

BRIAN  
INGPEN

**Brian Ingpen** hosts a weekly column in the **Cape Times**, called **Port Pourri**, where he shares with his readers the news about happenings in the Western Cape ports. He lives with his ear to the ground and his insights into the port vibes make for excellent reading. On this site, he shares his column and adds some photos as a bonus for an insider's view on the port life.

## TANKERS IN THE BLOOD

This shipmaster, now retired, is also the local school busdriver! Many would feel that the former occupation is probably the easier of the two, but when Captain Mike Parkin returns to his UK home next week, he will drive the youngsters to school because of a long-standing interest in buses, particularly the vintage types.

Hailing from Scarborough on the Yorkshire coast, the young Parkin journeyed a few miles north to Jarrow to join his first ship, the 18927-deadweight **Haustellum**, one of 39 of Shell's famous H-class tankers built in the 1950s. (Going down the ways into the River Tyne in 1956, **Helisoma** was also of that class, and was bought by Unicorn in 1973 to move oil products along the South African coast. She was renamed **Africa Shell** and traded until 1977 when she went to the scrapyards of the east)

Captain Parkin - then a cadet - recalls working on the ship's monkey island as **Haustellum** passed his native town, en route to the Thames to discharge a cargo of slops. Thereafter, the ship was stemmed to load in the Persian Gulf, a nice long voyage for the new cadet.

It was not to be. During the Suez crisis of 1956-57 when oil supplies from the Gulf were threatened by the potential of widespread conflagration in the region, Shell, like the other oil majors, had chartered a number of tankers to ensure the continuance of global crude and oil products trades. When the feared cataclysm did not materialise and the oil trade reverted to its usual volumes after the reopening of Suez, Shell had surplus tonnage on its books, and rather than incur penalties for renegeing on those charters, elected to lay up some of its own tankers.

**Haustellum** went to Falmouth where she de-stored prior to lay-up, most of her crew were signed off, and Parkin was on the train for Scarborough. His first trip to sea had lasted ten days!

Others would have walked away from the sea-going career, but made from sterner stuff, the young man persisted remained focused on his ambition. Aboard **Tomogerus**, a 1944-vintage T2 tanker built as Swan Island by the Kaiser Company in Portland, Oregon, Parkin at last was at sea again, heading for Curacao, that tiny Dutch island in the Caribbean where tankers load both crude oil and oil products mainly for Europe and North America. This was life at sea, mused the young man as his ship passed the Irish coast, and set course across the North Atlantic. Then the main propulsion unit broke down!

The salvage tug **Englishman** hastened out to tow the immobilised tanker into Falmouth, where, a few miles upstream, **Haustellum** still lay, moored to buoys fore and aft. Mutters that the lad would again have to take the train to Scarborough were put to rest when a spare unit was found in Rotterdam, shipped to Falmouth aboard a coaster, fitted in the tanker, and she sailed for the Caribbean. Two weeks later, Parkin actually saw his first foreign oil pipeline.

Later in his career, time on large tankers provided a different experience for Parkin, then sailing as second mate. **Marissa**, a 207000 -deadweight VLCC built by Shell in Japan, loaded her first cargo at Mina al Ahmadi, Kuwait, and headed for the Cape. With the south-west monsoon generating a heavy swell, the tanker ploughed on through the rough weather in the Arabian Sea.

Believing that these ships would be able to pass through a deepened Suez Canal once it reopened, Shell had installed the equipment on the forecastle to house the Suez searchlight, required to illuminate the banks of the canal during a transit before sunrise. Then came a message from the owners warning that, in similar weather, a sistership had sustained damage to the door to the searchlight compartment.

At the height of the bad weather when poor visibility prevents one seeing much of the foredeck from the bridge, Parkin who was on watch, was mystified by the constant ringing of the forward phone. Since no one could

possibly be up forward in those conditions, he reported the matter to the master who turned the ship so that men could go on deck to ascertain whether their ship too had suffered damage.

Water had indeed entered some forward compartments through the searchlight locker, causing an electrical short circuit that made the telephone ring. Compounding the problem was that the electric motor driving the pump to transfer essential bunkers from a forward tank during the voyage had been submerged. Marine engineers are generally resourceful folk who can fix most things, including waterlogged electric motors, and although a new one had been flown to Cape Town for the off-limits supply launch to ferry to the tanker when she by-passed the Cape, the engineers aboard had it working in no time.

With the prefix Bunga- as the company's nomenclature, containerships of the Malaysian International Shipping Corporation (MISC) are regular callers at South African ports. Carrying palm or coconut oil from Malaysia to Europe, and caustic soda from Britain to the Kwinana aluminium smelter in south-western Australia, the MISC tanker **Bunga Selasih** was Captain Parkin's first command, and there were many others - tankers carrying a wide variety of chemicals, bulkers moving steel, grain and even vehicles, and over the years, called at dozens of ports.

His time at sea concluded when he retired from **Prestigious**, a bulker engaged in worldwide tramping operations.

It would be most appropriate if the school busdriver were invited to talk to the youngsters about his fascinating career. They would learn a lot from this remarkable man, as I did over a cup of tea last Saturday morning.

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The logo consists of the word "CONSULTING" in a bold, red, sans-serif font. To its right is a blue circle containing a white "@" symbol. Further right, the word "WORK" is written in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font, stacked vertically.