meanwhile, I had tucked my top into my trousers!

As we drove through the streets of Corinto, the familiar distinguishing fruity smell filled the air, but as we left the town and drove through the countryside, the only impression was of hot, dusty roads and hazy mountains in the distance. As the driver increased speed on leaving the town, the wind whistled at our ears, tugging at my tucked-in top and making my long hair a tangled mess.

We had to slow down at one point because a lorry had overturned and fallen into a ditch. None of us were surprised after having witnessed the way the traffic speeded along, overtaking at random and narrowly missing oncoming vehicles. The pits in the road didn't help much, either.

Further along we noticed a field of plants with fluffy, white tops – cotton bolls, presumably. Then, after we'd been driving for a few miles, the driver turned the truck off the road and into the driveway of a large house. Alan and I instinctively crouched down as we noticed some low

trees and power cables, but Don was looking elsewhere. Alan shouted, "Duck!" and Don dived down just in time before we drove underneath a cable, thus narrowly avoiding decapitation.

It turned out that the driver was doing his milk round and we called at several such houses along the way, all tastefully built with large gardens planted with various types of trees. As we parked in one garden, directly underneath a tree, Don made an excited noise and had almost disappeared into the overhanging branches before we knew it. It was a lemon tree and Don had spotted a few large, ripe lemons. He picked, inspected and pocketed them expertly, saying they would do nicely for the bar.

"Up to your jungle tricks again?" called Al the Reefer, who had stepped out from the cab and witnessed the scene. Don was used to such remarks from many of the officers, but I always felt very uncomfortable on his behalf. He normally took the remarks quite good-naturedly, but on the odd occasion would bite back, usually to Peter the Chief Steward. This time, he ignored the remark and chatted to Alan and me about his previous experiences of lemon trees.

As we later approached one driveway, a guard holding a gun appeared, stopped the truck and spoke with the driver. When he was satisfied that we were merely doing a milk round, he let us go on up the driveway to the house. A smart woman of about 30 came to the door and eyed us suspiciously. She pointed to my camera. Don, who understood what she was saying, told us she didn't want anybody to take pictures. "She probably belongs to the Mafia," he said quite seriously. In view of the armed guard, I wouldn't have been at all surprised – I was glad Don hadn't been caught picking lemons in *her* garden!

We called at one more house and then drove into Managua. To our surprise, we stopped outside a hospital, where the driver got out and disappeared inside the building. Five minutes later, he reappeared with a well-dressed middle aged man who got into the driver's seat, while the young driver joined us in the back of the truck.

We set off on our travels once again, but the road soon deteriorated, becoming narrower, dustier and strewn with pits and bumps. In the back of the truck we were thrown around mercilessly, hanging on to the rail as if our life depended on it – which it probably did! When we met traffic coming the other way, clouds of dust rose in the air, nearly choking us.

My hands became red and sore from holding the rail so tightly, so I loosened my grip to see if that would help. Unfortunately, we went over a huge pit in the road at that moment and the truck juddered badly. I felt as if every bone in my body was jarred around and my right arm banged against the rail with a thump, bringing tears to my eyes. Later, a huge black and purple bruise appeared that stayed there for several weeks.

At last we turned down a narrow lane with trees behind fences on either side. It was the entrance to the long suffered for banana plantation and we drew up outside an open building, disembarking thankfully. There was dust in my eyes, ears and nose and my hair was knotted and tangled. Basically, I felt like a wreck!

We walked into the building and our middle aged driver, who was the Controller of the plantation, greeted the people cordially. He began to talk to us all, but there was a noise coming from the factory and I only caught a few of his words. Inside, we saw some young girls wearing plastic aprons, washing green bananas in a trough of water. The Controller dipped his hands into the cool water and splashed his sweating face. All the other men in our party followed suit, but I was too shy, too embarrassed, too much of a wreck...

Another group of girls were grading the bananas into first and second class. Further along, out in the open air, great bunches of green bananas were swung along a pulley to where some men stood with long, sharp knives. They expertly cut off the bananas into smaller bunches, discarding any sub-standard ones in a pile. We learned that these would be sold in the local market to be either fried or boiled to eat as we would eat a potato, or else they would be made into a drink. Don was taken up with the latter option and plagued us all afternoon with possible recipes for banana beer, banana wine and other dubious alcoholic banana beverages!



Washing green bananas

We were then shown into the actual tree plantation and saw bunches of bananas covered in plastic bags in various stages of growth on the trees. We stood for a while in the shade of the trees, taking photographs and talking with the Controller, who asked if we would like to visit another plantation not too far away.



The bagged bananas on the trees

As I climbed resignedly into the back of the truck once again, I hoped the other plantation really wasn't too far away, as I was already feeling rather exhausted from all the previous bumping around that I'd endured. Thankfully, it was a mercifully short drive, but as we climbed down from the truck, we had to wait for some huge water sprayers to change direction, or else we would have been soaked. It would have been an easy way of having a shower, though!

The second plantation was much the same as the first, with the Controller greeting the workers warmly. We learned that a lot of the employees lived either on or near the plantation and that some of the families had been working there for many generations. It wasn't exactly a steady job, because if there were no ships in the harbour waiting for a cargo of bananas, there was no work in the factory. Al the Reefer found out that the girls were paid approximately two dollars for ten hours' work – he was astounded and told the Controller so. Although the cost of living in Nicaragua isn't exactly high, it still seemed a ridiculously low wage. Al said that there wasn't any wonder the girls took to earning a living in town bars when seamen went ashore...

We left the plantation soon afterwards. Al the Chief Officer asked Alan and me if we'd like to sit in the cab on the way back and we agreed instantaneously – poor Don was the only one who had to ride in the back of the truck for the whole journey. On the way back, the Controller was very friendly and talked to us all the time. He told us that one of the volcanic mountains was expected to erupt shortly, a fact that made me slightly nervous but didn't seem to perturb him in the slightest. He told us he had a son who was studying to be a doctor and a daughter who had just had a baby in the hospital in Managua.

As we entered Managua, he said he must stop at the hospital and asked if we would like to come in and see the baby. We were astonished at this gesture of friendship and felt we must accept. I couldn't help thinking, though, that if my father invited a couple of complete strangers into my hospital room after I'd given birth, I certainly wouldn't thank him for it!

The hospital was cool and airy inside. It had open corridors with towels drying on the grass. We were shown into a fairly big room and shook hands with the Controller's wife and son-in-law, but his daughter was asleep, like the baby in the cot. The baby was wrapped up so well that we could hardly see his tiny face, but as I watched, a small fist found its way out from the covers. He had only been born that morning – it was the first time I had seen a baby quite so young. Later, the Controller told us he had to pay a considerable fee for the hospital room.

We waited in the corridor feeling out of place while the Controller said goodbye to his family, then we resumed our places in the truck and drove back to Corinto. As we travelled bumpily along, I noticed Christmas trees in several of the houses we passed - it seemed quite peculiar to see Christmas trees in the blazing sun. The Controller mentioned that there had been a fatal accident that day on the road to Managua, in which a lorry had overturned, crushing and killing the driver outright. It was no doubt the lorry we'd seen earlier while on the milk round.

Evening descended suddenly as we reached the dockside at Corinto and it was dark by the time we'd said goodbye to the Controller, after inviting him and his family on board the ship the following day. As we climbed wearily up the gangway, the bruise on my arm started to throb, not to mention my head. On reflection, though, I decided it had been an exceptionally interesting day and deemed my aches and pains worthwhile. We were too late for dinner, so after a much needed shower, we went downstairs to raid the fridge. There was hardly anything there, just some grapefruit, dry bread and cheese. The meals on the ship seemed to be worsening, but whether it was the food itself or the actual cooking, I wouldn't like to say.

Tuesday 17th December

Banana loading continued all day, with the exception of the afternoon siesta. Alan and I spent our time becoming somewhat hot, sweaty and suntanned out on deck, then cooling down in the cabin. Alan was teaching me to play chess, but I don't really think I was an easy pupil.



On deck with the volcanic mountains behind

After dinner, we spent the rest of the evening in the bar, talking desultorily and then partaking in a game of Scrabble with Peter the Chief Steward and Chris the 5th Engineer. As far as I could tell, Peter and Chris weren't exactly the best of friends. Chris seemed under the impression that Peter was a racially prejudiced homosexual and Peter kept calling Chris "Bangladesh" and "The Guru" – it was one of the more unusual games of Scrabble I've ever played. However, it ended without a bar brawl, although the Chief Steward's dictionary had to be fetched at one point to settle a brewing argument.

Wednesday 18th December

We left Corinto at around 04.00, but Alan wasn't called out of bed this time as he was due to be on duty at 07.00 anyway. However, he woke up with an earache that persisted until he was forced to visit Peter in his MO capacity, who produced some ear drops from the medicine closet. Unfortunately, Alan was then asked to help out in the engine room to sort out a problem with the data logger that monitored the engine and other associated equipment, as there was currently no Electrician on board. He was gone for a few hours, which couldn't have helped his ear at all and by the time he went to bed, he looked pale and tired.

Thursday 19th December

Alan woke at 05.30 feeling much better and went on duty quite happily at 06.00. His watch had changed because an hour had been put on the night before. I'd become quite used to an hour taken off and put back here and there...

It was another hot, sunny day, so we sunbathed for an hour after lunch. Since the first red-faced incident at Corinto, I'd experienced no more skin burning trouble, so thankfully had no further need of the calamine lotion. During the middle of the afternoon, Bernie came to tell us that we were passing Acapulco and asked us if we'd like to go on the bridge to have a look.

I was astonished to see how close in we were to the shore – we could make out the buildings quite clearly and several cars could be seen driving up a long road in the hillside. The Captain was standing beside us and wordlessly handed me a pair of binoculars. I wished I possessed a movie camera, as it really was quite a breathtaking sight. Apparently, Bernie had plotted a course for the ship close inshore especially to see Acapulco, which I thought had been a brilliant idea! Later on, as we stood out on deck in between watches, I felt incredibly pleased with myself for having the courage to leave my old life and see some of this amazing planet on which we live.



In between watches

As Alan finished his last watch at 20.00, we were able to watch the film that evening, which was called *Scarlet Lady*. The title hinted heavily at the film's subject matter, but it always made a pleasant change regardless to sit in the dining room, sipping a cold drink and watching the screen.

Friday 20th December

The day dawned dull and cloudy, much to my surprise, as I'd become quite accustomed to seeing the sun in a clear, blue sky. Alan had found out through the grapevine that there was to be a fire drill that afternoon, so when the alarm rang at 16.15, I was prepared. I collected my lifejacket from the corner of the radio room and presented myself on the bridge to 'stand by'. Stand by for what, I wondered vaguely – stand by to abandon ship and drown silently but violently in a heaving sea?

The Captain was there and helped me to put on my lifejacket, as I had somehow managed to get my strings entangled. Bernie and Don flew into the bridge brandishing their lifejackets, then flew out again, leaving me alone once more with the Captain. I longed to think of something to say that would make him think I was actually a wise, witty and intelligent woman – but my mind remained stubbornly blank and I stood there silently, bundled up in my bulky lifejacket, not having a clue what to do with myself.

The Captain strode up and down the bridge for a while, then stopped and turned to face me. "Would you like to see where we are on the map?" he asked. Unfortunately, due to the noise of the engine and his unfamiliar accent, I thought he had said, "Have you seen where we are on the map?" He must have been astonished when I replied in the negative – he certainly looked at me strangely for a moment, but he carried on walking over to the map, looking behind once to see if I was following. Meanwhile, I had realised what his actual words had been and felt a blush of mammoth proportions erupting on my cheeks.

"We're just about here," he said, pointing to somewhere indecipherable. "Oh yes," I replied, as words once again failed me. He made another attempt. "By tomorrow morning we should be just about ... here." He jabbed his finger on the map again. "I see," was my singular response.

As we walked back from the map, he asked me if I knew what lifeboat I was on. When I replied that I didn't, he said a little tiredly, "Oh well, I expect Alan will know if you ask him. That'll be all for now." I managed a falsely cheerful, "Rightie-oh!" before I made my escape with difficulty through the bridge door. I had forgotten I was still wearing my lifejacket and became wedged in the door frame. By sheer desperation, I managed to angle myself sideways and nearly fell out of the door into the corridor, fleeing to the safety of our cabin, where I sat on the bed rocking to and fro in horror (still in the damned lifejacket) and hoping fervently there wouldn't be another fire drill for as long as we remained on the ship.

After I had regained normal powers of speech, I ventured into the radio room, where Alan helped me to take off the offending lifejacket and informed me that we were assigned to the starboard lifeboat – the one with the engine. Incidentally, all Alan had to do during fire drill was stand by in the radio room with his yellow portable emergency lifeboat transmitter-receiver at the ready. He told me that the Captain had joked with him earlier about the Radio Officer being the last person to leave the ship. "Ah, but you know they say the Captain goes down with his ship, sir," Alan had replied. "Not where I come from," the Captain had retorted good-naturedly.

All this talk about emergency procedures and abandoning ship was beginning to unnerve me, so I returned to the cabin for some occupational therapy. Bill the Chief Engineer had cheekily given Alan his boiler suit, wondering if I could mend it for him. So I sat down there and then mended two great rips and a fallen-off pocket. Little did the Chief Engineer know how much I loathed sewing!

Saturday 21st December

Horrors! Peter asked me if I could do him a favour by mending his jacket. "Of course," I replied foolishly, before hoping I wasn't letting myself in for a barrage of needlework. I never found out if Bill and Peter found my handiwork up to their expectations, but that was the last time I was asked to sew anything. Am I really that bad with a needle and thread?

We passed the dreaded Gulf of Tehuantepec, but it was much the same as the time before – the ship rolled more than usual, but not nearly as horrifically as that first terrifying time.

Sunday 22nd December

As we approached Long Beach, the sky was cloudy and the sea was grey and heaving somewhat. The ship moved rhythmically up and down, juddering occasionally as it hit a big wave. It was my first experience of the ship pitching, but I hardly took any notice. As soon as Alan had gone on watch at 08.00, he had been trying to get hold of a shore station in order to put through a call to my parents and I was too excited to worry about any damn pitching.

The word must have spread around that Alan was trying to call the UK, as several people came and asked to make calls. Alan made several successful calls through San Diego Radio Station, before stopping for lunch. It was a good day all round and even lunch was exceptional – steak, chips and the trimmings followed by pancakes. Christmas decorations had been put up in the dining room, changing the atmosphere from one of everyday life to the special Christmassy atmosphere that I thought I wouldn't experience this year. Even the bar was sporting a small but almost perfectly formed Christmas tree.

Straight away after lunch, Alan and I went to the radio room to make our call to England. After a spot of bother, Alan contacted San Pedro Radio Station, who dialled direct to my parents' home number. We could hear the phone at the other end being picked up and the operator from our end saying, "I have a call for you from the United States. Go ahead, please." Then my mother's voice came through loud and clear, which seemed like a miracle! We talked for five minutes altogether, but Alan had to do most of the talking from our end, as I was so excited that I kept forgetting to push the right button and consequently didn't hear half of what Mum and Dad were saying. Although the call cost almost £5, it was worth every penny.

An hour later, we were in our berth at Long Beach and the long awaited mail finally found its way to our cabin. The wonderful rush of warmth that I experienced on seeing the familiar postmarks and handwriting is beyond description and we both sat down and read all the letters straight away, savouring every word.

We also received several Christmas cards, which I arranged lovingly on the desk. I couldn't help thinking that Christmas away from home wouldn't be so bad after all and went to bed feeling happier than I'd been for a long time, looking forward to a few days exploring Long Beach once again.

Monday 23rd December

The next day dawned bright and sunny, but we didn't go racing ashore because Alan had an appointment with a doctor at 14.00. Although his ear was much better, Peter wanted him to see a doctor to check that it was indeed clearing up properly. Reluctant to miss any opportunity of going ashore, I decided to accompany him. Three others were to go with us – Al the Reefer, Chris the 5th Engineer and Robbie the 2nd Steward.

After two frantic telephone calls made by Alan, the taxi arrived over an hour late. We had a comfortable ride from the dockside to the surgery and were soon sitting in the plush, carpeted waiting room, which led through a corridor to several doctors' offices. There were four receptionists behind an enquiry desk, all of them wearing white uniforms and soft-soled shoes.

There were several other patients waiting to see doctors – some of them black, some of them old and wrinkled and some of them seamen. The well-ventilated waiting room, decorated with Christmas bells and a big tinsel Christmas tree gave an atmosphere of friendly efficiency. Alan, Al, Chris and Robbie were all called through to see a doctor at the same time, leaving me alone to drink in the pleasant atmosphere.

Two middle aged, tired looking men came in, one of them speaking in broken English to a receptionist. It appeared that the other man, who spoke no English at all, had been burned the day before while at sea. He did indeed look as though he was in pain and I thought how fortunate he was that his ship had arrived in port only a day after his accident. The young receptionist, ascertaining that they both spoke Spanish, did her best to find out the necessary details while speaking Spanish herself in a sympathetic manner and the injured man was taken to see a doctor immediately.

Later on, a big young man with a crew cut came bounding in, holding a small paper bag in the palm of his hand. He didn't stop at the enquiry desk, but went straight behind the counter where the four receptionists were working. It appeared that he had a present for a receptionist who was currently busy in a doctor's surgery. It was likely that he had cerebral palsy from the way he was speaking and moving and the receptionists obviously knew him well. They greeted him, smiling as one of them ushered him kindly out into the waiting area, explaining that the receptionist he wanted to see would be out in a moment.

He sat on a chair and waited patiently until an attractive woman of about 30 came walking down the corridor. He immediately leapt up from his chair and accosted her at the entrance to the enquiry desk. She looked mildly surprised, then greeted him warmly as he thrust the paper bag into her hand. "Well, goodness me, what have we here?" she said, opening the bag and peering hesitantly inside.

"It's for you," he replied proudly. "You said you liked them the other day." He then announced to the other receptionists and the waiting room in general, "She's nice! She's nice!" In the meantime, the receptionist had discovered the nature of her gift. "It's a cheese hamburger!" she exclaimed. "Yes, I did say I liked them, Mr Bell – thank you very much indeed. Did you want to see Dr Drummond?"

"No, Ma-am," replied Mr Bell, before turning to the other smiling receptionists and announcing again, "She's nice!" As the nice receptionist walked Mr Bell to the door, my four companions came striding up the corridor.

They had to wait half an hour for their prescriptions, but it seemed that Robbie was eager for a drink. He told a receptionist that we would just be popping out for a quick walk. She warned us not to be late, as the taxi back to the ship had been ordered for exactly half an hour's time. So the five of us walked quickly along the well populated streets, looking in shop windows until we spotted a likely looking bar.

Robbie seemed in a jubilant mood and once inside the bar he told us why, talking quickly in an Irish accent. A couple of weeks ago, he'd had an argument with another other steward, who had punched him in the chest. Since then, he'd been having pains in his chest and had been worried that something was seriously wrong. After examining him thoroughly, the doctor had told him he was quite well – he'd been badly bruised, but would be completely fit again soon. The relief of this news put Robbie in the happiest mood I'd ever seen him in, although he still didn't laugh or smile, but talked non-stop very excitedly, bought us all drinks and made characteristic, satirical jokes. "Let's have another drink," he said. "Balls to the taxi, let's stay here all evening."

"I'd like to," said Chris, "but the ship is going out to anchor at 18.30 this evening, we'd have to stay ashore for the night." Robbie replied that this was a splendiferous idea, but Al the Reefer said it was a daft idea, as we'd have to pay for it ourselves. With this financial angle, Robbie was persuaded that it was time to return to the surgery, although he left the bar rather mournfully without a third beer.

As we hurried along, Chris mentioned that he was really hungry and didn't half fancy a nice steak. As he finished saying these words, a hot dog stall came into view, followed closely by a most inviting smell of frying onions. It seemed that we were all hungry and everyone succumbed except Robbie. While the others were ordering their hot dogs with various additions, he turned to me and said, "Hot dogs – no thank you! There are thousands of people starving to death at this very moment. The trouble is that half the world doesn't know how the other half of the world's living." Poor Robbie, his mind seemed to be in turmoil, but as we walked back to the surgery with our delicious hot dogs, he reverted once again to his usual satirical humour.

"Do you realise," said Alan slowly, looking at his watch, "that we're forty minutes late for the taxi?" At these words, we began to rush along, despite Robbie's comments that we should walk slowly, as he really fancied a night ashore. A few moments later, when we arrived at the

surgery, the waiting room was empty and only one receptionist and a doctor were waiting behind the enquiry desk.

"Where have you been?" asked the receptionist. "Your taxi came, waited for half an hour and then left." Alan and Al the Reefer apologised sincerely and then had to explain that the ship was due to go out to anchor at 18.30. The receptionist very obligingly rang for another taxi, but as she put the phone down, she looked dubious and told us she didn't think we would make it in time, as it was already 18.05.

"Good-oh," muttered Robbie, but fortunately she didn't hear him. As we sat in the waiting room, three young men and a girl came hurrying into the surgery. The girl was young, pretty and very pregnant. One of the young men, who was holding her hand, explained to the doctor at the desk that they needed a blood test in order to be married.

The doctor took them aside and they talked for several minutes. From what I overheard and the look on their faces, I surmised they were from a ship that had only just come in and was due to leave the following day. The doctor had to explain that there wasn't enough time to take a blood test and obtain the necessary official papers. They left looking very despondent.

Our taxi arrived and as we were leaving, the doctor said sternly, "Next time, don't go wandering off when a taxi's been ordered for you!" Alan, Al and Chris apologised profusely as we filed sheepishly out of the door and into the waiting taxi.

I pitied the poor taxi driver, because from the minute we climbed into his taxi to the moment we got out, Robbie was telling him to go slowly, while the others were urging him to go as quickly as he could. The driver seemed unfazed by this, however, and just asked us politely if we were at Long Beach for Christmas.

"Yes," replied Robbie in his quick Irish accent, before anyone else could reply. "I spent Christmas in Russia once. I'd rather spend Christmas there than here." Al quickly exhorted the driver not to take any notice of Robbie, but Robbie was unrepentant. "If you get to the ship too late, I'll give you a tip, but if you get us there on time, I won't give you anything."

Fortunately, the driver just laughed and kept his foot down on the accelerator. As we turned into banana berth number eight, we breathed sighs of relief to see the Glasgow Clipper there, looming up in the shadows of the approaching night. I began to walk sedately to the ship, but Chris who had been walking ahead suddenly shouted, "They've singled up - quick!"

Alan caught hold of my hand and dragged me along after him as he ran to the ship. The three others had climbed up the side by the time we got there. Alan quickly scrambled up, then reached for my hand. I had nothing to hold on to with the other hand and became a bit panicky. "I can't!" I screeched somewhat pathetically up to him.

"Someone help!" yelled Alan to the disappearing trio already on deck. Robbie came running back, leant over the side and grabbed my other hand. The two of them pulled me up easily. For the second time since joining the ship, I was incredibly glad I was wearing trousers. Heart still racing, I walked along the deck with Alan, as the ship slowly pulled away from the dock wall. I learned later that 'singling up' meant the ropes had been untied from the wall and we had made it by about one minute!

Once again we were too late for dinner, so raided the fridge for a limp salad. We then went into the empty bar and sat down thankfully, sipping a large rum and Coke. Al the Reefer joined us and five minutes later, Peter entered with his usual majestic air. "Hello-o Kay!" he said as soon as he saw me. "Hello," I replied, preparing myself for some Peter-like conversation.

He sat on the stool next to me and peered intently into my eyes. "I have something for you," he said, his eyes gleaming suspiciously. "Come with me!" He slid off his stool, held out his arm and repeated softly, "Come with me!" He was smiling so engagingly that I couldn't refuse. So I played along and stood up, putting my arm in his as he led me out of the bar and along the

corridor to his cabin. I began to wonder uneasily what all this was leading to, when he disengaged his arm and disappeared inside his cabin.

A few moments later, he reappeared with a big bouquet of flowers, which he held out to me. "This is a Christmas present for you from the Captain and officers," he said, as I took the beautiful flowers. "Umm – thank you!" I replied, somewhat shocked. "You shouldn't have!"

"My dear Kay," said the gallant Peter, putting his arm around me. "For you, it's a pleasure. You may kiss my cheek!" As I did so, I happened to glance into his cabin and immediately blushed. Sitting there and watching the whole scene with interest were several of the crew, including Charlie the Maltese 1st Steward, Robbie, Dave Moore and his friend Roger. They all smiled as my eyes caught theirs incredulously.

I moved away from the doorway and realised that Peter was saying something to me about not having a vase. I said I would find something and we walked back to the bar arm in arm. I was still quite dazed and was relieved there was still nobody else in the bar except Alan and Al the Reefer. As I was finishing my drink, Peter stood up, picked a yellow chrysanthemum from the bouquet and left the bar without a word. Curiouser and curiouser!

Alan and I went up to our cabin, where I looked in vain for something in which I could put the flowers. It was only later, when I was sitting on the toilet that I saw the perfect container. Hiding in the corner of the bridge toilet was a pretty, blue toilet brush holder that was never used – without the brush, it would serve admirably as a vase.

While I was arranging the yellow chrysanthemums, red, white and pink carnations and some ferns artistically in the toilet brush holder, Alan came back from the bridge. "I've just apologised to the Captain for being late," he said conversationally, "although he wasn't really worried because he's got other things on his mind. You know the ship makes its own water by an evaporation process ... you didn't? Oh well ... our water's tainted because there are jellyfish in the filters and he's had to ask the crew to work all night, sorting out the problem. The port authorities wouldn't let the crew work on it in the berth, which is why we had to go out to anchor. If we were still in the berth, we would have had to have shore workers ... have you washed that thing?"

After assuring Alan that the toilet brush holder was perfectly clean, we decided to go down to the bar again. Chris was there playing darts with Bernie, but when their game was over, Chris came to sit beside Alan and me. "Have you seen this girl Margaret, who Peter's hired to help in the kitchen over Christmas?" he asked conspiratorially.

"No ... what's she like?" asked Alan. Chris laughed his husky, suggestive laugh, but didn't have time to answer. Peter entered the bar, followed by a thin, blonde girl dressed in tight trousers and a black t-shirt. As she turned around, I saw a yellow chrysanthemum in her hair – so *that* was why Peter had plucked it from my bouquet! My esteem for him immediately plummeted by several degrees. The two of them went out into the dining room.

"They say she's having it off with Kevin," said Chris, the moment they had gone. "Did you see her face is all haggard, as if she's been up all night? Alan replied that he hadn't, but if she was with Kevin, she probably *had* been up all night. I had never heard of Kevin, so knew nothing about him (except that he must be a crew member) and wasn't all that bothered to find out..."

We had plenty of time to observe Margaret later on that evening, however, during a film show. Alan and I sat at the back and thus had a good view of everything that was going on. Margaret did indeed look haggard. She wore no make-up and looked pale and tired. Her face gave a false impression, though, because she talked incessantly in a loud, harshly accented voice throughout the whole film, driving the rest of us slowly mad.

She sat in between the Captain and Bill the Chief Engineer. She embarrassingly tried to hold the Captain's hand, but although he was polite to her, she sensed the brush-off. For the rest of the evening, she devoted her attention to Bill by holding his hand, putting her hand on his

thigh and tickling his neck. Bill seemed amused by the whole thing, but made it obvious that he wanted it to go no further by phoning for a water taxi to come and pick her up at 22.00.

I don't know if Peter felt somewhat guilty about giving Margaret one of my chrysanthemums, but during the first changing of reels, he suddenly left the room and returned with a Christmas tree decoration, which he handed to me with what I perceived as a sheepish smile. "I know it's only a very small gift," he said softly, "but it's for you, my dear, with my best wishes." I thanked him as he tiptoed back to his seat, wondering if Margaret's ear grating voice had been irritating him as well.

Tuesday 24th December

The ship moved into the citrus loading berth early in the morning and after lunch, Alan and I decided to go ashore. Bernie the 2nd Mate, Geoff the 3rd Engineer and Brian the Junior Engineer (a new addition) were already going for a walk, so we opted to join them. Geoff was small, rotund and had a mass of jet black hair. He soon became known for his natural Scouse wit and often had us all in stitches.

Another new addition to the ship was Tom the Electrician. Tom was getting on in years, had fine, silver hair and sat opposite Alan and me at the dining table – except that we never saw him there for breakfast or lunch. Poor Tom always had too much work to do, as there hadn't been an Electrician on the ship for quite a while before he arrived. We often saw him alone in the bar, drinking several cans of beer – he probably needed to drown his work sorrows.

So, Bernie, Geoff, Brian, Alan and I set off on our trek into the town in the early afternoon. As the ship was in a different berth from previously, nobody knew exactly which way to go, but after crossing several roads and occasionally committing the crime of jay-walking, we crossed a bridge and found ourselves heading 'downtown'. It was a beautifully sunny day and many people were enjoying themselves out on the streets of Long Beach.



Heading for downtown Long Beach

Alan was looking for a movie camera that was to be my Christmas present. He found one easily enough in Sears, a huge departmental store, reduced from \$100 to \$49. After shopping for a while, Bernie and Geoff decided to go and find a movie to watch – a blue movie, to be precise. The rest of us weren't at all keen, so there was a parting of the ways. Alan and I walked around the shops with Brian (a keen Black Sabbath fan) who wanted to buy a pair of boots – unsuccessfully, as it happened.

Footsore and hungry, we returned to the ship at around 17.00. As Alan and I climbed the last flight of stairs to our cabin, we heard voices and assumed someone was on the bridge. As we turned the corner to our cabin, however, we heard the outer door slam and as soon as we stepped inside the cabin we could smell cigarette smoke. Someone had been in our cabin! We

looked through all the cupboards and drawers, but nothing was missing – all we noticed was some cigarette ash on the carpet. Someone had definitely been in our cabin and that someone must have had a key. The only other person who had access was Charlie the Maltese 1st Steward, but he was almost certainly reliable. It was a mystery and rather a disturbing one. Alan told the Captain and the news spread quickly around the ship. We decided in future to lock all valuables in the radio room when we went out.

That evening we went down to the bar and when nobody was looking, I pinned up a Christmas card I'd bought in Long Beach, thanking everyone for the flowers and wishing them all a Happy Christmas. There was supposed to be a party in the bar that evening – the drinks were free and there was a rumour that some girls would be arriving, but they never did turn up. Most of the lads waited patiently, drinking free beer to pass the time, but at 22.00 a lot of them gave up hope and went ashore.

There were only a few of us left – Al the Chief Officer, Chris, Brian, Alan and me – when Peter suddenly breezed in. He had been out to dinner with the Captain and alcohol had obviously been on the menu. He made a beeline to where I was sitting, brandishing a long, flat parcel wrapped in brown paper.

"Kay!" he exclaimed, his eyes bright, but bloodshot. He sat down beside me and launched into a speech, half of which I failed to understand. "Kay, I would like to say that ... here is ... the flowers were from all of us, but this ... this is from I alone to the only lady on the ship."

"Oh, what have you done?" I replied, as I took the large parcel and unwrapped it self-consciously, aware that Peter had made me the centre of attention. It was a 3lb box of milk and plain chocolates and I thanked Peter as profusely as I could manage. "Thank you! They're lovely, just what I like. Thank you!"

"Kay, you are charming. You remind me of one of my nieces. You shouldn't be on this damned ship, there are far better ships you could be on." He went on talking non-stop, telling me again I was the only lady on the ship (I presumed he was thinking of Margaret) and saying several times that I was too shy and too good to be on the ship. He probably kept on talking because I was lost for words and just sat there looking at him and smiling stupidly.

"If there's anything at all you want, just give the word," continued the drunken Peter. "I'd like to take you out to dinner, but I don't think that husband of yours would approve." Alan, sitting on my other side, looked daggers at this remark. Peter, who had noticed the look, proceeded to explain. "Alan, I think of your wife as I do my niece. I think she is charming, just charming." With that, he stood up with an effort and extended his hand to me. I wasn't sure what to do with it, so just took hold of it for a few seconds and then let it drop. "Kay, excuse I, please," said Peter, who left the bar and wasn't seen until the following morning. The Captain never made an appearance at all that evening, so he too must have over indulged.

Al the Chief Officer came over and sat by us then. To my amazement, he was definitely drunk. He smiled in a dazed sort of way and talked in a slow, quiet voice of how awful Christmas was away from home. He looked rather ill at one stage, but at about 23.30 he seemed to come to life again and persuaded Chris to go ashore with him.

There were only three of us in the bar then – Brian, Alan and me. We waited until midnight, then wished each other a Happy Christmas and went to bed. It hadn't exactly been the madly exciting Christmas Eve we'd expected!

Wednesday 25th December

Christmas Day dawned sunny and warm. Alan and I sat up in bed and opened the presents we'd brought from home. I felt quite homesick when I read the labels with their loving words and wondered what everyone at home was doing. I had to remember, of course, that we were eight hours behind GMT, so while we were eating Christmas lunch, they would be relaxing after the day's festivities, full to the brim but still cracking nuts and watching the Morecambe and Wise Christmas Special on the television.

Later in the morning, the Captain called by at our cabin to tell us everybody was invited to drinks before dinner in the owner's cabin. He handed me an envelope before he left – a Christmas card "from the Captain, officers and crew of the MV Glasgow Clipper." I was very proud of that card and kept it on the wall all the time we were on the ship.

At midday, Alan and I dutifully made our way to the owner's cabin. All the officers eventually turned up, wishing everyone a Happy Christmas. I was handed a suspiciously large rum and Coke and sat down sipping it quickly – too quickly, because it went straight to my head. I felt that strange sensation of happy detachment, warmth in the stomach and quivering in the legs!

Alan went into the adjoining room to fetch some more drinks, when Bob the 2nd Engineer came dashing in, looking quite handsome in his uniform. To my surprise, he came straight over to me, kissed me soundly on the lips and said, "Happy Christmas, Kay." Everyone gaped, but the suspiciously large rum and Coke had rendered me much less self conscious than usual and I wondered with interest if anyone else would follow suit.

I was in this frivolous mood when Peter made his entrance. The usual gleam was in his eye as he leant over me and said, "You may kiss me." I did so, in order to raise a few eyebrows – the suspiciously large rum and Coke certainly had a lot to answer for.

It was 13.00 when we all adjourned to the dining room. Instead of the usual sparsely occupied three tables, everyone was seated at one of two tables. I was placed at the top table between the Captain and Alan, opposite Bob and Bill. Before we started, Margaret came into the dining room and walked quickly through into the kitchen. She said quietly, "Happy Christmas everyone," but nobody answered and at that moment, I felt very sorry for her.

We all had a cracker each and put on our paper hats. It was a cheerful meal and very filling. There was a choice of soup, cocktails and fish before the main course of turkey with all the trimmings. The Christmas pudding was good, but the rum sauce it was covered with was even better – we found out later the cook had used a whole bottle of rum. There was red or white wine to go with the meal and coffee afterwards. Also on the table were bowls of nuts, dates and some paper fireworks. Brian made a speech to the Queen, everyone had fun aiming their paper fireworks and then suddenly the happy meal was over and everyone filed into the bar.

It felt a bit of an anti-climax as I took a handful of walnuts that Bill had cracked for me up to the cabin and changed into trousers. Alan had two telephone calls to arrange (one for the Captain and the other for Bill) before we could go out in the car he had managed to hire for three days. However, it wasn't long before we walked off the ship with Geoff the 3rd Engineer and Chris the 5th Engineer on to a deserted dockside and into the Pinto car that had arrived.

It was a very pleasant drive along the freeway and up into the mountains. We stopped the car several times on the way up, getting out of the car to look at the wonderful scenery and to smell the fresh, mountain air. At the very top of a few peaks was a thin layer of snow, but where we were, the mountains were brown and friendly in the Californian winter sunlight.

We made a final stop at a place called Crystal Lake and went for a pine scented walk amongst fir cones and overhanging trees. It became dark as we walked and the temperature dropped alarmingly, so we hurried back to the car. As we drove back down the mountain road, we could see the lights of cars on the road further below us. The mountain didn't seem so friendly in the dark, so I was glad when we reached the bottom and drove along the freeway again. Geoff was delivering his entire repertoire of jokes, so it was a hilarious ride back to the ship.

There was no set meal that evening, which was hardly surprising after the great lunchtime feast. However, there was plenty of food laid out on the tables – mince pies, sausage rolls, patties, jam tarts, cakes and fresh fruit. There was a big Christmas cake, but it tasted horrible, as if some of its ingredients had gone bad. Alan and I weren't bothered, because we had a small home-made one all to ourselves. Before we left home, I'd made a big Christmas cake for Mum and Dad and had baked some of the mixture in a small loaf tin especially to bring with us. I had also pickled several pounds of onions, but regretfully had to leave them all behind!

The bar was nearly empty, as lots of people had gone ashore. Bill the Chief Engineer was there, though, with his devoted fan, Margaret. Later on, she announced that she was going to wake up Bob, who was asleep in his cabin. I began to wonder luridly about exactly how she would wake him up, but she returned a few minutes later with a bleary eyed Bob. He mixed us all a Bloody Mary and came to life again. He came to life so much that when Alan departed for the toilet, Bob came straight up to me and kissed me on the lips – again. When I asked him what that was for, he said it was a thank you for the Christmas card I'd pinned up in the bar – as if!

Alan returned and we were sipping our drinks quietly when Bob suggested we might go ashore – in Alan's hired car, of course! 'We' were Bob, Bill, Alan and me, but as soon as Margaret heard that Bill would be going, she asked herself along in such a way that it was almost impossible to refuse. So we set off gaily through the Long Beach streets and boulevards, stopping at Margaret's place for her to change her clothes. As in all the residential areas we'd seen in Long Beach, her home was just one storey high. Apparently, all the buildings, including the high-rise flats and sky scrapers are built to withstand the earthquakes that are prone to happen in this area because of the San Andreas Fault. Margaret told us that an earthquake was expected in 1975...

Margaret came out of her house dressed in a bright, floral cotton mini-dress, wearing make-up for the first time since we'd met her. I felt a complete contrast to her, definitely on the dowdy side in my Christmas present navy blue top and rather ordinary skirt. However, Margaret directed us to a large hotel called *Hyatt House*, which had several different rooms we could choose from. We opted for one that had a band and individual tables illuminated by candles covered with glass lamp shades.

There was waitress service and the drinks we ordered came with half a ton of ice and a long plastic swizzle stick. For some reason, the candle at our table wasn't lit, so Bob decided to stuff serviettes down on top of it in order to set it alight with his lighter. We all had visions of the table catching fire, but fortunately this didn't happen – we just had to put up with the smoke for a while.

Margaret asked Bill to dance and the Chief Engineer, being a gentleman, obliged. Later on, Bob asked me to dance. He had probably waited to see if Alan would ask me, but Alan is uncomfortable about dancing (in public, anyway!) So I went out on the dance floor with Bob and realised how tall he was. Each time he said something to me, he had to bend down and if I stood on tiptoe, I could just about catch what he was saying. We had a few bop dances, one smooch and then went back to the table. I felt sorry for Alan sitting at the table by himself and hoped he hadn't minded me forsaking him for a while.

The place was rather empty and as Bob and Bill decided they wanted more action, we went on to another hotel. Margaret directed us again – she had a particularly nervous moment when Alan effected a rather neat U-turn in the middle of a road and told him it was an offence to drive too closely to parked cars, but we managed to arrive without incident. As we drove into the car park, a bell boy came over and said he would park the car for us, so it was obviously quite a posh place.

It was very tasteful and quite luxurious inside, decorated in mediaeval style. We selected a table and waited for the waitress, who soon came over in a pretty, frilly blouse and short skirt. For some unknown reason, she picked on Alan and asked if he was 21. To be honest, I was a little affronted that she'd asked 24-year old Alan rather than 22-year old me! However, it was at this point that it gradually dawned on us we'd left our shore passes (in effect our ID) back on the ship. The waitress said she was very sorry, but she wasn't allowed to serve us without any identification.

Bill became rather upset at that news and told her so (along with quite a few interested people within earshot) in his strident Geordie accent, that he had never been so insulted in his life – whereupon we left the building hurriedly, collected our newly parked car and drove off feeling somewhat cheated. Margaret told us that lots of places wouldn't serve alcoholic drinks without

seeing an ID card beforehand, as the police were very hot on under-age drinking and often visited hotels to check. We had been lucky to be served at *Hyatt House*!

We drove along a little aimlessly and somehow ended up back on the ship. We went in the bar for a 'nightcap' but I was so tired that all I wanted to do was sleep. I was just edging successfully out of the bar, when a man came up behind me and said, "Merry Christmas" in a deep, husky voice. I had no idea who he was and where he had materialised from, but it turned out he was one of the crew who had been allowed into the officers' bar for a drink. He had wavy, silver hair, a dirty grey beard and was rather drunk. He shook my hand, then looked at his hand, realising how dirty it was. He said he was sorry about three times, but I didn't mind in the slightest – I just wanted to get to bed!

Managing to finally escape to our cabin, I practically fell into bed and was soon asleep – only to be woken up by the sound of Alan's voice from the radio room. He had decided to ring his parents, as it was now 09.30 on Boxing Day in England. He had the phone rigged so that I could hear what his parents were saying, but I was too exhausted to get out of bed and speak to them myself. So that was my first Christmas away from home over!

Thursday 26th December

After lunch, Alan, Don the 3rd Mate and I drove into Long Beach, as we'd heard the shops would be open. There was something wrong with my movie camera, but we had no trouble at all in exchanging it for another one. Meanwhile, Don had a spending spree and emerged from Sear's brandishing bags containing trousers, shirts and a jacket, beaming all over his face.

We decided to visit Marineland of the Pacific and after Alan had studied the map intently, he drove us there along wide, sunny highways and boulevards, until we turned a corner and saw the Pacific Ocean shimmering blue in the near distance and looking very beautiful.

We soon arrived at Marineland, paid the entrance fee and joined the crowds. The main attractions seemed to be the frequent shows that starred frisky dolphins, seals and two enormous killer whales. We rushed around seeing all the shows we could and enjoyed ourselves immensely in the happy, holiday atmosphere.

We sat enthralled while dolphins jumped through hoops of fire and competed against each other in high jumping, while seals played with balls and balloons and while black and white killer whales flopped about in their pools, splashing everybody in sight.



Dolphins leap over water jets

Throughout each show, trainers talked and joked with the audience in their typical extrovert way. My camera clicking finger worked overtime, especially when two brave trainers put their heads in the mouths of the killer whales, then went for a trip around the pool on their backs.



A killer whale prepares to make a big splash!

Apart from the shows, we saw a huge fish tank containing many exotic fish – and a strange, upright ‘fish’ in a diving suit feeding the occupants of the tank. We continued to walk around through slowly diminishing crowds in the growing dusk, looking at walrus, turtles, baby seals, other fish and seabirds. Alan even succumbed in the gift shop and bought me a little grey furry seal, which I named Flipper.

By the time we were driving back to the ship, all three of us were experiencing pangs of hunger and in a moment of weakness, stopped at an inviting looking steak house. The steaks we ordered were delicious and the low price included soup or salad beforehand. After we had finished our first cup of coffee, the waitress came over to refill our cups – an American custom to which I wasn’t yet accustomed.

On arrival back at the ship, we found some of the cabins had been burgled. Nothing of ours had been taken, but the Captain had lost his wallet containing £50 or more and Geoff the 3rd Engineer had lost £20. It was also rumoured that some of the crew had been robbed. Someone obviously had a master key and the air was thick with suspicion. Although the theft was reported to the police, nothing was recovered by the time we left port. Luckily, Alan and I had taken our money with us (although we didn’t have much left anyway) and had left our valuables in the radio room under lock and key.

Friday 27th December

Nobody was free to go ashore with us, so Alan and I ventured forth on our own to Disneyland. It was so crowded that we had to queue about half an hour for each attraction, but we still enjoyed ourselves, especially when we went for a ride in a submarine. There were four or five ‘submarines’, each travelling underwater around a special pool where the walls were painted and decorated with shells and sea urchins and ... mermaids? Like all the Disneyland attractions, it was meticulously planned and great fun.

After we’d exhausted ourselves and our finances, Alan had to drive the car back to the car rental office, where we were given a lift back to the ship by a young man who talked to Alan about the state of the world and who thought I didn’t know what he meant when he said, “Everyone is PO’d about the situation.”

To be honest, I became a little PO’d about the film choice that evening, as we sat once again in the dining room with some of the officers. The film was called *Bad Company* and in my estimation it really was quite bad!

Saturday 28th December

The year is rapidly drawing to a close and so is our time at Long Beach. I ascertained last night that we are due to leave at midnight with a cargo of citrus fruit and head for Tokyo, which

means crossing the Pacific Ocean and is a 'real' voyage as opposed to a coast hugging one. I felt somewhat apprehensive at this news ... but it didn't stop me enjoying our last day in sunny California, as Alan and I walked downtown to spend the last of our American dollars.

I managed to find a pair of Scholl sandals in a sale – and had my footprint taken for the records, which seemed a bit odd. We also had some shopping to do for other people, including cufflinks for Bill and Peter (as theirs had been stolen in the robbery) and a card for the Captain for his wife's birthday.

As we walked back, the sky darkened dramatically as clouds completely blocked out the sun. We quickened our pace, but were still ten minutes away from the ship when the skies opened. We ran with our heads down, but huge hailstones stung our faces and ears. In a matter of seconds, we were soaked through and sore. The hail lessened after five minutes, but when we reached the safety of the ship, our faces were red and stinging. It was quite an experience!

We were very hungry and didn't have enough time to change before lunch, so I went into the dining room with my hair in dripping rats' tails, leaving a trail of water droplets behind me. At first I had been very self conscious in front of the officers, but now I felt at home with them. I often went down bleary eyed to breakfast, or with my hair wet from the shower and looking weird. I'd decided that they would have to take me as they found me, which they seemed to...

Sunday 29th December

We went to bed last night thinking that the following morning we would be at sea, but we awoke to a shining sun and found that we were still tied up to the wall. We had been delayed for quite a few hours because the dock workers had been unable to finish packing the fruit while it had been raining and hailing so hard yesterday.

However, by 16.00, we were ready to depart. Alan and I stood on deck, watching as we left the shore and slowly sailed out of the harbour and into the open sea. I felt my apprehension returning in full force at the thought that we wouldn't see land again for ten or eleven days. I nevertheless tried very hard to keep everything in perspective and underneath the doubts and fears, I was actually very pleased that we were on our way to Tokyo. I felt quite well travelled when I wrote in my letters to home that I was looking forward to 'teatime in Tokyo'.

As the evening came and Alan went on watch, I sat on the desk in our cabin and gazed out of the porthole, thinking solemn thoughts until it became quite dark. The first night at sea became a bit rough and unaccustomed to the rolling, I hardly slept.

Monday 30th December

Our first complete day at sea was cloudy. Alan was on the 8 to 10 watch and we soon resumed our at sea routine. We are due to arrive in Tokyo at 14.30 on 10th January, which seems a long time in the future. However, as we cross the dateline at some point, it will really be 9th January ... which still seems a long time in the future.

Tuesday 31st December

Today was better – the sea was calm and we had rump steak for dinner! We had to put the clocks back an hour last night, which meant that Alan was on the 7 to 9 watch. There was a film show in the evening and although the films usually begin between 20.00 and 20.30, everyone waited until 21.00 when Alan finished his watch.

The captain, Bill and Bob always watched the films, along with anyone else who wasn't working, but there were usually only seven or eight of us. The film of the evening was *Junior Bonner* starring Steve McQueen. It was a fair enough way to spend New Year's Eve (as I'd long ago relinquished the hope of ever seeing a decent girlie film on board) but Alan and I went to bed before the new year arrived.

Wednesday 1st January 1975

Happy 1975! Alan was on the 7 to 9 watch again and while he was on duty, I helped him to do the December radio accounts, which I perversely seem to enjoy. Macaroni cheese and jam tart

with watery custard for lunch. The sea was fairly calm, but the ship was rolling a little. Alan and I were talking of how we wouldn't mind going home – already? This is not in The Plan! I think by the end of our discussion, we more or less decided to keep travelling for a year and make the most of the current adventure, rather than stick it out for the original two years. The mortgage will not be paid off!

Thursday 2nd January

The weather was fairly good, although at one time there was a lot of heavy cloud. I saw a rainbow reaching right down into the sea – a lovely, somehow comforting sight. We had to put an hour back last night, so we're now ten hours behind GMT and Alan is on the 6 to 8 watch, which is his favourite.

Cheese salad for lunch and omelette with chips for dinner. I'm trying not to eat too much, because I don't want to go home fatter than when I arrived. Older and wiser, but not fatter! After dinner we saw the film *Love Story*, so I take back what I said about no chance of a decent girlie film. It's a very sad story and I think I was expected to cry, but Alan and I have seen it once before. Besides, there was no way I was going to cry in front of all those men!

Friday 3rd January

Good weather today, the sun was shining most of the time. Alan showed me where we are on the map, which is somewhere on the vast blue depths to the east of Honolulu. I saw some seabirds flying around the stern of the ship, no doubt from Honolulu. I always feel comforted to see seabirds, because I have the notion it means we're not too far away from land.

Nothing of much interest happened except that Alan and I were given some big, juicy oranges from the ship's cargo – delicious! We had to put another hour back last night and Alan is on the 9 to 11 watch, his least favourite. We passed the time between watches by playing Whist, Rummy and Chinese Patience, interspersed with reading our books. Alan is reading Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, while I am reading Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*.

Saturday 4th January

The weather wasn't so good today, but we saw birds flying around the stern most of the time. Alan said they must be from the Hawaiian islands – mmm, nice! However, we were warned of heavy swells for 36 hours...

Lunch was cheese on toast followed by apple crumble and dinner was minestrone soup followed by plaice. Alan and I also had some delicious Sunkist Californian oranges again. Alan spent a lot of time today getting weather reports for the Captain – who I'm glad worries a lot about weather conditions, as it helps me to feel safer. Sometimes when I look out of the porthole, I feel very unsafe at the sight of the sea, especially when our ship is being tossed about a bit on it. This evening our ship began to be tossed about on it quite a lot.

Sunday 5th January

As we crossed the official dateline last night, today is really:

Monday 6th January

The weather continued to be unsettled, with heavy swells that caused the ship to pitch a lot, sometimes quite violently. We are now about 1500 miles north east of Guam. Rump steak, onions, chips and peas for lunch, after which I was so full that I didn't go down for dinner.

Alan has agreed to take over the accounts and ordering for the officers' bar. I guess it's another job to help pass the time quickly. I hope there's some mail for us in Japan, I so look forward to that link with home and loved ones. I don't think I was meant to be a sailor or a traveller, I miss home too much!

Tuesday 7th January

What a day! It started at about 05.00 when the ship began to roll and pitch really heavily, waking us up. We could also hear squally showers and saw some lightning as we encountered thunderstorms. Not a very pleasant way to awaken.

We went down for breakfast of a boiled egg and toast, but after that the swell seemed to become even worse and I became frightened. Everything started to shoot off to the other side of the room, including me in a chair when the ship rolled violently. Alan tried to make me laugh, but had no success – it's hard to laugh when you're afraid you're going to drown imminently and can see the sea so close, heaving and foaming.

I asked Alan to tell me about his previous experiences of rough seas and he told me he'd known it worse than this. The atrocious weather is being caused by a low that apparently spread and became bigger as we approached it. Regardless of the reason, I just couldn't face going down to the dining room for lunch and at about 16.00, the Captain decided to heave to until the sea wasn't so rough. We started again at about 17.30 – it was a very strange hour and a half, in which I came to some acceptance that if my life was to end by drowning, I would simply have to breathe in water and that would be it.

I later went down to a roast pork dinner and in the evening watched a Mexican cowboy film, although I can recall nothing of it. What I do recall, however, is that the projector had to be tied to a table and the only convenient place was in the owner's cabin.

Wednesday 8th January

The weather was better than yesterday (which was not at all hard to achieve) and some of the time we even saw a bit of sun and little, white puffy clouds. At other times, though, we passed through showers and thunderstorms beneath an overcast sky, with reduced visibility.

Later in the day when it seemed to become calmer, Alan explained that the storm front had passed over us so that we were actually in the eye of the storm. He said that when he went on the bridge he saw dark clouds all around us, reaching up like towering cliffs, while directly overhead was blue sky. As the storm was going in the direction we are, the Captain had resumed our course and we are continuing towards Japan, still in the eye of the storm.

At the moment we are eleven hours ahead of GMT, with Alan on the 7 to 9 watch again. He became very enthusiastic about taking over the officers' bar and called a meeting with the other officers. He is trying to generate some interest in a party and has also started to clean the bar. Apparently there are 100 kegs for draught beer lying empty in the fore peak and if they are cleaned, they can be filled in Australia or Long Beach, wherever we go next. I never even knew we had a fore peak!

Cheese salad for lunch and roast ribs of beef for dinner. Nothing outstanding, but it's good not to have to cook myself. I expect I'm becoming a bit tough by now. Peter asked me to do a little job for him, copying figures from one book to another. It turned out to be an incredibly boring, tedious job...



Alan and his sideburns sitting on our bed

Thursday 9th January

It was another one of *those* days today! It started off at around 05.00 again when the ship started to roll very violently, as we were no longer in the eye of the storm. Later on the strong winds arrived and it was really very unpleasant indeed. I didn't have the courage to look out at the sea, so Alan and I had our cabin curtains and the radio room curtains closed all day.

I didn't venture down to lunch or dinner and all I had to eat all day was a grapefruit, two cheese rolls and some chocolates. Alan went to lunch and was the only one there. He said the soup served in cups and the stew were very tasty – he was suitably impressed, as he'd thought that only sandwiches would be served. He also said it appeared I wasn't the only person who was scared, as Al the Chief Officer, Peter the Chief Steward, Bill the Chief Engineer and Bob the 2nd Engineer were in Peter's cabin before lunch, knocking back the whiskey.

I must confess that at lunchtime I asked if Alan could bring me a rum and Coke to ease the fear, which he obligingly did. I thus sat incarcerated in the radio room with the curtains closed, surviving each hideous roll of a ship that seemed hell bent on rolling itself over and wishing with every fibre of my being that I was elsewhere ... anywhere whatsoever, as long as it was on dry land. As well as rolling, the ship was pitching forward violently and slamming its bows into the water (apparently sending huge plumes of seawater skyward) in an action that seemed to jar every bone in the body.

The Captain came into the radio room and asked Alan to send a message that read: 'Due to very heavy seas and very strong winds our ETA has been postponed until further notice.' As the storm veered south, we had once more encountered the severe weather conditions and at 12.30 the Captain decided to heave to again until the storm had passed over us.

When we started again, it didn't seem quite so bad. The wind was still howling and shrieking, though, and some sea water found its way through two doors and deposited itself right outside our cabin, which is three decks up. Alan was on the 10 to 12 watch, so we didn't get to bed until 12 midnight – or 23.00, if you like, because an hour was put back, which means we are now on local Japanese time, nine hours ahead of GMT. I don't care what the time is, I just want to reach Japan alive!

Friday 10th January

There was still a heavy swell today and the wind remained high, accompanied by occasional squally showers and some thunder. The sea condition was still causing the ship to roll frighteningly and pitch forward violently. It seems there is only so much fear that the human body can withstand, before even the most dreadful conditions become almost commonplace. We've certainly earned our £15 a day this trip – well, Alan has! I contributed a little, though, by finishing off the radio accounts for December, to be dispatched in Tokyo.

Due to the weather, our ETA at Tokyo has again been delayed until 05.00 tomorrow. The cargo will be partially discharged and we will then head for Kobe, about 350 miles south of Tokyo, which will take approximately twelve hours. I am *really* tired of this weather, as apart from finding it frightening, it takes such an incredible effort just to move around.

However, I made an appearance at lunch and dinner today and we even had a drink after dinner with Peter, Bob, Bill and Chris. During the last watch (9 to 11) Alan and I finished off our current letters to home, which proved very difficult, because the ship was still juddering horribly. I was really feeling quite strange today – neither here nor there – missing presumed wishing myself elsewhere. Actually, in more lucid moments I found myself quite looking forward to seeing Tokyo tomorrow and receiving some mail from home.

Saturday 11th January

We arrived at Tokyo early this morning and went alongside at first light to discharge at Odaiba Pier. I found it quite exciting to think we were actually in Japan. Alan was supposed wait for a service engineer to come and sort out the weather report machine, but when he hadn't turned up by 13.00, the Captain said we could go ashore. Nice man! So we collected our shore passes and 28,000 yen, then caught the water taxi from the jetty just forward of the ship's bow.

The taxi took us into the town, where after some deliberation, we walked into the centre of this particular district of Tokyo. We'd decided not to go into the main shopping area called Ginza, because we didn't fancy taking a train there. One of the first sights we gazed at was a huge red and white tower (known as Tokyo Tower) that somewhat resembled the Eiffel Tower. Underneath this unusual piece of architecture was a tube station, café and small shops, while on top was a restaurant. We went for a meander around in order to get our bearings, not knowing what we would find. It all seemed very foreign, as even road markings such as pedestrian crossings were strange. Not far from the tower were some stone animals, for whatever reason I haven't a clue.



Stone animals near the foot of Tokyo Tower

We then went to look at three shrines that were nearby. One of them had approximately 90 nearly vertical steps leading up to its entrance, all of which we climbed. It was so cold that it felt good to have some warming physical exercise! There were small pieces of paper tied on the trees, which we assumed must be prayers.



One of the shrines without steps!

It then seemed time to investigate the shops and we were delighted to find that lots of items seemed very reasonable, despite having been told it would be expensive. I was a little shy of entering these shops at first, but Alan didn't mind at all and the sales assistants were so polite – they would clasp their hands together and lower their head a little in greeting, then just let us browse in peace. We came away with some fans, chopsticks and postcards, feeling very pleased with ourselves, if not feeling a trifle touristy.

Strangely, we bumped into Chris the 5th Engineer and walked around with him for the rest of the afternoon. It seemed a good idea to have a drink, so we found a small café and had a really good cup of coffee to keep us going until the water taxi was due at 18.00. We then wandered down some back streets and through a local market. I was interested to see some Japanese women wearing kimonos and some of the older women shuffling around on wooden platform shoes that looked extremely uncomfortable. Everyone we saw was dressed smartly, including the men (although to be honest, I found the men a little intimidating).

By 17.15 we were cold, tired and ready to go back. To pass the time and to warm up, we had a beer in a cosy bar near the boat station, until the water taxi appeared at 18.00. We were back in time for dinner and then spent the evening in Peter's cabin, having a drink and a chat.

Sunday 12th January

We left Tokyo at 08.00 on our way to Kobe to discharge the rest of the cargo. The weather was fine and calm for the first hour of the journey and to my delight, we saw Mount Fuji in the distance. We passed by lots of small boats, presumably fishing vessels – a very picturesque sight. Later on we encountered high winds again, but for some reason the ship didn't seem to roll or pitch very much, even when there were some squally showers and thunderstorms. Apparently it's winter monsoon season and the Pacific is best from April to August...

Alan spent hours working on the main transmitter and was worn out by the end of the day. American pot roast beef for dinner, which was very good. Dessert was syrup pudding, but the syrup was so sticky that it was like toffee and nobody could actually eat it!

Monday 13th January

We arrived at Kobe around 04.00, but Alan and I didn't surface until almost 09.00. It was a beautiful, sunny day and I persuaded Alan that it would be a good idea to go ashore – he was a little reluctant, as we were due to leave Kobe at 16.00. However, we collected our shore passes and walked to the Customs House, where we had to show what we had in our bags and were asked if we had any cigarettes – to declare, not because the customs official fancied a smoke, although I did wonder at first.

We were then free to catch a taxi to a big shopping centre called Motomachi, which consisted of a pedestrian-only covered arcade with open fronted and ordinary shops either side. It was very pleasant to walk along it, although we both felt very cold. Alan was pleased when we found him a calculator that cost ¥13,000 for his belated Christmas present from me.

As before, the shop assistants were extremely polite. Later on, when we bought two wooden carvings of old men (one for ¥3,600 and one for ¥2,200) the lady who sold them to us bowed. I was rather embarrassed and didn't know whether I should bow in reply – but I didn't and felt rather bad about it. It's difficult not knowing the etiquette and customs of different countries.

There was a biting wind and we were both incredibly cold, so decided it was time to catch a taxi back to the Customs House, where we again had to show what was in our bags. I realised that we hadn't taken any photos of Kobe, but all we had really seen were shops and buildings. I'd like to see more of the Japanese countryside, but am unsure if this will be possible.

Dinner was the only meal we managed today, consisting of soup, roast lamb and ice cream. The ship was delayed in leaving, due to stoppages and breakdown of equipment. Alan told me that we were meant to meet a deadline for arriving in the Philippines, our next port of call, but the delay means that even if we did full speed in fair weather, we wouldn't make it. Oh dear! We eventually departed at 22.30.

Tuesday 14th January

Although we lost a few hours yesterday, we are to proceed to Davao in the Philippines to pick up a cargo of bananas. Apparently, we may be turned back or diverted, but Alan doesn't think this will happen. The word is that Davao is very much like Corinto and a similar distance away from the Equator – which will be a pleasant change after the icy winds of Japan. However, we are then to return the bananas to Japan...

The weather was fair with the sun shining most of the day and the ship rolling lazily from side to side. I spent a lot of time making amendments to one of Alan's radio books, *Admiralty Lists Volume 3* – it's the kind of job nobody else wants to do (in this case, Alan). I like to think I'm making myself useful, though. Tomato soup, rump steak and pineapple for lunch to fortify the inner parts, with a baked apple for dinner.

In the evening, Alan experienced great trouble making contact with a radio station. He had to send our departure signals to Manila and Stockholm, as well as Japan and London and didn't manage to succeed until 01.30 the following morning. In between being thwarted, he ordered beer, whiskey, sherry, rum and Guinness for the bar.

PS – Money currently in our possession: English £0.34½p; American \$11.50; Japanese ¥400; French 15 francs.

Wednesday 15th January

A pleasant day with blue sky and calm sea, in which I mostly wrote letters home. Alan was busy again, but thankfully not as busy as yesterday. We managed to play a game of Scrabble in between watches. I'm disillusioned with playing chess, as all that happens is Alan constantly saying to me, "Check!" and then "Checkmate!" Well, I've had enough, mate! The Scrabble game was far more evenly matched, but even then he beat me right at the end...

By 18.00 we were halfway to our destination – so Alan was right and we weren't turned back or diverted. Our ETA is 12.30 on 17th January. The weather is becoming much warmer, so Alan says that tomorrow he will change from his blue uniform back into whites. I hope we can scrounge some bananas from the cargo this time, as we were unlucky with the Corinto bananas and I do love a nice banana...

Thursday 16th January

Another day of pleasant weather, although it's a bit on the warm and sticky side. It amazes me how after just a few days' sailing, the weather can change so dramatically from cold to hot. Alan has been on the 9 to 11 watch this trip, which means later to bed, but also later to rise.

I wrote letters and brought the accounts up to date with the aid of Alan's new calculator. We also managed a game of Scrabble (that Alan won as usual). The curry for lunch made us both cough, but the ham for dinner was less spicy. We have been given anti-malaria pills!

We couldn't manage the film this evening because of Alan's watch, but he said he'd show it in our cabin when we were in port. Alan was pleased because he finally got hold of Portishead Radio and was thus able to send off a couple of telegrams and also receive incoming 'traffic'.

Friday 17th January

We arrived at Davao at about midday in very hot sunshine and anchored off Davao city itself. Very quickly a number of small local canoes came along our port side, with mostly girls and women in them who were shouting something to the people on deck, although we couldn't understand what they were saying. One canoe with a man in was displaying pieces of coral, large shells and necklaces made from smaller shells that were obviously for sale.

It gradually became apparent that in exchange for the coral and shells, the people in the canoes were more interested in receiving soap and cigarettes than money. The trading was achieved by use of a basket up and down the side of the ship. Someone from the ship threw down cans of drink and if they fell in the water, girls from the canoes would dive in and retrieve them. Alan managed to exchange two American dollars for a large piece of coral and then two bars of soap for two shell necklaces.

Becoming bolder, he went to our cabin and collected a pair of boots that the previous Radio Officer had left behind, plus a couple of shirts of his own. For these items he received some more coral and another shell necklace. I'd had my eye on a large conch shell, which Alan purchased for two more American dollars. Success! While all this was taking place, we both had a go at taking some movie film of the canoes and Davao.

Back in the cabin after all this excitement, Alan put the large piece of coral to soak in a bucket of water, as it was rather smelly. He broke some of the other coral into smaller pieces, so it would be easier to carry home, as it's surprisingly heavy.

In the evening, after salad, ice cream and a game of Scrabble (but not all at the same time) the ship moved about 40 kilometres down the coast to the banana berth.

Saturday 18th January

The banana loading is underway – apparently they are being loaded through doors in the ship's side, as well as through the hatches. We were given a whole box of bananas by Bernie the 2nd Mate, as well as picking up a few of the spilled bananas on deck.

After lunch (cheese salad followed by wine jelly and cream) Alan showed the film that he'd promised in our cabin – *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* starring Clint Eastwood, which passed the time in the heat of the afternoon. We went out on deck between 16.00 and 17.00 to sunbathe and to dry the coral. We'd previously had a good look around us and decided it didn't seem worth going ashore, as all we could see were trees, hills and dirt tracks.

After dinner (beef, cabbage and potatoes followed by apricots and cream) we played Scrabble and both ended up with the same score – amazing, I must be improving! A drink in the bar seemed a good idea, although Alan spent most of the time talking with a Philippine official and I therefore resorted to reading my book.

We then saw another film (in the dining room as usual this time) entitled *Dirty O'Neal* about an American cop. It wasn't exactly the sort of film I enjoy, but it did have some humorous moments. Besides, one can't be too choosy in these circumstances.

Sunday 19th January

We awoke to sunshine again this morning and went out on deck to sunbathe, as it was pleasant rather than unbearably hot. The banana loading must have continued speedily, as instead of leaving at midnight, we will be leaving in the afternoon.

After a lunch of bacon, egg, sausage, chips and peas, Alan and I went into the bar, where Peter was entertaining some Philippine officials. Alan joined in the conversation very naturally while I just listened with fascination to talk of guerrillas and extreme political unrest. One of the officials said to Alan that if the ship returned to Davao, he would take him to the town and find some pretty girls. Alan pointed to me and said, "My wife!" It was a humorous moment.

We left the Philippines at 16.00, leaving behind the 2nd Steward, who failed to return to the ship after going ashore last night. Two Able Bodied Seamen were reported to have deserted and one Messman was paid off for medical reasons. The 3rd Steward apparently got the sack and left at Tokyo. The Glasgow Clipper seems to be falling apart – I really hope not!

When we first left, the sea was flat and calm, but as soon as we left the sheltered bay, it became rough. After some rather grotty fish for dinner followed by fruit salad, Alan was on the 8 to 10 watch. We are heading for Japanese shores once again, our ETA at Moji being 07.00 on 22nd January. After unloading part of the cargo there, our next port of call will be Kawasaki, where the major portion of the bananas will be discharged. I think I would rather like this life if only the sea didn't become so rough...

Monday 20th January

The sea was rough all last night, resulting in very little sleep – each time I started to doze off, I was woken abruptly by the ship giving a violent judder as it pitched into a big wave. The sun was actually shining for a lot of the time with just a few showers, but strong winds meant that the sea remained rough, with heavy head swells.

Alan got a 'Wave Height Prognosis' from his famous weather machine and it looks as if the weather will be the same for most of the way to Japan, with 14 feet waves. Groan! He was asked to fill out an equipment form for help in standardising rescue procedures for the Navy's

Oceanographic Department representative in San Pedro, California and says he hopes it will do some good. He has also been bitten by an insect and keeps trying to scratch himself madly. I managed to divert him with a thrilling game of Scrabble, in which we both ended up with the same score. We both felt a little strange today, probably enhanced by the sight of many bananas hanging in the porthole to ripen. Alan seemed to go more than a little bit bananas...



Bananas!

Tuesday 21st January

The sun shone for most of the morning, but the sea was still rough because the wind was high and so the ship continued to pitch and judder. Our ETA is now apparently 22.30 on 23rd January, but that is only for the pilot at Seki Saki (I love that name) which is approximately 80 miles from Moji. We are now nine hours ahead of GMT, as we put an hour back last night – so we are now on Japanese local time instead of Philippine local time.

Lunch today was French onion soup, bread roll and Welsh Rarebit, while dinner was cold lamb and salad followed by pears and cream. After dinner, Alan ordered orange, Coke, Drambuie and Benedictine for the bar. He also received a message about our next assignment – we are to collect a cargo of cars from Yokohama and take them to Honolulu!

Wednesday 22nd January

The sea was a lot calmer today and the sun was shining, so I felt happier. Alan spent most of the morning mending one of the ship's winches that had been damaged in the storm on our way to Japan. It's not his job to mend electrical apparatus, but he seemed to have some success, although he's rather unsure if the repair will hold ... only time will tell.

I hadn't woken up in time for breakfast, but made up for it at lunch, as we had rump steak, onions, beans, chips and egg. The 2nd Cook gave Alan and me a glass of rosé wine, which was most unexpected – possibly because Alan bought him a beer once? It was a lovely gesture, the catering staff definitely have the thumbs up at the moment.

In the afternoon, the ship rolled just as Alan was shutting the door after entering the cabin and the middle finger on his left hand was caught with full force in the heavy, reinforced door. He was obviously in a great deal of pain and lay on the floor for a while because he felt faint. When he got up, the finger was swollen and the nail went black. He said it happened because of carelessness due to tiredness after not sleeping well for the past two nights. Oh dear...

Thursday 23rd January

Alan's finger has swollen up and he said it kept him awake from about 02.00 this morning. He said we went through some rough weather last night, but for once I slept right through it. We didn't go down to breakfast, though, as Alan didn't feel too good. Fortunately, we have bananas to eat, as they are ripening well and are really good quality.

Dinner today was soup and haddock. Charlie the Maltese 1st Steward (currently the only steward) gave me a big piece of haddock. He seems to look after me quite well, it's very good of him. After dinner, we had a drink in the bar with the Chief Engineer and 2nd Engineer. They were talking about ships turning over – very comforting! Peter came in and bought me a double vodka and orange, which was strangely warming. We arrived at Seki Saki and picked up the pilot at 20.30, but we won't arrive at Moji until early tomorrow morning.

Friday 24th January

Alan had to get up early to help out on the bridge when the ship was docking, as they are so short handed. Don the 3rd Mate took the wheel and Alan had to write down the ship's movements, such as: *Dead slow ahead; 10 degrees to starboard*, etc.

When he came back after we were safely docked, he said the pilot had been yelling about us going into quarantine. The agents should have sent us a signal that never materialised. Alan was relieved to find out later that it hadn't been his fault, as the signal had been sent to the wrong station – Nagasaki instead of Choshi. Alan said that the pilot seemed a little unsure of himself and was giving orders far too rapidly for them to have much effect on the ship's movements – so much so that he and Don couldn't help laughing about it.

Alan, Don the 3rd Mate and Chris the 5th Engineer had a doctor's appointment arranged in Moji (Alan about his finger and the other two about their pox, I believe) so I went with them for the ride. We took a taxi there and a taxi back, all expenses paid. On arrival at the doctor's surgery, we all had to take off our shoes and put on a pair of Japanese slippers before we could go inside. I'm unsure whether this is a religious custom, or a hygiene issue. I suspect the Japanese are very infection-conscious, as in Tokyo and Kobe, I noticed quite a few were wearing white face masks that covered the nose and mouth. Seems a good idea to me!

The doctor told Alan that he couldn't do much about his finger, but gave him a compress to put on it to ease the pain and reduce the swelling. He also gave him a black, soft leather finger guard to protect the finger. Alan later said that the swelling underneath the nail wasn't reduced, but the finger itself felt far more comfortable.

We returned to the ship just before midday and were directed to the crew's bar, where some Japanese trades people were selling pearls, jewellery and brass ware. We bought two small but heavy brass vases with images of Japanese houses and trees on the front. After lunch, we stood out on deck for an hour, watching the activity at Moji harbour and taking movie film.

When we departed from Moji at around 17.30, having unloaded part of the cargo, Alan again had to go to the bridge and write down the ship's movements. Our ETA at Kawasaki is 21.00 tomorrow, where we'll discharge the rest of the cargo.

Saturday 25th January

The ship was rolling a lot in the night, resulting in a certain amount of hilarity when items on the desk next to the bed began to slide around rather alarmingly. There must have been a bit of a list to port, because Alan, who was lying next to the desk (while I was far more safely next to the wall/bulkhead) was gradually bombarded throughout the night by the alarm clock, Flipper the grey furry seal, a half pint glass, a pint glass, a bunch of bananas and some random paperwork. When the last remaining item on the desk, a wooden black bear with an open mouth that we had inherited along with the cabin, began trundling along the desk at around 04.00 and finally fell on to the back of a very sleepy Alan's neck as if it was biting him, we both burst out laughing hysterically. Whoever was on duty on the bridge must have wondered what was happening!

After a lunch of beef stew, I packed the coral after washing it all very thoroughly. I really hope it doesn't break on the way home. We also managed to sneak in a quick game of Scrabble, which Alan won as usual.

We anchored off Kawasaki at around 20.00, ready to go alongside tomorrow at 09.00. I'm really picking up all these seagoing terms. We went in the bar for a drink this evening and

found out the 2nd Cook has 'thrown a wobbler' – it seems to be a common occurrence on these ships. As a matter of interest (or not) our bar bill is in the region of £6 at the moment, while the 2nd Engineer's is £23 – wow! I know this because Alan does the accounts...

Sunday 26th January

Alan was on the bridge at 09.00 writing down the ship's movements again as we berthed at Kawasaki. As it's Sunday, the Japanese dockers weren't working and so unloading won't start until tomorrow. We were told that the shops would be open, though, so decided to go ashore after lunch – which was tomato soup, steak, chips and peas followed by fruit salad – and very enjoyable it was too.

There was a spot of bother with our shore passes and it was 15.00 by the time we left, along with Bernie the 2nd Mate and Geoff the 3rd Engineer. We caught a taxi to a shopping centre called Isezakicho, which is more or less a straight street with shops either side and tables and chairs in the road, as traffic is banned. There were many shops selling anything and everything, so we had a most enjoyable time wandering around.

After Bernie had purchased a watch for his wife – and here I must say that I had been very taken aback to find out that Bernie had slept with Margaret while we'd celebrated Christmas at Long Beach (and in my eyes no amount of watches or gift wrapped presents in the world would ever be able to make up for his infidelity) – we carried on to another shopping area called Motomachi. After that, we proceeded to yet another one, called Chinatown. After all this street pounding, our purchases for the afternoon consisted of two wall scrolls, two pincushions and some chocolate.

Geoff had a strange hankering to go to the Seaman's Mission, so we took a taxi there – but found out that where it used to be was now a half constructed new building. A nearby police station was consulted, where the address of the Seaman's Mission was written down for us in Japanese and handed to the taxi driver. However, after a circular drive around an area called the Bluff and several abortive stops along the way, we found ourselves back at Chinatown. The taxi driver was paid ¥980 and we disappeared inside a pleasant eating place for a drink and some food to calm ourselves!

We didn't particularly want to return to the ship, so continued to walk around the shops – and continued to make some more purchases, of three Japanese dolls and a pair of slipper/shoes. We were then devoid of yen, beginning to feel really cold and tiring rapidly, so called it a day and went back to the ship for a couple of drinks in the bar. I enjoyed listening to many tales of life at sea and stayed there until gone midnight...

Monday 27th January – Tuesday 28th January

We stayed on board all the time, as Alan was very busy with service engineers from Kawasaki, not to mention a pre-radio survey man, then a radio survey and finally a radar repair man. I didn't see him very much at all for two days, so managed to achieve rather a lot of letter writing and reading.

On Monday we saw two films that were borrowed from another British ship – *Diamonds Are Forever* (half of which Alan unfortunately missed) and *The Case of the Bloody Iris*. We also found out we're not going to Honolulu after all, but back to Long Beach once more. This is quite disappointing, but just has to be accepted.

On Tuesday we finally received some more mail – most of it was welcome, but there was also an unwelcome letter from the bank saying we owe money on the mortgage. Alan sorted this problem by writing a letter to his mother to take to the bank manager. It's rather problematical being at sea sometimes.

The radio survey was completed satisfactorily and in the evening we went down to the bar, as there was a leaving 'do' with free drinks for Bob the 2nd Engineer, who is flying home tomorrow. Some people eventually went ashore, leaving Bob, the Captain, and six more of us. Later on, three more left...

Wednesday 29th January

...and finally Alan and I left at 01.30. Bye Bob!

The ship apparently left Kawasaki at 07.00 and arrived at Yokohama, about eight miles away, an hour later. Alan somewhat unkindly dragged me out of bed at 09.30 (although I was actually glad that he did) because he wanted us to do some sightseeing. He had been up and about since 07.30 as he had been asked to get a weather map, but the late night was obviously telling on me!

However, I girded my loins (well, showered and dressed) and we were soon ready to depart. Our destination for the day was Sankeien Garden, which had been recommended to us. We successfully caught a taxi and continued to spend a very pleasant couple of hours wandering around the garden, looking at the old Japanese buildings, bridges, pagodas, stone Buddhas and the planting itself. However, I wished that we could have understood the meaning of everything a whole lot more, as it was so interesting, but also rather tantalisingly enigmatic to our Western eyes.

It was all very serene and peaceful, but also extremely cold. When we went inside one building to have a look around, we had to take off our shoes and the floor was absolutely freezing. I couldn't help thinking that a visit in springtime would have been so much better ... mainly, so much warmer!



Interesting, but oh so cold...



Alan poses on the picturesque bridge



I wish we understood Japanese writing!

To avoid frostbite, we caught a taxi to Isezakicho, where we quite easily spent the rest of our Japanese money on some beautifully crafted bowls and plates, some mother of pearl pictures, more postcards, some mini Mars bars and biscuits. In the taxi back to the ship, Alan (who had given the taxi driver the name of our berth) thought the driver was going the wrong way and bravely told him to go back the way we'd come. The driver wasn't too happy about it, but did as Alan asked and after a while, Alan began to recognise familiar buildings, so that he was able to direct the driver back to the ship. Alan said afterwards that he was really sweating in case he was wrong – but since we were both so incredibly cold, this may not have been an entirely bad thing.

However, another problem arose when we finally arrived back at the ship and the taxi fare was ¥1.080, because Alan had only kept back about ¥500. Whether this was entirely due to the driver going the wrong way remains unknown, but it resulted in Alan telling the driver to wait while he went on board to borrow more money – leaving me with the driver as proof that he wasn't going to disappear into the bowels of the ship never to return. I was slightly uncomfortable...

However, it was resolved with no further trouble and we spent over an hour warming up in Peter's cabin, having a drink and a chat. The ship finally left Japan at around 17.30. It was certainly wonderful to have visited several places of this fascinating country and although we shivered our way through the hours ashore, while being seemingly fleeced by taxi drivers (an interesting analogy), it was well worth it!

Thursday 30th January

The weather was rough and the ship was rolling and pitching dementedly. It becomes tiring when you can't put a mug of tea or coffee down without it zooming off across the desk or table at a great speed of knots. Alan curses somewhat when this happens – he was cursing a lot today and since I failed to sleep very much at all last night, we are both obviously a little short of patience.

There are 412 Japanese cars in the hold on their way to Wilmington, Long Beach, where our ETA is 23.30 on 8th February. Alan has received a message saying that the Glasgow Clipper is scheduled for the Continent after this assignment. I wonder if this will be changed in the same manner as our Honolulu near miss?

The weather improved later in the morning and the cheese salad for lunch was good. The new stewards seem to be making an effort, although the roast pork for dinner was rather odd.

Alan won the game of Scrabble we played before his last watch of the day. During his last watch, he was speaking by VHF to another Radio Officer he knows on the RS Queen, who has

also been unable to raise Portishead Radio on the way across the Pacific. It turns out they both know the Radio Officer on the MV Orange. It's a small world. Alan has decided he will write to Nera and ask to be transferred to a bigger vessel.

Friday 31st January

Time is changing again – last night an hour was put forward, making us ten hours ahead of GMT. The weather became rough again at bedtime last night and I consequently hardly slept. My right eye was aching and I felt like death warmed up by the morning, so Alan kindly brought me a grapefruit half and some toast for breakfast. Today he was on the 6 to 8 watch.

The engine stopped briefly in the afternoon, due to a heavy oil leak in one of the main engine feed pipes, resulting in two gallons of oil spilling out on to the deck in ten minutes (so Alan said). It could have been nasty, apparently. Alan also said that Al the Reefer will take us down into the cargo spaces when the weather moderates to see the way the cargo is stored. However, the ship started to roll more violently at just around bedtime again...

Saturday 1st February

We are now eleven hours ahead of GMT and I have survived January on the Pacific Ocean, which is completely misnamed as far as I'm concerned. I failed to get to sleep until around 02.00, but then made up for it by sleeping until 10.00. The ship didn't roll quite so much today and the sun was actually shining. I even saw a bird – at least, I think I did. I hope I'm not hallucinating.

The Captain has changed course and we are headed south in order to avoid a low ahead of us, as cars and bad weather don't mix. This bodes well. I like the Captain and I like the fact that we have cars on board. Alan went down to look at them today and came back up saying that he fancies a red Datsun.

Sunday 2nd February

We are now twelve hours either ahead or behind GMT, according to my trusty Radio Officer, which seems very strange. Alan saw some birds today, so I'm not hallucinating. He said the Caroline Islands and Gilbert Islands aren't very far away.

Rump steak, chips and peas for lunch, followed by a jam pancake. As I could hardly move after this, I spent the afternoon writing up the radio accounts (and discovered two errors) while Alan did the bar accounts and discovered that drinks are being taken without being signed for, so that the bar has made a loss of over £3 despite the increase in prices. There was a film tonight, but Alan and I didn't see it because he was on the 8 to 10 watch.

Sunday 2nd February

We crossed the dateline last night, which means that we are now twelve hours behind GMT instead of twelve hours ahead. This also means that we get another chance at Sunday 2nd February, in case you were wondering. Our ETA is 02.00 at Long Beach on 9th February, according to the Captain. He thinks we might stay there for two or three days, which will be good. The sea wasn't calm today, so the ship was rolling around rather a lot.

Food intake was disturbing – half a grapefruit, boiled egg, toast and cocoa for breakfast; macaroni au gratin for lunch; poached egg and cheese sauce on toast, plus cheese and biscuits for dinner. Too much egg and cheese!

Alan and I made out a notice for the bar, reminding people to ensure that all drinks are paid for. Thirteen cans of orange have gone missing in the last three days! We also attempted to play a game of Scrabble, but just as we were nearly finished, the ship rolled suddenly and all the tiles flew all over the place. Game discontinued. I'm sure I was winning...

Monday 3rd February

The sea was calmer and I consequently slept much better, not waking until 10.00. The sun was shining and it was actually quite pleasant. A further stock take of the bar revealed that fourteen cans of orange and seven cans of Coke are now unaccounted for.

Tuesday 4th February

Alan arose at 04.45 in order to complete a 5 to 7 watch. His reason was so he could try to get hold of Portishead Radio, but his ulterior motive was so he could get to watch the evening film. The Captain guessed his ulterior motive! The film was entitled *Madame Sin* starring Robert Wagner and Bette Davis. It was very entertaining and Alan said it was worth his early start.

He also said that he intends to write to Townsend-Thoreson Ferries to enquire about a job, as we've both become rather disheartened with this kind of life – or more specifically with this ship. We're unsure what to do, but intend to wait until six months is up on 20th May. However, we're both glad we came, to find out what it was like and to see a bit of the world.

Wednesday 5th February

We are now ten hours behind GMT with Alan on the 6 to 8 watch. We are to pick up a half cargo of citrus fruit at Long Beach followed by a half cargo of bananas somewhere in Central America and then proceed across the Atlantic to the Continent – what joy!

The weather was not at all joy inducing today and the ship was rolling all over the place, depriving us of sleep, peace, balance and sanity. There also seemed to be a worrying list to starboard. On one occasion when Alan and I were sitting (precariously) in our cabin while the ship was managing to achieve 45 degree rolls, Alan's eyes nearly popped out of his head when the ship seemed to go further than ever on one roll and he must have gazed out of the porthole and straight into the hungry jaws of a heaving sea. He said the ship probably rolls so much because of the automatic pilot. Well, get a manual one, then!

Two cars have apparently been slightly damaged, which is unsurprising. Also becoming damaged is our appetite, as the food has been going from bad to worse. I seem to have been living off cheese salad for days. I attempted some roast turkey for dinner, but it tasted contaminated, so we stole a cheese roll later in the evening. More cheese!

I drafted two letters for Alan today, applying for jobs at two car ferry firms...

Thursday 6th February

After all yesterday's whinging, today's weather and food was much better. However, even though the weather appears reasonably calm, the ship was still rolling somewhat. Our ETA at Long Beach is now 23.30 on 8th February, as we've apparently been making good time at 21.5 knots. It's the pitching and not the rolling that makes it impossible to keep up full speed, so my trusty informer tells me.

Alan was on the 7 to 9 watch today. There was steak for lunch followed by plums and custard, then haddock followed by Victoria sponge pudding with jam sauce for dinner, all of which tasted quite good. Filling but good!

There was a film this evening entitled *The Battle for the Bridge*, which seemed rather old fashioned, but it whiled away an hour or two. There was also a rumour going around on which to speculate upon ... that Peter the errant Chief Steward, is leaving the ship at Long Beach. Can this be true?

Friday 7th February

We are now nine hours behind GMT, with only one hour to put on tonight that will bring us in line with Californian time at eight hours behind GMT. The weather was even better today – the sea was almost calm, I could hardly believe it. The ship still rolled slightly, however, as it seems to roll on anything. Alan was on the 7 to 9 watch again during a more or less normal day at sea. The exception was our third 'fire drill and boat stations'. Following the first fiasco, I have learned to more or less endure them now. I think the Captain has learned to more or less ignore me, poor man.

The radar broke down today – both of them, so Alan informs me. This is bad news indeed, because if Alan can't fix them, we'll have to stay on board tomorrow while someone shoreside fixes them. This maritime lingo is really taking hold!

Saturday 8th February

The ship was incredibly well behaved and didn't roll at all, such relief! There was lots of fog about when we awoke, but it cleared by the time we approached Los Angeles. Alan was on the 8 to 10 watch and managed to fix the radars – what a guy! We shall now be able to rent a car and go ashore for possibly our last time on these shores.

It was a usual kind of day, although I did the accounts to pass the time. We arrived at Wilmington, Long Beach Harbor at about 20.30 and went downstairs to see the Immigration official for our shore passes. There was lots of mail for us, including some missing mail – my mum's Christmas card and Alan's mum's missing No. 2 letter (she very sensibly numbers her letters to us). A slight delay of several weeks in the postal system, but still good to read.

Peter the Chief Steward received news of his relief in Los Angeles, so he was very pleased and asked Alan and me into the Captain's cabin for a drink. The Captain didn't seem to mind. The Chief Officer and ship's agent (but not in the 007 sense) were there, so I felt a bit like I was hobnobbing with the hierarchy. We fell into bed sometime after midnight...

Sunday 9th February

Some more mail found its way to us this morning, which was a good omen for the day. It was raining quite hard, which was not quite such a good omen, but Alan still rang a car rental firm and hired (sorry, rented) a yellow Nova 2 Chevrolet. The office of the firm he'd used in December was closed and this firm was expensive, but nothing ventured, nothing gained...

We drove through the rainy Californian morning to Disneyland once more, to use up the tickets we had left from 27th December. This time we visited The Haunted Mansion, It's a Small World and the Santa Fe Railroad Co. It was pouring with rain all the time we were there and we became soaked through.

Undeterred, if not more than slightly damp, we departed from Disneyland and sought out Knott's Berry Farm, which seemed rather like a Wild West theme park. It was unsurprisingly a little devoid of people, but we did see some other signs of life – namely a gunman dressed in full cowboy regalia, who burst into our carriage while we were taking a ride in a steam train and demanded that we give him our gold. This was somewhat unexpected, particularly when he became insistent that we put up our hands. We complied in a very embarrassed British sort of way and hardly knew what to say or do. As we were the only two in our carriage and the witty banter from us was non-existent, he soon left us alone to go and startle the occupants of the next carriage.

After this alarming ride, we sought out tamer entertainment by going down a mine, where our clothes began to dry out. Thankfully, no mock mining disasters were visited upon us and we escaped unscathed to next visit the John Wayne Theatre, where our clothes dried out completely while we watched a show that included a magician's act and some dancers. Finally, Alan managed to entice me onto a kind of helter skelter water ride on a log boat that ended up by hurtling us headlong down a waterfall and causing us to become even wetter than we were before we'd dried out.

As we were rather fatigued by this time, we left the surprising Knott's Berry Farm and headed back in the car to Long Beach (drying out for a second time) where we stopped at a *Jack in the Box* eating place for a special beefburger and milk shake. When we emerged, it had thankfully stopped raining.

At about 20.00, we went to see two Kung Fu films to pass the time, before heading to the dockside. The ship was supposed to have left Wilmington and moved to the bunkering berth at 17.00; then it was supposed to have left that berth and moved to the citrus berth (where we were) by midnight. However, it was well past midnight and there was no ship...

Monday 10th February

We both managed to sleep for a few hours in the car on the dockside, which is not strictly legal, but what were we supposed to do? At around 07.30 some other cars began to arrive,

whereupon Alan asked when the Glasgow Clipper was due. The reply was 08.00 and indeed, the missing ship did make an appearance, so we clambered on board for breakfast!



"Has anyone seen the Glasgow Clipper?"

We received even more mail, it was becoming a pleasing habit. After reading the letters and showering, we went ashore with Al the Chief Officer and Bernie the 2nd Mate to a large discount store in Los Angeles, where Alan bought himself a jade cross and we bought my mum a pair of ivory earrings and my dad a large, very happy Hotei Buddha.

It seemed a good idea to return to the ship for lunch, but afterwards the wanderlust hit us again and we took Don and Al the Reefer with us to the famous Hollywood Bowl Theatre. The entire place was empty! We wandered around, up and down the steps (the many, many steps) taking photos of the iconic sign and peering into the Bowl itself, before deciding to go on to the Griffith Observatory.

However, the Griffith Observatory in Griffith Park proved very elusive, so we decided to visit the Farmers (no apostrophe) Market instead. Walking around was very enjoyable, although we didn't buy anything. On the way there and back, we passed through Hollywood Boulevard and Sunshine Boulevard, which pleased me almost as much as visiting the Hollywood Bowl!

We arrived back on the ship at 18.30, which was unfortunately too late for dinner, so we snacked on grapefruit and toast before watching some American television. I quite enjoyed the comedy shows we saw, but Alan didn't seem particularly impressed. Put it this way, he didn't laugh very much...

Tuesday 11th February

I was dragged out of bed at 08.45 and at about 10.00, we went to return the car to Avis in Long Beach. It was a lovely, sunny day and felt quite hot, so we walked around the shops and bought some postcards. We indulged in a drink and an American donut (doughnut spelt wrong) and then walked along amid palm trees and a sort of cactus grass to where the RMS Queen Mary has been moored since 1967.

We were more or less limited to the third deck, as the first and second decks seemed to be largely restaurants. A wax museum contained mostly wax models of English film stars and royalty, which seemed a little strange, but somehow very American. There were plenty of souvenir shops and I succumbed to a pretty shell candle and two pretty shells.

I also succumbed with Alan to a fish and chip lunch followed by an Orange Bang, which sounds slightly dangerous. What really touched me about the whole visit, however, was the sight of some names carved into the woodwork by soldiers when the Queen Mary had been used a troopship during the Second World War.



Alan stands nonchalantly by RMS Queen Mary

Having finished our visit to the retired ocean liner, we walked back to our fridge cargo vessel with rather sore feet and proceeded to tidy up the cabin, which had somehow become quite untidy. Dinner of roast duckling was early at 17.30. I can't say I enjoyed the duckling, as I couldn't stop imagining a dead baby duck. However, the others seemed to enjoy it and it appears the new Chief Steward knows his onions, which always helps.

In the evening, Alan and I watched a film by ourselves – *Shoot Out* with Gregory Peck, which we both enjoyed. The day's walking must have tired us out, as we went to bed at 21.30.

Wednesday 12th February

We were supposed to have left Long Beach yesterday, but it turns out that we won't be leaving until tomorrow. So, we went to the cheaper car rental firm we'd used at Christmas and Alan hired (rented!) a brown Pinto, which he seemed to like. By 10.45, we were heading towards the Griffith Observatory, near Hollywood. Alan managed to find it this time, although we arrived at about 12.15 and discovered it wasn't open until 14.00.

Loath to waste any sightseeing time, we decided to divert to the nearby Los Angeles Zoo for a couple of hours. It seemed much more spacious than English zoos, although the inmates were similar. It was a pleasant interlude, but we really wanted to see the Observatory, so returned at about 14.15 and finally made it inside.

It was fascinating to see the exhibitions of meteorite particles and rocks, etc, as well as demonstrations of light and radio. I wished I could have understood everything that I saw, but would have needed far more time to read everything and take it all in. As it was, I loved the ethos of the place and bought some slides of Earth and Apollo 15 as souvenirs.

We returned to the ship for dinner, but then decided to have a last fling and go to *Hyatt House*, where we had gone on 25th December (but this time with our ID!) We took along Chris the 5th Engineer and enjoyed a few drinks while listening to the group playing and watching people dance. Two rum and Cokes and one vodka and orange cost us \$4 (about £1-75) but I suppose they were large ones. We left at around 22.30, dropping Chris off somewhere before we returned to the ship and were in bed by 23.00.

Thursday 13th February

We got up in time for breakfast today and had returned the car to Harbour Rent-a-car by 08.45. As there was some time to spare, we walked to the shopping area and enjoyed the warm, dry Californian morning. I bought some more postcards and then we decided to have a final last fling, by going into a café and indulging in some American golden hot cakes with maple syrup and whipped butter, plus a vanilla milk shake each. We really shouldn't have bothered with breakfast, as we were forced to leave some of this fine, fattening fare!

The Harbour Rent-a-car staff then very obligingly gave us a lift back to the ship. Californian people are just so friendly – the two women who worked at the firm’s office invited us to their homes for an evening when/if we go back to Long Beach. It was one of these women who returned us safely to the ship.

To my surprise, Alan went down to the dining room and had some lunch, but I was completely unable to think of more food. I spent the afternoon tidying up, reading *The Moon’s a Balloon* by David Niven and helping Alan to pack the coral and Hotei Buddha in a big box for transportation home. The plan is to send this home from the Continent by road transport.

The ship departed at 15.30, with an ETA at Balboa on 19th February at 06.00. I managed roast lamb plus cheese and biscuits for dinner, before Scrabbling with Alan (he won) until bedtime.

Friday 14th February

The sky was overcast all day, but the sea was calm and the ship didn’t roll despite the half cargo of citrus fruit, so I’m not complaining in the slightest. Alan was on the 8 to 10 watch, so we made an appearance at breakfast. Something else that made an appearance was an early morning cup of tea at 07.00 left outside our cabin door – a courtesy we can now apparently expect whenever we are at sea.

A normal, slightly boring day ensued. I wrote a letter, made amendments in Alan’s weather book and won Scrabble by 15. It’s something. Our schedule is Balboa on 19th at 06.00, Kristobal on 19th at 20.00 and Almirante on 20th. From there we will proceed to Rotterdam and then Le Havre. The Captain said we should arrive at Rotterdam on 4th March.

Saturday 15th February

One hour was put on last night, which makes us seven hours behind GMT. It was another calm day and the sun was shining. I didn’t see any birds, though (unlike yesterday when I saw land as well). Alan was on the 9 to 11 watch, so we didn’t make it down to breakfast.

Cheese and coleslaw for lunch, followed by one currant fritter with maple syrup. I also ate bananas and chocolate during the day, so didn’t feel hungry at dinner time – oops! Managed to write two letters and finished *The Moon’s a Balloon*. Alan reads faster than I do, as his book count is now 20, whereas mine is a mere 13.

Alan seemed to be very tense today. He says it’s a complicated procedure passing through the Panama Canal (which we will be doing) as he has to make so many communications and signals. I was winning at Scrabble this evening, but for his last move he had a 7-letter word and consequently won – foiled again!

Sunday 16th February

Another fine day with sun and a deep blue sky – and more importantly, a calm sea and a steady ship. If only it could be like this all the time! Another hour was put on last night, which makes us six hours behind GMT.

Alan was on the 6 to 8 watch, so we went down to a breakfast of cornflakes and toast after he came off watch. He looked very tired and said he was feeling rather grotty, as he hadn’t had much sleep last night, even though the sea had been calm. Our ETA at Balboa is now 13.00 on 19th February.

Ham salad for lunch and rump steak, onions, mushrooms, fried egg, chips and peas followed by fruit salad for dinner. What a lot of food today, delicious and plentiful, the new Chief Steward seems to be trying to impress – and succeeding!

As Alan finished his day’s watches at 20.00, we were able to watch the film – *Paint Your Wagon*, a musical starring Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood. It was about gold mining in California and everyone enjoyed it. I went to bed at 23.15 with the songs still in my head – *I was born under a wandering star* – *I talk to the trees* – *Hand me down that can of beans* – *They call the wind Mariah*. Is there a connection there?

Monday 17th February

The sea was like a proverbial millpond for most of the day, I could hardly believe it. Alan was still on the 6 to 8 watch. He has a rash on his foot and seems to be suffering generally from stress. Maybe this helped him to win Scrabble by 40...

Tuesday 18th February

One hour on last night, so we're now five hours behind GMT with Alan on the 7 to 9 watch. Yet another day of good weather. I fear I'm being lulled into a false sense of security before the ship crosses the Atlantic and meets appalling weather. However, the past five days have been most enjoyable – Alan and I even sunbathed for a while after lunch, as we did yesterday.

Sausage rolls, mashed potato and beans followed by ice cream for lunch; ham salad followed by baked apple with custard for dinner. I also had extra cheese, biscuits and chocolate during the day, as I seemed to be feeling unusually hungry. Perhaps I have some form of shipboard intestinal worms?

£7 worth of drinks have been stolen from the bar so far this month, so Alan called a meeting to say that he doesn't want to look after the bar any more. It was decided to close it down, which means that all stocks will be returned to the Chief Steward. There was apparently talk of a barbecue when we arrive somewhere amenable, in order to use up all the surplus stocks.

The film tonight (courtesy of the other officers who waited for Alan to finish his watch) was *Rogue's Gallery*, which was fairly good and interesting. Well, it passes the time...

Wednesday 19th February

Another sunny day, started off with scrambled egg and hotcakes for breakfast. Definitely shipboard intestinal worms. I didn't care, though, as we spent the morning seeing lots of islands on our approach to Balboa, where we arrived at about 13.00. I finally understood, by asking questions, that Balboa is at one end of the Panama Canal and Kristobal is at the other end. We were due to start going through the canal at 17.15, but due to heavy traffic, our turn will be at around 01.30 tomorrow. A traffic jam in the Panama Canal!

After lunch of ham, beetroot and onion followed by mince pie and custard, Alan and I went out on deck to sunbathe. It was a bit too hot for my liking, so we went back inside after an hour or so and found some mail – there was a letter from my dad enclosing a photo of Christmas at home, which pleased me greatly.

Dinner was a buffet salad, with fresh fruit for dessert, which made a refreshing change. Alan still had to listen for the 'traffic lists' so we sat in the radio room and played cards. After this duty, we went outside and stood on deck for a while, looking at the lights of Balboa and all the other ships lit up – quite a sight.

Thursday 20th February

We started our journey through the Panama Canal at 01.30 this morning, although Alan and I were in bed asleep by then – which is rather a pity, as it must have been quite an experience. However, we did go out on deck at 08.00 and watched as the ship manoeuvred through the last few down locks on the Atlantic side.

I shall now write this as dictated by Alan: *"The ship is attached to four donkeys, only they're mechanical donkeys – they are engines which work on a rack and pinion rail; they have hawsers fitted on their side which in turn are attached to the ship and they then pull the ship through a series of locks. When all the locks have been navigated, the hawsers are cast off and away you go under your own steam."*

On the dockside, they had a vintage mechanical donkey on display, which looked a bit different to the modern ones, in that its hawser equipment was mounted on the top of the engine in the middle instead of being mounted low down on the engine side like the modern ones. The whole set up looked very efficient and well organised and seemed to be run by the US Navy or another service. A very good experience!"



About to enter a down lock ... and on our way through that lock



Coming to the end of the lock ... and the lock gate opens

Having emerged from the Panama Canal and out into the Atlantic, we continued to Almirante to collect a half cargo of bananas. It was very windy at first and later on we had some rain. The ship actually arrived at Almirante at about 18.00 and the banana loading started right away, as we're due to leave at 09.00 tomorrow – so it's a bit of a rush job.

In the evening we saw a film called *The Horsemen* starring Omar Sharif (who I quite like). Alan and I had both read the book by Joseph Kessel and enjoyed the film adaptation. There are palm trees (or possibly coconut trees) outside our porthole, it's a pity we can't go ashore...

Friday 21st February

A sunny morning, in which we arose at about 09.30 and went outside to breathe the Almirante air (very hot for that time of morning). At 10.45 we departed from the sunny shoreside, on our way to Rotterdam, with an ETA of 20.00 on 3rd March.

Alan got in touch with Portishead Radio this morning, but when he tried again this evening, he was unable to raise a reply and became very agitated, saying that he hated this job, as it was just playing at communications. Oh dear...

Saturday 22nd February

The ship started pitching a lot last night and continued to do so all day, as there was a high wind that whistled incessantly through the bridge door. Alan came to a momentous decision

and sent a telegram to Nera, requesting relief as soon as possible, as this job is making him ill. He is constantly frustrated with the not-so-good equipment and has been having headaches, stomach aches, pains in the chest and sleepless nights. Time to call it a day...

Lunch consisted of vegetable soup, cheese on toast and a doughnut with jam sauce (calories!) Dinner consisted of cheese salad and chocolate pudding (more calories!) I shall definitely be weighing myself when I get home. Still on the subject of food, we have again been given a box of bananas weighing in at 42 lbs. The bananas themselves are huge, much bigger than our previous supply.

Sunday 23rd February

The weather was slightly better today, but the wind was still whistling through the bridge door. We put an hour on last night, making us four hours behind GMT and Alan on the 8 to 10 watch. Horrible minestrone soup and roast turkey for lunch, but rump steak and all the trimmings followed by Bakewell Tart and custard for dinner. If I keep on eating like this, I shall start to weigh the ship down.

Speaking of ships, we saw another one today and also some islands – Cuba, perhaps? I wasn't expecting to see any land on this trip, so it was a pleasant surprise. However, Alan says it will be over a week before we sight land again. This news is not cheering. Alan and I played Scrabble (Alan won) and then chess (Alan won).

It'll be good to go home, although a part of me is rather sad that I won't have any more exciting places to write about – not for a while, anyway.

Monday 24th February

The weather was much the same as yesterday with strong trade winds, which sounds as if I know what I'm talking about. Our speed is 19.5 knots and our ETA at Rotterdam is now 04.00 on 4th March. Alan was on the 8 to 10 watch. We passed another ship, which Alan attempted to contact (well, someone on it) with the VHF, but he couldn't raise any reply. Interesting! Perhaps it was the Marie Celeste XIII...

There was an unexpected fire drill at 16.15, our fifth one since arriving. When I heard the fire alarm bell, it almost frightened the life out of me. However, I managed to stay alive for dinner of gammon, pineapple, chips and mixed vegetables followed by tinned pears and strawberry ice cream – a strange mix, but not inedible.

After dinner, we played Scrabble and ended up with the same score, although I have the feeling that Alan could have won if he'd been able to fully apply himself – he said he felt washed out and had an ache in his right shoulder. Relief is needed!

Tuesday 25th February

According to the weather maps, there are a few lows up ahead that we can hardly avoid. It seems as if Great Britain is having bad weather and sending some down to meet us. GB, you really needn't bother, we don't want them!

Alan was on the 8 to 10 watch today. He was also asked to help out in the engine room this afternoon, which he did for an hour or so. He managed to win most of the card games we played in between watches, as well as Scrabble. He is either extra clever, or extra lucky. Perhaps the biggest event of the day, though, was his fingernail coming off when he accidentally hit it (which is not lucky).

Wednesday 26th February

We put an hour on last night, making us three hours behind GMT. Due to an adverse current and some engine trouble, our ETA is now 08.00 on 4th March. Alan continued to have trouble sending messages and receiving them – he said it would be easier if he couldn't care less, as the worry is detrimental to his health. However, he bought a bottle of wine for this evening and it released some of his tension in an outburst of giggling! We both scored equally in Scrabble...

Thursday 27th February

The weather was mainly fine, but a low pressure formation north of us was causing heavy swells and showers. The ship wasn't rolling too badly, though. Our ETA at Rotterdam is now 09.00 on 4th March. We're over halfway there, but it's seemed a very tedious journey.

Another cheese overdose today: cheese salad and apple crumble for lunch; cheese beano, peaches and cream followed by cheese and biscuits for dinner. The bananas are ripening rapidly, so at least we had some fresh fruit.

The Captain received a telegram saying that he and the Chief Officer are going to be relieved at Rotterdam. That's nice for them ... but it would also be nice if Alan could be relieved at Le Havre, as my air fare home wouldn't cost too much then. Still, at least his finger is healing.

It suddenly became swelteringly hot at around 18.00 and stayed like it for the rest of the evening. It probably means we're approaching a low – no! We'll be passing through the Azores early on 1st March, will go past the Bay of Biscay on 2nd of March and then through the English Channel on 3rd March.

Friday 28th February

An hour was put on last night, making us two hours behind GMT. The ship was rolling heavily all night, resulting in an almost complete lack of sleep. From midday onwards, it was achieving those very nasty 45 degree rolls (due to a heavy WNW swell, according to the Captain).

However, the great news of the day is that Alan will be relieved at Rotterdam. My air fare will cost £19-82, which isn't too bad – anything to leave this dementedly rolling vessel. It rolled so badly at lunchtime that everything came off the tables, including salt, pepper, cutlery and tablecloths. The cupboard door also opened and all the jars of pickle and sauce flew out. Only four more nights and three more days to go. Oh, the relief of being relieved!

PS – The ridiculous and somewhat disturbing news of the day is that someone must have come into our cabin while we were elsewhere and stole two of my bras and one pair of knickers. I'm speechless! Fortunately, I'm not braless and knickerless, as I brought a good supply with me.

Saturday 1st March

Another hour was put on last night, making us just one hour behind GMT. Alan was on the 7 to 9 watch and the silly ship continued to roll manically all day, due to heavy head swells. This will no doubt delay our ETA at Rotterdam even more. The constant rolling is really wearing on the nerves, especially when it succeeds in those spectacular 45 degree lists. I can't wait to get home now, I'm practically counting the minutes!

We could only have prunes or cereal at breakfast because the ship was rolling so badly (I declined the prunes). I don't know if the rolling was an excuse, as for lunch the cook managed to turn out pork chops, mashed potato and beans and for dinner roast turkey...

I spent the day beginning to pack our big case and writing up the February accounts. The latter was tedious, as I had been slack by not keeping them up-to-date throughout the month. However, I managed to finish them just before bedtime. Three more nights to go.

Sunday 2nd March

We passed along the Bay of Biscay today – not that I really knew it, as the ship was behaving in exactly the same manner as the past two or three days, which is rolling horribly. Alan says it's due to a ridge of high pressure from the Mediterranean to the North Sea. I'm not sure I understand that, but I do understand that we put another hour on last night, making us now on correct GMT time. Our ETA has probably been delayed again, as there was engine trouble in the afternoon and evening, so we had to slow down.

The MV Glasgow Clipper will be going to Miami, Florida after leaving Europe. It seems a pity to have missed that opportunity, but it will be sailing across the Atlantic light-shipped, which is very likely to be hell and Alan keeps saying he will very be glad to get off the ship.

I completed packing the big case today, there was just about room for everything. While I was packing, the ship rolled suddenly and the open wardrobe door slammed against my hand, squashing my engagement ring. I couldn't take it off, so Alan had to use pliers – eek!

Lunch was some horrible savoury fried rice, but dinner was rump steak, egg, onions, chips, mushrooms and peas to fortify the inner person. Maybe the effort of trying to keep upright when the ship is constantly rolling uses up calories.

Monday 3rd March

We put an hour on last night, making us one hour ahead of GMT, as this is correct Dutch time. The weather calmed down a little during the day. We didn't get much further past the Bay of Biscay because we were slowed down. We were in the Sole area, where there was supposed to be a Gale Force 10 imminent, but we just missed it. The gods are on our side!

We passed into the Plymouth shipping area late in the evening and after that will go through Portland, Wight, Dover, Humber, German Bight, Fisher, etc (I think). I like being in the English Channel, it feels like home. The ship stopped at about 22.00 to carry out engine repairs. We went to bed at about 23.15 and when I woke in the early hours, we were on our way once more. Our ETA is now early on 5th March, so tomorrow will be our final day, as long as nothing goes amiss.

Tuesday 4th March

Alan was called out of bed at 06.00 to send some messages, but I slept until 09.00. I finished packing and cleaning the cabin until lunchtime, when we had sausage, egg, chips and beans followed by strawberry ice cream.

We saw lots of ships in the Channel, including a frigate we passed by and a passenger ferry – it was quite interesting and helped to pass the time, which seems to be going so slowly. Alan and I played cards a lot. I was very excited about going home, but Alan was trying not to be, as he still had work to do. In fact he was kept extra busy, as the Captain gave him loads of messages to send and he also had to arrange telephone calls, including one to Sweden. However, the final day passed and the final night arrived...

Wednesday 5th March

Going home day! When we awoke this morning we had arrived at Rotterdam. After breakfast, we went out on deck and at about 10.30, the new Radio Officer arrived. Alan showed him the radio room and equipment and we then had our final lunch on board – braised steak, beans and mashed potato. Finally, we saw the Captain, who gave us our plane tickets home. We were signed off the ship's articles at precisely 14.00!

We waited in the bar until a taxi was to come and take us to the airport. During this time, Alan told me quietly that the Captain had asked him to see that two crew members who also had tickets for our plane, actually made it onto the plane. They were known to be drug users and prone to trouble. Alan had told the Captain he would see they got to the check-in desk at the airport, but that was as far as it went, as he was afraid they would be carrying drugs.

The taxi arrived at 16.20 and we set off, along with the two dodgy crew members. I must confess that it felt very strange to leave the MV Glasgow Clipper for the last time, but the thought of going home was like a shining beacon. We arrived safely at the airport, checked in and separated ourselves quite easily from our ex-shipmates.

Take-off in the DC9 plane was thankfully smooth, as I was quite nervous after the bad turbulence during the flight to Los Angeles. We saw some dykes and windmills from the air and then puffy white clouds, until 45 minutes later we landed at Heathrow Airport – and even managed to get through Customs without paying anything.

It was already beginning to seem like a dream as we drove in the hire car along familiar roads. Everything looked smaller, but somehow very welcoming. It had been a brilliant experience and the throb of the engine still echoing in my head would no doubt disappear quite soon...

POST SCRIPT

❖ **MV Glasgow Clipper**

Launched on 11th June 1972, the gross tonnage of the single funnelled Glasgow Clipper was 7,742. Dimensions were 461.5 ft by 60.3 ft, with a single propeller and a cruising speed of 23 knots.

The Glasgow Clipper was sold and renamed **Andania** in 1976; **Europa Freezer** in 1981; **Balmar** in 1985; **Pacifico** in 1989; **Network Stork** in 1990 and **Banana Planter** in 1992. The ship was finally sold for scrapping on 19th April 1995.

❖ **Tuesday 7th January 1974**

The storm in the Pacific was a lot worse than Alan led me to believe. As well as being in the front line of communications, he witnessed it when he went on the bridge. In his own words:

"The reality was that we had to heave to because we couldn't out-run the storm and even when the ship heaved to, one could feel the weight of water falling on the bow and pushing it under ... one minute we could see the sky and next the sky would disappear and all we could see was a wall of water cascading down at us.

The weather charts were showing extremely high seas and wind speeds in excess of 100 miles an hour. I checked our own wind speed indicator and it was off the scale solidly. I have to say that this is the fiercest storm I have ever been in ... much worse than the North Atlantic in winter ... in fact I have never seen a weather chart like it before or since.

During this storm, two ships sank to the south of us, one a bulk carrier and the other a container ship. They both sent SOSs, but due to the vastness of the Pacific and the severity of the storm, no ship was able to go to their rescue. I did relay the SOS to Tokyo and San Francisco and followed the SOSs to their conclusion – there were no survivors from either ship.

After the storm was over, we had severe damage to the ship's antennas, winches and other equipment. When the holds were opened on arrival at Kobe, all that could be seen were lemons – no boxes or packing, just lemons – that were scooped up into containers and off loaded."

❖ **Charlie the Maltese 1st Steward**

As I mentioned, Charlie was always very kind to me and seemed to look out for me in many small ways. I was therefore very surprised to learn from Alan after we left the ship that Charlie hadn't always been a steward. Back in Malta, he had allegedly been involved in a working capacity with 'women of the street' and it was rumoured that he'd come to sea to escape some sort of trouble. He had apparently said that all women were tarts and whores, but that I was different to them and knew how to conduct myself. Due to the volatile nature of some of the crew, he apparently took it upon himself to protect me – and the word was that the crew were afraid of Charlie and wouldn't dream of crossing him. At the time, I knew nothing of this.

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FINAL NOTE

I was only able to write up this account of our travels because of the diary that both Alan and I kept while we were at sea. It seems a lifetime ago, but the memories are still quite vivid. Sadly, the photos that we took deteriorated over the years, but Alan has been able to doctor the remaining few digitally, so that they do give some idea of what life was like during those strange 105 days that we cut loose and travelled around a bit of the world!

Kay Santillo, October 2010.