

FEATURE - by Chris Pownall

S.S. TALTHYBIUS 1944-1971

I wrote about my experiences in the Merchant Navy in my memoirs entitled 'Funny How Things Work Out', but wish to record more specific details about the ship on which I sailed.

I served on the S.S. Talthybius in 1967, when she was operated by the Ocean Steam Ship Co., owners of the famous Blue Funnel Line.

In those days Blue Funnel had a fleet of 82 vessels and ran schedule cargo services from the UK to Australia, and the Far East. They also ran similar services out of New York.

Until the end of 1966, they carried up to 20 passengers per ship. These were generally very wealthy people that would stay with the ship for the entire voyage, which generally meant, three and a half months away from the UK.

S.S. Talthybius was built as a 'Victory' ship, by the United States Maritime Commission, and at the time of her launch in 1944, she was named S.S. Salina Victory.

Victory ships were designed and built to replace merchant cargo vessels that had been sunk during WW2. They were some of the first ships to be manufactured with all welded hulls. They were constructed as modular units and assembled in a matter of six weeks, start to finish. Everything about them was very basic as their life expectancy was quite short. In the main, they were used to convoy supplies to Europe and unfortunately, many never completed the Atlantic crossing, falling victim to enemy torpedoes.

At the end of the war, Blue Funnel purchased six Victory ships from the US Maritime Commission for what was believed to be £1 million. Originally, Talthybius was purchased by the Dutch Blue Funnel Company and renamed S.S. Polydorus. In

1960, she was transferred to the UK Blue Funnel line, at which time she was again renamed, this time to 'Talthybius'.

All Blue Funnel ships were named after characters from Greek Mythology. Talthybius would never have carried passengers, as her accommodation was very small. A typical officers cabin had a small bunk, a single wardrobe, a small settee, a table, and a single chair. There was a small wash basin but no toilet or shower facility.

Due to the all welded construction, many of these Victory ships suffered severe damage in heavy seas, and in fact some vessels even sank due to fractured hulls.

The Blue Funnel line never lost a ship in peacetime, and received an excellent reference in Winston Churchill's memoirs.

I joined the Blue Funnel Line as an Assistant Engineering Officer, and following initial training and coasting two main-line vessels, the 'Hector' and the 'Pyrrhus', I was offered either to sail supernumerary to New York on the Queen Mary, and join a Blue Funnel ship named 'Menestheus' destined for the Far East, or to sign on to 'Talthybius' who they were bringing back into service, following several years laid up in the Carrick Rhodes.

The Carrick Rhodes are in Cornwall and comprise a deep natural harbour created by the last ice age. This has long been a place where ships out of service could be laid up for long periods of time.

It was the time of the six-day war between Israel and Egypt and when President Nasser closed the Suez Canal, and Blue Funnel had two ships, the 'Agapenor' and the 'Menelaus', trapped in the Bitter Lakes on the Suez Canal. I was offered the opportunity to serve on one of these ships whilst they were out of service. There

would be increased rates of pay, in recognition of the boredom aspect, as well as the danger of being in a war zone. I decided to opt for Talthybius, as she was bound for the Far East and the excitement of those far away places was very appealing.

I first met up with Talthybius in Glasgow, and when I arrived at the King George fifth dock, she was a rusty hulk, that looked ready for the scrap yard.

Whilst Blue Funnel operated regular services that in the main ran like clockwork, they had tramp steamers that tided up after main line ships, as well as sailing there and back with a full cargo. This was to be the roll of Talthybius, and when I was offered the position of Assistant Engineering Officer I was told that we would be away up to five months, and amongst her ports of call would be Shanghai in the Peoples Republic of China, which at that time was caught up in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, headed by Chairman Mao Tse-tung.

The thoughts of going to China at this time appealed to me greatly, as it was a closed society and Blue Funnel ships usually called at the British colony of Hong Kong. This was to be a rare opportunity and I saw it as a great adventure.

When I told some of my colleagues what I had volunteered for, they fell about laughing. I had never seen a Victory ship and was used to the comforts available to officers on mainline ships, like the Hector and Pyrrhus on which I had completed my initial training. I recall that onboard the Hector my accommodation comprised a well fitted out day room with a beautiful roll top desk. There were no port holes rather, large windows with wonderful views of the open sea. My cabin on Talthybius would have measured no more than 3m x 3m and there was one port hole



Talthybius at Liverpool in April 1969

which was positioned such that it was useless to view through.

I coasted Talthebius from Glasgow to Swansea in South Wales, where we took on board steel products from nearby British Steel at Port Talbot. We then returned to our homeport of Birkenhead where the remainder of loading took place. It was a work of art in those days prior to containerisation and specialist teams loaded cargo according to where it was destined and at what stage in the voyage it would be discharged. The ships hold comprised of deep bottom tanks that could either be filled with liquid or dry cargo. Above these tanks were several decks that were individually filled with cargo and then capped off before another deck was completed above. We took onboard many products including machinery, motorcars, to things like toothpaste and corn flakes.

When all the holds were full, they then took on board deck cargo mainly comprising barrels of oil. These were strapped down with steel cables for safety and security in the event of heavy weather.

Before we embarked on voyage 43 to the Far East, I was allowed to visit home for one-week leave. Upon my return to the ship, we were all set to go and to my distress I discovered that I had left my uniform black tie at home. I just found time on the Saturday morning to nip to the uniform shop and purchase another tie.

Back on board, I was off watch whilst we put to sea and with other colleagues stood out on deck observing as tugs arrived to guide us out into the River Mersey.

The ship was moving steadily away from the key side, when I spotted a man running down the dock with a small parcel and shouting "Package for Pownall". As he approached the ship we were several yards from the dockside, but he threw it as best he could, and it landed not far from where I was stood. It was my original tie that my mother had posted. It was amazing that it arrived as it was addressed to the ship in Birkenhead.

That episode over, we moved out into the river, right opposite the Liver Building, and gradually Talthebius picked up speed, and we were on our way.

With the Suez Canal closed, we were heading down the Atlantic Ocean all the way to Durban, South Africa.

Ports off call in chronological order were as follows: -

Durban – South Africa
Singapore
Jesselton – Borneo
Labuan – Borneo
Manila – Philippines
Cebu – Philippines
Shanghai – China
Moji – Japan
Pusan – South Korea
Singapore
Penang
Port Swettenham – Malaya
Colombo – Ceylon
Trincomalee – Ceylon
Durban – South Africa
Las Palmas – Canary Islands
Liverpool – King George 5th Dock

In those days Blue Funnel only employed white ethnic officers and all other crew were either Chinese or Malaysian. A typical crew was as follows: -

Captain
Chief Engineer
First mate

Second Engineer
Second mate
Electrical Officer
Third mate
Third Engineer
Fourth mate
Fourth Engineer
Cadets
Fifth Engineer
Radio Officer
Sixth Engineer
Chief Steward
Seventh Engineer

The fifth sixth and seventh engineers were all ranked as Assistant Engineering Officers. You were graded according to your academic qualifications, engineering experience plus examinations by the Board of Trade. This determined the amount of seagoing time required before you were able to take the merchant marine engineering examinations.

We had three quartermasters whose job it was to steer the ship. No such thing as automatic steering in those days.

We had a boatswain who was also Malaysian.

The Chinese crew comprised engine room staff stewards and cooks.

The total number of ships crew was approximately 60 personnel.

In those days if the total crew was less than 100 personnel, there was no legal requirement to carry a ships doctor and in our case, the Chief Steward was in charge of medical matters having obtained a first aid qualification, and he had a very good book for reference purposes.

There was a small hospital on board, which had sterilised surgical instruments and step-by-step pictures to assist in minor operations in the event of an emergency. There was no mortuary on the ship and we were advise in advanced, that in the event of a death on board it would be a case of burial at sea.

The role of an Assistant Engineering Officer was mainly a watch keeping activity. This involved monitoring the main and auxiliary engines, maintaining the ships log, and carrying out minor repairs as became necessary. There were regular tasks such as checking the steering mechanism at the end of each watch, and conducting chemical analysis of the boiler water and dosage as was necessary to maintain the correct quality of boiler water.

Standby duties involved partaking in the control over the main engine during manoeuvres in and out of port, and the recording of each change of the engine speed and direction into the ships log. This was an exacting task, which had to be accurate with the time logged to the nearest second.

Standby duty was a two-man operation, usually involving a senior plus an assistant engineering officer. One would respond to a request from the bridge for a change to engine speed or direction by manually positioning the engine room telegraph and then entering the change in the engine room manoeuvre log. Answering the telegraph required training and involved more than might be realised. It wasn't just a matter of aligning the indicating arrow to the new call from the bridge, and there were rules requiring a swing of the arrow beyond the new position and then back to align with the opposed arrow, operated by the deck officer on the bridge. In addition there could be emergency calls that required a double

swing, and if things became really dangerous regarding the ships speed and movement, there was a red flashing light activated from the bridge that really focused the engine room officers on standby duties.

The other engineer on standby duty opened and closed the steam valves controlling the turbines speed and direction. This was quite hard work requiring considerable physical effort.

Watch keeping occurred around the clock, whether or not the ship was at sea or in port. When at sea the watches were four hours on followed by four hours off. Each watch was covered by a senior and assistant engineer but in reality it was the assistant who spent all his time on watch actually in the engine room. Senior engineers had other duties that they carried out remotely from the engine room.

With the Blue Funnel Line, each voyage was split into three, one designated outward bound, one designated homeward bound, and the third was known as the coast. I was teamed with the second engineer outward bound on the four to eight watch. I was with the fourth engineer on the eight to twelve whilst we were at sea doing the Far Eastern coast and together with the third engineer on the twelve to four on our way home. The watches were hard on the body as you were in fact going to work twice in every twenty-four hours and sleep patterns were such that you had two sessions of sleep during the twenty-four hours.

Whilst in port, you were put on port watches that were different from seagoing watches and were designed so that each officer had a similar chance of some time ashore. The Blue Funnel line operated four port watches e.g.

<i>1200 to 1700</i>	<i>5 hours on duty</i>
<i>1700 to 0200</i>	<i>9 hours on duty</i>
<i>0200 to 0800</i>	<i>6 hours on duty</i>
<i>0800 to 1200</i>	<i>4 hours on duty</i>

How it worked was, you did one watch and then skipped two but it meant that your two colleagues were either on watch or sleeping when you were off duty. Time ashore generally meant going without sleep because each day and every day, whether the ship was at sea or in port, you had to do your eight hours watch duty. Standby duties were additional to watch keeping and if there was a breakdown, you would be called upon for as long as it took.

Time off with sickness was not an option, I remember having a tooth extracted whilst in Singapore and it was a very unpleasant experience leaving me feeling very sore with a gum infection. No excuses, I had to keep my watches even though I was totally exhausted.

Times were equally tough when the ship was in heavy weather, with no stabilisers the ship could roll up to thirty degrees and pitch like a roller coaster when heading into huge waves. We faced waves up to sixty feet high off the Cape of Good Hope, which was quite scary. Sleep deprivation took its toll and at times we were seriously exhausted. Fortunately, bad weather didn't occur that often and for me, I was lucky that I didn't suffer from seasickness. A lot of it was common sense and those that were regularly sick, used to eat unwisely. In really bad weather the galley was closed and they provided us with a French bread stick and a piece of cheese to munch on.

I lost about two stones and my weight

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stabilised at about ten stones. My weight loss was not due to a lack of food it was down to the excessive heat in the engine room and the constant running up a down steep ladders within the engine room.

The temperature on the manoeuvring platform was always around 123 degrees fahrenheit varying only slightly with the external ambient air temperature. There was no such thing as air conditioning on a Victory ship, instead air was drawn down from the deck by large fans that distributed it around the ship, including the engine room. Once I had lost my excess weight, I felt very fit except in bad weather when everyone, whether you were seasick or not felt very tired and generally woozy.

Noise was a problem within the engine room mainly coming from the ships engine which was a Westinghouse triple expansion steam turbine, generating 6,000 horse power, with the high speed shaft rotating at 15,000rpm. When steaming full ahead, it was almost impossible to hold a conversation without shouting into each other's ears. We had no ear protection whatsoever so I guess many crew members would suffer from deafness later on in their lives.

Health and safety was very limited on board and as well as no ear protection, there were no hard hats to protect your head from falling objects or breathing masks to filter out air borne asbestos from the extensive insulation and lagging which covered all the steam pipes and valves.

I've already referred to the main engine, which was fed with superheated steam from twin boilers built by Babcock and Wilcox, providing steam at an operating pressure of 465psi.

Electrical power was produced by turbo generators, of which the turbines were manufactured by Joshua Hendy Iron Works, of San Francisco. The coupled generators had been designed and built by Allis Chalmers of Milwaukee and they produced 300kw of three wire DC electricity.

The propulsion shaft, which connected the main engine gearbox to the ships propeller, was 16 inches in diameter and rotated at 100 rpm. This speed and power gave the ship a top speed of 15 knots. Because Talthybius was a relatively old lady and heavily corroded around the deck plates, we ran the prop shaft at 90rpm, which gave us a normal cruising speed of 11 knots. As well as for safety reasons, it was also more economical and efficient to run at this slower speed. The ships propeller was a four bladed bronze type, weighing 29,765lbs (13.3tons) with an outside diameter of 18ft 3ins.

A total of 534 Victory were built in various USA shipyards. Talthybius was built by Permanente Metals Corp at their No 1 Yard, Richmond, California. Her hull number was 536 and she was originally launched as S.S. Salina Victory on 24th November 1944. She had a gross tonnage of 7,607 and a displacement weight of 15,200 tons.

Looking back, I am pleased that I had the opportunity of spending what was a short time in the merchant navy and in particular serving with the Blue Funnel Line, who were renowned for being amongst the best shipping companies at that time. Discipline was very strict on board, which was good. However there were certain restrictions that I didn't agree with, for example junior officers, of whom I was one, were not permitted to

socialise with senior officers and junior officers plus senior officers were not allowed to socialise with the crew. I found this to be a nonsense and it meant that you spent a lot of time on your own which did not suit my personality type. Some guys were very content with their own company but I needed companionship. I did have a drinking partner who was the Electrical Officer, and this was within the rules. He and I would drink together at every opportunity and our tipples was beer plus gin & tonic.

On the return part of the voyage I spent



Assistant Engineering Officer Pownall pictured with Mother Lucy whilst on leave in May 1967.

a lot of time off watch teaching one of the Chinese crew English. The lessons took place in my cabin and I would give him a couple of beers and he amused me greatly with his pronunciation, particularly with words beginning with 'R' & 'L'. Not long before we landed home, I was instructed to stop this socialising with a member of the crew and despite my objection, I had to comply with the instruction.

One morning, shortly before we arrived home, I was in the 4th Mates cabin when the steward came round with morning coffee. "I don't believe it" I said, "chocolate biscuits - it's the first time I've seen chocolate biscuits after several months on this ship". "What do you mean?" said the fourth mate, "we have chocolate biscuits every single day". I was furious, as on the engineers deck, we had plain biscuits such as, morning coffee and nice varieties. I immediately went to the Chief Engineers cabin and complained bitterly. He advised me to forget the matter, as I was unlikely to change anything and I was leaving the company at the end of the voyage, it would be better all-round, to let sleeping dogs lie.

During the voyage, I had noticed something else which I considered to be discriminatory and unfair. Each Sunday evening for dinner we had prime fillet steak with a fried egg on top. It was obvious that the captain had the largest steak and thereafter, they became slightly smaller as they progressed down the ranks until at my end of the table, they were noticeably smaller in size. Whilst this was grossly unfair, it didn't make sense

because it was the lower ranks that were doing the physically demanding duties whereas the Captain and Chief Engineer mainly had clerical duties to perform. Our electrical officer used to remark that the head cook must spend ages trimming a little off each steak so that they appeared smaller than those given to the immediate senior ranking officer. What a nonsense and totally at odds with what Blue Funnel had been announcing that as of about 1965, Deck Officers and Engineering Officers would have equal status and all signage on the entire fleet had been changed showing Officers only whereas prior to this the signs used to read, Officers and Engineers.

Looking back, I suppose I can understand why these situations arose. After all Blue Funnel had a very strict discipline on board, and there was social segregation between senior and junior ranks as well as with other members of the crew.

Whilst the Chief Engineer has four stripes as well as the Captain, it is obvious that the Captain is in overall command of the vessel and what he says, goes.

I recall on one occasion whilst we were in a Far East port, we were carrying out essential repairs to one of our steam turbine generators. Having spent many hours stripping the generator down, we received a call from the Captain requesting that we abandon the repairs and get the dam thing back together ASAP. All involved in the maintenance thought the Old Man had lost the plot and it wasn't until dinner that evening when he explained that he had been offered a cargo worth £1 million in another port that we realised the wisdom of his decision. We could not put to sea without that generator and the quickest action was to abort the repairs and put it back as it was and then find an opportunity later on the trip.

Upon our arrival back in the UK, a personnel officer who offered me a stint on the Blue Funnel ship Centaur, interviewed me in India Buildings. This was a relatively new vessel that sailed between Singapore and Sydney Australia. I was very tempted but decided to stick to my decision to move on, as I believed that I didn't have the right aptitude or temperament for a career in the Merchant Navy. I felt very lonely and with working in effect, twice each day whilst at sea, a week seemed an eternity. It is good to look back and recall some of the good times and whilst the life at sea was not for me, I wouldn't have missed the experience for anything.

Although I have complained about some elitism in favour of the deck officers, I must admit that all officers were extremely well looked after. The food was 5* quality and we went short of nothing. The pay was good and I found the whole experience character building, particularly so when visiting those far away places.

There is an interesting video on YouTube, which shows a 9-minute clip of the workings of an engine room of a Victory Ship. It is entitled 'SS American Victory Engine Room'.

Some time after I left the Merchant Navy, Talthybius was transferred to a sister company, Elder Dempster Line, and operated on their West Africa service, before being laid up at Bromborough Dock, in Birkenhead.

In December 1971, she was broken up by Nan Fong Steel Enterprises of Kaohsiung.