

CHAPTER FOUR -- MY FIRST SHIP

Prior to joining the Ramore Head I had received a letter from the company with a list of suggested items that I should take with me when I joined my first ship. For some reason that I couldn't understand, there was this fixation about dungarees, work shirts and heavy sweaters. I wasn't sure why I would need these, because I already had what I needed to do my job -- my uniform.

In a state of excitement, and a certain amount of hidden apprehension, which was disguised as bravado, I was driven down to the Pollock Dock by Uncle David. There, before my eyes, was the pride of the Headline fleet, the Ramore Head. I looked up at this big black-hulled ship -- the largest ship I had ever seen close up. It was a relatively new ship, having only been built the year before.

It was also the flagship, which meant that the senior Master in the company was its Captain. I looked up at its black funnel with the emblem of Ulster -- a contoured red hand with three drops of blood dripping from it, superimposed on a white shield. It looked as though it had been newly painted.

The story behind the emblem is one that has been, and will be, open for debate for years to come. It is said that two brothers, the O'Neils, were coming over by boat from the mainland, hundreds of years ago. They had agreed that the first one to touch this new land would become king. As they got close to the shore, one brother being smarter than the other, cut his hand off and with blood dripping from it, threw it ashore -- thus becoming the first one to touch the new land, and securing his title as king.

While it is an interesting story, it doesn't end there. It has been a topic of debate for many years for the people of Ulster -- the question being, was it his left hand or his right hand? If he were right-handed he would have used that hand to cut off his left hand -- and vice versa. Sometimes it is shown as a right hand and other times it is a left hand. Therefore, the argument will go on forever.

Uncle David left me at the bottom of the gangway, because after all, how would it look if I were seen as having my uncle holding my hand arriving on board for the first time. I was now a seaman -- albeit a slightly apprehensive one. As I climbed up the gangway I had the nagging thought of what would happen if I didn't like life at sea? The thought was quickly dismissed from my mind.

I had two pieces of baggage. An old Royal Navy green canvas suitcase, which my father had given me -- and what else -- a seabag! It required two trips up the gangway to get my bags on board. When

I got to the top of the gangway I noticed that my brand new uniform was getting covered in grain dust. The ship was discharging grain from the holds through long tubes, which were sucking the grain out of the holds, and the dust was everywhere.

Someone about my own age appeared beside me and said, "You must be the new cadet," which was fairly observant of him, seeing I was wearing a cadet's uniform. I couldn't figure out who this person was, because he was in scruffy working clothes, covered in grain dust -- but he was wearing a uniform cap. Surely he couldn't be a cadet, not dressed like that. I was wrong -- he was. He introduced himself as Frank Best, and then helped me with my bags up to the cadets' accommodation.

In the cadet's mess I was to meet two other scruffy people -- Frank Sadler, the senior cadet, and Joe Paskins.

My three colleagues were all from the south of Ireland. Frank Sadler was from County Monaghan -- Frank Best from Dun Laoghaire, and Joe Paskins was from Courtown, County Wexford.

Frank Sadler took me to meet the Chief Officer, Norman Stark. My first impressions of this man never changed. He was a small, fat man of about 28 years of age. He had the bumptious attitude sometimes associated with many small men. I was later to find out that he was arrogant, crude and spiteful -- a man of very few redeeming features. His first words to me were, "Get out of that uniform and start scrubbing out the wheelhouse." So much for, "Welcome aboard."

This was my first job as a cadet, on my first day. It was to happen many times over the next two years. Sometime during the day we, "signed on," the ship's articles. The various tasks we were given by Mr. Stark that day were often interrupted by the requirement to have the cadets assist the ship's carpenter, commonly known as "Chippy," to secure and batten down hatches, as each hold gave up its last grains of wheat to the giant suckers.

That day, we seemed to have done so many different things in such a short time that my head was spinning. Late that afternoon we battened down the last hatch, and stood by to sail. Frank Best and I were assigned to the after end of the ship for sailing, under the direction of the Second Officer, Mr. Cyril Pringle. He was everything Norman Stark wasn't. A big, bluff man with a great sense of humour and a twinkle in his eye. Since those days our paths have crossed at times. He is now a good friend of mine -- forty-five years after I first met him.

Sam McBroom, the "Lamptrimmer," was responsible to Mr. Pringle for taking charge of the sailors and the two cadets who handled the ropes and wires that we hauled in, as they were slipped off the bollards on the quay. Sam was a gruff elderly man with a weather-beaten face, who looked as though he had spent a hundred years at sea. He had spent his whole life there, and knew everything there was to know about being a seaman. His fingers were like marlin

spikes. He taught me a great deal over the next two years -- always giving the impression that he was telling you things grudgingly, and that you were wasting his time, as you would never make a seaman anyway -- but secretly delighted that he could teach you something.

I met many an old sailor like him over the years. It was just my luck to have the dogwatch that day. That was the period between four and eight in the afternoon and evening. Unfortunately, Mr. Stark had that watch on a regular basis -- so it was not a good start for my first day at sea. It was to get worse.

After we cleared Belfast Lough, I was told to go aft and, "stream the log." I knew what was required, because I had read about it at the nautical school -- but I didn't know how to accomplish it.

When I went aft, the log clock and the governor were attached to the top of the bulwark, as they should have been. It all looked very simple. All I had to do was to attach a coil of rope (called the log line) that was lying at my feet, to the governor, and then throw the remainder of the coil over the side. The other end of the coil had a rotor vane attached to it, which would cause the line to rotate, which would then turn the mechanism in the clock, showing the distance that we were travelling through the water. All very straightforward.

What I didn't know was that the coil of rope was supposed to be flaked up and down on the after deck, so that it could be "streamed," to prevent kinks and knots forming. That is where I ran into a little trouble. I just hooked one end on to the governor and then threw the coil over the side. I couldn't believe what was happening in front of my eyes. I had never seen such a mess. With the line spinning under strain, it didn't take long before the coil of line was a mass of tangles, knots, kinks, loops and knots forming in the loops and kinks -- all spinning round under the control of the rotor.

It was terrible -- and of course, as the ship was moving through the water at fifteen knots, the whole line was under a heavy strain, which only caused the knots to tighten. I really didn't know what to do next. Luckily, Sam McBroom appeared. He couldn't stop laughing at a situation which I saw as a lot less humorous than he did.

He told me he had never seen a log line in such a mess. However, as the great seaman he was, he came to the rescue. It took us some time to haul the line in and re-stream it correctly -- and by the time we finished, everything was working just the way it was supposed to. I never made that mistake again.

My next problem was with Mr. Stark. Streaming the log should have taken about ten minutes, so it was very hard to explain why I had taken nearly an hour! He was not impressed.

The cadets' accommodation consisted of two sleeping cabins, a shower and toilet, and a small mess or eating area. We were

responsible for keeping these areas clean. I shared a cabin with Joe Paskins, and on that first night I couldn't wait to get to bed, to try to block out the images of my first day at sea.

"Seven bells," was the next thing I heard. Frank Best was calling me from a deep sleep at three-thirty in the morning. I had to be on the bridge by four to start my watch. Frank put a steaming mug of tea in my hands, while I was still trying to wake up and become accustomed to my new surroundings. I found out pretty quickly that putting the mug in your hands was done to make sure you would stay awake. If you fell asleep again, you would soon wake up when you spilt your tea -- hence the reason for making sure your relief got his mug in his hands. It worked.

The watches were arranged so that you were on watch for four hours -- then an eight hour period off watch (but you worked during the daylight hours) -- followed by another four hours on watch. This meant that as well as being on the four to eight o'clock in the morning, which I was just about to start, I would also be on watch from four to eight during the evening as well. It was the same for the other watchkeepers who were on the eight to twelve, and twelve to four watches. The fourth cadet would be on day work, which meant that he did not keep watches, but worked between seven in the morning and five in the afternoon. He also acted as our messman, and was responsible for keeping our accommodation clean and getting our meals from the galley. We would rotate through the watches between the outward and homeward passages.

A cadet would spend his four hours on watch during the non-daylight hours on the open wing of the bridge, regardless of the weather. His main job was as a lookout -- reporting any lights seen to the mate on watch. He also acted as bridge messenger. Depending on the weather, it could be a most miserable four hours -- or a boring four hours -- or both. On a dirty night, when you were wet and cold, all you wanted was for the clock to race ahead to get you somewhere near the end of your watch. You spent your watch wishing the hours, and eventually the minutes away. Depending on the mate on watch, you might be lucky enough to be able to leave the bridge, to go below for a short while and enjoy the heat of the galley, if he wanted you to make him a mug of tea.

At "seven bells," or half an hour before your watch was to end, you would go down to call both the mate's relief and your own. The normal practice was that you were required to remain on watch until both your relief, and the mate's relief arrived on the bridge. If they were late in arriving -- you were late in leaving. Hence the hot mug of tea placed in their hands, while they were still in their bunks. This tended to wake people up in a hurry.

The last hour of the morning watch was always allocated to scrubbing the wheelhouse deck. Mr. Stark used to take a great delight

in walking through a patch that was covered in soapy water and trailing it over an area you had just scrubbed. He seemed to get a perverse delight in doing it. He was that type of man.

It was during those early days at sea, on clear nights, that I first started to take a great interest in the heavens -- locating planets, stars and their constellations. The names were magic -- Castor, Pollux, Sirius, Vega, Aldabaran, Arcturus, Capella -- and a million more. I would use stars as pointers to direct me to different constellations. It took me many years, but I made a point of studying the heavens, so that I could locate and name most of the important stars in the various constellations -- not forgetting the Constellation of Orion -- or the Constipation of O'Brien as it was irreverently known.

Not only was stargazing interesting, but it helped beat the boredom of four hours by yourself on the wing of the bridge. I found it fascinating for instance, to discover such things as the star Aldabaran was nine hundred light years away and that it gave off over one hundred and fifty times the light that the sun did. Even now, I find myself in awe of those facts. It just shows how insignificant we mortals are.

During those four lonely hours in the middle of the night on the bridge there was very little to do except think. Sometimes the mate on watch would come out of the wheelhouse and have a chat with you, but not that often. I think one of the subjects that was most thought about, was what you would do if you won the football pools. Earning four pounds five shillings a month, (nine dollars in those days) the thought of winning seventy thousand pounds gave you a lot of latitude. I must have spent millions in my mind over the years!

The weather at sea during my first trip was excellent. It took about five and a half days to cross the Atlantic from the north of Ireland to Belle Isle on the north tip of Newfoundland. The remaining two and a half days were through inland waters. My first trip up the St Lawrence was marvellous. The weather was warm and clear, and it was fascinating seeing all the villages on the shore come into view, dominated by the huge churches with high spires.

We would, in most cases, sail from the UK without any cargo. Therefore, on the way across the Atlantic the cadets would work with Chippy in erecting shifting boards in the holds. These were heavy wooden boards that would be erected from the bottom to the top of the hold, which provided a temporary wall, which prevented the grain from shifting from side to side during a sea voyage. These were huge boards, and in a rough sea this was a dangerous evolution -- but it had to be done.

We spent about five days in Montreal loading grain and flour. On our time off in the evenings, and if you weren't duty (every

fourth day), the cadets routine in Montreal -- and in fact most ports, was to go to the movies the first or second night -- followed by a banana split at a Diner, then back to the ship. The remainder of the time in port was spent going to the Mission to Seamen, for free dances or movies. It was just a place to go to get off the ship. With our round trips lasting about three weeks -- four at the most -- nine dollars a month didn't go very far in Canada.

While in port, each day a different cadet carried out a gangway watch during the daylight hours. This involved being in uniform, standing at the top of the gangway -- in effect, acting as a glorified doorman. Now I knew why I had to have a uniform! You were also supposed to keep undesirables off the ship. How do you recognize an undesirable among a hundred or so longshoremen? At night you remained on board in case your services were required.

Christmas Day and gangway duty were the only times you wore your uniform. On Christmas Day the cadets were "invited" to eat with other officers and passengers in the main Dining Saloon. Other than that, we ate in our own mess. I was now beginning to see what my fellow students at Captain Boyd's Nautical School meant when they said I was better off buying some overalls -- and why the letter from the company stressed work clothes and heavy sweaters.

It soon became very apparent that cadets were a very cheap form of labour. If there was some extra work to do, it was much cheaper to get the cadets to do it, rather than paying sailors overtime. I had no objection to that, but I think what I resented more than that, was that we received only very limited training in practical navigation subjects. There was certainly never any formal instruction. You had to rely on the second or third mate explaining specific aspects of navigation when you were on watch with them. Otherwise, you were expected to study by yourself and pick things up on the job, or in your own spare time -- which was fairly minimal.

While those were the negative aspects of the job, the positive ones far outweighed them. I was sixteen, and I was starting to see the world -- and there was a fairly secure future ahead of me. In addition, I liked the life, and enjoyed working with the sailors and other cadets. We also got on very well with two of the three officers.

Coming home at the end of my first voyage -- it was only six weeks, I was looked upon as a bit of a celebrity by my friends who were still at school. I can't remember, but I'm sure I secretly revelled in it. Most of the time we had about five or six days in Belfast -- occasionally discharging the remainder of our grain and flour in Liverpool. Then we would start the cycle all over again, only this time it would be from Liverpool to Montreal.

My next trip -- it was now November, we ran into what was to be my first full Atlantic storm. I had seen movies about ships in gales and hurricanes, but nothing ever prepared me for what I was to witness during this trip. In the many years to come, I would experience similar situations -- each slightly different from the other. It doesn't matter whether I'm talking about this specific voyage, or the hundreds I've made in the thirty-four years I've spent at sea, in all cases it showed one simple thing -- the tremendous power of the sea. I can write about it, but it has to be experienced before you can fully understand it.

On that particular voyage I can remember standing on the bridge -- about 50 feet above the waterline -- or the equivalent height of a five-storey building, and looking up, at the boiling seas above my head, with the blowing spindrift stinging your face and totally obscuring visibility. The seas would come thundering down on the decks, crushing steel ventilators, just like you would crush a piece of paper. Our "jolly boat," stowed aft, just disappeared from its davits.

I have never been afraid of the sea, but I have always treated it with the utmost respect. In normal circumstances, in a seaworthy ship, taking reasonable seamanlike precautions, you will come through. If you don't take seamanlike precautions you will reduce your odds of survival, because the sea is very unforgiving.

We were hove-to for three days, which meant that we found a course, cruising at minimum speed, where we could ride out the storm, and hopefully keep damage to a minimum. Sleep was impossible. The best that could be hoped for was to be able to jam yourself in your bunk and not roll out.

It was during this trip that I was seasick for the first and last time. When people say that they don't care whether they live or die when they are seasick -- I can understand them. It is a terrible feeling. What doesn't help, is when your "friends" revel in your condition, and bring a garbage can containing the scraps of a meal they have just eaten, including fatty pork, pea soup and other such appetizing contents, to your bedside. Later, I must admit to taking part in similar episodes, in an effort to give a sick person an appetite! It didn't seem to work for some reason.

Other than the bad weather, this trip was similar to my first one. In Montreal, we would share a cab up to Phillips Square -- fifty cents each -- go to a movie -- have our banana split, then back to the ship. After that it was the Mission to Seamen in the evening, for the rest of the time in Montreal. If you had a bit of money to spend, it went on nylon stockings. I can't remember the details, but the term 15 denier and something else seems to come to mind. As nylons had not come back on to the market in the UK yet, they were very much sought after. At that time I didn't have

a girlfriend, so my mother and Aunt Peggy were the lucky recipients.

Normally, because of the quick turnaround times in either Liverpool or Belfast we would only manage to get a few days leave between trips. This really didn't bother the cadets, as we looked upon any port other than Belfast, as a foreign port.

We were told that our next trip was to be to the States, and that we would be loading grain and flour in Baltimore, and tobacco in Norfolk. My mother wrote to her brother, Bert, who lived in New York, a three hour train journey from Baltimore, to tell him about my visit. He wrote back to say that he was writing to the Master, asking him if I could come and visit him in New York, while the ship was in Baltimore. He would also enclose a rail ticket for me in the letter to the Master. With this in the offing the trip started on a high note for me.

When you travelled to Canada there was no requirement for a smallpox vaccination, but to the States there was. As a child I had never been vaccinated. For some unknown reason my mother never believed in it. As a result I had a terrible reaction to it. I developed a high fever and in fact, had all the symptoms of smallpox.

I was in my bunk for two or three days -- and my arm felt like lead. Slowly I recovered, but I wished that my mother had me vaccinated as a child.

This trip we were to spend Christmas at sea. This was the day we got dressed up in our uniforms and had Christmas dinner with the "Big Boys" -- the officers and passengers. Only Christmas dinner mind you -- anything more would have been too much democracy being shown to the cadets!

One embarrassing and humiliating requirement before ships were allowed to go alongside in the States in those days, was a medical inspection by the port authorities. When the pilot boarded the ship at the harbour approaches he was accompanied by an immigration officer and a doctor. It was the doctor's task to inspect the private parts of all the crew, one by one. He was supposed to be checking for signs of venereal disease, but I found it ironic that he only checked sailors and cadets -- and not the officers and passengers. Obviously they were immune from any such diseases!

Once we were alongside I phoned my uncle, who told me that he had written to the Master and enclosed my rail ticket to New York.

That was on a Sunday morning, and because I had the gangway duty that day I couldn't get away until the next day.

Sundays were normally quiet, as no cargo was worked that day, so it was a fairly easy, but sometimes boring duty. That afternoon I had a smartly dressed gentleman come on board asking to see Mr. Stark. I took him to Mr. Stark's cabin, and knocked on his door,

only to discover he was taking an afternoon nap. I told him he had a visitor, and left. Shortly after the visitor left the ship, Mr. Stark came out on deck in a flaming temper, yelling and shouting about me disturbing his sleep. He then told me that the Master had given him my rail tickets, but that I could forget all about going anywhere, as I was to have my leave stopped for the duration of the port visit. This was all because I had woken him up from a nap on a Sunday afternoon. I was very disappointed, but it was in keeping with the man's personality. It was another few months before I was to meet my uncle and his family, when the ship went to New York.

Most merchant ships on a regular run would normally carry up to twelve passengers. Any more than twelve meant that you had to carry a doctor -- hence the magic figure of twelve. Many of the passengers we carried were people from the UK who were emigrating to Canada. Most of them did not have a job to go to. They often spent the first night in Montreal at the YMCA or YWCA, but quite often, before the ship left Canada, five days later, most of them had jobs. Such was the job market in Canada in those days. Many worked in the Montreal area until they had saved up enough to move to other parts of Canada. Quite often, some months after a husband had travelled with us, his wife would also come out with us to join her husband, once he was established. Other passengers would make the round trip with us, usually in summer. Sometimes we would get Canadian passengers who would cross over with us to the UK -- spend a month there, then come back with us on the next trip.

During the winter months, when we couldn't get up to Montreal, because of the ice in the St. Lawrence, we would normally go to Saint John, New Brunswick, although occasionally we would go to the States. My first winter visit to Saint John was an experience that stuck in my mind for years. I had been used to British winters of windy, cold, raw days -- but nothing like the bitter cold of the Saint John waterfront, or trudging down King Street, after getting off the bus in West Saint John, to walk back to the ship.

Except for the cold, we enjoyed Saint John -- mainly due to some friends of Frank Best, who came from Dublin. The entire Rigby family was extremely kind to us. They made us feel very much at home, where we were all treated like family by these genuinely fine people.

While we would normally return to Belfast or Liverpool with our cargo, occasionally we would go elsewhere. One trip took us to Cork. In Belfast or Liverpool the grain was discharged by large suckers -- the same type of thing that covered my new uniform with dust on my first day on board. In Cork we were met on the jetty by an army of horse-drawn carts, and dozens of men with burlap sacks and shovels. Where it would normally have taken four or five days to discharge elsewhere, it took us four weeks to shovel, bag, sling and transport by horse and cart in Cork.

We were berthed on a main road with pubs the whole length of it. This made it very difficult to account for the sailors at times.

It was not uncommon to see a sailor go on to the jetty to feed a horse with a handful of grain, even though the horse was up to his ankles in the stuff. The sailor would work his way along the horses until he got close to the nearest pub -- and then he would nip inside, and you'd lost him for an hour or two.

Cork was also the only place I had ever been where the girls coming in from the surrounding countryside to the Saturday night dance would wheel their bicycles across the dance floor around the dancing couples, to park them at the far end of the hall. Cork was different!

Frank Sadler left the ship after I'd been there a few months, to go as uncertificated third mate on one of the company's smaller ships. He was relieved by a Terry McDowell, from Banbridge, who for some reason or another got the nick-name of McGinty. He was a twin, whose brother was on one of our other ships. Frank Best became the senior cadet.

Joe Paskins was a pleasant enough person, but he was always scheming, and did some odd things. We picked up our food, which was already on plates, from the galley, which was only about thirty feet from our mess. When it was Joe's turn to act as messman, we discovered it was not uncommon for him, when he was en route to our mess, to take food off one or two of the plates and put it on his own. If questioned about the unequal portions on the plates he would invariably say that the ship's rolling had caused the food to move from one plate to the other!

I haven't mentioned the engineers yet. The Chief and Second Engineer ate in the main Dining Saloon with the rest of the officers and passengers. However, the other four junior engineers ate in their own mess, next door to ours. I could never understand this. Did they have to pass a knife-and-fork test when they wrote their Second Engineers certificate that qualified them to eat with the other officers?

The Chief Engineer was a pompous, arrogant individual, who cared only for himself. One day in heavy seas, one of the junior engineers who was packing a piston on a deck winch, was hit by a large wave that came sneaking over the bulwarks. It threw him around all over the place, banging his head, arms and legs on the various bits of deck equipment. He could quite easily have been washed overboard.

Badly shaken, he went up to the mess to calm down and collect himself. The Chief happened to be there at the time, so he told him what had happened. The Chief's only comment was, "I hope you didn't lose any tools over the side."

One thing that I encountered when we went to places like Norfolk was the overt racism. There is nothing subtle about a sign that says, "Whites only." Of course this was 1950, or 1951 and that's the way life was. Segregation was alive and well and living in the South. You had to be sure that you drank out of the "White" side of the water fountain when you went to the movies. The same was true of the toilets. It was strange really, because the coloured people (as they were called at the time), didn't want you to use their water fountain any more than the whites wanted the coloureds to use theirs. What the coloureds wanted was the right to choose, and not be told what fountain they were to drink out of.

Another thing I had to come to grips with was travelling on buses. A bus may have had many empty seats at the front, or white section of the bus, with the back of the bus full and standing room only for the coloureds. We just accepted it, because that was the way it was.

In France, my father had finally realized that the convalescent home idea was not going to work. I wasn't that it was not a good idea. It was just that it was before its time. The war in Europe had only been over a year when this venture started. People just didn't have the money for things that were seen as frills. Thirty-two years later I visited the area again, to find several such homes in the area -- all thriving. It was just a matter of being the wrong time.

With the business in France closed, my father came home to Northern Ireland, and went back to something he knew -- the sea. He joined a company called Leneghens, which had their ships registered in Belfast, but ran all over the world. My visits to Belfast between trips never coincided with his, so I was never to see him again, from the last time I saw him when I was on holiday in France.

Thelma's father, Uncle David was still at sea. He was now sailing with the Canadian Pacific Steamship Line, which ran from the UK to the east coast of Canada, on a similar run to our own. I hadn't seen him for some time -- certainly not since I had been to sea. Then one day I saw his ship, the Beaverlake, coming into Montreal. I went round to see him, and we had a good long chat. We talked about going to the movies, but he said he didn't feel too well, so we never went. It was nevertheless good to see him again. He was such a kind, gentle man. Within three months, on 3 January 1951, he died of coronary thrombosis, after having renal surgery. He was 51. Thelma had now lost both her mother and her father by the time she was 21 years of age.

I spent two years on the Ramore Head, and my only complaint about those two years, was not with the ship. It was with the part of the world that we were operating in -- the North Atlantic. I made twenty voyages, which meant a lot of bad weather in the winter, and a lot of fog off the Grand Banks in the spring and summer. It was a comfortable ship and I had good shipmates. We had a few changes

among the officers, but our nemesis, Mr. Stark was still there when I left.

In September 1951, I was transferred to the ss.Dunmore Head. I was now 18 years old.