

PORT POURRI



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.

CAPE TIMES

FEBRUARY 2009

- 04 FEB 2009** - **SOME GLIMMERS OF HOPE IN A DARKENED SHIPPING FIRMAMENT**
- 11 FEB 2009** - **CLOSED GATES CUT ACCESS TO SHIPS**
- 18 FEB 2009** - **OF UNION-CASTLE SHIPS AND GREEN SHIPS**

4 FEBRUARY 2009

SOME GLIMMERS OF HOPE IN A DARKENED SHIPPING FIRMAMENT



TOP: The tanker **Nordic Pio** arriving in Cape Town from Algeciras en route to the east.

Now is not the time to be a shipowner. Daily hire rates have declined to points much lower than the 1999-2000 crunch, and some 300-metre Capesize bulkers that once were fetching over \$200000 a day, are being fixed now at around \$6500 per day. Strangely, owners of the smaller Panamax ships can sometimes get more for their ships.

Within a fortnight, the ore carrier **Princess Carrier** will load 150000 tons of Sishen iron ore at Saldanha Bay for Qingdao, China, at a freight rate of \$10 per ton, while five months ago, the going rate was over \$40 per ton.

More spectacular has been the collapse of rates on Brazilian ore shipments to China. Six months ago, amidst the heady days of insatiable Chinese thirst for minerals, Capesize owners were banking \$103 a ton; **Lowlands Sunrise** will get a mere \$13.95 per ton when she heads out east next month.

However, some increases in the dry bulk market have provided a glimmer of hope for owners in an otherwise darkened firmament. Scrapping of older tonnage has helped to reduce the number of ships available, and by late this week, some Capesize rates had clawed upwards to \$25000 a day.

Tankers seem to have escaped the worst of the current downturn in shipping markets, probably because fuel is always needed, especially during the bitter northern hemisphere winter, and the current Arctic conditions over both North America and Europe may help to stave off a decline. Indeed, some analysts believe that the tanker market may have positive surprises in store.

Boosting the vlcc sector – those large tankers of around 300 metres and capable of holding about 2 million barrels of oil – has been the chartering of a number of vessels as floating storage tanks by speculators. The theory is that they buy oil at the current low price (*\$44 a barrel*) with the goal of selling it on the futures market several months hence, and, with future prices of around \$65 per barrel, they will make a tidy profit even after paying for the charter of the ship and carrying the cost of the money tied up in the oil for that period.

While this practice is risky and requires significant financial clout to be successful, it takes ships out of service for lengthy periods, thereby reducing the number available for conventional charter, and increasing the charter rates of vessels remaining in the market. I understand that some 25 large tankers have been chartered already for this purpose and a dozen more could be used.

The containership market has also been hit. As this column scooped last week, the first of the Maersk giants has rounded the Cape and large MSC ships as well as those of the French company CMA CGM are also Cape-bound. Who would have thought that pure economics would have brought the largest of containerships around the Cape rather than transiting Suez?

Some observers wonder whether this is not a prelude to a regular service that would swallow up the lines' services between Europe and South Africa, Europe and the Far East and South Africa and the Far East, with the deepwater port Ngqura (aka Coega) as the South African wayport once it has come on line for container traffic.

In vain, I peered seawards over the last few days, hoping to glimpse one or other of these mega-ships as they round the Cape. However, from a vantage point on the Eastern Mole, I spotted some other interesting vessels, including the 300-metre containership **MSC Flaminia** with a deadweight of 85800. She is about half the capacity of the new superships (the MSC Daniella-class) that Geneva-based MSC have commissioned recently, and **MSC Daniella** will probably be among those diverted to the Cape to escape the high toll at Suez, and the piracy surcharge slapped on shipping passing through the Gulf of Aden.

Also in port over the week-end was the smart offshore support vessel **Maersk Assessor**, inward from Aberdeen and bound for Australia. I would guess that her low freeboard had encouraged Maersk to divert her to Cape Town to avoid the terrors of piracy.

Nordic Pio, a 37000-deadweight products tanker that arrived just before lunch on Sunday was another calling for bunkers and taking the longer route from Algeciras to the east.

Overshadowing the US frigate **Robert G Bradley** at Number 2 Jetty was **Saga Ruby** that called here some years ago as **Vistafjord**, and later in Cunard colours as Caronia. In the latter guise, she berthed at 502, a move that was not a success. On that occasion, I watched her arrival through a camera lens while perched in the open doorway of a helicopter, a most pleasant experience as the sun had just broken through early morning cloud, and the images came out crystal clear.

Contrary to the doomsayers – and I was one – the visit by the cruiseliner **Aurora** last week, in fair weather, went well, despite her being berthed at Eastern Mole. Again King & Sons did a remarkable job in arranging the logistics of disembarking dozens of passengers and embarking others, as well as conveying folks between the Waterfront and the ship.

The crew of the salvage tug **Smit Amandla** stretched their sea-legs again last week-end when SAMSA ordered her to stand by **BM Adventure**, an ageing Chinese-owned freighter, immobilised off the Cape late last week while on passage to Ghana. The Svitzer tug **Battleaxe** had put to sea on a daily hire to take the ship in tow, and she is reported to have arrived with the tow at Saldanha Bay. Allegedly, no berth was available in Cape Town which is a little strange.

Local repairers should do well out of her, but the trek by repair teams from Cape Town to Saldanha may cut the profits a tad.

11 FEBRUARY 2009

CLOSED GATES CUT ACCESS TO SHIPS



TOP: **Arundel Castle**, built with four funnels and modified during a refit shortly before World War 2 from which she emerged with a clipper bow, more powerful oil-fired engines and two funnels. She was withdrawn in December 1958 after 37 years' service.



TOP: **Albatros** alongside the Waterfront, Cape Town.



TOP: After discharging grain, the Kingstown-registered bulker **Federal Saguenay** prepares to sail from Cape Town.



TOP: **Mona Lisa** (ex **Kungsholm**, **Victoria**, **Oceanic II**) bunkering in Cape Town.



LEFT: Ocean Africa Container Lines' **Border** caused a flutter last week when she suffered propeller problems while trying to weigh anchor in gale-force conditions in Cape Town's roadstead. The Svitzer tug **Battleaxe** and Smit's **Smit Amanda** went out and the ship was towed in to discharge her container cargo. At time of writing, she was due to be towed to Durban for drydocking as the Cape Town drydock is fully booked.

With its barrel buried in concrete and used as a mooring bollard at the Elbow, an upturned cannon has been a silent witness to shipping in the Victoria Basin for nearly a century.

It has seen Thesen's coasters, heading for the west coast; whalers, after wintering in Cape Town, outward for Antarctic waters, and ready to blow the brains out of any hapless whale that passed their bows; **Arundel Castle**, her railings crowded with passengers looking forward to two weeks of bliss aboard, while three of her four funnels sent masses of soot skywards (*green people hadn't arrived on the planet at that time*); with bunting flying, **Carnarvon Castle**, the first mailship with Burmeister Wain engines, came in at dawn on 2 August 1926; and sadly, several ships sailed past that cannon during World War 2, only to be blown to bits, their crews screaming in final anguish to the leaden skies before succumbing to the raging ocean.

British trampships from famous old companies - Ropner, Hogarths, Runcimans, Hains and others - carrying grain loaded at Collier Jetty, also passed slowly by, outward for Europe, the Hooghly River or the Middle East. Gone are those houseflags, as are the local conveyor systems since the country now imports grain, brought by mass-produced tonnage.

One Saturday afternoon, with my bicycle leaning against that cannon, I watched the fully laden **South African Statesman** arrive from the UK. She was one of five ex-Clan Line steamers that came into the Safmarine fleet in 1961. Two went to Union-Castle management the following year, while the others remained with Safmarine, one wrecked amidst frightful seas at Green Point.

As **South African Statesman's** propeller thrashed astern and the tug swung away from the freighter's starboard shoulder to heave astern on the steel wire and then to nudge the ship alongside South Arm 4, I pedalled around to the berth. Once a shoreside crane had put the old green teak gangway in place, a cadet, much older than the standard 7 spectator, rushed ashore into the arms of an excited lass, chaperoned by her father, standing a discreet distance away. The well-mannered fellow sought out the older man, shook his hand and thanked him profusely for bringing the apple of both their eyes to the docks.

As the shadows lengthened that afternoon, I watched a Blue Star freighter berth at No 7 Quay and **South African Trader** sailed from East Pier into the setting sun. It had been an interesting day for the youngster who, in the gathering darkness, pedalled home to Mowbray.

Many similar days were spent near that old cannon. From that vantage point, I saw **Clan Urqhart** veer violently to port as she sailed into a south-east gale, hit the tug **FT Bates** and buckle her portside plates on the East Pier bullnose. In the twilight a few months later, I witnessed a similar incident involving the inward **Straat Bali**, while a Greek-flagged freighter failed to go astern on entering the Victoria Basin, and, with **TS McEwen** heaving astern and both anchors clattering from the hawsepipes, she stopped metres from Collier Jetty.

If no ships were moving, there was always interest further down South Arm where the coasters landed their cargoes of sugar, detergents and paper, or a quick jaunt to watch cargowork in the Duncan Dock.

Perhaps a dozen years later, I wandered past the Unicorn coaster **Verge**, berthed at Elbow, as the pilot was boarding. He recognised me from a time when our paths had crossed at Safmarine.

"Want a ride?" he asked as I paused to chat at the foot of the coaster's gangway. I needed no second invitation, as I knew the master, Gerry Brand, a gruff old salt with a heart of gold.

With a few seaman's phrases and a bone-crushing handshake, Brand welcomed me aboard, before ordering sandwiches and coffee for the pilot and me, despite the late hour.

It was an anomalous and expensive procedure during the early days of containerisation. On arrival in Cape Town from the coast, a Unicorn ship would discharge containers at berth 502. Then she would shift to Number 2 Jetty to load bulk fish oil, before moving to Elbow to discharge newsprint rolls which at the time were not containerised. Thereafter, she returned to 502 to load containers for the coast.

Thus I joined **Verge** for her shift to 502, disembarked with the pilot and, lectured by the driver on what would happen to his rear end if an unofficial passenger were discovered in the pilot car, I returned to my own banger parked at the Elbow near that cannon, the usual bicycle resting place during my *kortbroek* years.

The fishing fleets still pass that cannon. Research vessels and warships go to the Waterfront, the occasional superyacht heads for West Quay, and cruiseliners squeeze through to berth the Waterfront.

No youngster can get near that cannon now to watch the ships. It lies behind a **No Public Access** notice, a boom, a sliding security gate and another gate at the small craft bunkering point. Similar measures are in place elsewhere, including the breakwater.

As shipping operates behind closed gates and even tyre-shredders with rottweilers as back-up - I kid you not - young people remain oblivious of its exciting and lucrative career opportunities. Yet about 16000 vacancies exist globally for qualified sea-going officers, and this country has rising unemployment figures!

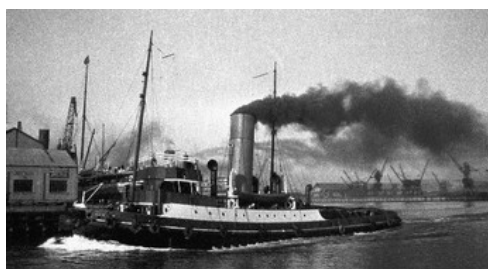
For them to become enthralled by this vibrant industry, youngsters must see the ships close-up, but who will rein in the security hawks?

18 FEBRUARY 2009

OF UNION-CASTLE SHIPS AND GREEN SHIPS



TOP: Gulf Africa Line's **Aalborg** in Cape Town, having arrived from the US Gulf. On deck she carried a large number of truck cabs.



TOP: The powerful harbour tug **TS McEwen** (aka **Smokey Sue**) was well-known in Cape Town from 1925 until her withdrawal from service in 1971. Her palls of smoke were as legendary as the many salvage operations in which she was involved.

Six similar Union-Castle mailships with two tall, raked funnels, entered service early last century. For that era, they were remarkable ships with a cargo capacity of around 6000 tons and they bowled along at 16.5 knots.

The fourth of the class to be delivered was **Kenilworth Castle** that enjoyed only a few months' service before she was converted for troopship duties in World War 1.

Outward from Cape Town for the UK in June 1915, the British cruiser **HMS Kent** and the destroyer **HMS Rival** were among the warship escort for the small convoy that included **Kenilworth Castle** aboard which was a contingent of South African nurses who had volunteered for service in France.

As **Kent** turned to leave the convoy off Plymouth, she came on a collision course with the mailship that turned to avoid the warship, but collided with the destroyer's stern. **Rival** was cut in two as depth charges on her afterdeck exploded, also blowing a hole in **Kenilworth Castle's** bow and the mailship began to settle. Fortunately, in her number one hold was a cargo of wool that absorbed some of the ingress of water, effectively shoring up the bulkheads. Otherwise, water pressure may have caused the bulkheads to collapse, and the liner would have sunk.

Folks aboard thought she had been torpedoed, and the abandon ship procedure swung into action perhaps too hastily as two lifeboats were swamped, precipitating their occupants into the cold water of the English Channel. Fifteen passengers, including some of the nurses drowned.

Other nurses were among those picked up by a passing ship and landed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where they boarded a UK-bound vessel, arriving too late for service in France, and settling instead for work in British hospitals that were treating wounded soldiers.

The former German steamer **Field-Marshal**, captured at Dar es Salaam in 1915, brought the nurses back to South Africa in April 1919.

Regular reader Philippa Ismay sent me scanned photographs and a clipping from Daily Graphic showing some of the group that included her mother, Maisie Jacobs who hailed originally from Bedfordview, Johannesburg.

Wearing their white uniforms and starched veils, the nurses looked extremely smart, although I am sure they normally wore "*civvies*" aboard as the soot fall-out from those two funnels would have spoiled their uniforms.

Folks of my vintage will remember - with some nostalgia - the palls of smoke emitted by the tug **TS McEwen** (aka **Smokey Sue**), but the largest smoke screen I can recall came from a Colocotronis tanker sailing from Cape Town during the Suez closure. It will be hyperbolic to say that the Green Point lighthouse keeper may have been tempted to turn on the foghorn but the bay lay covered in smoke as the old tanker made her way down the coast.

An encounter with an oil slick while aboard **SA Winterberg** in 1992 was the worst I have witnessed. Steaming at 19 knots at some distance off the coast of Sierra Leone, we entered the slick shortly after noon, and left it astern at around 1800, making it well over 110 nautical miles in length, and it stretched abeam of the containership as far as the eye could see. Bits of cloth, old buckets, brooms and other jetsam sprinkled the slick, indicating that a tanker, probably en route from Europe to load in Nigeria, had been cleaning tanks, and had simply pumped the oily sludge overboard.

Fearing that his ship might be held responsible, the master reported the slick, probably to Freetown.

In recent years, shipping has cleaned up its act considerably, lamentably without much credit. "*Scrubbers*" now extract much of the carbon from funnel emissions while strict regulations relating to dumping of waste at sea are in force. Even waste water is treated to internationally-acceptable levels before it is released, or once in port, "*black*" water (sewage) and "*grey*" water (other waste water) is discharged into road tankers for proper disposal.

Transgressions carry severe penalties that range from heavy fines to prison time, although in some instances, prosecutors have exceeded all intelligent argument simply to appease public disquiet after an accident.

Indeed, hapless seafarers are regarded as fair game, as illustrated by the malicious treatment of the master and chief officer of the supertanker **Hebei Spirit**. Anchored in a designated position in Korean waters, she was holed in the portside by a drifting crane barge that, during a squall, had broken free from her towing tugs. With crude oil pouring into the sea, the two officers sprang into action to pump as much ballast as they dared to list the ship to starboard to restrict the volume of escaping oil.

Unimpressed by these gallant efforts, and ignorant of the lengthy procedures necessary to get an anchored supertanker underway to avoid the collision, Korean prosecutors succeeded in jailing the men, a sentence that the appeal court subsequently set aside. Going for the jugular, prosecutors successfully appealed that ruling, and the officers were re-arrested. Although they are now confined to a Korean hotel until all legal steps have been concluded, they should not have been prosecuted at all.

Was the intrepid Captain Chesley Sullenberger III prosecuted when fuel from his ditched aircraft sheened across the Hudson River? No, but he isn't a seafarer.

Could the anchored tanker have avoided the drifting barge any better than the engines of Sullenberger's plane could have avoided the flock of geese?

Without unreasonable green zealots, those days of smoky ships seem more genteel.