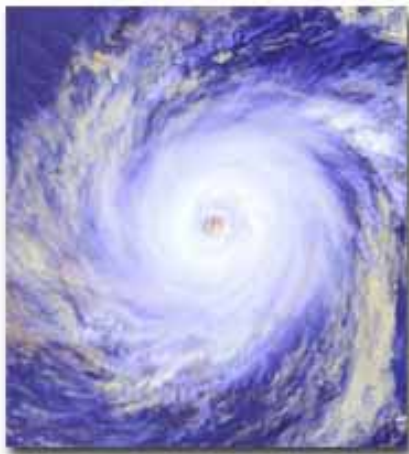


This was to be my second trip to sea after leaving the Vindi, and I was already feeling like an old hand.

I went down to the shipping pool and was assigned to the Mary K of Kyriakidis Shipping Company, and signed articles on 6 June 1955. She was a cargo vessel of 7,039 tons, one of several ships named after members of the owner's family, others being the Nicholas K and Andreas K. I found the crew was made up of 3 Londoners, plus an assortment of accents from all over the U.K. and around the world, including Indian, Arab and Scandinavian. My fellow Londoners were all in the catering section, and we each had a cabin on the starboard side. I felt quite important having a cabin to myself. It was rumoured that she was going down to the Mediterranean and possibly East Africa, but it could have been anywhere, as she was a tramp steamer. It didn't seem to matter much as we liked the ship and the most we could be away for was 2 years as that is what our contract specified. We were allowed to pay off as soon as the ship returned to the U.K. or at the end of 2 years, wherever the ship was at that point in time.

We did head for the Mediterranean, calling at Marseilles and Port Said, then on to Aden, Mombassa and Mauritius where we took on a cargo of sugar. This was all very exciting for me as my first trip had been to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. I spent a lot of time bargaining with the bum-boat men at Port Said and ended up with some good purchases for my mother and sisters. Our return trip took us back through the Mediterranean and there was much speculation as to where we were going with our cargo. At Gibraltar we were told it was to be Montreal. We called in to the Azores to get some medical treatment for one of the crew then resumed our slow trip across the Atlantic. During the next few days I became aware that we were heading through the Gulf Stream and into the turbulent waters of the north Atlantic. We learned that a hurricane, named 'IONE', had formed in the Gulf of Mexico and was heading up the east coast of the U.S.A. in our direction. We had no idea what this meant for



us, but knew the Captain was plotting its progress very carefully. As we neared the Grand Banks the ship's course was altered to take us south of the hurricane's course. Unfortunately the hurricane veered just after our last position report and we went directly into its centre. On 20 September it had now been downgraded to an 'Extra Tropical Storm', and began to affect our progress.

The build up of heavy cloud and increasing seas was the first indication of what lay ahead. The ship's cook had been preparing a large roast in the galley as he knew we were facing bad weather and saw his chance of giving us a good feed before it all set in. As the galley boy it was my job to deliver the roast to the table. I was standing in the doorway of the galley holding the roast in a meat tray and waiting for a pause in the waves. I was fully prepared to run across the open deck to deliver it to the pantry beyond. I felt pretty confident at counting the waves as I'd gauged the pattern. I chose my moment and took off. I was half way across, when a rogue wave caught me full on and picked me up. In a split second I was engulfed in water and felt sure the wave was carrying me away from the ship. Suddenly I found I was being dashed up against the galley door, with a resounding thud. I still carry the scar on my knee caused by my sudden connection with the ship. Unfortunately the roast and I had parted company and was never seen again. No doubt Davy Jones dined well that night.

The helmsman swung the ship's bow to face the increasingly steep seas. Over the next 24 hours the waves increased in size until they were as high as the funnel. Water was

EYE OF THE STORM

- by Bill King

crashing over the bow and pounding the bridge. It became quite dark, even though we were in daylight hours and eventually we entered the eye of the storm. It was really weird. We were moving across water which had become less violent and more like a boiling cauldron. The waves were now only about 12 feet high but with no direction to them. All around the horizon was a wall of grey cloud stretching up, and yet the visibility was quite clear in our space in the middle. It really was like being in a large saucepan. The view in every direction being the same. The Captain told us that we were going to encounter even worse weather than the previous day as soon as we moved from the eye. How right he was.

As the ship began its course through the remainder of the storm and away from the eye, everything depended upon the skill of the helmsman. He had an enormous responsibility and the tension in the wheelhouse was something I had never seen before. I took mugs of tea to the Captain and crew on duty on the bridge and arrived just as we plowed into a huge wave. The water was over the top of the bridge, turning the light green. We emerged from what had seemed like a terminal dive beneath the waves for the Mary K. It was during those hours of fighting mountainous waves that it became apparent that all the lifeboats had been badly damaged, davits bent out of shape and the main sea door to the aft accommodation had sustained considerable damage. I took two empty 5-gallon drums to my cabin and tried to convince myself that if

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the ship went down then I would have my two drums to cling to. We spent over 3 days in the hurricane and were about 300 miles off course when it became safe enough to resume our journey towards the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

We proceeded up the St. Lawrence River passing the magnificent Chateau de Frontenac and beautiful city of Quebec. It was a great relief to be able to get our feet on dry land after our experience of the past days.

During our time in dock repairs were carried out to the ship. We actually had new lifeboats plus a new sea door for the aft accommodation.

They also found that our bridge, due to the heavy pounding of the waves, had a distinct lean backwards, but it did not affect the safety of the ship, so we were given a clean bill of health from the people who were expert in these matters.

After discharging our cargo of sugar in Montreal, we departed for Seven Islands (Sept Iles), about 100 miles south of Labrador, on

the St Lawrence. We tied up alongside a giant conveyer belt, which loaded iron ore into our holds. There was dust flying everywhere. In a matter of hours we were heading east towards the Atlantic. When we were about a third of the way across we encountered a storm. It was nowhere near as violent as our previous experience but it was enough to shift our cargo. The pyramid shaped load at first connection with rough seas slipped



to one side. The ship was now sailing at a fair angle which gave the Captain yet another challenge to his seamanship. A bit of bad luck with some steep waves would have turned the ship over and we would have sunk immediately. We were very lucky that the weather moderated and we were able to continue our lop-sided voyage to Newport, South Wales. But all was not to be over for us quite without incident. When we reached the

River Severn our progress was halted by running aground on a sand bank. It meant that we had to wait for the next high tide but no actual damage was sustained.

I signed off the ship on 24 October 1955 and remember being asked by the Chief Steward if I would return for another trip. It took me almost one second of deep soul searching to give him his answer. I truly believed that I had been as close to meeting my maker on that ship as I wanted to be for now. I was later to read in the seaman's newspaper 'Lloyds List' that the Mary K was overdue en route to South America. Like many small cargo ships she may have disappeared without fanfare, and I grieved for the lads that had

gone back for the next voyage. Subsequent copies of Lloyds List did not provide details of the Mary K arriving in port.

In August 2003 I received an email from Brian Entwistle who had been an apprentice on the Mary K from just after I left her, to 1958. I was most pleased to hear that the ship had not sunk, as I had feared. She was obviously built to withstand whatever was thrown at her.