

MID-OCEAN PRAYERS BEAT THE devil of the deep

BY MIKE PIGNÉGUY



The *San Rangitoto* before departing Auckland



The fisherman's wheelhouse has every electronic aid

I have yet to describe successfully what happened to me that night, as it was one of those situations that have to be experienced to appreciate what it was like. But as it was the most terrifying experience that I have ever had, I don't recommend it!

I awoke at 0500 on the *San Rangitoto* after coming off watch at midnight. I didn't know what had woken me, but I had distinctly uneasy feeling that all was not well. There was an increasingly overpowering feeling of darkness, with a strong, evil influence that I felt was trying to engulf me, almost tangible and very claustrophobic. I thought at first that I must be having a nightmare, but I knew that I was very much awake and that what was happening was real.

With the all-surrounding darkness that was enveloping me like a thick velvet blanket came a very strong message, not a voice but rather in a feeling that came across me in waves that I was not going to be able to complete the voyage, and that the best thing I could do was to leave the ship, now. This feeling became so strong that I was convinced I was losing my mind as I struggled

to clear it of these terrifying thoughts.

“Get off the ship now” was the clear message coming through! I really did not want to do that, as we were just about in the mid-point of the Southern Indian Ocean on a voyage from Bunbury, in Western Australia, to Durban in South Africa. You can’t get much further from land than that!

I really had had enough of ocean voyages with my years in the merchant navy, but when the skipper, Tim Phipps, asked me if I wanted the mate’s job delivering the *San Rangitoto* from Auckland to Port Louis in Mauritius, it was a carrot that I couldn’t resist, as I was keen to return to Mauritius and make contact again with some long lost cousins.

The *San Rangitoto* was built in 1988 and had been in Sanford’s fishing fleet as a stern trawler and factory ship. Of 784 gross tonnes she was a well-constructed vessel, with the typical layout of the bridge and accommodation all the way for’ard and a large working deck astern, protected by high bulwarks and workshops on either side.

When I joined the ship in Auckland I had a slight uneasy feeling, but I put it down to pre-trip thoughts about the 7700 mile voyage. Upon entering the mate’s cabin, my eyes were drawn to a Bible that was on the desk. I thought that it was a bit unusual and, without further thought, put it on the bookshelf above the bunk, little realising what an important part it was going to play in my completing the voyage.

There were six of us as a delivery crew, equally divided between the bridge and engine room. We all kept watches of four hours on and eight off and pitched in with keeping the ship clean when off watch. Tim was not only the skipper and but also a darned good cook. He was well aware that a well-fed crew is a happy crew, and that we were!

We sailed late in the afternoon on April 1 (an omen perhaps?) and, steamed up the Northland coast.

Being in a lightship condition the *San Rangitoto* was fairly lively, and a couple of rough days in the Tasman Sea had us holding onto everything. Tim had decided to go south across the South Australian Bight. We only had one rough spell in the bight, which didn’t last long and had no wind with it.

The afternoon of the 12th day saw us steaming into Bunbury for fuel and some stores, and also to stretch our legs, of course! There was a rumour that the new owners might want the ship in Durban instead of Port Louis. I wasn’t too happy about that, as Port Louis was the reason I was doing the trip.

However, nothing was confirmed until we were three days out and well on our way, giving me no chance to jump ship! So we had another 1500 miles or so added on to the voyage, which would take a further six days. And so it was left hand down a bit and head for Durban.

The weather was fairly comfortable as we settled in for the 18-day, 4600 mile voyage across the Southern Indian Ocean. Life on board became a not unpleasant routine of watches, meals, reading, sleeping and keeping the ship clean.

All was going well until I awoke at 0500 on the morning of the sixth day and found myself struggling to retain my sanity. The “black” feelings were coming over me with increasing strength, and it was getting much harder to resist the calling of getting out of my bunk, going out on deck and stepping over the side.


It was then that I remembered the Bible that on the shelf. I started praying like I had never prayed before. As I prayed, the black, totally enveloping feelings started to ebb away. I kept this up until it was time to go down to the mess for breakfast at 0700. Tim always cooked up a great breakfast, but that morning I had little appetite and, being in the mess started to make me feel acutely uncomfortable again.

Once on the bridge at 0800 I was fine, but I told Tim what ►

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