



CAPE TIMES

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.

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4 JUNE 2008

THE COLOURFUL CAREER OF CAPTAIN WALTER BISSET



Top: Baron Saltoun entering the "cut" into the Alfred Basin, Cape Town, c. 1934. She was one of the 13 losses suffered by H. Hogarth & Sons during World War 2 when she struck a mine in the outer roadstead at Cherbourg, France on 12 June 1940.



TOP: Tugmate Walter Bisset aboard the steam tug **TS McEwen**. With him is the tugmaster, Captain Berry. This photograph was probably taken on their return to Cape Town after their tug towed the Ellerman freighter **City of Lincoln** off the rocks at Quoin Point, and delivered her to Cape Town.



TOP: Empire Goblin, used during the war as a search and rescue tug between Dassen Island and Cape Point. After the war, she became a harbour tug in Cape Town for a short time.

In the watery late afternoon sunlight and set against the darkened mountain, the laden **MSC Bremen** made a grand sight when she arrived from Europe the other day, followed closely by the bulker **Hanjin Penang** from Indonesia and the containership **Leutjenberg**, raising the number of ships at anchor to 11.

I have in mind a similar image of a smaller vessel, the British trampship **Baron Cawdor**, arriving off the port late one day in the 'fifties, also presenting a vividly-lit picture. At the time, I was aboard **John X Merriman**, the harbour tug that was one of my school holiday homes.

Fully laden with coal from Lourenco Marques (Maputo) for Cape Town's steam locomotives and powerstations, she was one of the vessels operated by Hogarths - based in the small port of Ardrossan on the misty shores of the Firth of Clyde - and that offered interesting voyages for those who would wander down the sealanes.

A few days ago, I renewed acquaintance with Captain Walter Bisset whose recollections of that famous company stretch back 72 years when he walked - and cleaned - the decks of those steamers as a ten-shillings-a-month apprentice, living in a cramped four-berth cabin with no mod-cons aboard the old coal-burner **Baron Blythwood**.

His first voyage was most memorable. The old ship went under the chutes at Cardiff to load coal for Alexandria. Then, during the Red Sea passage, the cadets hosed the ship down to rid it of every speck of coal before painting the holds with whitewash in preparation for the salt cargo that she would load in Aden for Calcutta (Kolkata). Then she steamed down the Indian east coast to Visakhapatnam to load manganese for America where she loaded a cargo of scrap metal for Japan, "*which*," Bisset remarked wryly, "*they shot back at the Americans only a few years later!*"

Hogarth's lost 13 vessels during the war, including **Baron Blythwood** that was torpedoed in the North Atlantic in September 1940, although Bisset was not aboard at the time. He was fortunate to survive several bombing raids while his ship was in convoy, and on one occasion he watched in horror as a torpedo passed

directly under his ship, only to slam into a petrol-laden tanker on their port side with all the expected tragic consequences.

There are few places Bisset has not seen. Small Canadian ports yielded log cargoes for the trans-Atlantic haul. On one voyage, the master was given only the co-ordinates of a position off Labrador where the ship was to load logs, floated down a river, and guided alongside the ship by traditional lumberjacks, riding the logs in Boys' Own fashion.

Carrying a cargo of bagged linseed from India for the UK via the Cape, Bisset's ship ran low on food and coal. Mutterings among the crew turned to a nasty situation that forced the master to summon the officers to the bridge, and to read the riot act to the crew, who abandoned their aggressive stance. To maintain a good head of steam, every piece of spare dunnage went into the furnace and when she arrived off the Cape, a tug brought coal out to her.

It was a call of destiny for young Walter Bisset. Berthed astern of the ship, was one of the harbour tugs whose mate Bisset had recognised as a shipmate from his two-year stint aboard the trainingship **General Botha**. He hastened down the quay to meet him - Bob Deacon, later Port Captain in Cape Town - and such was Deacon's enthusiasm for harbour operations that Bisset called on the port captain who promised him a job once he had his master's ticket.

Within a year, he had passed his exams, and was aboard the Admiralty's rescue tug **Empire Goblin**, based in Cape Town to patrol the area from Cape Point to Dassen Island.

A particularly proud recollection was the refloating of the Ellerman cargoliner **City of Lincoln** that hit Quoin Point at full speed on her maiden voyage in November 1946. Although his tug, **TS McEwen** and her consort **TH Watermeyer** had dashed to the scene, both returned to harbour after several days when it became apparent that the freighter would not be refloated without an extensive operation to jettison cargo, to seal all vents and to pressurise the spaces open to the sea. .

The ship came off the point only in March the following year, but, amidst the heavy swell, the towline parted, and she drifted ashore again, this time on a sandy beach. **TS McEwen** and **TH Watermeyer** managed to pull her off, and **TS McEwen** towed her to Cape Town where crowds gathered to watch the arrival of the badly damaged freighter.

Bisset was master of **TS McEwen** for nearly seven years, and after spells on dredgers at Port Elizabeth and Durban, as well as senior tugmaster in Port Elizabeth, he was promoted to pilot.

Apart from his marriage of more than 60 years - his wife was the sister of the senior cadet aboard **Baron Blythswood** - his career highlight surrounds the magnificent Blue Riband holder United States that Bisset - then senior pilot at Port Elizabeth - berthed at daybreak and sailed the following morning to set a new record for the passage to Cape Town. I saw her that evening off Camps Bay and drove to watch her enter the harbour, an unforgettable experience.

Various promotions culminated deservedly in Captain Bisset's appointment as Port Captain in Cape Town.

Do other careers carry such rich memories?

11 JUNE 2008

TOWING OPERATION IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC - AND UNI-CAL'S BUNKER TANKERS ARRIVE



LEFT: The arrival of the two Uni-Cal bunker tankers in Richards Bay.
Photograph - Ron Bevan, Sturrock Shipping, Richards Bay



RIGHT: Aboard Southern Valour, en route from Richards Bay to Durban
Photograph - Rob Young

A steering failure that disabled the 40450-deadweight vegetable oil tanker **Biz 160** nautical miles south-west of the Cape, sent Svitzer's tug **Battleaxe** hastening into a heavy swell in the wee hours of Monday morning. With

the barometer falling and the wind freshening from the west later, the small tug would have had a difficult passage.

Biz was en route from the Argentine port of Rosario, upriver on the River Plate, to China on a Louis Dreyfus charter when the master sought assistance. Steering failure in the South Atlantic in winter with a depression approaching is no picnic, and the tankermen will be glad to see Cape Town.

A daily hire charter for the tug was brokered by Offshore Maritime Services. Many companies will be vying for business generated by such a force majeure call, and, as a later report indicates that she has lost her rudder, **Biz** could be here for a while. Besides the ship repair folks and agents, chandlers will benefit, particularly if her port stay is lengthy.

When the call came on Sunday night, the larger **Smit Amandla** - a better proposition to tow the moderately-sized tanker in deteriorating weather conditions - was bound for the southern Cape coast where **Glas Dour**, the FPSO at the Sable oil field, is re-laying anchors with the help of several anchor-handling tugs. Indeed, it appears as though it is quite a major operation with several powerful tugs in attendance, including the Chinese tug **De Hong**.

In the seaway currently being experienced, the anchoring operation will not be easy, but the big tugs holding the FPSO during the operation should help matters. The longer that operation continues, the higher will be the bill as these tugs do not come cheaply these days.

On the east coast, a tugmaster probably breathed a sigh of relief on completion of a 42-day tow from China to Richards Bay, having had no piracy perils in the South China Sea, and having enjoyed fair weather for most of the voyage, apart from the initial delay to the voyage when a typhoon crossed the Chinese coast.

For those six weeks, he and his crew would have kept an eagle eye on the semi-submersible heavy-lift barge, rolling along astern and carrying two Chinese-built Unicorn-Calulo bunkering tankers, **Southern Valour** and **Southern Venture**. They were discharged in Richards Bay, a tricky process that involved cutting the welds securing the mini-tankers to the deck of the carrying barge that would then be ballasted down to submerge her cargo deck sufficiently deep in the water to enable the pair of mini-tankers to be floated off.

Once they had been activated after their long piggy-back voyage from China, fuelled and stored, they continued to Durban under their own steam. I understand that the 12-hour trip went smoothly amidst calm conditions. The widely respected former naval officer, Captain Gus Mostert, commanded the two-ship flotilla on the voyage along the KwaZulu-Natal coast, and he probably had many flashbacks to those heady naval days when umpteen Ton-class minesweepers exercised at close quarters, with much activity on the after deck as the sweeping gear went out.

He is not only respected for his naval career, but also for a latter-day career in the merchant navy. During a stint as navigation lecturer at Simon's Town School's Maritime Studies Department, he took groups of youngsters on several round-trips to Durban aboard containerships.

"*This is great!*" he enthused on his return from one of those training voyages. Inquiries to SAMSA indicated that if he wished to switch to the merchant navy, he - then a mature retired naval captain with years of naval command experience, as well as having served as the chief officer (or Executive Officer in naval parlance) on a tanker (**SAS Tafelberg**) and a cargoship (**SAS Outeniqua**) - would have to study, serve as a cadet (albeit for a reduced time) and work his way up. Unlike others who griped and walked away from the prospect, he energetically embraced his new career at sea.

With understandable mirth - and I suspect some frustration - Mostert watched the master of his first merchant ship sign his cadet book, confirming that "*the candidate can switch on the radar*" and "*the candidate knows to use the largest scale chart available*"...etc.

He flew through his studies with distinctions, he completed his sea-time aboard Unicorn tankers, and he obtained his master's ticket, sailing as chief officer in the tankers for several years, but returned home to finish the yacht he had started building years ago.

As this true salt could not resist a heaving deck beneath his feet, he readily took to commanding a mini-tanker for the short haul between the two KZN ports, and next month, he will probably bring **Southern Valour** to Cape Town where she will replace the present bunker tanker.

Is he not the second South African to command both a warship and merchant ship, the other being Admiral Hugo Biermann whose wartime exploits aboard **Gamtoos** earned him the OBE?

The all-consuming nature of sea fever is embodied in Captain Mostert's two-part career that less determined officers forfeited. His story also highlights the bureaucratic nature of maritime regulations that need urgent review, especially in the light of the local and global shortages of qualified ships' officers.

When **Southern Valour** steams into Cape Town harbour in a week or two, another true salt, Chief Engineer Rob Young - latterly Unicorn's marine director - will be in the engineroom, bringing his career full circle. Forty-three years ago, Engineer Cadet Young sailed for the west coast aboard Thesen's **Pondo Coast**.

18 JUNE 2008

LENGTHY TANKER TOW ENDS *Safmarine names more ships*



ABOVE: **Biz** under tow by **Smit Amandla** with **Battleaxe** off the tanker's starboard quarter, and two Cape Town harbour tugs about to make fast to the disabled vessel.



TOP: The vegetable oil tanker **Biz** in Cape Town after the 13-day tow from the South Atlantic.



RIGHT: **Battleaxe**, the Switzer salvage tug that went out to tow in the disabled tanker **Biz**.



TOP: **Safmarine Ngami**, alongside in Cape Town. She is on the South Africa-USA service.



TOP: The Indian bulker **Lok Rajeshwari** in Cape Town.



TOP: **MISC Darlington**, sailing from Cape Town.

Amid turbulent seas, the tug **Battleaxe** brought the immobilised tanker **Biz** off the Cape on Monday morning after a week-long operation. **Smit Amandla** took over the tow off Robben Island, **Battleaxe** had berthed at the Landing Wall, and the tanker - with either a damaged or missing rudder - was due to enter port last Tuesday.

More problems emerged, and the sorry procession only berthed on Saturday 21 June, after a lengthy operation that has prompted many in the industry to wonder why a 160-mile tow should have taken 13 days to complete.

Battleaxe is an unusual vessel with a top hamper designed for her original role as a fire tender. As suggested in this column last week, the operation during a South Atlantic winter blow would have been very difficult, given the size and power of the tug - only 38 metres with 3800 bhp - and the size of **Biz** - 176 metres, a draught of over 11 metres and 40450 deadweight. As the larger more powerful tugs on the coast at the time of the call-out had been contracted for operations at the Sable oilfield, **Battleaxe** was the only vessel available.

I was in the harbour at dawn on Monday, hoping to watch **Biz** berth, but saw several other ships move instead, including the 6-hatch Indian bulker **Lok Rajeshwari** that sailed for Damman. She had called for bunkers, a very pricey commodity and the Saudis will have to pay a bit more for her cargo of Argentine grain than they may have imagined.

Over the last few weeks, the price per ton has escalated by about \$90 for 380 CST (fuel used in many ships' main engines) and about \$70 for marine diesel, and with more sabre-rattling at Iran in recent days, there is a likelihood of rates firming even more, despite some Gulf states agreeing to boost oil production.

Another ship that sailed into the heavy swell on Monday was the Malaysian-operated **MISC Darlington**, a smart 294-metre containership, bound for the Far East. Three tugs pulled her from the quay in the freshening south-wester. She is registered in London, not surprisingly, as the British register is used by numerous foreign owners who benefit from that country's tonnage tax system. Perhaps local politicians reading this column may take note that a similar system has been discussed for years here in vain, a factor that keeps locally-owned ships well away from the South African flag.

The first MISC vessels to call here once trade sanctions had ceased were **Bunga Melati** and **Bunga Angsara**, containerships with a capacity of around 1300 teu, little more than a quarter of the capacity of some of their successors on the trade.

And, as I drove back to the lighthouse to see if **Battleaxe** and **Biz** were in sight - they weren't of course - I spotted **Safmarine Makutu** slowing down prior to anchoring in the roadstead. She and her three sisterships are evidence of the phenomenal growth of the South Africa-Far East trade with more than double the capacity of **SA Vaal** (1850-teu), Safmarine's first containership on the so-called Safari service that had several similar-sized ships belonging to Dutch and Japanese partners.

I recall the start of Safmarine's Far East service forty-one years ago. At the time, I wondered why the company had used the former Clan liner **SA Statesman** to inaugurate the service as they had at their disposal the fast, modern **SA Huguenot** and **SA van der Stel**. Certainly their competitors were using some impressive ships at the time. Worse followed when they drafted the old Victory ship **SA Venture** into the schedule. However, all seemed to work out well as Safmarine joined their Dutch and Japanese rivals in a joint service, and it wasn't long before **SA Alphen**, **SA Weltevreden** and other modern ships were frequenting Singapore, Hong Kong and Japanese ports.

At the Volkswerft Stralsund Shipyard in Germany last Saturday, Safmarine had their first double naming of the 2500-teu container vessels, **Safmarine Nakuru** and **Safmarine Nuba**, bringing to seven the number of owned vessels named by the company this year.

The pair join their sisterships (**Safmarine Ngami**, **Safmarine Nyassa** and **Safmarine Nile** that were named earlier this year and are on the South Africa-USA trade) in the fleet but will operate on the Europe-West African service. **Safmarine Nakuru** takes her name from a soda lake in the Great Rift Valley in Kenya, while **Safmarine Nuba** is named after a range of mountains in southern Sudan. The trio on the local trade will swell the number of conspicuous white hulls in the ports.

Interestingly, their crew complement is given as 17, a figure that may exclude cadets. As the shipping world ponders the source of the next generation of qualified officers, shipowners are facing mounting pressure to include berths for cadets on all new ships. The demise of Safmarine's old "Big Whites" deprived the company of many cadet berths, some of which were fashioned from the former passenger cabins. Although the newer ships carry some cadets, they do not have space for as many as their famous predecessors.

Also conspicuous with her white hull and of an even earlier vintage than the "Big White" quartet, the reefership **Snow Crystal** made a welcome return to Cape Town over the week-end to load fruit. She is one of four sisterships built between 1972 and 1973 in the same French yard as **SA Waterberg** (later **Maersk Constantia**), but their visits have dwindled recently as containerised fruit exports now exceed the traditional reefership operation.

Many ships will pass through the port in the next few days, but I fancy that **Biz** will become a familiar sight in port for a lot longer.

A VISIT TO THE SHIPWRECK MUSEUM



Some of the newspaper headlines covering maritime accidents in the Cape Agulhas area.

Again I took the road through the Overberg wheatlands last week, not to savour memories of the Breede River steamers, but to visit Napier, a most agreeable trek. I was to chat to a group of local folks about shipping and the maritime courses at Simon's Town School.

Shipping's dynamism and the wealth of maritime-flavoured anecdotes make such a task easy, and I was encouraged by the level of interest among those ruralites. Perhaps that interest is explained by the presence, about 25 kilometres down the road from Napier, of Bredasdorp, another delightful country town and home to the Shipwreck Museum, a most fascinating place with its litany of tragic tales and interesting artefacts from umpteen shipwrecks along the Agulhas coast.

Taking that winding road through the wheatlands on numerous occasions over years have been rescue and salvage teams, hastening to Cape Agulhas and its environs to attend shipping disasters.

From early colonial times when survivors struggled ashore from wrecked East Indiamen to find help, to the era of satellite communications, salvage operations have become extremely sophisticated.

When the steamer **Camphill** stranded in thick mist west of the Cape Agulhas lighthouse in 1913, farmers inspanned teams of oxen to pull wagons down that road, perhaps trundling past a few buildings still standing in Napier or Bredasdorp en route to the coast. And those wagon teams will have hauled the salvaged flotsam back along that road, as evidenced by houses having beams from the hatch covers.

As late as February 1939, a horseman raised the alarm when, through the fog, he saw the Yugoslav collier **Avala**, en route from Cardiff to Burma, hit the rocks closer to Quoin Point. Within days, the frightful seas had smashed her to pieces.

Not far away, **Eso Wheeling**, an American T2 tanker heading for the Arabian Gulf to load oil products in November 1948, also came to grief, capsizing as water flooded her empty cargo tanks, pierced by that rocky coast.

Although hundreds of tons of oil had been spilled after the stranding of the laden tanker **Wafra** in February 1971, South Africa's first Torrey Canyon-type disaster was averted when the powerful German tug **Oceanic** pulled her from the reef off the Agulhas coast where the tanker had been ashore for 10 days.

The daily rates for the tugs involved in the **Wafra** incident make interesting reading. The Cape Town harbour tug **FT Bates** was on hire at ZAR1800 per day, and the larger **Oceanic** got ZAR8000 per day plus a handsome salvage payout, a little different from current rates where large salvage tugs might earn upwards of R200000 per day.

Three years later, one of the more inexplicable wrecks occurred when the well-found eight-hatch bulker **Oriental Pioneer** appeared to have been deliberately grounded after allegedly springing a leak. Vainly, tugs tried to refloat her, but when cracks appeared in the hull, they abandoned their efforts.

To take off the ship's bunker oil, Green R Line's mini-tanker **Pondoland** - recently bought from Greek owners - was sent to Cape Agulhas. Since she had not completed a refit, her pumps were inoperable, and portable pumps had to transfer the fuel oil. Her amiable master, Captain Mike Robinson - later a senior Unicorn master - told me that he brought the tiny tanker alongside on the seaward side of **Oriental Pioneer** where the water was deeper.

The bunker oil was cold and semi-congealed, slowing pumping operations. With only 180 tons aboard, Robinson had to abort the operation amid heavy weather, and sailed for Cape Town. Another attempt ten days later was also cut short as huge swells began to break over **Pondoland's** bow as she lay alongside the bulker, eventually driving the tanker to shelter in Struisbaai.

When the weather improved, Robinson tried another tack - he anchored his vessel bow-to-bow with the bulker, enabling them to take on the rest of the bulker's fuel.

The long list of incidents off that coast includes two obsolete Maersk tankers - **Peter Maersk** and **Anglo Maersk** that broke free from the tug towing them to the scrapyard. One came close to the beach before a salvage vessel put up a line to pull her away from the shore.

Another drama off that coast in 1979 - the heyday of the supertanker - had the potential to cause the biggest oil spill ever. The 351-metre Iraqi tanker **Al Rafidain** was on the long passage via the Cape when engine failure put her at the mercy of the inshore currents.

The laden tanker's 22-metre draught, and her rapid drift through shallowing water towards the coast brought the salvage tug **Wolraad Woltemade** dashing from Cape Town. This big prize would impress an arbitration court - an immobilised tanker off a lee shore, and carrying around 310 000 tons of crude oil that could cause a mammoth mess if she grounded! And it was 20 years before double-skin construction became mandatory for tankers.

With the vessel only 1500 metres from the notorious Five-Mile Reef off Cape Agulhas, the tug took her in tow and headed for deeper water.

And there is the story of an East Indiaman wrecked on the Agulhas coast. Rescuers found the body of a strange hairy man on the beach. "*Evolution is right!*" they must have exclaimed, although it was in the pre-Darwinian age.

Someone examined the strange fellow, and pronounced it to be an orang-utan, probably among the Europe-bound cargo!

So visit the Shipwreck Museum, evidence of what a few oomph-filled people can achieve.