

Experiences of the Western Pacific



Another interesting diversion was an instruction one voyage 'to proceed to Christmas Island (Pacific) and load the ship with anything useful' back in Tarawa. You may remember Christmas

Island was used in atomic testing, thus hard to determine what would be uncontaminated after all these years, although I did notice there were some very large fish caught at anchorage there, but none of the crew would eat them. I remember going into the ex-RAF officers' lounge, and finding all the glasses standing on the bar, just as they had left them when they were told to evacuate the island and

leave things 'Just as they are'. Another sight to behold was a warehouse hut, stacked floor to ceiling with coffins - just in case? The more notable things we loaded included some old Dennis fire trucks (one ambition fulfilled) and several vintage motorcycles. More useful material included builders' supplies. A memorable experience.

I didn't yet mention the need for our large derricks. We carried on deck our own flotilla of small craft - two whalers, two flat bottom boats and one launch. All were about 25'-30' long. We used the whalers to steer through the surf onto an atoll island, place our two tons of produce at the feet of the islanders, load them up again with bagged copra and float a line through the surf for our launch to tow them back out to deep water. The flat bottoms we used more extensively in shallow water lagoons. As we sometimes made several stops in one day, and because there was government ordinance prohibiting me from taking the ship into some lagoons at night, time was occasionally of the essence, and that's why we had big derricks for the size of ship. Have you ever seen a small ship with her anchor aweigh being chased by a launch and whaler? The winchman skills deployed in snatch-lifting a fully-laden whaler from the open ocean are on a par with anything that you would see on a North Sea oil rig (in winter).

And what about Tokatati, you might ask? He was our carpenter, remember? He was a good man, but like many a sailor before him, always 'hung one on' when he returned home to Tarawa. The locals had what they called 'island night', a sort of disco, and of course the seamen and those fortunate enough not to have to go to sea frequently clashed over the girls. On more than one occasion, I had to bail Tokatati and his pals out of the local police station after a night out. The magistrate was a Welshman, known as Toby Jug to the locals, because that is what he looked like. He had formidable bearing and a very low opinion of drunken sailors. Came the day when he informed me he would have to lock Tokatati up if he couldn't behave himself, and my protestations that he was always sober at sea were taken with a pinch of salt. Anyway, he let Tokatati off, with a final warning. A few weeks later, I was told we were taking Toby Jug on a trip around the islands, in his role as Circuit Judge of the Crown Colony. He looked at Tokatati twice when he came onboard, but, after a week, admitted that he seemed likeable enough after all - and that's when Tokatati got his own back. We were at a lagoon island that dried out at certain times, and so it was that the unthinking Toby Jug went ashore to hold court. When he looked out at sunset, there was no water and we were about a mile away at sea. He had no choice but to ask the island elders for sleeping accommodation. They fixed him up with a hut, and no sooner had he retired than Tokatati threw in two local girls - poor old Toby Jug never got over it! Neither did he mention it to me, but for some reason the ship's crew either were never criticized by the Beak again.

