



Features

I soon corrected this misapprehension. Our Engineer kept our overpowered engines running in perfect condition, explaining to me their peculiarities which he had fortunately mastered. Unlike his predecessor who had caused the ship to turn back from Colombo, he was a *real* engineer.

I had plenty of recent Malacca Strait experience and told the Mate to keep a good lookout for pirates, some of whom I had rebuffed on a previous occasion. Going up to relieve him on watch at midnight, I found the trapdoor to the wheelhouse firmly closed, so went up the outside to the bridge. Those doors too were locked and when I peered through the window, he thought I was a pirate - until I assured him I wasn't. Apologetically, he told me he'd seen a fishing boat which in the dark 'looked like a pirate'.

Our two tugs kept within a few cables of each other all the way across, stopping midway to test our manoeuvring, putting us alongside each other just for practice. Off Jeddah, Port Control advised us to come in one at a time and no, no pilot would be provided. *Jeddah 24* should go in first and we would be met at the quay by local dignitaries, keen to welcome their new tugs. In went *Jeddah 24* and put herself neatly alongside the stone-walled little camber dock, which already contained many rather old and battered-looking harbour tugs. As I stood in towards the inner harbour, our tug suddenly and without warning took a sheer over to port, heading straight for a submerged reef. Port Control politely advised me, in perfect Oxford English, to straighten up and avoid the reef - which I was trying to do by pressing what I hoped were the right buttons! I felt the tug was laughing at me as she corrected herself and we entered the little dock at easy speed, to go alongside the wharf port-side-to, ahead of *Jeddah 24*. I had the Mate up forward, putting out the headlines and Donald aft with the sternlines, the Chief Engineer with me on the bridge. All was going well, the five white-robed dignitaries on the wharf looking suitably impressed, when suddenly *Jeddah 24*, astern of us, moved ahead ten feet, butting our stern, driving us into the stone dockwall ahead, causing chunks of it to drop off with clouds of dust and a great noise, while our aft mooring line somehow fouled the other tug's bridge lifebuoy, which immediately emitted a dense cloud of orange smoke enveloping the welcome committee. The Harbour Master was not pleased and ordered me out to the anchorage. Clearly this was all my fault but I suggested to him that, as we were now here, could we not remain? Never before had I seen a Harbour Master dancing with rage: 'No, get out, go and anchor outside.' Making our way out to the anchorage, I wondered bleakly how many lashes in the market place my disastrous docking had cost me. After all, this was Saudi Arabia, where people are stoned to death for lesser crimes.....

Later that afternoon, Port Control called. 'We're going to put you in a more accessible berth, Captain. The Pilot will be out in five minutes.' Nothing about fifty lashes in the market place! In fact, Port Control had been friendly and polite throughout. The Pilot was a smartly uniformed young man who asked immediately: 'Can you drive this thing, sir?' When I nodded, he looked relieved and said, 'We're going port side to the wall, outside the camber dock.' And he watched curiously as I pressed the buttons. To both our amazements, after giving a pretty little twirl off the berth, she put herself alongside the wall *starboard* side to. The pilot looked bemused and said politely: 'Well done, sir!'

By this time, the dignitaries had departed. And no, there were no market place lashings. Instead, I was given my air ticket home. Since then I have been retired - permanently!