

PIER-HEAD JUMP



A 250 foot “Laker” Class cargo ship built on the Great Lakes towards the end of the first World War, but completed too late to see service during that war. Many saw service during World War II with several being sunk by enemy action.

Had I known the outcome of this journey before hand I doubt that it would have made any difference. Just the opportunity of going to China was enough to excite any young man, but Shanghai....that conjured up visions of adventure that I'd only read in books.

I was sitting in a replacement depot in Manila, Philippines, summer 1946, awaiting transportation home to the States. So many men ahead of me had higher priorities that it was like waiting for a miracle to happen, when along came a note to report to the Transportation Officer at the docks and bring all my gear. I was endorsed as an ordinary seaman but had been sailing as an AB, Oiler, Cook, Mate and even one trip as Super-cargo. With almost two years of discharges and now, having completed my contracted tour of duty, I was awaiting a way home. I was offered one last assignment that could move me to the top of the priority list if I'd take it. I never asked what would happen if I turned it down. Shanghai, China was all it took, on a pier head jump, seven days at the most and leaving within the hour, take it or leave it.

Many ships were sitting idle in the bay at Manila; their fate depended on their age and the needs of friendly nations. Some of the vessels were being turned over to the Philippine and Chinese governments because they were surplus to our needs.

Everything I owned was in a dark green duffel bag with a shoulder strap. It was easier to carry than a sea bag and you could get more into it. It held a year's accumulation of valuables; and clothes were not a high priority down in New Guinea or the Southern Philippines.

Five minutes was all I needed to clear out of a tent I shared, as a civilian, with 10 GI's also waiting for their turn to go home. They weren't a bit envious of me heading in the other direction, but most of the guys said if they had to stay here another two weeks they might be tempted to do the same.

Reporting aboard just at dinner time gave me a chance to meet most of the deck gang in the mess. The crew had sailed together on several "Lakers" that they had been delivering to the Chinese, and I got the impression this was just a routine ferrying job to them. No liberty permitted in Shanghai dulled the excitement I had been building in my mind. Sea watches had already been set and we were to cast off after chow. I must have eaten like I was starving, asking questions in between bites, and had to explain that this was the best chow I had eaten in a year and it sure as hell beat the slop they served at the "5th Repel-depot" (as we called the place where 10,000 men were waiting in Tent City).

After mess I was taken to the bridge to sign the articles and get my watch and berth assignments; 12-4 is not the preferred watch but being at the bottom of the seniority, it was expected. The mooring lines had already been singled up and all hands were on deck to cast off.

A couple of Oriental men in uniforms came aboard (I took them to be harbor pilots) and we were on our way.

Three days out and we could see Formosa off to our port. The weather was fresh and the seas were following us from the South China Sea. Our steam steering engine quit on our second day out, so muscle-power took over. These ships were built for the 1st World War but were completed too late to see any war service. The 1200hp triple expansion steam engines didn't establish any speed records, 10 knots empty or loaded, but being very reliable, they saw service all over the world. Before the war many of these 250 foot Lakers were used as lumber carriers and were called "Lumber Schooners" along the Pacific Coast. There were quite a few in the South West Pacific at the wars end. A typical crew of 22-24, not counting armed guard, could handle the ship under most conditions but everyone had to do their share.

We had two men that most of the crew considered to be agitators. They wanted overtime for every move they made. One of these men refused to go on

watch, claiming to be too sick so the Captain moved him to a empty cabin and restricted him to that cabin, not allowing him to come out even for meals or to have any visitors.

After a while the guy started throwing fits as if he was drunk or on pills, slamming the bulkheads and screaming his head off at all hours of the night and threatening to kill us all.

I came off watch at 0400 and I heard pleading and crying coming from his cabin. The sounds were different from before so I called the mate and he agreed that the skipper should be awakened. The Captain and mate opened the cabin door. Blood was everywhere...he had slashed his wrists. We put tourniquets on him, but he fought like a mad man. I had to hold him while the mate tied him up. He had taken a razor and slashed his wrists, cutting through the tendons and all. I didn't think he had a chance to survive. The Captain got some kind of medication down him to make him relax which gave us a chance to clean him up. What a mess he made of himself! But we couldn't stop the bleeding.

We were less than 20 miles off the north coast of Formosa and the seaport of Chilung when we radioed in and asked for assistance. We came about and made port near lunch time. We drifted outside the harbor so we wouldn't need to clear customs, and discharged the injured man to a naval landing craft to be transported to a Navy ship at anchor. Oddly enough, the injured man's friend and co-agitator never uttered a peep during the whole incident, and in fact later admitted that he thought the other guy was a bit crazy.

Two days more to Shanghai, then a plane trip home!

We entered the Yangtze River, and traveled up the muddy river about 20 miles past Shanghai. A couple of tugs came out to escort us to the docks and off to the left I could see a cluster of vessels very similar to us laying alongside a dock two and three abreast. We were snuggled into a vacant spot to make us the third ship out. No sooner had we docked than the two Chinese military officers started laying down rules of conduct, for our own safety they said. We were not to interfere with any actions of any Chinese persons aboard the vessels. We were told to stay in the mid-ship house until transportation could be arranged, and no one would bother us. The engine crew banked the fires and we started getting our things together.

A half hour after we docked a sampan secured along-side and at least 20 coolies scrambled aboard running every which way, grabbing anything that wasn't secured. If the Captain hadn't yelled at them they would have taken the mooring

lines that tied us to the ship alongside and set us adrift.

The boarders found a reel of wire we used for the cargo booms which must have weighed a 1,000 pounds or better. They managed to upright it so it would roll, swung out a cargo boom, hooked a large block and tackle, and started heaving. Understand....that these little guys, weighing around a hundred pounds each soppin' wet, were hauling the booms out of the crutches and swinging them out all by hand, no steam to assist them. We could only just stand there and watch.

The sampan was a little over 50 feet long and had a stubby mast and what looked like a boom and sail was laid off to one side. What appeared to be a lot of oars were laid on the side next to our ship. The boarders had the wire reel over the side and started easing off when someone must have realized that they didn't have enough rope in the block and tackle to make it all the way down. I've got to believe that this was the birth of the phrase "Chinese Fire Drill". In one instant everyone became the boss, yelling orders to whoever wasn't shouting orders to someone else. Meanwhile the line was slipping down and it took all they had to slow it down and we could see the bitter end inching its way to the gang trying to hang on.

More men scrambled aboard from the sampan and tried to get a stopper to snub the ever shortening line. By ones and twos they eased their grips until no one was holding on. The stopper worked for about one minute and then suddenly it let go. It dropped about 15 feet down through the top deck, and it must have gone right through the bottom of the sampan, for it started settling almost immediately. The boarders abandoned our ship and tried to beach their vessel. The last we saw of the sampan is when it was caught in a strong river current going downstream at six or seven knots.

One of the Chinese officers returned and instructed us to depart the ship with only our personal belongings. We were to put all of our gear in one pile on the dock so they could inspect it prior to the trucks taking us to our shore side accommodations.

Steam was still up in the boilers, but the generators were slowing down and the lights were getting dimmer. The Chinese officers said that was not our worry any more. As we crossed the other sister ships to get ashore we could see how they were cannibalized. Anything that wasn't welded was gone; port holes, water coolers, hatch tarps, even the hatch covers were gone. We made it to the dock as it started getting dark.

Several trucks arrived. They loaded officers in one, seamen in the other two

with all the gear. I felt like I was being held as a prisoner of war, and that the Chinese were our enemy.

Most of the crew had brought ships to Shanghai recently and were as worried as I was, as they had never been treated this way before. As we boarded the trucks we were told not to show our faces to anyone outside the truck, no talking, and that the flap would be secured, and that all this was for our own protection.

We must have traveled 10 miles or more, stopping for no one. I could sense we were slowing down and turning one way then another so we must be near our destination. We stopped, the flap was opened and we climbed out of the truck into a mass of humanity in what looked like a baseball stadium. I found out later that it was the race track and that all foreigners were being rounded up for their protection. I had never met a communist before, I had heard of Mao Tse-tung but I thought now that the war with the Japanese was over the Chinese would come together and have peace. I heard that the communists were infiltrating Shanghai and destroying any nationalists supporters they could find, and especially Americans for they continued to back Chiang Kai-Shek. That was the reason they waited until dark to move us.

We stayed at the race track for two days eating rations with tea and cookies, sleeping on army cots with no mattress or pillow (just a blanket), waiting in long lines to use the head, and drinking water only from a Lister bag. What a mixed bag of nationalities, you name it they were there.

We were taken to the airport in the same manner as we came, we thought to return to Manila, but we were informed that we must go through customs at Formosa. This applied to any one coming from certain parts of the Orient.

We made Manila finally, and taken to a ship going stateside. She was the Kingsbury PA177. We were crowded together like sardines; the tiers of bunks were 7 to 10 high. A single pipe berth maybe 18 inches wide and no mattress. The stench drove me topside for most of the trip. Thirty two hundred men and chow was served twice a day. Some of the guys with nothing to do would start lining up for the next chow as they came out of the first chow. For some reason I was always the last in the chow line. The first groups had turkey, loaf bread and fresh butter for Christmas, but I got chillibbeans and rice.

We did experience a memorable phenomenon, Two New Years Eves. What a trip! Would I do it again? Damn right I would!!

Below is a LAKER "Steam Schooner" of Historical note



CYNTHIA OLSON

December 7, 1941, prior to the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, the CYNTHIA OLSON radioed that she was under attack by a surfaced Japanese submarine; thus becoming the first American flag merchant vessel sunk by the Japanese Navy in World War II and, unfortunately, with the loss of 33 civilian merchant crewmen.

Owned by: Oliver J. Olson Co. San Francisco, CA.

Sailing under charter to the U.S. Army Transport.

From "A CARELESS WORD... A NEEDLESS SINKING" by Captain ARTHUR R. MOORE.

Model by Bob Mader.

On display in Museum aboard SS Lane Victory, Berth 94
San Pedro, California.

photos by Ron

The CYNTHIA OLSON and her “LAKER” class sister-ships were mass produced at many shipyards along the shores of the Great Lakes for service in World War I but were completed too late for that service. They were originally named after lakes. At 250 feet in length, they were designed so they could pass through the Welland Canal, from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, then on to the Atlantic Ocean. They were affectionately called “Steam Schooners” by those who sailed in the lumber schooner trades along the West Coast of North America. They were ideal for island-hopping and entering small harbors because of their shallow draft. They became the proverbial “Tramp-ships” as they “gunk-holed” wherever cargo was available.

A LAKER portrayed the German freighter “ERGENSTRASSE” in the exciting movie “SEA CHASE”, featuring John Wayne and co-star Lana Turner. Many volunteers aboard the “Lane” sailed on these ships including our own Galley-Master Sven Ostman who was the location chef, in Hawaii, for that movie. He prepared a wedding dinner for John Wayne and his new wife Pilar, including all cast and crew.