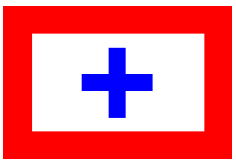
The Last ‘Samboat’ under the Red Ensign

‘SS. Sandsend’ (ex ‘Samindoro’) 1944 – 1967

By Geoff Walker



Having just completed a period of study leave and examinations in the UK, which had taken a considerable toll on my finances, I found myself needing to replenish the coffers before returning to my familiar sailing grounds in Asia.

Unfortunately, it was during the seamen’s strike, when jobs were scarce. Nevertheless, the London Shipping Pool offered me a three-month voyage as Third Mate on a British Flag vessel**, ‘Sandsend’**. Little did I know what I was getting myself into.

The plan was simple: a single voyage from Rotterdam to Argentina to load grain for a return passage to the UK. The ship belonged to ‘Headlams’, a company based in Whitby. The arrangement suited my plans perfectly, or so I thought.

I was given a ferry ticket to Rotterdam, where I was to find and join the **Sandsend**. No agent met me on arrival, so I took a taxi and set off in search of the ship. The Pool officials in London had not provided me with much background to the ship so I didn’t really know what I was looking for.

After an hour touring the docks, with my Dutch guilders almost exhausted, I was no closer to finding her. I was about to ask the driver to take me back to the ferry terminal when the stern of a rust bucket appeared from behind a dockside warehouse. I could just make out a faded “END”, with “BY” beneath it. I had found the elusive **Sandsend**, registered in Whitby.

As the taxi drew alongside the gangway, my heart sank. I knew at once that I had been sold a ‘pup’. The ship was an old Second World War ‘Samboat’, dirty and badly run-down compared with the type of vessels I had sailed on before. There was little I could do, so I paid the driver, collected my gear and strode up the gangway.

It was about nine in the evening, and despite searching, I could not find anyone aboard. Eventually, I came across an empty pilot’s cabin with an unlocked door and decided to settle there for the night. With no bedding and nothing to keep out the cold, my first night aboard is best forgotten!

I woke with the sun the next morning and set out to find the Master or Chief Mate. Starting at the top, I knocked on the Master's cabin door. A big man, half asleep and still in his pyjamas, answered. He did not seem to be expecting me but was untroubled when I explained that I had joined the previous evening and found no one aboard. I later discovered that he had been her Master since she was built in 1944 as the **Samindoro.**

From the outset, the ship seemed a disaster. The accommodation was typical of the Second World War: bare steel bulkheads and deckheads, all badly in need of a good soogying and a coat of paint.

My cabin was a large, box-like room, empty apart from a small bunk, a desk, a chair and a locker. The locker's hinges needed replacing and its doors needed to be re-hung, as they would not close properly. I stood in the middle of the room, my heart somewhere down by my feet, feeling like a 'shag on a rock'. I was thoroughly depressed, and hungry to boot.

There was no washbasin or toilet in the cabin. The deck officers shared communal facilities a short way down the passage. The toilets stood in a row behind half-height swinging doors, rather like those of an 'Old West' saloon. To find a vacant cubicle, one looked beneath the door for the absence of feet.

A few washbasins had cracked mirrors above them, and the two showers offered little, if any, water pressure. Even the pale blue paint scheme seemed to bring on a headache.

I hesitated until the last moment before signing the ship's articles, chiefly because they were for a two-year term. With the seamen's strike still in progress in the UK, however, and the captain sincerely assuring me that we would make only a single voyage to the River Plate, then return to the UK, I reluctantly agreed.

The Master was quick to complete the signing-on formalities, probably in case I changed my mind. He assured me that the **Sandsend** was a solid ship and that her owners were a fine, traditional shipping company. He also told me that he had been her Master for the past 22 years, which gave me some idea of his age.

In time, I discovered that he was not only a big man but also a man of great integrity, with a generous heart and a fine seaman's skill.

My first stop was the dining saloon. After much questioning from the Chief Steward about who I was, I eventually got something to eat. The eggs floated in oil and the bacon was all fat, so I settled for toast and marmalade. Another promising start, I thought, and perhaps a sign of things to come.

The Mate arrived for breakfast smelling of the previous night's alcohol and still partly under the influence. He was from somewhere in Scotland and in his late fifties. The Second Mate was a pleasant Londoner of 72 who told me he had sailed with King Line.

Our Chief Engineer was well into his seventies and wore glasses with lenses like beer bottles. The Second and Third Engineers were Geordies in their mid-forties and seemed decent enough.

I was immediately wary of the Fourth Engineer, another Geordie, fresh out of the Royal Navy. He struck me as highly opinionated: what he did not know, apparently, was not worth knowing. With his longish sideburns and coiffed hair, he looked rather spiv-like to my eye.



The ‘Sandsend’ at anchor, pictured loaded with Army Lories on deck. Perhaps, taken when requisitioned by the MOT during the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. Reportedly, she did play an active role in the emergency. (Unknown photographer from Public Domain)

The entire deck and engine crew came from West Africa, though all were residents of Cardiff. I had previously sailed only with Asian crews, so this was a new experience for me.

During the voyage, I found the crew’s frequent arguments, often over minor matters, unsettling. To me, these exchanges seemed on the verge of a ‘punch-up’, although none took place. Even so, I remained on my guard, particularly during night watches, and never felt entirely at ease in their company.

The captain told me that our first leg would take us to Safi, in Morocco, to load phosphate for Cape Town, with a bunkering stop at Las Palmas in the Canary Islands along the way.

I realised at once that, despite the assurances I had received, the voyage was unlikely to last only three months. It was beginning to feel as though I had been ‘shanghaied’.

We left Rotterdam and headed down the English Channel in rough weather. My first sea watch was an education. The original wheelhouse, beside the Master’s cabin, no longer served its intended purpose. Instead, it was his laundry, with clotheslines strung everywhere, and a storeroom for the assortment of junk he had collected over the years,

including reels of fencing wire and bundles of bamboo tomato stakes. The magnetic compass, radar and steering pedestal had all been removed.

In its place, the ship's carpenter had built a timber 'chicken coop' on the Monkey Island. The Second Mate told me that the Master had supervised its construction. It was a rough affair: whenever the ship rolled, the structure swayed about six inches from side to side. A window would often drop out with a tremendous clatter, and the deckhead leaked like a sieve whenever it rained.

According to the Second Mate, the windows had come from derelict Second World War Italian lorries. The Master had acquired them years earlier, apparently while transiting or lying at anchor in the Suez Canal.

The radar, manual steering gear, ship's telegraph and magnetic compass had been professionally installed in the makeshift wheelhouse. There was no gyrocompass or automatic steering, so the ship had to be steered by hand at all times.

There was a telephone connection to the engine room, but neither a telephone nor an intercom to the Master's cabin. To summon him, we shouted down one of the small cowl ventilators on either side of the makeshift wheelhouse.

The 'chicken coop' was a nightmare: cramped, stiflingly hot, and barely large enough for a small folding chart table. With the duty mate and helmsman both on watch, there was no room to swing a cat. The steamship's funnel stood immediately behind us and gave off considerable heat.

If our illustrious engineers failed to warn the bridge before blowing tubes, the duty mate had no chance to turn the ship out of the wind. Smoke and soot would then penetrate everywhere, leaving us choking. I was told that there had once been cabs on both wings of the Monkey Island deck, but these had been partly removed by the time I joined.

Loading a full cargo of phosphate at Safi was uneventful, if dusty, and took only a few days. We then headed south towards Las Palmas for bunkers. By the time we reached those latitudes, the weather had become calm and pleasant.

I remained disappointed in the vessel, but we had settled into a routine. On the passage to the Canary Islands, the best average speed the ship managed was 9.5 knots.

The night after following our departure from Las Palmas, I was woken by the quartermaster about 6.30am asking that I quickly go to the bridge. I arrived out of breather to find a large Russian ship crossing our bows from port to starboard. Our unsupervised helmsman had just started to turn our ship to Port, entirely the wrong thing to do. I still had enough sea room to counter this and alter course to starboard to go full circle and pass the stern of the other vessel. It was a close encounter because had the Russian ship obeyed the Anti-Collision Regulations by correctly decided to

make a late alteration of course to starboard in order to give way to us, a very serious situation may have arisen.

I asked the helmsman as to the whereabouts of the Mate and was informed he had left the bridge about 15 minutes after having taken over the watch from the 2nd Mate and had never returned. I went looking for him, fearing he may have met with some form of accident. Upon entering his cabin, I found him heavily intoxicated, so I let him be and returned to the bridge to keep the remaining hours of his watch.

I discussed the problem privately with the 2nd Mate and we reached the decision that we should report the matter to the Master since it involved ship's safety. As it turned out we did not need to because about 9am the Master went to visit the Mate about something and found him in his cabin in exactly the same state as when I had last seen him. The Mate remained in his intoxicated condition, on and off, more or less until we arrived in Cape town.

The Master requested I accompany him to search the Mate's cabin for hidden booze, but it was fruitless as there was no additional alcohol to be found. A couple of months later we were informed by one of the quarter masters; whilst in Las Palmas the Mate had purchased a significant amount of duty free 'Dry Sack Sherry', which he had given the crew for safe keeping and which could be supplied to him as he requested. He did attempt to shower, shave and sort himself out for our arrival at Cape town, but unfortunately for him he tripped over a 'Ring Bolt' on the main deck, in the vicinity of number 2 hatch, causing him to fall and badly injure his face. He was badly concussed and out of action again for more than a week.

After discharging the phosphate in South Africa, we thoroughly washed down the cargo holds in preparation for our next destination: the River Plate. There, we were to load bulk grain in Argentine ports for Europe. For my part, I hoped 'Europe' would mean the UK.

First, however, we had to cross the South Atlantic in the late southern winter without cargo, a daunting prospect. Our route would take us well south, past the remote, mountainous island of Tristan da Cunha.

The old **Sandsend** laboured throughout the passage. Her blunt bow lumbered into rough seas and strong westerly winds, which dogged us most of the way, and the best the old lady could manage was an average of about seven to eight knots. Despite carrying maximum seawater ballast, she rode like a cork and made constant leeway, requiring frequent course adjustments.

We followed a great-circle route, passing about 60 miles from the remote volcanic island of Tristan da Cunha. Persistent overcast skies made taking sights difficult. The crossing lasted some 22 days.

We made landfall off ‘Isla de la Lobos’, in the estuary of the Río de la Plata, in dense fog. It was an arrival I would never forget. Our progress was slow, although the Master knew these waters well. The continual fog signals from the steam whistle on the funnel, so close to our ‘chicken coop’, were almost deafening.

Even so, we were nearly run down by a Panamanian tanker steaming at full speed. She crossed our bows from port to starboard at close quarters, and only the Master’s timely decision to stop our engines saved us from disaster. For the rest of my seagoing career, this encounter, impressed upon me the importance of observing the anti-collision regulations, especially in restricted visibility; rules made for the guidance of wise men and the disregard of idiots!

Towards the end of our Atlantic crossing, before we reached the River Plate, the Chief Mate had begun his drinking habits again, despite a stern dressing-down from the captain. Under the Master’s guidance, the Second Mate and I loaded the ship to her grain capacity, first at Buenos Aires and then upstream at Rosario.

The passage to and from Rosario was a real eye-opener, particularly when it came to the unreliability of some of the river pilots. The Master had warned me about this, and I learned a great deal from him during these times.

Once we were loaded and ready to leave Argentina, my heart sank again. We were to head towards the Straits of Gibraltar for orders. There was still a chance that we would discharge in the UK and I could sign off, but if that was the intention, why had we not been told to make for Land’s End for orders?

We had experienced problems with the magnetic compass during the South Atlantic crossing. The persistent cloud cover had given us few opportunities to take azimuths. Before we left the Argentine coast, the Master swung the ship and prepared a completely new deviation card. He carried out the task so quickly and expertly that it was clear he had done it many times before.

In contrast to the crossing from South Africa, we enjoyed excellent sailing conditions as we made our slow progress north from the River Plate towards the Canary Islands. We would replenish our bunkers at Las Palmas once again. The Chief Mate, meanwhile, had reportedly again been warned that any further acts of dipsomania could lead to his replacement.

We were only four or five days’ steaming from the Straits of Gibraltar when the Master received a cable directing us to Civitavecchia and then Livorno, in Italy, to discharge at both ports. My worst fears had come true, and I was bitterly disappointed.

Despite my disappointment, our stay in Italy felt like a holiday, with beautiful sunny days and charming people. Unfortunately, an accident while I was working on deck put me in hospital for a time. During my absence, the good ship **Sandsend** sailed without me.

Looking back, the **Sandsend** had certainly seen better days. When I left her, she had only a couple of months remaining before ending her days at a Taiwanese shipbreaker's yard. Yet I remember her Master as a superb seaman and a man of great character and integrity. Nor did I have any complaint about the owners, whom I came to regard as very decent employers.



(Malcolm Cranfield collection/Late Allan Shiffman)

The old 'Sandsend' just as I remember her; smoky and rundown.

End

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