

St Helena Celebrates International Day of the Seafarer with Tribute to Retired Bosun Patrick Williams

In 2010, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), designated 25 June as the International Day of the Seafarer as a way to recognize that almost everything that we use in our daily lives has been directly or indirectly affected by sea transport.

Today we celebrate one of our retired seafarers, **Mr. Patrick Williams** (Bosun).



Mr. Williams was a valued member of the crew of the RMS St. Helena which was the lifeline of St. Helena, crucial to providing everything of need. Mr. Williams shares some of his memories of his career at sea.

Starting Out

I first joined the old RMS St. Helena (Ex Northland Prince) in October 1978, whilst coming home on leave from Cable & Wireless on Ascension where I was employed as a Pontoon Coxswain at the Pierhead. Even though I had already signed a contract to go back, the catering department was looking for a Utility Steward, so eager to work on a ship, I took the chance. The sun deck was certified to carry thirty six passengers, but being the maiden voyage, joining from Ascension were sixty six, plus all the cabins were full, so the Captain took a bit of a risk. Rodney Anthony and I had to help with the meals due to a staff shortage. Also the weather was really bad between the islands at that time.

In those days Ascension employees didn't carry passports, so it was a rush for me, first to see Colin and Marlene Yon for passport photos, then to The Meadow to the Salts shop for a white shirt and black trousers (always wore shorts on Ascension). On sailing day I signed on, getting to know new faces and getting familiar with the ship. It was up to the UK via Ascension and Las Palmas. If my memory is right, we only did the first two voyages to St. Helena and back to the UK.

During December 1978, we departed Avonmouth, came down the Bristol Channel and anchored off St. Ives Bay (with a lot of other ships) waiting for a lull in the weather as it was really bad in the Bay of Biscay. We only anchored for one day, the next day the Captain (Martin Smith) decided to up anchor and go. I don't remember the right dates but it was a Sunday night, we were serving coffees in the forward lounge a little after nine o'clock when the ship made a sudden roll. Everybody was all pushed to one side and then the next side. Coffees were called off and all passengers were told to go to their cabins. After packing everything away, we also were told to stand down. During the night the lights flickered and then went out, then the engine stopped. That was the scariest bit, but after a few minutes we had engines again. I couldn't sleep in the bunk so I was down on the deck with my life jacket on. I was really scared. I was sharing a cabin with the late Ronnie Johnson who was Bosun's Mate at the time. Normally we took five days to Las Palmas from the UK, that time we took nine to ten. Some ships went down not far from us.

As time went on, some ratings decided to go home and I was told to do Mess Man's duties, looking after the ratings areas, toilets, showers, mess room etc. After about a year in catering, some deck ratings decided to pack it in, so the late Donald Bowers, who was a stand-in Bosun at that time, said to me, if you want to come on deck, go and see the old man right away (old man is the Captain). So up I went and knocked on his door. Those days he was a much younger man with a strong voice, 'so you want to go on deck'. I said 'yes Captain', 'go and see the Bosun, and remember, be prepared for all weathers, hot or cold'. I started off as a DHCC (Deck Hand Uncertified) and started every night on the bridge steering the ship. You must have twelve hours of steering at sea before you can go under Pilot's orders taking a ship into port.



The Falklands Task Force

In 1982 the RMS St Helena got requisitioned to join the Falkland Task Force as a Minesweeper Support Vessel to the two Minehunters Ledbury and Brecon. After putting the passengers off at Avonmouth we departed for Portsmouth. I think that was 22nd May 1982. It was time for a refit. We had four 20mm Oerlikon guns, two on each side and one of our cargo derricks was used as a RAS Boom (Replenish at Sea). After leaving Portsmouth (quite a few Saints saw us off), we sailed for Portland to liaise with Ledbury and Brecon and also to collect our helicopter. On 13 June '82 we left the berth and it was on my watch (the 4 – 8) but there was a Royal Navy rating on the wheel (steering), so I just stood on the bridge wing on lookout.

When we had to do the trial RAS to test all the gear, hoses etc. Captain Smith asked the Royal Navy Commander in charge of the rating, if his watch keeper could take over the wheel (that was me) which he readily agreed, so I had the privilege of steering alongside RFA Black Rover to test our RAS gear. Upon completion we set sail for the Falklands. Practically every day we did RAS with HMS Brecon and Ledbury. Night time was really serious stuff, radio silence, ship black out, completely different to the passenger ship style. We arrived in Stanley Harbour on 10 July 1982, cold and snowy, and after settling down and having a quiet breakfast, our lifeboat was lowered and tied up to the ship's side. Discharge was by pilot ladder.

What I will say, if no Saints had been there before the war (maybe whaling ship days), then the late Pat Tudor Francis and myself were the first two Saints to step ashore in Stanley. With other UK personal we went ashore to collect mail, (no emails those days). Every ship on group had their own number, we were RN Party 2100.

During our time in Stanley we were strictly told not to wander off the main track ways, this was due to mines that the Argentines had placed during their invasion. Boat handling in Stanley Harbour was not easy. The late Willy George took the boat in the morning and I would in the afternoon. During our stop at Port San Carlos, we anchored off Ajax Bay whilst the Mine Hunters did their job. During our time in the Falklands, where the Mine Hunters went, we had to follow.

One time in Stanley, Captain Smith instructed me to collect the Governor Rex Hunt and bring him to the ship for lunch, so Pat Francis and myself headed for the Government Jetty. After arriving, we tied up the boat and waited. I saw a London taxi cab and two men chatting, but I was looking for the Governor in uniform, so we waited a little longer, getting past lunch time now. The two men, one in black coat and cap, and one had a Sherlock Holmes hat so I got out of the boat, made my way to them and told them I'm waiting for the Governor. To my

surprise Sherlock Holmes said 'yes I'm the Governor'. Anyway, after a bit of a struggle near the gangway he was piped aboard to an enjoyable late lunch. During my time in Stanley, I managed to get my passport stamped and bought six souvenir glasses, and they arrived to St. Helena all safe. On the 14th August 1982 we sailed for home.

We weren't scheduled to call at St. Helena northbound, but due to the quick work from Ledbury and Brecon, Whitehall in London agreed to call at St. Helena for a crew change. Our route was UK, Ascension, Falklands and back the same way. During our passage from the Falklands towards St. Helena, I said to Captain Smith 'would it be possible if we approach from Egg Island, if we could go in formation, that is one Hunter in front, RMS in the middle, and one Hunter behind, sail across James Bay towards Rupert's, then go to port, head to sea, and then come into the anchorage side by side. Good idea, but one Hunter had a small engine problem so the other stayed back to assist. The RMS steamed towards the Harbour to 'what a welcome'. Again I was on the wheel steering. The flight deck was manned, the guns were manned, helicopter on show. I was the only Saint on the bridge, the rest were Merchant Navy and Royal Navy, dressed smartly in their whites. Unfortunately we did not get a great welcome home.



I didn't get off in St. Helena, I sailed on to the UK to do my courses and when we returned to St. Helena I signed off on leave. After leave I was told by Solomon's to join the 'Aragonite' under command of Captain Bob Wyatt. Only two deck hands were signed on, one cook and one steward. The rest were UK Officers. The Aragonite was called the Governor's twelve seater bus, voyaging between St. Helena, Ascension, Capetown. The RMS St. Helena was still under MOD charter.

Visiting Tristan da Cunha

One day in James Bay, Pat Francis and myself were doing some maintenance work on deck when Captain Wyatt shouted from the Bridge to put the shrouds up on the fore mast, we're going to Tristan. (In nautical terms, shrouds are wire stays to secure the mast). To me it was excitement and hard to believe. Going to school we learned about Tristan, now hopefully we would see it in reality. We had bananas roped up in the lower hold, they were green but by the time we arrived at Tristan they were dropping off the bunches. I think we took about five – six days. We mainly went to pick up the Governor and Arthur Corker who went to supervise the building of their swimming pool.

The day we arrived, and before we anchored, the Islanders long boats with pretty sails were heading for Nightingale Island. After we anchored half could go ashore, and half stayed back on board in case the weather broke out. We were there for a few days, but what was a bit scary was we only had life rafts certified for a certain amount of people, and at that time there was a college team of about twenty (Denston College) who boarded as well, plus a few

medivacs going to Capetown. I think the Governor bunked down in the Captain's cabin. We all made it safely to Capetown.

Progressing

Somehow Captain Wyatt wouldn't let us go back on the RMS, I mean Pat Francis and myself. He wanted the two Pats to stay with him, but as time went on the MOD was finished with the RMS and things got back to normal. I was slowly working up to Bosun's Mate, but what I will say, signing on MOD articles to join the Falklands Task Force was the highlight of my time in the Merchant Navy.

Peter Joey Sim always relieved Ronnie Johnson as Bosun, but when Ronnie resigned I was promoted to Bosun (Chief Petty Officer). Then along came the new RMS. Peter brought her down from the UK to St. Helena then I joined to take her to Capetown for the first time. As voyages progressed on and Andrew Weir took over, the making of the airport started to take shape. Some officers rose to the rank of Captains and Chief Engineers. It was good to see Saints progress to the top.

MV Oman Sea One

I was on ship when we heard of the Oman Sea One believed to have gone down, I thought some busy times to come. I wasn't going to stay up all night to look, so I turned in. Next morning about 06.00, I was awakened by Julian Swain (Deckhand) saying there's a man waving to them, so I said ok, get all the remaining deck hands out for this. Our emergency boat list was completely ignored, so certain crew members was boats crew. So to make it short, we put our boat into the water, there was quite a bit of swell but we got to the survivor, threw him some rope and heaved him alongside, then into the boat. He was the Indian cook, with two life jackets on. It was a bit of a struggle getting back alongside ship, but after a few attempts, we managed to get hoisted up after bouncing into the embarkation deck. Some senior officers (no names mentioned) were out of the boat and away, maybe for some clean underwear.

So like the saying is, there's always stories to tell, of good times and rough times. As for me, on the 29th July 2017, I dropped the anchor of the RMS in James Bay, signed off, and was homeward bound. With the old RMS, the Aragonite and the new one, my time at sea was thirty nine years.

We wish Mr. Williams a long and happy retirement and thank him for his service to the island of St. Helena.