

Falcon



After getting my Masters Certificate of Competence, I took a thirteen-year gap year from deep-sea ships. This period included five years with Saftug on the Wolraad Woltemade and John Ross, four and a half years in the good old SAR&H and three and half years in the UK pub trade.

At ten on the night of 20th November 1990, I was standing on a dimly lit lay-by quay in Rotterdam watching the red tail lights of the taxi that had dropped me off, disappear behind a deserted warehouse. I felt very cold and lonely. The only ship on the quay was the even more dimly lit 21-year-old Falcon. She was high out of the water, and I had plenty of time to see the rust streaked hull as I clambered up the steep accommodation ladder.

The Chief Officer's cabin didn't look much better than the rusty hull. But for better or worse, this was to be home for the next 8 months.

Little did I know that this rather dark and miserable night was to be the start of seventeen of the best years of my life. My eight months on the Falcon was without doubt the most varied voyage I had ever signed on for.

When I joined the Falcon she had just been chartered out to the USA Military. We were to play a role in Operation Desert Storm. Saddam Hussein was rattling his scimitar at Kuwait and President Bush wanted to test some guided missiles under hostile conditions. The Falcon, along with 100 other ships, was chartered to ship tanks, artillery equipment, transport vehicles, even helicopters from Europe to Saudi Arabia for the ground support forces.

After a few days we shifted to a loading berth and loaded mostly transport trucks, ambulances and jeeps. Nothing glamorous.

The Falcon was also my first experience of sailing with Polish officers. The only English speaking officers on board were the captain, the chief engineer, radio officer, and me, the chief officer.

We sailed from Rotterdam on 30 Nov 1990

Going from Europe to the Persian Gulf gave me my first experience of the Suez Canal. The most important lesson I learnt on that transit was you could never have enough Marlboro on board when transiting Suez. Marlboro is the international currency acceptable in all countries with flexible border controls.

We transited Suez on 11th December.

There is something surreal being part of a convoy of ships going through a desert. Especially when moored in the by-pass cut and seeing the north bound convey making its way through the sand dunes, the canal itself being hidden from sight. Luckily this wasn't my last Suez transit. The frustrations are far outweighed by the grand simplicity of steaming through a desert. Seeing customs officers patrolling on camels. Small mosques in the middle of the desert. Leaving Port Said in the pre-dawn dark and hearing the muezzin's call going out into cold desert air. Timeless desert images that have stayed with me.

On to the Persian Gulf. While streaming through the Arabian Sea we started being challenged, seemingly, by every navy in the world. The US Navy, of course: plus the Italian, Canadian, Spanish, Australian, the Royal Danish Navy, Royal British Navy, and many more.

Off Oman we were boarded by the US military to give us the latest mine-free routing chart. This brought home to me the fact we had a bit part on the stage of international hostilities. I mean, this was serious stuff. That was until the major delivering the safe route charts burst my bubble.

The way he put it was that the US occupation of Europe had just come to its official end. And the USA had to remove all military equipment — a lot of it obsolete — out of Europe. It appears that scrapping tanks is almost as expensive as building them. And no big market for second-hand jeeps and trucks in Europe. This exercise would have to come off the Defence budget. But if you happened to need the equipment in another war, it would come of the much bigger war budget. "And you will not read in the papers when this stuff leaves Saudi." Seems there is a lot of desert in Saudi in which to hide camouflaged vehicles. Plus, the second hand market is better there in Saudi. I never did read anything about the mass removal of obsolete US military equipment from Saudi.

We arrived in Damman on the 15th December. Damman had become a US Military area, so no border formalities. Apart from local shore crane drivers, everything was under US control. A unique experience for me — absolutely no port procedures. And this in an Arab country where Bibles are quite often put under seal along with demon liquor and Play Boys.

Operation Desert Storm was the first female equality battle zone. First time in my life I saw female stevedores. The stevedore 'foreman' was Lt Rose Peabody. A university graduate who had graduated just in time to start paying back her bursary.

I asked her how long the discharge would take. "About 36 hours." A Big Negro Master Sergeant shook the deck as he stamped to attention. "24 hours, Mam!" We sailed 24 hours later.

Once discharged the vehicles drove off towards a hangar not far from the ship. They went in European forest green, and came out Saudi dessert tan. And disappeared into the desert. Never to be seen again.

After Damman we headed south to Durban and dry-dock. Arrived there 10th January 1991 and sailed again on the 21st. You seldom get that lucky that you can miss a dry dock if you are on a ship for eight months.

After dry-dock we headed for Port Elizabeth. Spent from 23rd to 31st January 1991 there, first at anchor, and then loading manganese ore for Cagayan de Oro in the Philippines. Nothing really newsworthy about that. Except if you were to look at the bills of lading. Namibian Manganese loaded in Maputo. Amazingly creative paper work happened back then.

En route to the Philippines we called in at Singapore for bunkers. Singapore may be a litter free country, but it is not crime free. Singapore bunker barges at that time were known worldwide as being the biggest bunker sharks going. Rogan Troon, the chief engineer on the Falcon was more than equal to any Singaporean bunker thief, so maybe we got what we signed for.

Cagayan de Oro was my only visit to the Philippines. It was good to see the home country of so many of Safmarine's seafarers.

In Cagayan de Oro the agent took us to dinner. Along with a Philippine general. "General," says the agent, "let me introduce you to the British officers from the Falcon." The general laughed and said, "I know they are from South Africa, and so is the manganese ore. But where are the drinks?"

We departed from Cagayan with no destination. Awaiting further orders. The plan was to go and anchor in Singapore Roads, but soon after sailing we got orders to head for Dalian in China, to load rice for Angola.

My impressions after a two day stay in communist China. Cold and grey with patches of snow. And the Chinese Comrades did not smile at Capitalist seamen. The US dollar was not legal tender. The currency we were issued with was coupons valid only in Dalian. Each town issued their own coupons.

From Dalian we headed for Singapore. We were going to bunker there and also give the cargo-brokers time to find another cargo for Africa. Shortly after we sailed we got orders to make for Bangkok to load beans for Pointe Noire in the Congo.

This was all becoming too straightforward for the Falcon. Some fog was needed.

Thick, thick fog while heading down the Taiwan Strait, closed in on us. We could see up to the forward end of hatch No.5, immediately in front of the bridge. That left 100 metres of ship we couldn't see. Our radars were in pretty much the same state as the rest of the ship. Chinese fishing boats are made of wood. Good radars struggle to pick them up. We were on

reduced revolutions, with a lookout posted on the fo'csle. I was on watch on the bridge. The light was changing from dark grey to light grey as daylight approached, but the visibility remained 20 metres. The bridge walkie-talkie crackled to life. "Fishing boat on the bow." "Port or starboard bow?" I asked. Leaving out "Idiot". "The bulbous bow, Mr Mate".

Because we were lightly loaded, the top of the bulbous bow was above the water. The fishing boat had slipped up on it and was jammed against the stem post. With 3 shocked Chinese fisherman looking up at the lookout. The still quiet atmosphere in fog was shattered by the emergency alarms ringing. The engine was stopped. Luckily, the AB on the bow was not an idiot, but a quick thinking seaman, and he had already got a cargo net out of the fo'csle store and hung it over the ship side. The fishermen clambered up to safety.

Once the ship was stopped in the water the boat slid off bulbous bow and we put a line on it and dragged down the starboard side. The fog, having done its damage, disappeared into thin air.

When the captain, Willie Wilcox, came on to the bridge I went down to see the damage and take some photos. The wooden boat, about 4 metres wide, had a big "V" punched into it amidships. The fish hatch was clean and waiting for the days catch. The other fishing boats were busy retrieving all the fishing gear. They weren't going to take on their fellow fisherman though. One of whom was complaining of internal pain.

My photos landed up saving Safmarine some money. Years later the Chinese claimed damages. Their story? The boat sunk with all its gear on board, and a hatch full of fish.

Once we cast off the lines and moved slowly ahead, the boat sunk. And the other boats carried on to the fishing grounds. Taiwan was not interested in our communist fishermen. The company wanted us to carry on to Bangkok and land the men there. But Captain Wilcox contacted the agent in Hong Kong and asked for his advice. No advice, only one option. Land the men in Hong Kong. The agent said no other eastern port, and probably no other place would happily allow any communist Chinese with no papers to be landed without big, big issues and money. A short spell at anchor at Hong Kong, and the drama was over.

Next stop Bangkok. Another first for me.

We moored to buoys in the river. The stevedores came on board and stayed there for the whole loading operation. They brought their own 'gas kitchen' with them. There was no change of shift, they simply took it in turns working in the hatches or sleeping on the main deck. Even toilets with running water. The running water being the Chao Phraya River. Long drops were rigged over the ships side. It wasn't long before I discovered the stevedores preferred using the hawse pipes as long drops — with the anchors still housed. A compromise was reached. Anchors lowered into the water, and the anchor wash water kept running all the time.

Loaded with our beans we headed for Pointe Noire. Provisions were starting to get a bit low. But not desperate. Only that changed; we got orders to go to Beira. This meant going

round the south of Madagascar and heading back up to Beira. Would need to take on stores in Beira if we still wanted to be eating before taking on stores offshore at Cape Town.

Now what could we be going to Beira for in April of 1991? Pretty obvious really. We were going to load 5 thousand tonnes of bagged mealies from Zimbabwe. Destination? Food aid in Angola, of course. Only we didn't load 5 000 tonnes. Six hundred tonnes were stolen on the railway journey from Zimbabwe to Beira.

And we couldn't get stores in Beira either. They had food problems of their own. All we could buy was flour. UN Food Aid flour. It was legal though. Each village got an issue of flour. But you can only eat so much flour. So they could sell flour to buy other essentials.

On completion of loading the draught survey showed we were short of what the paperwork said. The Canadian agent from CARE said it was not a problem. The stevedores in Lobito would discharge every bag on the manifest. Even if it wasn't there. The stevedores there got paid by tonnage worked.

The crew change was to be off-limits in the early hours of the morning. And our budget conscious superintendent had cut our order. The cost of getting the order out on the ferry would have been too much. But said superintendent had come out on the ferry, goodness knows what for. The captain was handing over to his relief, so it wasn't to see him. Told him I'd offer him some coffee, only there wasn't any. I took him down to show him how clean and painted the store spaces were.

"Where are all the provisions?" he asked.

"On the ferry" I replied. He had the good grace to look a bit sheepish.

We arrived at Lobito on the 6th May 91, and were advised to go to anchor. They were waiting for the pilot to arrive from Luanda. How long? That would depend on when there was a ship sailing from Luanda to Lobito. Luckily we had to wait only 3 days for the pilot to arrive on a ship. But then he was tired, so we had to wait another day, while the overworked pilot had a sleep.

Finally we got alongside.

And we entered another world. The radio room was sealed. No communication with the outside world. Shore leave was allowed. The Poles were allowed ashore at night, but not in the day, when the South Africans could go sightseeing.

Cargo work was slow. We took almost 3 weeks to discharge the bags of mealies and rice. And our Canadian friend in Beira was right.

What was strange was that on the second last day of discharging there were still 260 odd tonnes to discharge. They were averaging around 250 tonnes a day. On that second last day there didn't look to be 260 tonnes in the hatch. Started cargo operations 08:00 on the 6th June and completed discharging at 10:30, having discharge a record 260 tonnes in 2 and a half hours. Bag tally and tonnage perfect.

The Canadian man in Lobito was happy with the result of the discharge operation. They managed to get 80% of the actual cargo discharged out of the harbour. He explained how difficult it was working there. The food donations were meant for starving people. The stolen food was being taken by hungry people. And a hungry person was classified as someone getting three meals a week. A starving person got one or less meals a week.

And corruption ruled. I would see a big strong man go up to a truck and have a bag of mealies loaded on his back and he'd walk out the harbour gate no problem. I once saw a pathetic old man cleaning out mealie korrels from between the railway lines on the quay. This pathetic old man was set upon by a well-fed policeman, had his pockets turned out, then chased away.

One day walking ashore in town I saw a woman half sitting half lying with her back against a wall and a baby on her breast. I say breast — it was an empty flap of skin. How did she and her man find the energy to make the baby? How did she have the energy to carry the baby to full term? And how long did that baby last?

Lobito was once a wealthy holiday resort. Now you could see buckets being hoisted up three floors in a block of flats. Toilet buckets. The building's sewage system was blocked. For years. Not a single shop in town was open for business. Shop windows empty. Did see one shop with a naked window dressing dummy. You get the idea. What was odd though, there weren't that many broken shop windows. Maybe not enough energy for random destruction?

I used to run down the peninsula that ran from the harbour to the beach at the end. The road lined by what were once grand houses. Now squats smelling of blocked sewers. The beach was still good, and used by UN personal. Once as I arrived back at the dock gates I was stopped by an army officer.

"What is the problem?"

"No problem."

"But who are you running from?"

"No one."

"Then who are you chasing?"

"Uhh?"

His sergeant explained that there are people who wear funny shorts and t-shirts run for fun. He let me go, but I could see he wasn't too sure he was doing the right thing.

We sent a crewman with a social disease ashore to a doctor. He sent him back with a note saying, "You are right. Give him a penicillin jab if you have any. I can't waste my supplies."

Finally on 6 June 1991 we sailed for Pointe Noire, which disappointed the pilot. He wanted a lift to Luanda.

Pointe Noire looked so modern and opulent. And we put in a massive stores order that cost a fortune. Far more than the ferry would have cost in Cape Town. That was my first call to the Congo. Years later when I regularly traded on the West African coast from Dakar down to Pointe Noire, I realised how primitive Lobito was. Pointe Noire is not so modern.

We sailed from Pointe Noire and drifted for 2 days before being told to head down to San Lorenzo in Argentina to load cattle food for Cape Town and Durban.

Two days later we discovered a stowaway on board. At 04:00 he was scratching around in the accommodation looking for food. Wearing ragged shorts, a torn vest and flip-flops, he'd come on board in the Congo. He was under the impression we were going to New York, where he would be given a job and a house. He couldn't understand why we weren't there yet. He was told New York was just over the horizon.

Stowaways are supposed to be kept locked up, but we decided to let him go out on deck and work with the crew. He ate with the crew. We even gave him soft drinks and cigarettes. We did weld bars across the porthole as the cabin he was in opened on to the main deck. Didn't want him doing a runner in San Lorenzo.

San Lorenzo was a first for me. And also the longest river pilotage I experienced. 260 nautical miles up the Parana River in Argentina. Cape Town to Three Sisters?

Learnt about Ox Bow lakes at school. Must admit they sounded fictitious to me. The downside of Ox Bow lakes is it's not feasible to have up-to-date charts. But it's so amazing to see these odd lakes scattered about the flat, flat countryside. On one stretch the pilot pointed out where we would have gone 2 months earlier. What was now an Ox Bow lake used to be part of the river. We were totally dependant on the skills and knowledge of the pilots. Oh, and we anchored overnight as there are no lighted buoys on the river.

The immigration officials were not interested in landing our stowaway. But he became a local sideshow. It was almost inhuman. Nearly always a stevedore or two gawking in through the barred porthole. Black people were not too common in the Argentine, apparently. But our man was no longer dependent on us for cigarettes.

After San Lorenzo we headed for Cape Town, where I signed off on 23rd July 1991.

However, our hitchhiker was not so lucky. Immigration was too busy dealing with about 20 other stowaways that day. Our man had to wait until Durban before being sent back to the Congo.

I was told our hospitality was rewarded by our passenger. He put in a claim for wages. He got something — with no deductions for cigarettes, soft drinks and being free to walk about the ship.

And that is the end of eight months on the dear old Falcon.

Incidentally, the distance travelled was a romantic 38 980 nautical miles, or a dull 72 237 kilometres. And does not include the 9 720 kilometres 'commute' from Durbanville to work and then back home again.

Les Hellmann