

Timeless Memories of Old Ladies of the China Seas

By Geoff Walker

When I embarked upon a seagoing career, it was always my wish to serve on ships flying the Red Ensign or at least a flag that offered imperial validity, such as Hong Kong, Bermuda, Australia, or New Zealand, but that was not possible in the changing post WW2 world of shipping. Therefore, I must be the first to raise my hand when it comes to admitting to having sailed under various Foreign Flags or Flags of Convenience. The reality of the situation was accepting FOC's if one wished to stay employed, especially on ships trading within Asia, which was my main objective.

With the rapid expansion and "Boom" in Asian shipping during the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, it would be true to say that many of the fledgling ship owners were only interested in the cheapest of the cheap operating costs for their ships, and mainly in turning a fast buck, thus avoiding as much as possible operating their ships to the higher echelons and more costly, international standards. I hasten to add, this did not apply to all, as there were some very fine Asia based ship operators and owners, that ultimately became international "Captains of the Industry" in later years. Unfortunately, those operators that were at the lower end of the scale tended to tarnish the entire Asian cohort, during those earlier years, albeit totally unjustified.

There were some first-class owners who operated their fleets eminently in every way. However, it must be said that during 1960 and 1970s Asian owners did gain a reputation for operating rust buckets. The ship below is a good example of how the notion came about.

However, in fairness, most of the rust buckets were pre-war or wartime built, designed to perform only a few voyages (if they were lucky), hence they did not have the quality of steel in their construction, which aided their susceptibility to corrosion. This called for the regular engagement of "chipping gangs" or "side parties", for older ships, such as at Indian ports, or Hong Kong, to remove rust scale and corrosion. These gangs could achieve in a single day, what it would take ship's crews a month to complete and assisted greatly in the overall maintenance of ships.



"Kowloon Venture"
seen arriving in
Australia to load grain
for China during 1960s.
It is believed this ship
was operated by
"Venture Shipping"
who are now one of
the premier Asian
companies, with a large

modern fleet of ships, efficiently and professionally operated, immaculately presented, and maintained.

(Unknown photographer)

I had been very fortunate and had landed on my feet as I worked for several well established, and reputable Asian ship owners that had built an excellent reputation. I sailed on, or was associated with, many ships old and new, a few of the many, which follow.

“Straits Breeze”, an ex-Australian vessel sold East, captured departing one of the Borneo River ports having loaded a full cargo of logs, most likely for Japan. Formerly the “Kooringa” 3,292 GRT, single screw steamship built at Caledon, Dundee for Australian owners. Triple-expansion, exhaust turbine making 11 knots. 1959 sold to J Manners & Co and renamed “Straits Breeze”. 1965 under J Manners & Co renamed “San Eduardo”. 1965 sold to Teh Foo Navigation Co and renamed Teh Foo. Broken up at Kaohsiung in 1968.



(John Manners Group)

MV “Asia Breeze” (formerly Asia Fir, ex-Carronpark), 5328 GRT, built 1949 by Charles Connell & Co., Scotstoun. I joined in Hong Kong in 1965, then commenced a prolonged period of coasting around the Philippines, visiting many ports loading bulk Copra Husk. Original destined for Europe. However, this was not to be. Having completed loading at our last load port in Manila, we set sail. Some hours later we were forced to return due to trouble with the main engine. Over the ensuing week several attempts were made to effect repairs, but every time we headed to sea we were forced to return with a reoccurring problem.

Following several weeks, and many unsuccessful attempts by ship’s engineers to rectify the issue, owners decided to have the ship discharge her cargo and then undergo tow to Hong Kong for major repairs. Hence, we discharged our entire cargo into a Philippines President Lines freighter, by ship-to-ship transfer.

The renowned salvage tug “Taikoo” was dispatched from Hong Kong to Manila in order to tow the “Asia Breeze” back to Hong Kong. The tow, which had a duration of about 5 days was uneventful, with the ship eventually arriving at Taikoo Dockyard, where she remained for about a month, undergoing major engine repairs, prior to returning to service. Hearsay suggested, the problem was that a misalignment of the main engine bed plate was the culprit, having been sustained due to a grounding at Hong Kong during a Typhoon, some months earlier. Once returned to service the ship operated successfully until

1970, before being sold for continued trading, and renamed “Atlas Navigator”. She was sent for demolition at Bombay in 1974. She was a grand old Iron Lady.



(John Manners Group)



The compact general Cargo ship “**Cardross**” built 1948 by William Gray & CO, West Hartlepool. Originally as “**Virginia**” but later renamed “**Cardross**” when purchased by James Patrick and Co Pty Ltd – Sydney. Sold to the John Manners group Hong Kong, in 1962 and retained name. 1967 sold to Wallem and Co Hong Kong, 1969 resold to Kian Hin Leong

Enterprises, Hong Kong. 1977 reflagged Somalia and sent to breakers at Foochow in the same year.

(Unknown photographer)

Another fine vessel was the **“Treasury Alpha”** 10,314 GRT, renamed **“Tamaki”**, which I took over in Singapore in about 1983. Built in 1963 by S. A. Cockerill-Ougree, Hoboken, this was one of a class of fast 16.5 knot general cargo ships for the national shipping line of Belgium. During her time as **“Tamaki”** she was under Panama registry and worked mainly within Asia until 1985 when sent for demolition at Qingdao. A lovely old ship of her era.



(Unknown photographer)

Below, the sister vessel to **“Tamaki”**, the Hong Kong based Navegante Shipping Agency Co’s vessel **“Santa Clara”** (ex CMB) which was another vintage Iron Lady, that ended her days in Asian waters, providing many years of useful service. Built as one of four sisters in 1964, the **“Teniers”** of CMB. In 1981 sold to Santa SA, Panama (Navegante Shipping Agency, Hong Kong), renamed **“Santa Clara”** (Panama flag). In June 1984 she was sent for demolition at Shanghai.



(Bob Scott)



Liberian flagged **"Sula"** built 1943 by Burrard Dry Dock, North Vancouver. Just one of many wartime built "Empire" and "Fort" type ships prevalent in Asian waters during 1960-70s. Photographed at Thevenard, in South Australia after having loaded a cargo of grains, bound for Manila. Built as **Fort Columbia**, 1948 sold and renamed **Sunrell**. In 1959 she became **"Sula"** and was finally scrapped in Kaohsiung in 1969. Reportedly operated by Hong Kong managers, on behalf of Pacific Trading and Navigation Ltd., Liberia. (Chris Finney)

Another Empire ship **"Labuan Bay"** (ex-Clan Mackinnon). Originally built as **"Empire Dunnet"** for the British government in 1946. The **"Empire Dunnet"** was sold to Clan Line Steamers Ltd. and was renamed **"Clan Mackinnon"**. In 1961, **"Clan Mackinnon"** was sold to Mullion & Co Ltd, Hong Kong, and was renamed **"Ardross"**. In 1963, she was sold to Kinabatangan Shipping SA, of Panama, and was renamed **"Labuan Bay"**. Last seen by the author in 1963 as **"Labuan Bay"**, sailing fully laden from Sandakan, Borneo. She was a regularly plied Asian waters. Unfortunately, on 20 March 1967 **"Labuan Bay"** ran aground and caught fire at Bancoran Island, North Borneo. She was refloated on 24 March 1967 and towed to Manila. On 11 July 1967 she caught fire again and arrived for breaking at Kaohsiung, on 9 November 1967.



(Unknown photographer)

Many British built post war tramp ships found their way to Far Eastern waters in the 1960s, as UK owners began to dispose of less economical ships in their efforts to counter rising operating costs. Below, the British tramp ship **"Ripley"** originally belonging to Stephens, Sutton, and Company - Red "R" Steamship Company of Newcastle, after only 10 years of service was sold to Cambay Prince SS Co, Hong Kong (John Manners Group), in 1963 and renamed **"Thames Breeze"**, becoming a well-known Asian

trader. She stranded on Investigator Shoal in 1969 whilst on a voyage from Shanghai to Colombo with a cargo of Bagged Rice and was declared a CTL. A sad ending for such a stout vessel of her day.

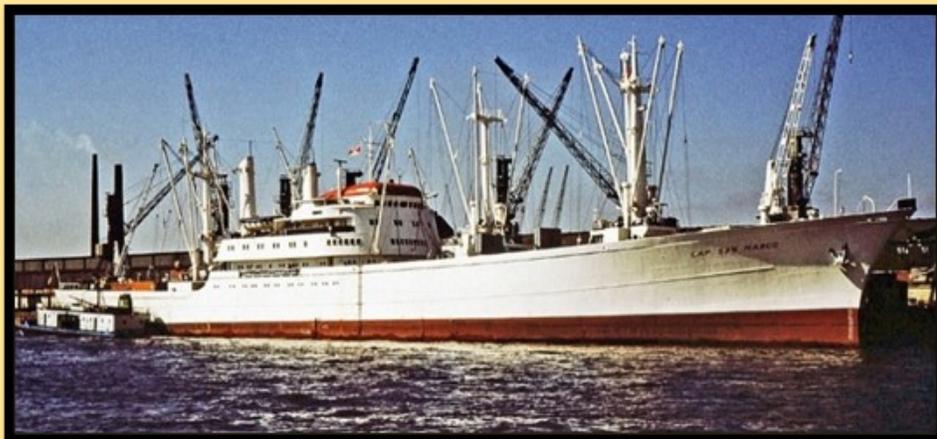


(Unknown photographer)



(Unknown photographer)

The **“Thames Breeze”** ex **“Ripley”** Built 1953, 5843 GRT.



(Hamburg-Sud)

The superbly streamlined Hamburg Sud cargo liner **“Cap San Marco”**, taken in Hamburg around 1973. The ship was sold East and taken over by the author at Hamburg in early 1985 for a voyage to the Far East. The ship was reflagged “St Vincent” and renamed **“Marco Polo”**. The ship was eventually sent for demolition at Qingdao in late 1985, following the successful completion of several positioning voyages under Hong Kong management.

This was the first of several of this class taken over by the author’s Hong Kong based managers, for working towards Asian waters, and for eventual demolition.



Ex-Hamburg – Sud's "**Cap San Antonio**", renamed "**San Miguel**" (Unknown photographer)

The 1962, Deutsche Werft built "**Cap San Antonio**" taken over by the author's Hong Kong managers, from Hamburg-Sud for a demolition voyage to the Far East in early 1986. The ship was reflagged "St Vincent" and renamed "**San Miguel**" by Hong Kong based principals. This ship was one of a class of 6 "White Swans of the Atlantic", that operated a Europe-South America service during 1960-70s. In November 1973, she suffered a major fire resulting in her midship accommodation having to be completely rebuilt. After taking delivery of the ship, and completing several positioning voyages, she was sent for demolition at Huangpu in October 1986.

A third Hamburg-Sud "White Swan of the Atlantic" was taken over by the author at Barcelona in early 1986, for a demolition voyage to the Far East. The vessel was under Spanish management of Ybarra, an associated company of Hamburg-Sud at the time of the hand over. The ship arrived in Asian waters late in 1986 following several position voyages with cargo. The vessel was already sold for scrap, and literally on her last voyage and only hours away from her final demise, when the City of Hamburg intervened and purchased her for preservation as a museum ship as she was the last remaining "White Swan of the Atlantic". The Hong Kong based managers, who had no desire to see such a fine ship broken-up, were able to exercise an escape clause in the contract of Sale and divert the ship at the last moment.

The ship, which had been reflagged "St Vincent" and renamed "**Sangria**" was subsequently delivered to the German buyers at Cuxhaven, from where the ship sailed up the Elbe to Hamburg, amid much pomp and ceremony. The vessel finally underwent substantial refurbishment to become a Museum Ship at the Port of Hamburg.

Below, the beautifully restored "**Cap San Diego**" (ex-**Sangria**) once again showing off her full splendor, captured laying at her berth in Hamburg, where she is now a museum ship and floating hotel. She undertakes periodic trips down the River Elbe from Hamburg to Cuxhaven and back.



(Peter Haas,<https://commons.wikimedia.org>)

The overcast and stormy looking day on which the photo was taken does not do credit to this splendid German built vessel of the 1960s.

This short collection is but a few of the many classic ships, worthy of memory lane, that were so frequently encountered during the in 1960-80s in Far East waters. Most definitely, the end of an era.

End

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