

Chapter 5

Storm.

Surprisingly few people got off the train at Folkestone, certainly far less than I expected, considering it was known as the 'Boat Train'. I mused at the thought of where I would be now, if I had boarded the wrong half of the train at Victoria. Probably at the other end of the Kent coast by now. Perhaps that's where the 'missing' train passengers got to. I picked up my holdall and followed the signs for the 'Folkestone to Boulogne Ferry Terminal'. I had no problem passing through the ferry reception area, and once on board I made straight for the cafe, having not eaten for hours. I found an empty table, and sat down with my snack. As I ate, I pondered over the events so far, and was curious about what was supposed to happen next. I was only told, to be on this ferry, tonight.

Perhaps I would be met, when I got to Boulogne. I finished eating and took a stroll around the ship, which by now, was well under way.

The clouds in the night sky faintly reflecting the distant glow from the coastal towns, now beyond the horizon. A cold wind was blowing, instantly chilling anyone, who dared to set foot on deck.

The sea was jet black, in sharp contrast to the white bow wave, and the 'foaming' propeller turbulence, which was lit up, by the ship's brilliant illumination. 'All very romantic for lovers', I supposed. Anyway, after a good look around the cold deserted boat deck, I decided to go down to the lounge. The lounge was quite crowded, and I noticed the bar was open. I was just surveying the scene, when I was tapped on the shoulder. I looked around and instantly recognised Oonagh. She invited me over to the bar, 'To meet someone else, who was also going out to the *MiAmigo*'. She introduced me to nineteen year old Kevin Carter, a new DJ. The three of us stood around, talking for some time, during which, I wondered what other surprises were in store. Oonagh was quite concerned that we understood what we were supposed to do, when the ship docked. She also said that the French Customs could get inquisitive, and because Kevin and me didn't speak French, they may start asking awkward questions, like what I was doing in France. However, she assured us she had taken care of that problem in advance. I think Oonagh must have known nearly everybody on board that night, because the next part of her plan was brilliant.

Once the ferry had tied up in the harbour at Boulogne, Oonagh stayed behind with Kevin and myself until all the passengers had disembarked. We then went down to the Vehicles Deck where we were introduced to two French truck drivers, whom Oonagh knew very well. After a few jokes between them Oonagh turned to Kevin and told him to jump up into the cab, of one of the articulated trucks, next to the driver, 'And pretend your a drivers mate'. She then told me to do the same, in the other truck. The trucks then drove off the ferry and up the short ramp into the Customs shed. I thought, this isn't going to work. The Customs officer came over to the truck, and must have known the driver, because they exchanged a few French phrases, and burst out laughing. Signing what looked like, the drivers manifest documents, he waved us on, without even a glance at me. The driver steered the truck through the dock gates, and stopped in the roadway outside.

There, sat in an old Renault car, was Oonagh and Kevin. I hopped out of the truck, and she got out of the car, and passed him something, through his cab window. Then with a few spoken words of appreciation, he drove off. I couldn't get over this crafty manoeuvre. Oonagh would do well, working for the C.I.A. I thought, as I tossed my holdall into the back of the car and got in.

We drove out of the dock area along the promenade, and stopped opposite a seafront cafe. She told us to bring our bags, because we had been booked into the hotel adjoining the cafe. As soon

as we had found an empty table Oonagh ordered 'Cafe au lait' for the three of us, and began to bring Kevin and myself up to date, on the next part of the plan.

Apparently we were booked in for one night only, and we had to be up by 6am the next morning, ready to move. She said she was leaving then, because there were still some more arrangements to be made, and would see us in the cafe at 7am, so we could all have breakfast before we left. It was too early to turn in, so the two of us went for a walk along the seafront, but there was nothing to see. Boulogne looked a right 'dead hole', so we went back to the cafe and sat drinking coffee, and talking about what was going on at this moment, aboard the 'ghost' ship, *MiAmigo*. At about 10pm we went up to our rooms or one room divided into two with a connecting door, which wouldn't close. It had been one very long day for me, and I could hardly wait to get to bed.

I didn't get to sleep straight away, thinking of the last twentyfour hours. I thought how ridiculous it was, to have to travel over to France and then back to England, to get to the *MiAmigo*.

Unfortunately, it was the only way it could be done, because the vindictive M.O.A. (1967), made it an offence to supply the ship with goods of any kind from mainland Britain. The law however, couldn't prevent anybody travelling out to the ship from a foreign country, whilst it was in international waters. This was about to be put to the test. I must have fell asleep soon after that, because I started to dream about the raid on the ship. In it, someone had a 'SHIP IMPOUNDED' notice in their hand, and began nailing it to the mast. Knock..knock. .knock...knock... knock... I was rudely awakened from my dream by somebody urgently knocking on the door and the room light suddenly being switched on. Carter was already out of bed to answer it. As I was in the adjoining room, I could only hear garbled voices. I looked at my watch, it was well after 1am. He shut the door quietly, and in a disappointed voice told me the whole trip was off. Something had gone wrong with the arrangements apparently. The message wasn't very specific, so we couldn't be sure what the problem was. What a wasted journey we agreed, and both resigned ourselves to going home the next day. It wouldn't be necessary to get up at 6am now, as was the plan. At least I can have an extra hour in bed to catch up on lost sleep.

Shortly after 5am there was another loud knocking on door, and once again Carter got up to answer it. "Telefon Monsieur", I heard the messenger say. Carter quickly threw on a dressing gown and followed the man downstairs. I decided to get dressed, sleep now was clearly out of question. Kevin returned a short time later, and with a look of excitement told me it was, 'On again'. It was Una who had telephoned with the news, and we were to meet her in the cafe at 8am. She was sitting at a table already, when we entered through the hotel-connecting door. Over breakfast Oonagh told us about the difficulty trying to arrange a boat. Fortunately she had located another boatyard owner, and friend, who was taking us out to sea that morning. Oonagh had parked the car outside the cafe, and shortly after we had finished eating, we were on our way to a boatyard a short distance away. The first view I got of the boatyard was a great forest of yacht's masts. I hoped we weren't travelling in one of them, I didn't fancy ducking under a boom every few minutes, for hours on end.

We stopped by a shed and man came out and greeted Oonagh. After introductions to the shipyard owner we followed him on foot, along a maze of wooden staging, in between some fine craft. There were yachts of all sizes, and several expensive looking cabin cruisers were tied up. Our new 'captain' then stopped at a luxury forty foot gleaming white, cabin cruiser, and welcomed us aboard. It was stocked to the gunwales with all kinds of provisions, presumably for the *MiAmigo*. After the owner made final checks, Oonagh, who had to go back to the car for something, returned and also climbed aboard. Any more surprises I thought? I didn't realise she was going out to the ship as well. I couldn't recall her mentioning it previously, and anyway, it wasn't any of my business to ask. The engine was started and we cast off, heading out toward the harbour entrance, and what looked like being a nice sunny day. Once clear of the harbour and into the English Channel, the four of us settled down to an estimated 6-hour journey. Amongst all the boxes of provisions, practically filling the cabin, Oonagh extricated a couple of cardboard boxes containing lots of various foods to eat, and also produced an electric kettle, cups, milk, and tea or

coffee. I was starving after the so-called, 'Continental' breakfast we had eaten earlier. Soon the aroma of freshly made coffee filled the cabin, although I preferred tea, as did Oonagh. By the time we had all finished eating, the French coast was just a thin line on the horizon. The sea was reasonably calm, but with long 'swells', which made the craft appear to slide down one side of a wave then climb up the other. Luckily they were only small ones, and nobody was bothered by it. We were only cruising at about 20-25 knots, well below the probable speed of this craft. I supposed, if the boat was going too fast we would start bouncing off wave tops, which wouldn't help matters. I didn't think anybody relished the idea of calling 'Hughie', over the back of the boat.

Crossing the English Channel was fairly uneventful, mainly eat, drink and relax. I noticed Oonagh was very friendly with the skipper, and sat next to him a lot in the 'wheelhouse'. I think she must have had a guilt complex over it, knowing that both Kevin and I had noticed. Because, later on, she turned to us and said sheepishly, "Don't say anything about this to Ronan will you"? To ease her conscience we replied, 'Say what?' So that's the score, I thought, Oonagh must be Ronan's girl friend. I smiled inwardly at the thought of, what Rhonan would do if he found out. As the afternoon drew on, we started to approach the Kent coast, and the notorious Goodwin Sands, a long wide underwater sandbank, which has been the 'graveyard' of many an unfortunate ship of old. It was no problem to us, with our shallow 'draught'. However, it did have another nasty surprise in store, a very choppy sea. Waves seemed to come from all directions, probably because there is the turbulence of the English Channel and the North Sea meeting in that area. This turbulence seemed to never end, as we headed north. It was certainly a test of our sea legs, as the boat pitched and yawed constantly for nearly two hours. Carter looked a little green around the 'gills', but was surviving; Oonagh looked like she had done this trip many times. I was in good shape, but was sorry I'd eaten that last pork pie, because it didn't know which direction to go, in my stomach. Finally the sea became calmer, as we left Goodwin Sands behind. Oonagh and the skipper were looking at a navigation chart for the area, and told us we may have to change course because of a 'possible problem'. Marauding Coastguard boats, on the lookout for smugglers.

In 1975, there wasn't a problem as there is now, concerning the depletion of fish stocks in the North Sea. Therefore it was quite normal to see several groups of small fishing boats dotted along the coast, some were little lobster boats. There could be as many as thirty boats spread over a small area of sea, making it easy for small boats to smuggle anything into the country, by using the fishing boats as cover. Our own boat would probably look suspicious travelling on a dead straight course, due north, and several miles offshore. Fortunately the skipper had a good idea. We changed course towards land, to hug the coast, and slowing down, mingled amongst the fishing boats dotted all around. He had thought of something else. While Oonagh took over the helm, he had fixed up at least three, deep sea fishing rods in the stern seating area, set at an angle overhanging the stern. Any patrol boat in the vicinity would naturally think we were one of the many varied boats, out fishing for the day. Provided they didn't look too closely, and find there were no fishing lines attached to the rods.

It did the trick. We saw two patrol boats about a mile away from us, during our run up the Kent coast, but neither of them took any notice of us. By the time we had left the numerous little fishing 'fleets' behind, we were off the coast of Ramsgate. It was time to turn away from the coast now, and head out to the *MiAmigo's* anchorage in the Thames estuary, approximately 25 miles from land.

Finally, by late afternoon, the tall radio mast of the ship came into view. The ship had a '*Marie Celeste*' look about it, until two figures appeared at the ship's rail, the last remaining Dutch crew. We tied up alongside, and clambered over the rail onto a much firmer deck. My legs felt like I was still aboard the cabin cruiser, going up and down repeatedly.

After we were introduced to the Dutch crew, Jan and Joop, the only people left on board since the 'piratical' raid by the Home Office a week earlier, we adjourned to the crew's messroom. A huge jug of coffee was brought in by Joop, who poured mugs all round. I'm not sure 'pour' was the

right word to use, because it was so thick and strong, I wasn't sure whether to use a kitchen knife to spread the sugar on it.

The convivial discussion over coffee then turned to switching on the powerful radio transmitter, and getting Radio Caroline back on the 'air'. But Joop recalled Pete Chicago, the transmitter engineer, arrested just recently, saying something about the 'crystal', being removed from the transmitter, by the Radio Regularity officers. Without the crystal, the transmitter couldn't operate. Oonagh looked at me and asked, 'What can we do now'? I lifted the mug up to my mouth, and chewed another mouthful of coffee, while I mulled over the new setback. I told her we couldn't do anything without the crystal, unfortunately. But as she was going back with the boat owner, after the stores were unloaded, I told her to put a coded telephone call through to Eric Day, either tonight or early in the morning. If there's no answer ring Carl England or John Shannon, to relay a message to Eric, also coded, and ask him to send you one or two, 1187 type matchboxes, urgently for your collection. He will know what you mean. They will have to be brought out to the ship, which means we will have to twiddle our thumbs until then.

After the rest of the provisions were unloaded from the cabin cruiser, Oonagh bade us farewell and climbed back on board with the owner. Jan untied the boats 'painters', and with a roar of engines, the craft edged away from the side of the ship, and within minutes it was just a speck in the distance. With that, we all went inside to talk about the latest problems, and what we could do in the meantime. Whichever way we looked at the set back, the answer was still the same, nothing. After a feast of a meal prepared by Joop, the four of us settled down to watch Dutch TV. Jan was twiddling around with our 'Manual TV Aerial Rotator', a wheel operated device which turned the outside TV aerial around, to line up with the TV transmitters. He had lined the aerial up with a Dutch TV station and the reception was very good. Belgian and German TV programs all had good reception also. I could see the need for this rotating aerial, when you consider that the ship swings around on its anchor, as the tide changes. We could even tell when the tide was turning, because the picture would slowly start breaking up, usually in the middle of a good film, and one of us had to get up to turn the 'wheel'. At around midnight, we had a last drink and went to our cabins. It had been another long day, and then I had a sudden thought. Which 'time format' had the *MiAmigo* adopted, GMT or Dutch, (Continental) time, which was an hour in front? Jan and Joop's watches, and the ships clocks were all on Dutch time, so I reset mine an hour forward too. I now had this inner satisfaction, that I was putting two fingers up to the M.O.A. and the Whitehall dictators, by being outside territorial limits.

My cabin was down one flight of stairs from the main deck, and could accommodate up to six people, so I had choice of any of the bunks. We all had our own cabins too, which was a good thing. I decided on one of the bottom bunk beds, reasoning that I didn't have far to fall onto the deck, if the sea got a bit rough. However, with the gentle rocking movement of the ship, I was soon sound asleep. I awoke around 8am after a really good sleep, and got up from the bunk bed. At least I was still in it and not on the floor, because during the night the ship dipped into several troughs, as it turned on its anchor. I got cleaned up and dressed, thinking about whether Eric had a spare crystal. Even if he had, it was going to take some time to get it out to the ship. Its a pity Oonagh didn't know any helicopter pilots, amongst her many contacts. I had made my mind up to explore all over the ship after breakfast. On entering the mess, I was greeted by Joop, who had made a mountain of toast, grilled bacon, eggs, sausages, fried tomatoes, tea and coffee. "Help yourself", he said in his excellent English accent, and I did. The sea air must have given me a huge appetite. Jan and Kevin strolled in a short while later, and we all sat around the big table enjoying the food and conversation. After breakfast each of us offered to wash up, just for something to do. As time wore on, it did tend to get a tad boring, with nothing to do. It wasn't even necessary to make a 'Who Does What' roster, we all volunteered.

After the crockery was put away, the crew passed the time reading magazines, watching TV, or just sitting in armchairs talking. I told them I was going on a tour around the *MiAmigo*. "Don't fall overboard", was their witty comment. I decided to start at the bottom of the ship and work up.

At the foot of the main staircase was a large wide refrigerator, stocked full of cans of beer, soft drinks, spirits of all kinds. Another cupboard held thousands of English, Dutch and French cigarettes, and rolling tobaccos. When I asked Joop how you paid for the drinks and cigarettes, he told me the whole lot, like the food, was free. Back in those days I used to smoke 'rollups', so it was great, to just help myself anytime I wanted, or have the odd can of beer with the lads at night-time, watching TV. Life was quite comfortable on board. Unfortunately it wasn't summer, or we could have lounged on deck as well.

A short while later I strolled forward, to where I suspected one studio was sited, and opened a door into a record library area. It may have been used as a studio at some time, but looked disused now. The room was right up in the bow and tended to go up and down like an elevator, due to the ship riding at anchor. I hastened out of there because my breakfast hadn't yet digested, and walked back along the central gangway, with cabins on each side. Other parts of the lower deck housed

the engine room, and storage tanks. Coming out on deck again I walked forward to the large steel transmitter aerial mast. It looks impressive on photographs of the ship, but you have to stand at the base of it and look up, to see its awesome size. It's a wonder it didn't affect the ship's centre of gravity. Walking back along the deck I stepped over the combings, back into the messroom corridor, which led to the other, currently used studios, and record library. I sat down in the studio by the record decks and microphone, wishing we were 'on the air', so I could give the roadshow lads a 'plug'. After the 'mini' tour I went back to join the others, as it was getting dark outside. Next day, I climbed the outside stairs to the wheelhouse, which was mounted at the stern end of the ship. I was surprised how high we seemed to be above sea level, also I could see all of the way to the bow, over the top of the messroom and studios. The bow was lifting gently over each wave coming towards us. Everywhere in the wheelhouse was clean and looked freshly painted. There was a 'Ship to Shore' emergency radio, mounted on one wall. Navigating table and charts, and ship's telegraph with the lever set to, 'FINISHED WITH ENGINES'. I must admit the days were long, and each of us usually found something to clean, or wash to pass the time. Mealtimes became the highlights of the day, and in the evening Jan or Joop switched on the TV to what seemed like a good film on a Dutch TV channel. This caused Kevin or me to ask questions like; "What the hell is that Dutch good guy, saying to the Dutch bad guy?" This caused a lot of humour, especially when one of them would reply, " You should pay more attention to what's being said. They're both bad guys". Jan and Joop didn't need Dutch subtitles for English language films, because they could speak, and understand English, better than a lot of English people could.

The weather stayed good for a few days longer, and by the following Saturday we were hoping to get some news about the crystals. We stayed up till nearly midnight watching the late movie. We had just eaten some late snacks and were drinking our ninth cup of tea and coffee, when the picture suddenly started to break up, on the TV screen. "We've swung around on the anchor," said Joop, and stood up to turn the aerial rotator wheel, which corrected the picture. He hadn't sat down more than a minute when the TV went funny again. Once again he rotated the aerial to correct it, but as fast as he corrected it the picture would break up again. We first thought the TV was on the 'blink'. Then Jan said he thought the ship was turning with the tide. We were certainly moving a bit more than usual, and we all went out on deck. Although the *MiAmigo* was lit up like Blackpool Illuminations, the sky was pitch black, and we could only see the immediate surrounding sea, which seemed only a tad more 'troughier' than normal. The wind had got up a little, but nothing to be alarmed at. Jan told us to see if we could make out the coast lights, and if the anchor was still holding. "Try and see the channel buoy Number 3, which is only a short distance from us," he added. I could see faintly in the distance the lights along the Kent coast, a long way off. As long as they're not coming any nearer, I thought. The Thames Estuary, where the ship was anchored, is made up of a lot of dangerous sandbanks. Most certainly a hazard to any ship entering or leaving

the Port of London, therefore all navigation charts of the area show clearly marked deep channels through the maize. The channels were given strange sounding names like, Knock Deep, Black Deep, and North & South Edinburgh channels. The Radio Caroline ship was towed to a position, away from the main shipping lane, after she had lost her anchor earlier in November. She was only about a hundred yards from Buoy Number 3, in the South Edinburgh Channel, approximately 25 miles from land, in the North Sea.

Then I saw it, its wet surface reflecting our floodlights. "Over here", I shouted. "Number 3 buoy is over here, about fifty yards off the starboard bow". The others rushed over and saw it bobbing around like a cork in the dim reflection. "Is it number 3"? Jan asked, "Because if it's a different one, it means we are drifting." We all strained our eyes to see the number on it, but the darkness was playing tricks on our eyes. I think Kevin saw the white painted '3' first, half hidden from view, and we all breathed a sigh of relief. Then I commented, 'It may be the right buoy, but why are we now only half the distance from it, than we were this afternoon, maybe we have dragged our anchor'? However, Jan suggested the buoy probably looked further away this afternoon, because the ship was further around on her anchor, therefore, you had to add the length of the ship to the equation, he hoped. Happy that nothing was going on, we all traipsed back inside where it was nice and warm. If I recall, one of the lads did mention, the marked dip in temperature outside. I hoped it wasn't a bad omen.

At around 3am on the Sunday morning I was suddenly woken by a large jolt, that shuddered from one end of the ship to the other. I switched on the reading lamp but everything seemed alright, perhaps I had imagined it. Granted, the ship was pitching and yawing more than usual, but I assumed this was due to the wind whipping up a bit of sea turbulence. Then I heard shouting in the corridor, and running footsteps. I quickly got dressed and went outside and met up with Kevin, who told me that the captain wanted everybody in the messroom.

As soon as we were gathered in the mess, the acting captain Jan, told us that the ship hitting the sandbank beneath our keel caused the large jolt that we all felt. This could occur, he stated, in circumstances, like now, when the sea was being tossed around by the wind. Apparently this caused huge wave depressions, or hollows. And because we had probably swung around on our anchor over a sandbank, we must have hit it when the sea depth under us, suddenly dropped in a depression. He also voiced his concern about the safety of the ship. If this 'grounding' happened too often, a ship could break its back quite easily, he added. 'Very reassuring', I thought. Still, what

He said was true, but worse still was the present problem of doing something about it.

As far as starting the engines was concerned, "Forget it, they don't work", he continued. "The only thing we can do is, hope the weather doesn't get worse, and tune into the shipping forecast later. Oh, and don't forget to batten the hatches", he then said, obviously in good humour. He added he would be up on the bridge keeping a watchful eye. Joop, by this time had brought in a big jug of cocoa, and poured out four mugs. Jan took his cocoa up to the bridge while we went back to our cabins. After two attempts to get into my bunk, which was on the port side, I found it easier if I used the ship's roll to port, to tip me in. Once in, I thought, I could easily be tipped out again if the ship did a big roll to starboard. Luckily that didn't happen, but unfortunately, whenever the ship rolled to port, I headbutted the port bulkhead, at the side of the bunk.

At about 7am I woke up with a sore head, the ship was still going through the same pitching and yawing motions, as the previous night. I was tipped out of the bunk, and immediately realised that it wasn't easy to stand up. The ship was rolling more than ever, but luckily we hadn't hit the sandbank since. After washing and dressing, I went outside to have a look at the state of the sea. I expected it to be bad, but not as bad as it was. The sea was mountainous, with the bow rising at least twenty feet, only to crash down again, seconds later in a great surging mass of boiling foam which sent hundreds of gallons of sea spray back along the full length of the *MiAmigo*. Uttering several oaths, I spat out the seawater, and went to get a towel from the cabin to dry my face.

Over breakfast I learned we were experiencing a 'Severe' gale. Force 9 on the wind scale, blowing from the North, and the forecast for the afternoon was even worse to come. Storm force 10 was predicted for the Thames area, veering North, Northwest. Now I knew the reason for the 'Save Ass' warning, I thought I saw, under the Folkestone station sign, all those days ago. Jan's main concern, and ours too for that matter, was the danger of the anchor chain breaking. We could even drag the anchor clean out of the seabed. It was holding us so far, having stood up to several hours of stormy sea already, so that had to be a good omen. Someone needed to go forward, to have a look at it, in case it was under too much strain. I think Joop volunteered, and disappeared into the spray, emerging ten minutes later saying, "Good news, the ship is still attached to the anchor". We didn't laugh. After Joop had had his little laugh he became serious, and told Jan, that every time the bow lifted almost out of the water, the chain was under terrific strain. He also suggested we check it every hour. "It could snap anytime".

As the day wore on, the gale force winds did in fact increase to Storm force 10, as the shipping forecast had predicted. Meals became a balancing act for the cook. The large dining table was awash with spilt drinks. Anything that wasn't fixed down became relocated elsewhere. To move around the ship we had to hold onto handrails or guy-ropes whilst dodging the spray. To go from the wardroom block, housing the mess and studios, to the bridge and wheelhouse at the stern, entailed crossing a short deck area, open to the elements. By the time I reached the stairway leading up to the bridge, I had a mouth full of salt water from the spray, which was being blown clean over the bow, at such force it reached the stern end, before drenching everything beneath it. Needless to say, I didn't make that trip too often.

We had no idea how long the storm would last, so we could only make do as best we could. There was water everywhere, broken crockery in the galley and mess. Plastic bottles rolling around every-

where, some spilling their contents on the floor. I went down to my cabin, a couple of chairs had fallen over, and the floor was littered with newspapers and magazines that had originally been stowed in racks. Luckily there was no water sloshing around in the cabin, and my bed was dry. However, I didn't think I would be needing it that night. I could hardly stand up in the cabin, which seemed to be behaving like a 'Roller Coaster'. I closed the door behind me and went back up to the messroom. 'Mess', being the appropriate name. The others had gathered to clean up the broken crockery, and mop up the water.

Later, when everything was looking a bit more tidier, the captain went up to the bridge to check our position, whilst Joop and Kevin were in conversation. I got up and said I was going for'ard to check for damage, and make sure we still had an anchor. Joop told me to be careful, and hold on to the lifelines; he had put up earlier. Thanking him for his concern I left the room.

As soon as I stepped out on deck, the wind and spray hit me full in the face, so that I had to pull the oilskins, I had borrowed, over my head for protection. I staggered forward, grabbing onto every handrail, guyrope, or lifeline within reach. The bow kept rising high into the air, and dropping back again, as the large 15 to 20 foot waves hit us from the North West. I found it easier to progress forward if I timed the waves, but it was still difficult trying to maintain a balance. I had managed to get across the for'ard well deck, but I decided not to climb up to the fo'c's'le to get a better look at the anchor chain. No thanks! Not while that part of the ship was going up and down, like an express elevator to hell.

Instead, I opted for a cautious look over the welldeck handrail, at the anchor chain I hoped was still attached to us. But for how long could it stand this stormy sea? Noticing we still had an anchor chain, I went back to the relative peace of the messroom.

Later, Jan came back from the bridge and informed us that, "In his opinion the anchor won't hold out much longer. Certainly less than 24hrs, if this storm keeps up". The latest weather forecast he had heard, was more of the same, and as the engines were useless, there was the possibility, that if the chain snapped, we could drift towards the coast, and run aground on the rocks along the Kent coast. I liked his use of the words, 'Run aground on the rocks'. He more likely meant, 'Pile up on

them'. He continued, 'The best bet, if we were lucky, would be a nice sandy beach". It wouldn't be the first time the *MiAmigo* had ended up on one of those, I thought. When asked what the worst scenario was, he said that if the chain snapped, the ship could 'broach to', that is, turn side on to the sea, causing waves to pour over the side, and ultimately the ship would founder. 'If she drifted with the tide, we could be reasonably safe, if we didn't pile up. The emergency 'Ship to Shore' radio was working alright, just in case,' he added.

The rest of the afternoon was spent watching TV as best we could, with Joop rustling up sandwiches and hot drinks. It was impossible, in those conditions, to expect cooked meals. Also there was a big fridgefreezer full of soft drinks, beer, spirits, and all sorts of chocolate bars, not forgetting cigarettes, all free. It would be a pity to leave it all to the fish and crabs.

Around 8pm the storm was just as bad, and the skipper suggested we should all move to the wheelhouse, which was part of the poop deck, at the stern end. It would be safer up there, and we would be close to the emergency radio. We took sleeping bags with us, but I didn't think anybody would get to use them, however they came in handy to wrap around you, to keep warm.

Kevin, who was the youngest amongst us, began to gradually look more worried about the danger we were in, and mentioned that his mother would be very anxious. It was only natural he was fearful, of the unfortunate circumstances we were in. As far as I was concerned, the fact that we were still afloat, was the only thing on my mind. I had a stubborn faith in the old tub, and didn't think this storm would affect her, any more than the dozens she had survived in the past. But the captain had a different opinion. I could see that he was very concerned for Kevin, who was beginning to lapse into an uneasy silence, huddled in his sleeping bag.

Jan finally came to a decision, after an hour of serious discussion, and decided to radio for help. He understood I wasn't affected by the predicament we were in, unlike poor Kevin, and appreciated

my reasons for wanting to stay behind, but as acting captain, his duty was to the safety of the crew. It was obvious Kevin had to go ashore, and it was with regret, he thought I should leave with him.

Inwardly, I was cursing Kevin for wanting to go home, for it meant me having to leave also. I didn't want to go, even if the present situation was a tad precarious, I found it extremely exciting. Maybe it's because Liverpool people are said to have seawater in their veins, evolved over generations of seafarers, who have lived there, and spent most of their lives at sea, serving on fast 'clippers' under full sail. Or in the stoke holds, of old coal burning ships, struggling to stay in convoy, whilst ploughing through a storm in the North Atlantic, during WW II. Always in danger of U-boat attacks. That, to me, is real seamanship.

However, the captain's decision was final, and as we gathered in the wheelhouse he spoke to Frinton On Sea Coastguard, and told them of our dilemma, over the emergency wavelength, on channel 66. They then relayed the call to Ramsgate Lifeboat station. The reception was very bad, and the acting captain, Jan, had to turn the volume full on, so we could hear over the noise of the storm outside. Then a lot of dialogue took place between Ramsgate, and the *MiAmigo*. They wanted to know what the present danger was. Were we adrift; were we sinking, any sick crew members, how many were on board etc, etc? I suppose they were evaluating the need to send out the lifeboat.

Apparently, Ramsgate's biggest problem was the mountainous seas outside Ramsgate harbour. After a lot of verbal traffic, Ramsgate decided to pass the problem to Margate Lifeboat Station, because the seas were too rough for the Ramsgate boat to get out of the harbour. Whereas Margate was more sheltered, and probably had a better chance of launching. I got the feeling there was some 'buck' passing going on, probably because we were still afloat, and not sinking. Jan voiced the same opinion.

Our radio calls were now transferred to Margate RNLI, who asked similar questions as Ramsgate. Jan was getting a little irate at the number of times we were 'put on hold', while they deliberated on shore, whether our situation was critical or not. I think they wanted to play the 'waiting game'

a while longer, to see if things got life threatening. It was now approximately 11pm on the night of the 16th November 1975.

Because of Kevin's condition, the captain informed Margate that we had an ill crew member, and in his opinion he had to be taken off, taking into consideration the anchor chain could snap any time now. That seemed to settle the matter. Margate asked for our nautical position, and on receiving the information, informed us that it would take at least 4 hours to travel the 35 miles, probably longer in the strong headwinds. The radio went quiet then, Jan leaving it in the 'receive / standby' mode, while we settled down for the long wait.

Outside, white water was being blown up from the bow, like huge shards of splintered glass hitting the wheelhouse windows.

"This is Margate lifeboat, come in MiAmigo. Margate lifeboat calling MiAmigo come in please." The radio crackled into life, awakening everybody from the lethargy we were in. Jan immediately reached for the radio set and acknowledged. The reception kept breaking up, but we were able to make out that their ETA was approximately half an hour, and would call us again in 15 minutes, and asked us to switch on any floodlights. We were already lit up like a beacon, with large floodlights fore' and aft'. The radio crackled into life again after 15 minutes with the news that they must be very close now, but as yet everything was pitch black. "We are brightly lit", replied the captain.

Ten more minutes passed before the lifeboat hailed us, "We see you now. We are about a mile off your port side. Can you see our lights?" Of course, to see anything off our port side meant going outside, especially as the boat was coming from the south, and we were facing north. A few moments later a shout went up from our port side, Joop had seen their lights, and Jan relayed this information to them.

For what seemed like an eternity, the little boat drew closer; trying to gauge the peaks and troughs as it was being tossed around like a cork. One minute we could see it, the next, it had disappeared down a trough, hidden from us by the huge walls of water. By now we were all on deck hanging on to whatever spar or guy rope, that was at hand. The captain had told us to bring our baggage with us and be ready to transfer over. However, transferring over from one floating object, which won't stay still, to another floating object, with a mind of its own, is no straightforward task. Especially when both floating objects are next to, but not joined to, each other. As the lifeboat drew within ten feet of the *MiAmigo*, huge volumes of seawater rose into the air in the gap between us. When that wave fell back, the little boat went down into the trough with it, while we were riding on top of an

adjacent one. It was agreed that Kevin should go first. While the lifeboat crew was hanging on ready, Kevin had to climb onto the ship's rail and hang on, ready for the order to jump. Somebody had hold of him also, and when one vessel was on its way up, and the other on the way down, there was the split second, when both ship and boat drew level with each other. The distance between the two vessels kept varying also, making it a dangerous operation. I thought the risks of getting mashed up, by falling in the water between the ship and lifeboat, were far greater than actually staying with the ship.

"Throw your suitcase over quickly, and jump", shouted one of the lifeboat crew. Kevin let go of the ropes and jumped across the gap just as the boat was on its way down a trough. He landed heavily on the small cluttered deck of the lifeboat, but was quickly grabbed by a couple of crewmembers, and taken into the small cabin. "Your turn Ron" said Joop, as I looked at the widening gap between both vessels. Gradually the lifeboat coxswain steered the boat back, as close as he dare, to our port side. I climbed onto the rail as Kevin had done, and grabbed hold of nearby guy ropes. Suddenly a huge pair of hands grabbed hold of my belt, at the back. "I have got hold of you,

I will not let you fall". It was Joop with a big grin on his face. I told him I appreciated his confidence in me. Then on the order, I jumped the widening gap and landed clean on the lifeboat's deck. My holdall followed, and I was ushered into the cabin where Kevin was nursing a

bruise. While we were still alongside, Jan passed over a small crate of either vodka or gin, 'in appreciation', to the lifeboat crew, and the coxswain soon found a 'hidey hole' for it. I thought they certainly earned it. We waved our goodbyes to the two remaining Dutch crew, and pulled away from the side of the *MiAmigo*.

Then an odd thing happened, instead of turning for port, we started to circle the ship at distance of a hundred yards. The lifeboat was moving slowly, just maintaining headway. It was an uncomfortable experience as well. Because as we headed north up the starboard side of the *MiAmigo*, the sea hit us head on. Then when we turned to cross the ship's bow we were side on to the storm, this caused the boat to roll over a lot. Moving south, down the *MiAmigo's* port side, was the least stomach churning, as we had a 'following sea', and the wind was behind us. We circled the ship three times, during which time; a lot of radio conversations were being passed back and forth to Margate. It appears the Dutch crew had been asked, if they were sure they didn't want to be taken off, while the boat was still here. From what I could gather, Jan had a difficult decision to make. Was he prepared to take the chance, and stay with the ship, hoping it would ride out the storm, or grasp this last chance to get off, before the anchor chain snapped. The lifeboat crew were getting a tad irritable by now, and I overheard one of them say, "I wish someone would make up their mind". The same crewman turned to Kevin and myself, and said, that their HQ had ordered them to remain alongside the *MiAmigo* until further notice, in case the Dutch crewmen changed their minds. Finally, after a long half hour had passed, the lifeboat radio crackled into life again, informing the boat to return to Ramsgate, rather than Margate, because of Ramsgate's more southerly protection from the elements. The decision had finally been made. It seems that the Dutch crew had decided to stay with the ship, against the advice of the lifeboat control station. With the problem finally sorted out, the lifeboat engines roared into life, and we started on the long three hour run back to port. Both Kevin and myself pondered on the fate of the *MiAmigo* during the next few hours. Our own danger was not over yet, as we climbed over mountainous seas, hardly making any headway. We did have the advantage of a following sea, so we weren't thrown around like a cork as much. The wind was behind us, howling like a 'Banshee' in the rigging. However, that didn't prevent the storm lashed spray from being blown over the stern, and into the rear of the cabin, where I sat. I had been given a rug to put around me, and over my knees, and every so often, I had to shake half a gallon of sea spray from it. Still, we kept up a humorous camaraderie with the crew, during our roller coaster ride back to port. One of them jokingly apologised for the cramped conditions, adding, 'Never mind that, just wait until you want to go to loo. You have to lean over the stern rail, and hang on tight'. I'm glad he thought it was funny. I recall that it was between 6-30 and 7am when we tied up in the harbour at Ramsgate. Both Kevin Carter and myself stepped from the lifeboat onto the lower stone steps of the harbour wall. It felt really strange to stand on something solid for a change. My legs were still doing a 'fandango', as we both climbed the steps up to the roadway. Unfortunately, there was an unexpected welcoming committee waiting for us on the quayside, made up of, Customs officers, Kent police, press reporters, and BBC TV. The press cameramen started popping flashbulbs, and the TV men and reporters asked us dozens of questions. I hadn't expected this unwanted welcome, in fact I didn't think anyone would be here at all. Both Kevin and myself had a cover story in the event of being questioned, and had rehearsed it word perfect. Part of the story was to deny being on the ship, for any other reason than as visitors, so when the press and TV questions began, we would only comment on being on board, as such. Adding for good measure, a couple of 'porkies', about being, 'Glad to be off the *MiAmigo*, and back on dry land'. I read in the London evening newspapers, later that day, that some reporters had labelled us, 'Two Seasick Irishmen', in one, and, 'Two drunken Irishmen', in another. The following morning, a couple of 'nationals' labelled us 'Drunken, and Seasick, Irishmen', which compounded the ignominy. I was however, amused at their description of me being 'drunk', considering I Don't drink. But I might possibly do well in a, 'Tea Drink Anybody Under The Table', contest.

However, I thought the criticism levelled at the Dutch acting captain, by one or two newspapers, a day or two later, was unfair. Suggesting that, 'It was a 'con' trick to call the lifeboat out, just to take off, two drunken Irishmen'. These comments were in bad taste, making it appear, that the acting captain simply wanted a taxi service for Kevin and me, therefore risking the lives of the lifeboat crew. Kevin was ill, and the captain had decided to call for assistance, based at the time, on his experienced opinion, of the danger the *MiAmigo* was in.

Dawn was only just breaking as we walked up the quay to Ramsgate Customs Shed. This was only a formality, as neither of us were carrying anything other than personal possessions, and we were soon outside again, followed by the media, but led by police officers, into the nearby Police station, for 'questioning'.

We weren't put in cells, but asked to follow an officer to what appeared to be a dingy interview room with no windows. After a short wait two mugs of tea were brought in, and without saying a word the officer went out again closing the door. Through a glass in the door I could see one of them loitering by the door. Was that in case we tried to walk out? Over mugs of tea Kevin and I went over our 'stories', to make sure we wouldn't contradict ourselves. We wanted answers to several questions also. For instance; Were we under arrest, and if not, why are we not allowed to go? We wondered what the 'guard' standing outside the door would do, if we just got up and walked out of the room. Also, shouldn't we be allowed one telephone call, like what happens in the movies, and where is our attorney?

I decided to put something to the test, and told Kevin I had to go to the loo, "So lets see what happens next"? I said. I could still see the 'guard' through the door window, and got the impression he was trying to pretend, he wasn't on sentry duty. I stood up, walked over to the door, and tried the doorknob. It wasn't locked, but immediately, the officer turn around in panic, to face me. He quickly composed himself, and tried to feign a look of unconcern. I asked him to point me in the direction of the toilets. Instead, he told me where to walk, and started to follow me. He was even waiting for me, when I came out, and promptly followed me back to the interview room. I felt like asking him if I was a prisoner, the way he was acting.

We waited in the room for nearly an hour, then an officer came in and asked Kevin to go with him, to answer some 'routine' questions. He was gone for about half an hour, and then it was my turn for the interrogation. At least Kevin came back in one piece. His fingernails hadn't been pulled out, or his clothing torn, revealing bloody weal's across his back. I stood up and followed the 'guard' through some offices, and up some stairs to what looked like the Gestapo HQ. I was ushered into an office, where a senior officer was sat at a desk. He invited me to sit down, and looking through some papers, asked me if my name was Ronald Doyle, to which I replied in the affirmative, seeing as the media had that information already. Then started the 'cat and mouse' game. "Also known as Ronnie Dee", he asked? I replied, "No", which I think upset him. He then tried to get me to admit, I used both of these names, but I stubbornly refused, telling him that he must be confusing me with somebody else, with the name Dee. He gave up on that question, after about ten minutes of parrying words, when I told him that, I knew of a 'Ronnie Dee, whom I believe, lives in Liverpool. "I believe he runs a disco", I added. He obviously didn't believe me, but it was my word against his, as he was trying to gain evidence from what I said.

"Ronan O'Rahilly", he suddenly continued. "He is the owner of Radio Caroline, isn't he"? I was supposed to say 'yes', or so he thought. "Ronan who"? I replied. We continued to play cat and mouse games, with me denying any knowledge of who owned the ship. He wanted to know why we were on the ship, suggesting we were there to operate the radio station. 'What an incredulous idea, to think that', I replied. 'We were out there on an extended visit, when the storm blew up'. And so, the 'charade' continued, for another quarter of an hour, before he told me I was free to go. As I was leaving his office, he said that we would both hear shortly if there were to be any charges.

We had been there for nearly four hours and had only been given a mug of tea, and nothing to eat. The last time we both ate was around 5pm the previous day, and that was only a sandwich. We were treated like common criminals, in that police station, and afforded even fewer rights. What really is obnoxious about all this, is the Gestapo style interrogation, we were put through, under duress, and without any legal representation, which we should have been entitled to. Had it been the present day, and we had just smuggled in a hundred or more, illegal immigrants from the *MiAmigo*, we would have been given the 'red carpet' treatment, by the authorities. Then we would have been given transport to a hotel, all clutching new, free social security benefit vouchers. As Kevin and I walked the short distance to Ramsgate railway station, we reflected on both of our interrogations, and how we had told them nothing. It was even better than expected, because both of our answers to police questioning, corresponded on every count, just like we had rehearsed it. We had a while to wait for the London train, and as we were both hungry, ordered tea and sandwiches in the station buffet, where the talk turned to the next developments. Kevin said he was going straight home, because his mother would be very worried. I told him I needed to see Rhonan when I got back to London, before I could return to Liverpool.

About an hour later the train drew into London, and we both bought the London evening newspapers. On the front page of the London Evening Standard was the large heading; 'Radio Caroline Drifts In Estuary Gale... SOS APPEAL BY POP SHIP'. This was followed by the story that, the reporters had gleaned, from our meeting on the quayside. On that particular day, as I recall, the liner *QE 2* had been in trouble somewhere, but that ship's story wasn't as important as the *MiAmigo's*, and was relegated to the back page.

Kevin and I bid our final farewells to each other, doubting whether we would ever meet again, unless the DPP wanted to ridicule themselves, by making a court case out of, 'Two drunken Irishmen went to sea, in a little pea green boat.....'

I found a telephone kiosk and dialled the number I had been given, 'For emergencies only'. It was Rhonan on the other end, and he told me to meet him at a cafe in Kings Road, as soon as I could make it. I didn't have much money left, and was lucky to have enough to get there. I arrived before he did and sat drinking a cup of coffee, thinking about my last meeting in Kings Road with Oonagh, and how much had happened since.

Rhonan walked in, just as I was finishing my coffee, and sat down at the table. We talked about the latest occurrences, and who was left on the ship. Finally, he stood up and handed me some money, saying how unfortunate it was about the storm. He added that he needed time to plan ahead, and didn't have any other ideas, other than assessing the damage to the *MiAmigo*, after the storm. I could see he looked worried about it all, and as we shook hands, I tried to reassure him that the 'Grand old Lady' was in excellent health when I last saw her.

It was with much regret, that I walked into a chilly Euston Station that evening, of the 17th November. The next through train to Liverpool wasn't until 10pm, which meant a wait of over two hours. Rather than hang around any longer, I opted for the 8pm London to Holyhead train, which was known by the interesting title of, '*THE IRISH MAIL*', even though it meant changing at Crewe.

The platform was deserted when I made my way to one of the empty carriage compartments. I wasn't surprised there was nobody on it, because the compartments were absolutely freezing. It was so cold I was shivering in the seat. Even when the huge steam locomotive was coupled up, it took ages for the heat to reach the compartment.

With the train still virtually empty, we pulled out of Euston Station into the dark night. By now, the carriage was starting to get warm, and my eyelids began to get heavier and heavier. I switched off the compartment lights so that I could see the outside world go by, and snuggled into the seat for a much needed rest.

The clatter of train wheels crossing over a large rail junction, to the north of London, briefly awoke me. I looked out of the window, and on the far side of the junction, high up on what could

have been a water tower, a large red neon sign was brilliantly lit, displaying the words; *GO IRISH MAIL*. Such a nice farewell gesture I thought, as I dozed off again.

One of the things that later came to light was how wicked the Marine Offences Act is. I had no idea at the time, that tugboat owners wouldn't go out to help the ship during the storm that day, for fear of contravening the MOA. Lives could well have been lost because of it.