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**“DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS.....  
TO THE HAVEN WHERE THEY WOULD BE”**

**ONGOING DIARY COLUMN (No. 10)**

**To Boldre, England from Melbourne, Australia by Freighter**

*Andrew Neaum*



*Bird spotting from the bow of the Rickmers Seoul*

**Saturday 27 July 2013 9.24am**

We are now latitude 40.27 north and longitude 59.15 west. There is still pretty well the whole of Newfoundland to the north of us and so we have in no way shaken free of the New World and cannot yet claim to be in the middle of the Atlantic. The wind is SSW, the sea almost rough giving rise to a fairly strong lateral roll. We travel at 13 knots, which is 13 nautical miles an hour. How much is a nautical mile? Not all that much more than an ordinary mile so we travel no faster than I used to bicycle up Orr Street on my way to Shepparton hospital. Standing on the Pilot Deck this morning the wind seemed gentle, coming more from behind than ahead and nullified by our speed. The temperature was 25 degrees.

Yesterday evening all four passengers took a walk to the bow. It is a more complicated walk than on the container ship, with all sorts of strange corners and crannies in which stowaways could hide with a fair chance of getting away with it for a day or two. On the the port side you pass underneath the towers of two of the four great cranes on the ship. The three in front of the bridge obscure the view and so unlike on most ships, the bridge is to one side (starboard) with only a narrow bit of deck on that side for pilotage purposes. The whole accommodation tower is closer to the stern on this ship, for there are no holds behind the accommodation superstructure.

At the bow we all stood on the raised platform, an exhilarating place to be. You look right over the bow and down easily to the great bulb breaking the water for our passage. We saw a single sea bird but no flying fish.

Already the food begins to pall. The meat declared its identity in a language other than English last night. No wonder, for it turned out to be unsalted, roast ox tongue, gelatinous and bland, not at all to my taste or any of the others for that matter. Then there were “fish fillets” for lunch which turned out to be small pieces of battered fish, the batter soft from being cooked too long before serving and the fish in relation to batter all but non-existent. This is a working crew’s diet not a passenger’s and we do not grumble, it is part of the deal and we love it. We have a Barbecue and party tonight. Just a thought, is potato poisoning tuberculosis?

There was life boat drill yesterday afternoon. We all gathered with our gear at the muster point at the stern of deck B and were shown a demonstration of hosing down a fire. Two crewmen then put on immersion suits and jumped into the swimming pool where they floated around for a few minutes. We were then shown our seats in the “free-fall” lifeboat. This sort of lifeboat is on a ramp or chute, and when released simply rushes down to the water impelled by gravity. It was very claustrophobic inside and hot. It would hit the water at literal break your neck speed. I trust we will not have to use it!

Patty has a series of eight DVD’s about New York on a USB stick, so we watched most of one of them in our cabin as we couldn’t get the machine in the little lounge to work. The series promises to be excellent. The film we watched on our own in the evening was “*Unstoppable*”, all about a runaway train in America and based on fact, another nail-biter. One of the most poignant moments in all my reading this voyage: Hari Kumar’s tears on learning during an interrogation in prison of Diana Manners’ death. The second of the Raj Quartet.

### **Sunday 28 July 2013 7.12am**

A fairly grey morning. We are told that the Atlantic has worse weather generally than the Pacific and it seems so, though we have had nothing nasty yet and seem unlikely to. At the moment, according to Raoul, we are following a depression and so are likely to have mostly gloomy weather from now until Europe. We have at last shaken free of Newfoundland to the north and so now look north towards Greenland. I notice from the bridge’s chart how large the sea shelf south of Newfoundland is and am reminded of learning at school of its richness as a fishing ground. We continue at around 13 knots (bicycle speed). Our exact latitude is 42.45 north and our longitude 52.07 west. The wind is WSW, a strong breeze and coming from behind which means it is very calm and still on deck. The air temperature after breakfast was 23 degrees, the water 24. The swell is down from yesterday.

We continue to have long conversations after meals, though at breakfast today this was without Roland who went off on some task or other with the Chief Mate. We questioned Patty a little about her background and what her father did. She is truly an intelligent and perceptive person, though with an air of naivety as well which is probably largely illusory. Her father ran a business to do with office supplies, but did not enjoy it. Her mother came into the business eventually and in Patty’s opinion would have been far better taking it over and leaving her husband to bring up the children, for she was more favourably disposed to business than he. He was musical and artistic and frustrated by commerce. She seems to have had an untroubled and happy childhood and she loved the freedom granted to her by College and then during her years at Cambridge.

Yesterday evening we had the barbecue and party, an event that the members of the crew who met us on the gangplank when we first boarded the ship had so enthused about. It turned out to be most enjoyable and indeed lavish. I went up to the spacious Pilot's Deck at about twenty to six and there was a half barrel fired up and cooking portions of chicken and sausages, including a special homemade Roumanian sausage made by one of the Roumanians to a recipe of the Captain, very good, if a little salty. I had been a bit worried about booze, as I have no cash, only a card which is useless on board, but all the booze was on the house, beer, wine, even whisky. I settled for beer, stuck to that and so today have no hangover I am pleased to say.

We stood around eating what was on offer, drinking and talking, and then looking down at a lower deck spotted a whole roasted young pig, which was brought up too. Diana joined us, as did Patty and presumably the whole ship's crew except whoever was on duty on the Bridge. We then repaired to the Blue Room where three tables were spread for us and any officers who wished to eat at a table. There was a great buffet spread which included as well as a variety of desserts and all the barbecued meat, chillied prawns which were very good indeed. Then the band began to play, two guitars and a drummer, they exceeded all expectations. The inspiration and leader of the trio is the bosun, a slightly grizzled, always smiling Filipino who we learned later has five children with two of them married. He can play really well, giving us instrumental items on the guitar as well as vocal ones and even in these provided imaginative and skilled instrumental riffs and improvisations. The drummer, also a Filipino and the second mate was very competent and the second guitarist had a lovely, light tenor voice. My only criticism would be that the voices tended to be drowned by the instruments. The bosun's chief love is country and western, but he gave us mostly sixties and seventies pop and was particularly good with his guitar in blues numbers.

We danced a little and had a thoroughly good time. The captain is a strange fellow, rarely smiling but always with a twinkle to his eye and in his demeanour, attitude, generosity and indeed lavishness appears to be genuinely avuncular and caring of his men in a pleasing and almost touching way.



*The Seoul Mate Rock Band*

One of the most notable things about this ship is the spring in the step of the crew and their invariable friendly greetings. We left the party at about ten and then

watched a film we had downloaded from Patty: "*Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy...*" Like all Le Carre, it was complicated but compelling. In the afternoon we watched the rest of the first of eight documentaries on New York with Patty.

### **Monday 29 July 2013 7.20am**

Another grey morning and cool, both in the cabin and outside, a possible harbinger of the sort of weather I have now to get used to in England. Only 19 degrees in the cabin, 15 outside after breakfast. Latitude 44.45, longitude 45.56. So we approach an insignificant but interesting congruency, latitude 44 and longitude 44. Our speed is a mere 10 knots. The wind appears to be turning north west.

An uneventful Sunday and we add a little to Mattins to mark the difference in the day. There was steak in the evening and at lunch there was a bottle of wine on our table, I thought it to be Roland's and so didn't bother with any, but the Captain from his table indicated that it was from him and expressed surprise at it being ignored. He started expatiating upon its fine quality, a Californian Pinot Noir, for some reason it was chilled. When I had a glass I did find it pleasing, however at dinner when it was at room temperature as it should be, it was not quite as good being a little too sweet for a dry wine. As well as steak for dinner we had ice cream, a Sunday treat on ships it seems.

In the afternoon we watched the second of the documentaries on New York with Patty. It is still very much to do with the City's history and so was revelatory and enlightening to someone like me who is almost totally ignorant of all U.S. history, let alone New York's. I had no idea, for example, that the Civil War required a draft and that significant and dangerous riots against this in New York came from the huge and very poor Irish population, who were down there at the bottom of the pile with the blacks, too poor to pay the \$300 necessary to avoid the draft.

Afterwards we went for a walk to the ship's bow. The sun having come out and the wind being behind the ship it was still and lovely. In the evening we watched and enjoyed Barry Lyndon, a Kubrick film based on the novel by Thackeray. It is a sort of tragic parallel to Fielding's comedic Tom Jones and with beautiful music, mostly Handel and Bach, but also one of my very favourite Schubert slow movements, the Andante from the piano trio in E Flat, though anachronistic for the novel was set in a period before that piece was written.

At breakfast there was no Patty but we had a good laugh with Roland. He talked a little about the Swiss invention of Muesli, and told us about Bircher Muesli, the original version, in which apple is a necessary component. The word Muesli is the diminutive of a word possibly associated with our word mess.

### **Tuesday 30 July 2013 9.15am**

Another grey day, with patches of sun here and there on the sea, but more squalls than sun in evidence. The sea is a little less troubled than yesterday. We are now about half way across the Atlantic and on the chart, well to the south east of us, are the fabled Azores. We continue to do around 11 knots and are 45.26 degrees north and 39.37 degrees west. The wind is in the north between 17 and 21 knots which is 19 to 24 miles per hour. The swell is only 1.5 metres. For breakfast I ordered two boiled eggs, and very good they were too. I must not have them everyday I suppose, but will be sorely tempted. We watched Anna Karenina last night a good adaption

done by Tom Stoppard, but to reduce a complex and huge novel so rich in ideas to what in effect is a short morality tale has got to be very far from satisfactory. There were some lovely moments in it though. We also watched a good chunk of the New York documentary, this time all about the rise of a social conscience in a madly money oriented and driven city. We again walked up to the bow, but in a strong and bitter wind.

### **Wednesday 31 July 2013 9.25am**

This time next week we should be in port at Antwerp and possibly even en route to Calais. We continue to plough on at the pace of a bicycle, 11.9 knots. Our latitude is 46.15 degrees north and our longitude 32.51 degrees west. The wind is always an estimate here because the anemometer is broken. The estimated force this morning is 17 knots and from the north. This means that it is the wind and not the current that causes us to drift from our true course, requiring periodic correction. On the radar screen the projected course is shown as well as the actual course which nearly always deviates from that projected just because of drift.

An uneventful and peaceful day yesterday that included yet another trip to the bow, another chunk of the documentary on New York and the viewing of a remake with Meryl Streep and Denzel Washington of *The Manchurian Candidate*, utterly engrossing.

### **Thursday 1 August 2013 9.45am**

The chart on the Bridge that plots our course now shows England to the far east. We notice with interest that Cornwall stretches out of the latitudinal fifties to dip its toe into the late latitudinal forties. This brings home to us that we are approaching journey's end.

The sea is grey and less than friendly looking. The swell is between two to two and a half metres, not at all horrendous but we do roll a bit more than yesterday. Very little sun breaks through a grey and squally sky and the wind is cold and uninviting, our latitude is 25.47 degrees west, our longitude 46.39 degrees north. Our speed is as usual and we are well on schedule to dock at Antwerp on the morning of the sixth of August.

Yesterday's main event was a visit to the engine room. It is the third I have seen in the last few years and the oldest, but still a clean, impressive and hugely complex hub to the tiny city that is a ship. It provides power for propulsion and electricity, sewage disposal, water distillation, heating, cooling, cooking, lighting and much more. Especially interesting was a trip to "the Citadel". This is a space to which everyone repairs as a last resort if pirates ever manage



*Our tenement the top floor, below the Bridge*

to get on board. It is not a room at all, just a passageway below deck with rudimentary provisions, a couple of old mattresses and half a dozen discarded chairs. Painted on to its wall is the satellite phone and radio numbers of navy rescue ships. Should a retreat be made there, the outside handles to the engine room and of the citadel are removed and the doors are welded shut. Presumably they could only be opened by a grenade.

If chased by pirates the great objective is to prevent them boarding. The pirates' modus operandi appears to be working from a mother ship and venturing out in small, well-powered boats made of plastic so as not to be detectable by radar. The Chief Engineer told us that there is actually a training school for pirates in Somalia. Merchant ships like ours tend to be unarmed, though many in dangerous waters take on board security men hired by the shipping company who are. In fraught waters this ship will travel at about 18 knots, leaving a few more in reserve for any actual chase. If chased the ship is manoeuvred from side to side to make boarding even more difficult. We saw great coils of razor wire, stored underneath the bow deck, which are put right round the ship and around the accommodation area in pirate-dangerous waters. There are also dummy soldiers placed prominently to help deter any would be boarders. If a targeted ship appears too difficult or well prepared pirates tend to withdraw to wait for a softer option.

On such tours Patty asks lots of questions and takes lots of photos, confessing afterwards what is fairly obvious at the time, that she barely understands a word of what our heavily accented crew say. I learned at breakfast this morning of another trip that Roland has made. He has travelled by road from northern Alaska to Ushuaia in Argentina. A journey that took him sixteen months. He is an adventurer indeed.

We watched an Australian film called "*Lantana*" last night. We also continued the New York saga with Patty. It was all about the exploitation of employees, dreadful working conditions and the battle to improve them that was sparked in part by a terrible disaster known as the Triangle Waist Factory Fire. In this fire young girls locked into a factory had to jump to their death from eight, nine and ten floors up, a hundred and forty six died. A little forerunner to the Twin Towers horror.



*The "free fall" life boat*

**Home**