

CHAPTER SEVEN - AFRICA

I remained in the Speaker until March 1955, having made one more trip to South Africa. On completion of each voyage one normally managed to get two or three weeks leave. The amount of leave due was determined by a complicated formula of so many days a month, plus one day's leave for every Sunday spent at sea, providing it was more than eight hours! I normally managed to get about three weeks leave.

On completion of my leave, I received instructions to join the mv. Governor in Liverpool. She was one of our relatively new motor ships, with very comfortable accommodation. After loading the majority of our cargo in Liverpool, we then sailed for Milford Haven in the Bristol Channel to load bombs for the Royal Air Force in Kenya, before sailing for Mombasa via the Suez Canal.

About this time, in the early to mid-fifties, the "winds of change" (to quote the Prime Minister of the day) were taking place in Africa. Independence was the war cry -- and sometimes, it was more than a war cry -- it was war. As were many other colonial powers, Britain was reluctant to see her colonies gain independence. They knew it had to come, but they wanted it on their terms -- not the Africans.

In the case of Kenya, the leader of the independence movement, Jomo Kenyatta, had been arrested, jailed without trial, and sent into exile to the arid northern border of Kenya, where he could do no harm. However, Britain was not prepared for the support that Kenyatta had amongst many of his people, particularly his own Kikuyu tribe, and the Meru and Embu.

What stemmed from this surge of support for Kenyatta was an organization that was called Mau-Mau. Those words meant nothing, but the Mau-Mau had become a terrorist organization whose aim was independence for Kenya. It's interesting to note that organizations that fought for their independence, were mainly called terrorists -- but once independence was gained, they became freedom fighters!

The British government decided to bomb the Mau-Mau into submission -- hence the reason why we had been to Milford Haven, loading bombs for the RAF. It used to be called gunboat diplomacy, but as the Mau-Mau were three hundred miles from the coast, a gunboat was not quite the right vehicle. Therefore, the might of the RAF was to be used, "to teach the wogs a few lessons about who's running their country." The Mau-Mau fought the authorities with home made rifles and long-bladed knives called pangas. This was gunboat

diplomacy at its finest!

While I had been in the Mediterranean before, I had never been through the Suez Canal and beyond. Once through the canal and the Gulf of Suez, we came into the Red Sea. I had never experienced heat quite like it. It was like an oven. Night and day, the temperature hardly changed. It remained with us for our five days passage between Suez and Aden.

At the southern end of the Red Sea, are the Straits of Bab-el-Mendab - the Gates of Hell -- a most aptly named spot. In those days ships did not have air-conditioning. The only way to get any air into your cabin was by using wind scoops which fitted in your port hole -- and even then, whatever air you managed to get was hot and dry.

When we arrived in Mombasa we were told that we were to go alongside the berth to discharge our bombs, because they received high priority. However, once we had landed the bombs, we would have to go out in the stream and remain at anchor, until a berth became available for us to discharge our general cargo. We were told that we would probably be at anchor for about three weeks, due to congestion in the port. This was mainly caused by giving priority to ships with supplies for the Royal Air Force.

On our first day alongside I became very friendly with two of the RAF officers who had come down from Nairobi to arrange for their bombs to get to their destination. Because of my interest in the Mau-Mau and the whole East African situation, they invited me to spend a week at RAF Eastleigh in Nairobi with them. Of course, first and foremost I had to get the Master's permission. As the ship was not going anywhere except the anchorage, he gave me the permission I needed. Captain Herbert Jones, the Master, was an extraordinary man whom I respected very much. I will spend some time on that subject later.

Before we flew from Mombasa I had to sign a "Blood Chit," which absolved the Air Force from any blame should I be killed or injured during my time with them. We flew up to Nairobi in an old Lincoln bomber, which had been used in the Second World War. I was sitting behind the Navigator as we took off. What I saw did not fill me with confidence -- and I then realized why they were so insistent that I sign the Blood Chit. As we trundled down the runway, the wings were actually flapping, as the aircraft built up speed! Regardless, we made it.

I stayed in the Officers Mess at RAF Eastleigh while I was there. My two friends arranged with Air Operations for me to go on some bombing runs in the Lincolns. After that, I would then fly in the back seat of Harvards for some low level bombing and strafing runs. They were normally used as trainers, but had been converted to carry

20-pound fragmentation bombs under the wings.

I attended both the pre-flight briefs and debriefs with the rest of the aircrew, which I found very interesting. The briefer stressed the need for accurate bombing, as our ground forces were not very far away from where we were bombing.

Before we took off, the briefer gave us "Survival Chits" (see the Photo Gallery at the end of the book). These chits were written in English and Swahili. If your aircraft had to make a forced landing or some such thing you were supposed to wave this chit in the faces of the Mau Mau, who were approaching you with the one intention of removing your head with their pangas (machetes). You were supposed to talk to them in Swahili telling them that the British government would reward them if they assisted us. The main problem being that nobody in the aircrew could speak Swahili, and with them charging at you, there was very little time to learn! I don't think waving a piece of paper in front of a charging Mau Mau warrior, who could not read was a well thought out idea! However, I suppose some bureaucrat in London thought that he was doing a good job in preparing these Survival chits!

On the five sorties in which I took part, our targets were either in the Aberdare Forest, or on the slopes of Mount Kenya. After we dropped our bombs we would make a couple of low passes, strafing the area with machine gun fire, then head for home.

The aim of the raids was not so much to kill the Mau-Mau, as it was to force them out of the thick forest, where our ground forces could engage them. The forests were so thick you couldn't see anyone. All we could see were the explosions where our bombs fell. Aircraft went on separate sorties, with the idea of keeping an aircraft up in the air on a continuous basis during daylight hours.

While I was there, I went into the city of Nairobi a couple of times. It was a strange sight to see women dressed in their summer dresses with pistols around their waists, having afternoon tea at the New Stanley or Norfolk Hotels. The farmers and their wives would come into town in their Landrovers with an arsenal of rifles and sidearms. This was for real. This was not for fun -- whites were being attacked and killed by the Mau-Mau. They wanted "Uhuru" -- their independence.

One evening I was invited to have dinner at the home of one of my RAF friends that I had met in Mombasa. Over the years I have eaten many meals, under many different circumstances, but nothing has ever compared to this. It was the strangest setting I've ever experienced. There we were, with the men dressed in suits and the ladies dressed in their evening finery, eating dinner, carrying out normal dinner conversation, with loaded revolvers on the table!

The Mau-Mau had developed a pattern of attacking white people

while they were eating their evening meal, usually by coming in through the back door -- overpowering the house-boy, and then attacking those having dinner with their pangas. Therefore, most white families took all necessary precautions, including having guns at the ready on the table.

Unfortunately, my week in Nairobi went by much too quickly. I had experienced something that I don't think any other Merchant Navy officer had managed to do -- to fly with the Royal Air Force on operational missions. But not only that, I had experienced this world where normal people continued with their everyday lives, except that they were armed and prepared to defend themselves if need be.

When I returned to my ship in Mombasa I was given the name of "Bomber Hunt." That name stayed with me for some time. It was an experience I will never forget.

It's ironic to think now, that Kenyan independence was one of the very few reasonably successful stories associated with independence on that continent. Kenyatta became President, and governed the country fairly and justly, which was the opposite of most of the results, where other countries obtained their independence. Even today, Kenya is one of the more stable countries in Africa.

Many of those countries that obtained independence twenty to thirty years ago are still embroiled in tribal wars, which have killed hundreds of thousands of people. If that's the price of democracy, then colonialism may not have been too bad after all.

I know that it's not a popular view in this era of not being able to speak one's mind in case it upsets somebody, but frequently the results of democracy in Africa speak for themselves. On the other hand, many colonists did not adequately prepare the Africans for independence -- so who is right?

We were eventually given a berth alongside, where we discharged the rest of our Mombasa bound cargo. Then it was down the coast, discharging more cargo in Tanga, Dar-es-Salaam, and over to the spice island of Zanzibar. From there, our next stop was Beira and Lorenzo Marques (now called Maputu), where we loaded our homeward-bound cargo.

Because many white Kenyans were worried about their future in Kenya, quite a few of them returned to the UK, to start life anew.

That must have been a very hard decision to make, because, not only were they leaving a country where, in most cases, they had lived for years -- but they were going to have to change their lifestyles as well. Life in Britain was different from life in the colonies.

I felt particularly sorry for one elderly gentleman that returned to England with us as a passenger. He was taking a very

large amount of Kenyan cheese back to the UK with him for his family. He took great pains to ensure that the Chief Steward would keep the cheese in the ship's refrigerator for the passage home. The only problem was that the Chief Steward didn't tell the Second Steward, who was responsible for bringing up the provisions for the crew from the refrigerator. As a result, I, and about sixty other people on board, thoroughly enjoyed this new cheese that we thought the Chief Steward must have purchased in East Africa. Not only had this poor man lost his country -- he had lost his cheese as well!

After some leave when we returned to Liverpool, we were off again to East Africa. This time we would be going clockwise, right round Africa, through the Mediterranean to East Africa, then onwards to South Africa -- before returning to the UK via the South Atlantic.

It was during this voyage that I received word that my father had died. We were in Mombasa at the time, and I can remember exactly where I was standing when the Second Mate, Tom Wilson, handed me a letter from my mother. Apparently my father had died on the 3rd of July 1955, but because there had been a problem trying to locate his next of kin, my mother only received the news in mid-September.

It was the Salvation Army that had finally managed to track her down, after much sleuth work. Since then I have always been an avid financial supporter of the Salvation Army. I have been very impressed with the work they do all over the world. My father had died from cancer of the bladder, in Hobart, Tasmania, where he had been a Cargo Superintendent. As my mother never knew that he had been ill, the news came as an awful shock to her.

Even now, it's difficult to say how this news affected me. I suppose I was sad, but I wasn't heartbroken. He was a man I hardly knew. He was a kind man -- and I don't recall ever having a falling out with him -- but we weren't close. Years later, in fact, only a year or two ago, I realized that neither he, nor I, had ever said, "I love you." Maybe it wasn't necessary. Maybe it was understood, but it was never stated. Perhaps I didn't know him well enough and love never entered into it. I just don't know.

When my mother died in September 1991, I felt grief, but not that all consuming grief that one is supposed to feel when one loses a loved one. But just like my father, I know I never told her that I loved her. Nor can I recall her saying it either. Is it because we were raised in a different era, where love between parent and child was assumed, or was it because one did not express intimate feelings to your parents -- or was it just me? One thing I do know, is that I have always told my girls that I love them -- and continue to do so today.

I made two more trips in the Governor to South and East Africa. The Second Mate during that period was Michael Jones. From the

beginning we formed a strong friendship over those few months that has endured to the present day. I can say quite unequivocally that today, both he and his wife Jean, are my closest friends. I had the honour of being best man at their wedding. Many years after we first met, Michael was to become the Marine Superintendent of Harrison's. It's just unfortunate that we now live three thousand miles and an ocean apart. However, even so, we have managed to see each other quite regularly.

Earlier I made a passing reference to Captain Herbert Jones. He was a man whom I respected and admired. I think I have always respected men who were gentlemen. By that, I don't mean gentlemen of means. I mean men who have good manners and are considerate of others. You don't need to have means to do that. In the world of today those ideas may be archaic to some people, but I still feel that there is always a place for good manners.

Herbert Jones was a character with a supreme ego. At night, he would come up to the bridge while I was on watch and regale me with his stories. He covered every subject that one could think of, and in each case he was the hero of the story. I think that one of his favourite quotes says it all -- "If you are in any doubt about something, just say to yourself, what would Herbert Jones have done?" I really enjoyed sailing with him.

I left the Governor in May 1956 to come ashore to study for my First Mate's Certificate. While I obviously wanted to get on with obtaining further qualifications, I was sorry to be leaving the Governor. I had enjoyed myself there. I liked my shipmates, and it was really where I got my first taste and love for East Africa.

This time I passed the written and oral exams, but failed the signals part of the examination. As this was only a minor setback I was happy to go back to sea again, when they needed a Third Officer in an emergency, before attempting, and passing, the examination again on my return at the end of the voyage.

In August 1956 I joined the ss. Historian in London. She was a Liberty ship, similar to the Speaker. This was going to be my first trip to the West Indies. The Master was George Harvey, who appeared to be a very nervous and weak man. The Chief Officer was a drunk, who, when he was in that condition, was a violent man. Some time after I had left the Historian he was fired for chasing George Harvey with a fire-axe. No wonder Captain Harvey gave the impression that he was nervous!

We made the standard Harrison's West Indies voyage -- Trinidad, Barbados, Antigua and Demerara, then back to Liverpool. Whenever the ship was in Liverpool I would spend a considerable amount of time at my aunt's house. She was the same aunt that my mother, sister and I had stayed with on our return from France. Her son Roy, with

whom I went to school when we returned from France in 1947, was about my age, and we got on well together. That month, October 1956, Roy was going to get married to Dorothy Benbow, who lived nearby. Luckily, I was going to be home for the wedding.

One Saturday afternoon, just before the wedding, I was sitting watching television in the lounge above my aunt's shop, when in walked this lovely blonde girl, who said, "You must be Ray." It was Shirley Norris, who had been a friend of Roy and Dorothy's for many years. She actually remembered my sister from when we lived there in 1947.

I was certainly very attracted to this blonde beauty, although I found out that she was going out with a Royal Air Force officer at the time.

While I was in Liverpool during this period I sat and passed my signals examination, only to be sent back to the Historian again -- but this time as Second Officer. We were off again on another couple of short voyages to the West Indies.

When I was in Liverpool I normally stayed with my aunt. Emma, her maid, enjoyed looking after me, whether I liked it or not! There are so many stories about Emma that a whole book could be written on that subject alone. Once, when Roy and Dorothy were in the shop at lunch time, Emma fed me my soup before they came in. She would always wait at the door of the dining room to get my reaction to her cooking, so of course I always told her it was excellent. That day the soup tasted terrible, but I ate it -- as all good guests do. When Roy tasted it, he spat it out and called for Emma. She was very upset, pointing out to him that Ray had liked this chicken soup. He asked her to produce the can, which she did. There was one small can of chicken soup and one large can of evaporated milk!

Emma had never learned to read or write -- but the cans looked the same to her!

Although I was getting all the sun I wanted on the West Indies trips, I preferred the South and East African run. I enjoyed those parts of the world more than anywhere else I had ever been, therefore I was delighted when I was told that I was going back to the Governor as Second Officer.