

FIVE

THE NIGHT I ALMOST GOT SHAGGED

When you see any place of repute for the first time it's impressive, but Sydney is a whole different ball game. When I first saw it on that warm sunny morning, in a bizarre sort of way it felt like home. If you said I felt that way because I'd seen it many times before on television or in magazines, you would most probably be right, but whatever the reason it didn't alter the fact that I felt very comfortable being there and would accept anything that this great city had to offer.

I turned up in the engine workshop still wearing a big grin and waited for the Second Engineer to come down and dish out the day's work list. Within 10 seconds of him walking through the door my grin had vanished, not only did I have to do a mornings work I also had to go on watch, but not just any watch, it was the bloody 12 to 4 which meant starting at midnight. I'd never heard of anything so barbaric in my life, how could anybody possibly start work at midnight AND midday all within 24hrs? Of course, I knew that it happened, I'd been on the ship 2 months for Christ sake, I just never thought it would happen to me!

How could I get drunk, have a social life, chat up girls and still have time to recover in the eight hours between watches? I started having a bit of a panic attack, and I think if anyone had looked closely they would have seen a little tear in the corner of my eye when I realised that all the chat up lines I'd been rehearsing in front of the mirror for the last few weeks had been a complete and utter waste of time. My future flashed before my eyes – work, dinner, bed, work, breakfast, bed,

work, dinner, bed, and so on and so on until I retired a lonely old man who didn't meet any girls because he was stuck on the fucking 12 to 4 watch for the rest of his life! God, what was I going to do? There was only one thing for it, sulk, and try and convince the Chief Engineer that my talents were best suited to day work duties. I plucked up the courage to go and plead my case to the "Almighty" who listened patiently before proceeding to rip my head off and shove it up my arse, by the time he'd finished his verbal onslaught I was a jibbering wreck. "How'd it go Bondy?" one of the guys said, "Not as well as I thought it would" I replied, "Wanker", he said "you'll learn" and continued on his merry way. I had no choice in the matter so I grabbed my tools and headed off to the engine room doing an impersonation of Dick Dasterdly's dog.

Once I'd finally accepted my impending doom I realised that I didn't even know what a watch keeper did. I assumed he just drank tea and stared at pumps or something for 4 hours before signing a book to prove that he'd actually been there.

If I say that I was soon to find out what watch keeping was all about, that wouldn't be strictly true.

Engine systems have pumps and pipes, inlets and outlets, pressures and temperatures, different types of oils and even 6 different types of water one of which was so hot you couldn't see it and they were all wrapped in steel tubes that seemed to have no beginning or end. There were also the gauges, some had numbers from 0 to 2, some had numbers from 0 to 900 and some even had numbers from -30 to +5. What on earth was all this about? I knew I was supposed to know some of this stuff but where do you start? Well, the fact is I didn't start, which is why I said that it isn't strictly true that I found out what watch keeping was all about. I really was absolutely useless, and

those of you who know me and are reading this will be nodding your head and saying to yourself “ Yeh, he was, what a tosser, didn’t even know what a bilge pump was!”. You can’t really blame me though for not wanting to learn anything new, there were beer and girls waiting for me just a few yards away from the engine room, it was like the ‘call of the wild’, I knew what I should be doing but the temptation of what I preferred to do was overwhelming.

I wasn’t proud to have been the most useless person ever to step foot on an object invented by cave-men and it took me a long time to motivate myself to learn this job, and I’m talking months here not days. In fact it wasn’t until my next trip when I was ‘promoted’ from bilge junior to evaporator junior that I started to get my act together but in the meantime I continued my first trip at sea by trying my best to enjoy myself.

The first cruise was the Christmas cruise, 10 days of fabulous fun filled frolicking fornication. The 12 to 4 watch didn’t turn out too bad after all. I didn’t get to see many of the places that we visited but who cares when you’re living in the Playboy Mansion!

From a professional point of view I can’t say that I was very responsible but I was absolutely dedicated to this hedonistic lifestyle that I’d fallen into.

Captains Cocktail Parties now had a reason to exist, we were no longer hoping for somebody under 70 to make small talk with as the abundance of gorgeous girls were like a box of Cadbury’s Selection and small talk was the last thing on both our minds and theirs.

Sometimes it became a bit embarrassing, you could be standing there with one of your mates when a girl would come up and ask if you wanted a drink, a girl ask ME if I wanted a drink this really was heaven! The embarrassing bit would

come when she went to the bar to buy your G&T and another one would sidle up to you and ask the same, this is no bullshit, it happened all the time.

The 12-4 were supposed be 'off decks' by 1030pm which meant that you had to go to bed but in reality it meant that you couldn't be seen in any of the bars.

Cue the chat up lines.

Everybody had their own methods but all with the basic intention of getting a bit of stuff back to your cabin before one of the senior officers caught sight of you and reported you to the Chief Engineer, that was last thing we wanted so we had to be pretty smooth, and Aussie girls loved smooth. Don't forget that this was 1980/81 and not many young Brits could afford to travel to Australia and the majority of these girls had never even met anyone from the UK before so the smooth approach very rarely failed.

Once in the cabin you could approach your quarry in 2 different ways, directly or covertly. The direct approach would normally be to lock the door behind you, pour her a crippler and put on 'Bat out of Hell' before grabbing her and putting your tongue down her throat. I only tried this once but she passed out on the bed before I had chance to wet my lips and by the time I'd woken her up it was 10 to midnight and I had to go to work.

The covert approach was definitely worth the effort.

Open the door and allow her to enter the seductively lit room first, if you had a chair in your cabin you always made sure that it was occupied by some immovable object so she had no choice but to sit on the bed. Ask her what she wanted to drink, never assume that they all drink Rum and Coke, even though 99.9% did. Slowly walk over to the tape player, press play and

watch her eyes dilate as Christopher Cross starts singing 'Sailing'.

Never never sit next to her on the bed straight away, wait until you pour her the next drink and then sit down. Talk about her, never about yourself unless she asks and even then keep it to a minimum, this is HER moment, make her feel as though she is the most important person in the world and always keep your eyes fixed on hers, I guarantee that within 5 minutes she will put her glass down which is the signal. Reach across, put your glass next to hers and tell her she's gorgeous before kissing her lightly on the lips. If she wanted to go all the way I always made sure the tape machine was off, I found that music was far too distracting, either my feet would start tapping or I'd start singing under my breath, thank Christ I didn't use the direct approach, God knows what she would of thought if I'd started singing 'Two out of Three Ain't Bad'.

If you did a good job (and sometimes even if you didn't) you could go to work at midnight and come back after 4 hours and find her still asleep. Now this was a real predicament, the smooth approach normally relied on staying reasonably sober and after 4 hours of sweaty work your tongue felt like the bottom of a birds cage and there was always a case of beer to be drunk in one your fellow watch keepers cabins. So it was either shower up and get back into bed with the latest love of your life or go and drink beer and talk shit with the lads.

I'll let you readers decide my most frequent choice.

One night while we were on watch, Jim, the other junior engineer was going on and on about this 'Princess' that was waiting for him in his bed, he drove us nuts, on and on he went for 4 hours. At quarter to four I had to go up and call the 4 to 8

watch so I took a peek in his cabin and found it empty, now here was an opportunity!

I went back down below and told the 3rd Engineer what I was going to do so and as soon as my relief arrived I was up the stairs like a shot. I had a very quick wash and went into Jim's cabin. I turned all the lights out stripped down to my underpants and got into his bed, which still smelled of perfume and beer, and waited for him.

I heard the lift door open and the sound of three voices in the changing room. My heart was thumping and I was laughing uncontrollably, but I couldn't laugh out loud so I bottled it all up and the tears started pouring down my cheeks. The guys finished washing their hands and I heard one of them say "coming 'round for a beer Jim?", "Nah" he said "Unlike you dickheads I've got someone waiting for me, see ya tomorrow". I was now almost hysterical and when the door opened I really don't know how I controlled myself.

There was a very narrow window in these cabins that gave just enough light to see a few feet which was just as well because Jim didn't want to turn the light on and wake his 'sleeping beauty'. I heard him take his boiler suit off and he sat on the bed and started running his fingers through my hair. I felt as though I'd been holding my breath for about ten minutes but when he said "hello darling, I'm back" I thought I was going to die. He then pulled the sheets back, got into bed (without a shower I might add), put his arm around me and started whispering in my ear. I just wish to this day I could have seen his face when he realised that the girl he'd left 4 hours earlier had grown armpit hair and a five o'clock shadow.

He jumped out of bed and turned the light on to find Bondy lying in the spot where his 'Princess' should have been. "YOU BASTARD, YOU BASTARD, WHERE IS SHE? GET OUT YOU

BASTARD". I literally crawled out of the cabin to find the other guys on the floor outside in similar state of dementia and when one of them said "you're lucky he never shagged you Bondy" we almost woke the entire ship, "FUCK OFF" were Jim's final words before he slammed the door shut. He didn't come 'round for a beer that night but what a laugh we had!

But that was what it was all about. We were young horny alcoholics cruising around the South Pacific Islands with access to free food, cheap beer, great girls and even greater mates and the best part was we got paid for it. Who wouldn't have acted the same way as we did? Absolutely nobody that's who!

I stayed on the 12-4 watch for the remainder of my first trip which lasted 4 months and although it wasn't the best working routine to be on I still had fantastic time. I started out this book by saying "I was going to see places and experience things that I could have only dreamed of a few months earlier" and it was absolutely true. Never in my wildest dreams could I have expected to have had 4 months of constant fun, even the bad times were good and the good times were bloody marvellous, but all too soon the end of my first trip drew to a close and I had to fly home for a few weeks leave. Although I craved to stay on the ship and continue the life to which I had become so accustomed I still wanted to go home and tell everyone of my exploits. I flew home from Sydney on 9th February 1981 and straight into the expectant arms of Mum and Dad.