

My Memories as a Deck Cadet with SAFmarine

Part 2

“SA Shipper” from 6 Oct 1966 to 14 March 1967

“MV Allamanda” from 16 March to 29 September 1967

“SA Drakenstein” from 1 Oct 1967 to 26 November 1967

Chapter 1 – On Holiday

I signed off the “South African Venture” 15 May 1966 with about three months leave due to me. Made contact with Vernon & Di Pretorius once back in Pietermaritzburg (PMB). We had a few parties and dined out a lot. I recall sitting with Vernon and Di in the lounge at Victoria Hotel to listen to the 1966 World Cup Final on the radio. It was only time England won a world cup by beating Germany in the final.

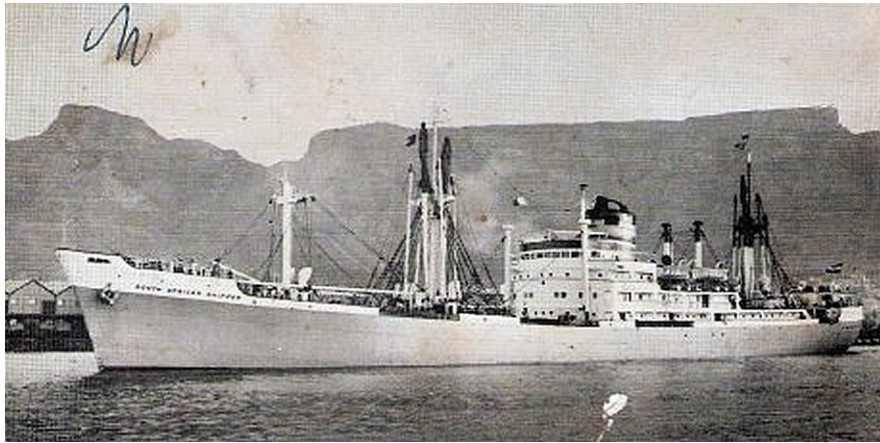
I played soccer for the “Black Horse Hotel” football side in the Sunday Pub League during the time I was on leave in PMB. I had played for them before going to the General Botha and found myself to be not very fit after a year at sea, having mostly played darts, table tennis and liar dice followed by a few beers – some times too many beers. In 1964 played for the De Beers FC from Summerset West in the Western Cape Premier League. We won the knock out cup played at the Hartleyvale Stadium against Tramway FC. My best soccer achievement. It was down hill thereafter!

When my vacation was up I was supposed to join the “SA van der Stel” This vessel was one of the new generation ships the company had just commissioned. Would have linked up with Otto Peetoom (class of 64) had I joined the ship. This did not happen.

A going-away party was organised for me at the Crown Hotel in PMB a few days before I was due to sign on the “Van der Stell”. Not sure what really happened that evening as I was having a good time. I do recall an altercation between Ainsley and Barry Lock. It was sorted out and the party carried on and we went home at closing time The next morning I got up at about 11 and made myself a cheese and tomato sandwich. Tried to take a bite, but my jaw would not cooperate. I could not chew, yet I felt no pain. So I went to the hospital for an x-ray and found I had a fractured jaw – I must have been knocked in the jaw at some stage the night before. I had to spend 6 weeks in hospital with my jaw wired up and living off soup and egg flips, so I missed joining Otto on the ship going to Japan. It was not too bad in the hospital as I got to know plenty of Grey’s Hospital’s finest young nurses. I also managed to get myself shifted to a bed on the veranda. I kept a set of civilian clothes at the bottom of my locker. And after Matron

had left our ward following her nightly rounds, I would slip out over the wall, and walk a few blocks up to the Crown Hotel for a beer or two.

Chapter 2 – The “SS SA Shipper”



The “Shipper” was one of three ships Safmarine acquired from the Clan Line shipping company which were built in Scotland in the 1950s. It was a steamship like the “Venture”. Later the ships I sailed on were diesel powered motor vessels.

Once I was released from hospital I was rescheduled to join the “Shipper” where I linked up with Richard Winterbach (Class of 64): it was back on the UK route for me – good bye Japan. Richard and I got on very well and formed a good team and worked well together. I recall a very nasty job we had been given which required us to clean out the bilges. We had to take alternate shifts in the bilge because it was cramped with strong gasses which made it difficult to work in for any length of time.

The difference to the previous UK trips was that we also went to Luderitz and Walvis Bay.

Luderitz:

There is no actual harbour in Luderitz bay. While we were at anchor barges from the fish factory, loaded with bags of fish meal, were towed out to the ship by tugboats or similar vessels. I don’t recall this operation too well. The cargo was then transferred from the barges into the ship’s holds using the ship’s derricks. We also lowered a lifeboat for testing and under the third officer’s command we took a cruise around the bay. Luderitz is in a true desert – not a single sign of any green – just yellow sand and grey rock outcrops. Unfortunately the photos I took during my time on the Shipper, which were on colour slides, have subsequently disappeared.

Walvis Bay:

I recall going ashore and meeting local fisherman and having a drink with them. These are really the toughest of seaman I ever encountered during my time at sea. Not much to do in Walvis in you off time. We spent our leisure time at the Mission to Seaman Centre having a beer and playing of

snooker. I think the main cargo loaded here in Walvis Bay was fish meal and tinned fish from the local cannery

Chapter 3 – London & the European Ports

Once in the UK we docked at Liverpool, Birkenhead and Glasgow. The experiences I had at these destinations were much the same as told in Part 1 while I was sailing on the Venture. The Shipper also docked in London and some European ports during my time on the vessel.

London:

The ship docked at the East India Docks. These docks no longer exist and have been redeveloped. The docks were near the English First League football club West Ham's home ground at Upton Park. The name of the football league was changed to Premier League much later. The crowd stood on the terraces to watch football at most grounds in those days. So I went and stood on the terraces to watch West Ham play Stock City one Saturday afternoon. There were four of England's World Cup squad in action that day. Gordon Banks was in goal for Stoke city and West Ham had Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst and Martin Peters. I don't remember the score but think it was a draw. I really enjoyed the game.

A Grand Dinner was arranged by the Captain to entertain some of the top brass from the Safmarine London office. I was assigned to gangway duty to escort the guests to the dining room. I had to put on my best number one navy blue outfit for meeting the guests. I chatted up a pretty young lady who arrived with her parents. I got her phone number but we sailed the next day. I tried to contact her on my second visit to London, she was not interested.

Richard and I found a lovely pub near the docks which we frequented a few times. I think it was in East Ham. It was similar in atmosphere to what I experienced in Dublin. The Pub featured a local band and many of the customers would be invited to sing with the band. They had some pretty good singers that frequented this pub. Richard also introduced me to his favourite drink – Advocaat lemonade with a dash of ginger brandy. Years later I introduced this drink to Lynda without the brandy and it was one of the few alcoholic beverages she enjoyed. Obviously in limited amounts.

We caught the subway (green line I think) to the centre of London and spent the day touring the City of London seeing Buckingham Palace, Trafalgar Square, watched an old lady feeding ducks in St James's Park and last but not least Piccadilly Circus. I think we walked past Hyde Park but no soap box operators were out at that time.

La Havre France:

Only docked there for one day and I did not have anytime off duty so I saw nothing of France.

Antwerp Belgium:

Antwerp-Bruges is the world's largest port for handling general cargo. I recall being on the bridge when navigating up the Scheldt River to our berth in the harbour and I chatted to the Pilot during the long trip up the river. The Pilot was Flemish and a discussion on the similarities of Flemish to Afrikaans ensued. From what he said it appeared that Flemish is much closer to Afrikaans than Dutch.

We spent a few days in Antwerp and I was able to get ashore to sample the night life and check out the female talent. I don't recall making the acquaintance of any young ladies but certainly enjoyed the atmosphere and the Belgian beers. The standard of the pubs and clubs was higher than some of the places we frequented in other ports.

While in port I was involved in assisting the Boatswain doing maintenance on the ships heavy duty lifting gear. This derrick was a special feature on this class of vessel. My memory of this was that the work was tricky when lowering the derrick onto the deck in some pretty cold, snowy windy winter weather. Though I experienced worse weather on the midnight to four watch, on the bridge, in gale force sleety weather sailing up the Irish sea to Galasgow.

Hamburg Germany:

From Antwerp we sailed into the North Sea and then up the river Elbe to Hamburg. During this trip we celebrated Christmas with a superb lunch prepared by the really top-class catering staff. Also during this trip our radar was on the blink and we had to navigate through some very dense fog. The skipper, a Hungarian, spent the whole time on the bridge as without radar we needed to be extremely cautious in this very busy shipping route. The entrance to the Elbe was still mined as it had not yet been fully cleared since the war. A buoyed channel had been swept clear of mines and was the only safe way to enter and leave the port. We had to cruise slowly through this area as we were still in thick fog without radar.

We could not go to Hamburg without a visit to the notorious Reeperbahn in St Pauli. I did not have enough money to purchase a beer at any of the clubs – prices were so inflated. I think I only had a single Deutsche Mark and it was not enough – don't recall the exchange rate at that time. The thing I recall most from our walk through this area was that the clubs hired uniformed doorman, wearing naval caps, to entice customers to enter their particular club. The St Pauli Indra Club was where the Beatles honed their skills before later becoming famous when Brian Epstein discovered them

Chapter 4 – The Caribbean

While in Glasgow in September 1966, I received orders to transfer to the MV Allamanda which was docked in Rotterdam. The Allamanda was a 30 000 ton Tanker that Safmarine had acquired from the Maersk shipping Company. It was registered in Hamilton Bermuda and thus we could go to ports that would not allow a South Africa ship to enter. I recall flying from Glasgow and observing the English patch work country side as we flew south. My next recollection is going aboard the ship and meeting up with two of my best friends from the 1964 Class, Peter Stacey and Mike Nelson. The three of us spent our weekend liberties from the college with Clive Gibson who came from Lakeside in Cape Town. His mother used to prepare us the best bacon and egg breakfasts ever. His parents were quite old and I recall Peter Stacey saying “past the effing salt” – forgetting he was not at the college dinner table but the Gibson’s breakfast table.

We then set sail from Rotterdam for the Caribbean.

Willemstad Curaçao:

Curaçao is a Dutch Caribbean island, known for its beaches tucked into coves and its expansive coral reefs rich with marine life. We were destined to spend six weeks here doing engine repairs so had plenty of time to explore. In those days Shell had one of the largest refineries in the world here in Willemstad. It was shut down in 1985.

I can remember visiting Fort Beekenburg and had some photos taken while looking out over the bay from the Fort. It was built in 1703 by the Dutch to ward off the British like Captain Morgan and other pirates. I recall the big bronze cannons facing out into the bay.

We also attended a rock session in an open courtyard. I recall talking to some young Dutch guys who lived in Willemstad. Everyone we met spoke English. We spent most of our work time while in port chipping the deck with compressed air chipping machines. We were always in shorts with our shirts off getting a lovely tan. At night and on weekends we visited clubs having a good time.

The Cadets job while loading or unloading crude oil was to work with the Pump man (I think that was his Rank). While loading we had to full the tanks evenly to insure the stability of the Vessel. Understanding the layout of the valves in the pump room was important part of our job - a mistake could cause you to pump the oil overboard! Fortunately, this never happened. I remember we had the ability to pump sea water into some tanks when light ship or while we were cleaning tanks. You still had to maintain the stability of the vessel so that it did not list or become too low

the bow or stern. My memories are not too good on this anymore but we controlled the loading and unloading by switching the flow between the tanks making sure the ship's stability was remained level. Also the mooring lines connected to shore were adjusted as the waterline changed.

Puerto (Something) Venezuela:

For a few weeks we did a run from Willemstad to Puerto (Don't Recall Name) and back. We were at sea only about 8 hours between ports. We loaded Crude oil in this Venezuelan port for processing at the refinery in Willemstad. It was just a small place with only the port buildings. We were able to get a taxi to a small village nearby to have a drink in the pub and fraternised with some local people (Girls).

Maracaibo Venezuela:

This is quite a big town at the mouth of the large lake of the same name. We loaded crude oil here and I think this was taken to Birkenhead. I know we did a trip to Birkenhead. I recall going ashore with one of the junior engineers and being caught in a really heavy tropical storm. I was on the bridge with the captain leaving the port and had to sail through a narrow entrance to the bay. While sailing out of the bay through this entrance to the ocean I felt the ship list as we touched the bottom, the ship listing slightly to port as it slid over the sand and we entered the ocean without any damage.

Cartagena Columbia:

We loaded the cargo from here for Brooklyn, United States. Everywhere we went in this city you saw armed police – obviously a dangerous place. I recall visiting a night club and chatting up some Spanish-speaking ladies. The police were present at the entrance to the night club to ensure no trouble from any rowdy seamen. I just know my expensive Zippo cigarette lighter was stolen at some point that night.

Port of Spain Trinidad:

We loaded the cargo from a jetty a long way from the shore that extended out into the bay. The pipeline was small so the loading was quite slow and took a long time. I recall talking to the crew of a small boat that took people from the ship to the harbour wharf. We discussed cricket and it was amazing that they knew most of the top South African players though we were not allowed to play against the West Indies.

I never went ashore in this port but the third mate did – his name was also JD Baxter – same name as my fellow Cadet from GB 1964. Unfortunately he was mugged so this probably would have made me reconsider whether I would go ashore even if I had the time. I never felt in any danger at any time in all the ports I visited.

New York USA:

I was on the bridge as we sailed under the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge towards Manhattan. I recall being at the helm steering towards the Statue of Liberty. Cadets often did this but helm duty was mainly carried out by a leading seaman when entering or leaving harbour. Deep sea steering was managed by auto pilot. The first time in USA we docked in Brooklyn for engine repairs. Don't recall were we docked the second time but Marine Superintendent Don Tooms (Captain on the Venture) came aboard. They were having some problems with the Cape Coloured crew. It had then been decided to send them back to South Africa and we then sailed on my last trip to UK with a Spanish Crew.

69th pier Brooklyn USA:

Again we spent a few weeks for engine repairs while in the USA. US customs and immigration were not friendly. Everyone had to report to them no matter what time you docked, even if you had been asleep after coming off watch an hour earlier. Every where else I don't ever recall anything but friendly officials in a port. In fact the only time I saw officials was at the gates to the harbour and we were always treated well, especially the UK port police.

I recall Mike and I drinking small classes of cold draft beer for 20 cents US in local pub in Brooklyn. Remember in those days a US dollar was worth 72 South African cents. The Americans we met everywhere were very friendly - not like the bad image they had as Tourists

Mike Nelson and I took the underground from Brooklyn to Manhattan and visited Times Square. We went shopping on 42nd Street. I bought two turtle neck shirts at good prices. We then spent lunch in central Park watching some youngsters playing baseball. Lunch was washed down with a six pack of beers bought from the super market.

Also went to Greenwich Village which was the centre for folk music in those days. Had my first ever Pizza at an Italian restaurant while in the village. I don't think they were available in SA in those days.

US Virgin Islands:

Not sure why we docked here – I don't think they have either oil or a refinery! But I do recall going ashore with the Purser and had lunch with a family he knew that were involved with shipping. I recall discussing how we used our knives and fork while eating compared to the American way. The Island was a beautiful place and had great weather.

While at sea between various Ports:

Our job while crossing the Atlantic Ocean or going north to New York was to check the temperature of oil in the tanks. We had to insure the

temperature remained warm, so the oil would not thicken, on trips to the north in colder climates. We had to lower the thermometer through the ullage cap of each of the ship's tanks. I think the ship had three tanks in each of the eight holds. We recorded the temperature in a log book. One cadet always stood up on the raised walkway to watch out for waves coming over the deck. The freeboard (distance from waterline to ship's deck) is around two metres on a tanker when fully loaded. Remember oil is lighter than water. The raised walkways allowed you to walk safely from the aft accommodation to midship accommodation or to the forecastle

During a return journey, when light ship and the tanks were empty of oil, our job was to clean the tanks. This was achieved using heavy duty hoses to spray the tank bulkheads under pressure with heated salt water. The hose is fitted with a two-piece special type of nozzle that rotates slowly through 360 degrees and is able to reach all surfaces of the tank. The hose is lowered into the tank through the manhole entrance to the tank. While the tank is being cleaned the water and sludge is pumped into the slop tank. The Slop tank is then pumped ashore at the destination port.

On the way to New York we passed close to the epicentre of a hurricane - probably about 30 nautical miles from its centre. I think it was after leaving US Virgin Islands on our way to New York. We must have been sailing with the wind behind us as the waves came past the aft accommodation and swept across the after deck as high as the raised walk way. My cabin was facing aft from the mid ships accommodation. I had good photos of this but they disappeared with all the slides I had from the trips I did with Shipper, Drakenstein and Allamanda.

I also recall sailing in a circle at some point due to a problem with the rudder. We had to signal we were not under command by showing two black balls one above the other at least 6 feet apart. This happened in day time otherwise the black balls would be replaced by red lights. Don't recall what was done to rectify the situation but we sailed on to our destination later that morning. I just recalled us laughing and saying, "Here we go again!".

As you have gathered this tanker was not that reliable. We had to be in port for major repairs twice in the six months I sailed on it.

Chapter 5 – SA Drakenstein

The Drakenstein was a refrigerated vessel built in Holland. One of three the company had commissioned.

I transferred from the Alamanda in the UK. I don't recall where we were but I think it was Birkenhead. On the Drakenstein I joined up again with Richard Winterbach who I had sailed with on Shipper. I did the trip from UK to South Africa. I did not sign off in Durban but did the trip up to Beira and back to Cape Town where I signed off. Just did extra time on the coast to ensure I had enough sea time to qualify to tackle my Second Mates ticket in the New Year.

I enjoyed the trip back to South Africa but we were light ship so the ship was prone to pitch or roll a lot in heavy seas. We hit some strong winds off the Skeleton Coast while I was working in the forepeak storage space. I was assisting the seaman splicing rope and the pitching was starting to make me queasy. The sailors were watching me and smiling thinking I was going to be sick. Tea break saved me and I went back amidships for the break. When I returned I was fine.

I recall loading frozen beef (I think) probably in Durban for UK. We had to monitor the temperatures and record the results in the ships log,

I signed off in Cape Town. Spent a couple of days there – stayed at the Mission to Seaman. The accommodation was basic and inexpensive. The Sparks (Radio Officer) had also signed off and lived in Cape Town. Went with him, his sister and other friends to the night spots. I recall Daryll's was what the girls wanted visit.

On my final night there was a party and I took PTI Smiths younger daughter Linda as my date. The two girls were now living in Mowbray with their Mother having been divorced recently. One of the guys at the party was going to Port Elizabeth and leaving at midnight, so I accompanied him to PE. From there I then hitch hiked as far as East London. I got to East London late in the afternoon. Tried for lift without luck so I decided to stay over and booked in to a Hotel in Nahoon. Early next morning I got a lift back to Maritzburg.

Once back in good old PMB I met Lynda fell in love and never got back to Nautical College to study for my Second Mates ticket. The rest is history – we were engaged in February. Got my old Job back in the audit office at Natal Provincial Administration starting work on 1st of February 1968. Then Lynda and I were married on the 31 August 1968 and settled in at our new house at 23 President Swart Road, Bizley Valley with Shane 4 years old and young Mark at just 3 years old.



1968 - 31st August Marries Gordon