Probus talk 10 April 2025

Life on the Ocean Wave

David Brown

David, one of our members, regaled us with anecdotes of his experiences on board a variety of ships in the Merchant Navy. His talk was well illustrated with pictures of the ships in which he had served. He started off as a Junior Engineer but completed his tenure as Chief Engineer having sailed all around the world.

He joined his first ship in Falmouth, a 9,000 ton tanker- tiny in comparison to today' vessels. There was a crew of 85 of whom 10 were stewards and some cutlery was silver. They sailed to the Persian Gulf (as it was in the early 1960s), thence to Ceylon, where he rode an elephant, to Bombay and Aden having had suspected appendicitis en-route. His second ship took him to Melbourne and the third to the icy Baltic.

Strangely his family were allowed to join him on a number of voyages and on one occasion they were involved in fishing for sharks. A member of the crew caught one that was then beheaded to keep as a souvenir. The remains of the body were thrown back into the sea …. and eaten by other sharks within seconds.

On another voyage the ship had 20k tonnes of cargo that acted like blotting paper, and about 15k tonnes of timber, the bulk of which was lying on the deck. A storm hit the ship and only about 8k of the load remained. He showed us a picture of the deck which showed items about to fall into the sea.

On another occasion he took his children off from school for 5 months (mainly summer holidays). The family joined him in Naples whilst the ship was in dry dock for repairs, but new owners then requested that it be moved to Amsterdam so the Naples holiday was cut short but they did enjoy Amsterdam too.

This particular ship had a 6 week on / off leave schedule whilst others were 3 months on / off.

Once in Miami he had lost his visas and so was effectively arrested by the US Police at the docks i.e. handcuffed and escorted by the police moving him from one place to another.

Sea sickness is something that affects the most sea worthy. Sadly, that happened on more than one occasion with both the experienced crew and his family.

After a few years David was finally promoted to Chief Engineer. To get to his ship in the Falklands (just post war) as soon as possible he and some 60 crew members were flown out, all sitting squashed into the plane, quite literally knee to knee. The plane was refuelled twice during a 13 ½ hour flight. Not his most favourite event. The ship included a number of Royal Navy staff, so the food and service standards were considerably better. They even stopped at sea so that some of the crew could go for a swim!! Some had rifles in case a shark appeared, but as the shark was a protected species they would shoot you!!

When a ball went overboard, the Captain turned the ship around to go and pick it up. David had never experienced anything like this before. There were even boxing competitions.

On that trip a crew member was found sitting at a table with a bullet sitting upwards and a hammer in his hand, and about to hit down on it, presumably not really knowing what would happen next. Fortunately, David did know and quickly advised him that he would probably lose his wrist in the explosion and as well it would adversely affect the table of

crew members sitting across from him. He picked up the bullet opened it and took out all explosive powder then ignited that which gave of a loud bang which surprised the whole room. Nobody touched bullets after that ever again.

David finished his time at sea on the Tall Ship MIR, an impressive yacht used as a training ship. He subsequently taught at the Glasgow College of Nautical Studies for over ten years.