

# 'Not all gloom and doom': Seafaring on the Cape Mail during apartheid

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Most of my adult life I have kept a journal. The entries have been intermittent, but I seem to have recorded all the significant memories and impressions of my life. This is not meant to be an academic analysis: rather I hope it will be an insight into how one woman decided go to sea, in the 1960s, when it was not the customary thing to do.

More often than not it was a man's world. Looking back, even then, I was struggling to understand inequalities based on gender and race. My father was in the Royal Navy and as a child I loved listening to the stories of his time spent at sea. (My father also taught me about feminism.) I was convinced the sea would be my path (or should I say my wave?) in life. At the time I did not realise that although women were allowed to join the Royal Navy we could not go to sea. Consequently I joined the merchant navy in 1966. This was a decision that would change the rest of my life – and how I would to live it – in so many ways.

I attended a medical in the offices at the Cunard Building, in my home town of Liverpool. It was a farce conducted by a retired doctor in the employ of the shipping company. The main element was an eye test in which you merely read, from a distance and with both eyes, letters on

a chart. That was the only time I have had private treatment! The shipping company I signed up with was Union Castle. My ship was the S.A. Oranje sailing to South Africa on the Cape Mail. My home port was to be Southampton. I found it quite strange that, living in one of the largest ports in the world, I had to travel down country to sail from Southampton. Even stranger, I was classed as a merchant seaman. Quite often when travelling by train (before the 1966 strike we were given concessionary rail travel), I was asked for proof of my identity as I looked very much like a woman, not a man – as you can see from the photograph in my pay book!

While sailing in and out of South Africa I became very aware of the segregation forced on the black people of this beautiful country. I witnessed apartheid at first hand: the first time was travelling on public transport. I noticed that a thick black line was painted, from the floor up the side and on the ceiling of the bus, with a notice stating 'Non whites should not pass this line'. I just could not understand why this was happening in the supposedly 'free world'. After all, my father like lots of other men and women had not long ago fought a world war to bring free-



The author's Seaman's Record Book. (Photo: author's collection)



The author (right) with two South African passengers. Such was the total racial segregation of the apartheid regime, I was asked to pose for the photograph because the women had never before seen a white person serving. (Photo: author's collection)

dom to the peoples of Europe and the Far East.

Racism seemed to have moved from one continent to another. I was not aware at that time of similar segregation happening in some parts of the United States. Lack of knowledge of other nations seems strange now, the world feeling so much smaller today – the global village as it is called. Although I was an active member of the Labour Party, I really did not know what was happening in the wider world of the mid-1960s – especially not in Africa. My mind was more concerned with issues around equality for women: which it still is.

Not all of the white population supported apartheid. I had read *Naught for Your Comfort*<sup>1</sup> by Father Trevor Huddleston who made a brave stand against the barbaric treatment of black people in their own country. He openly opposed the government, police and some of the Christian denominations for their support of apartheid. After being recalled from South Africa the apartheid authorities barred him from returning. Recently reflecting on my years at sea also reminded me of the brilliant Lancashire cricket player, Basil D'Oliveira, whose plight brought to the fore many issues pertaining to South African apartheid's treatment of the country's 'non whites'.

Witnessing apartheid did not mean you had to comply with it. One of my friends and cabin mates – we were allo-

cated four women to a cabin – came from Scotland. Her mother took in students, one of whom came from one of the townships outside Cape Town. He used to give my cabin mate items, large and small, to take to his mother in the township. Many of these items were too expensive or impossible to obtain – e.g. soap powder, first aid equipment, pencils, notebooks, wool, sweets, tobacco, children's clothes and so many essentials. A black person could not afford any of these items, and little else either, on their meager wages. We were glad to do as much as possible to help.

If visiting a township rules required us to obtain a permit at the nearest police department. I cannot remember the full name of the department we needed to contact – because we never did! My friend and I got a taxi and worried about the consequences later. We noticed mostly women, children and old people around and about the township. I did not realise the men had gone to work camps, merely coming home about once a year. This put a very large burden on the women bringing up the children, while also having to go out to work. Their work was mostly of the domestic kind: cooking, cleaning and working as nannies for white people. I could not comprehend how white people who thought a black person was inferior would nonetheless have them looking after their children, in some cases nursing them.

We planned to be back on the ship by nightfall. We knew there was no dusk in this part of Africa: it was light and then suddenly dark. Not realising how late it was we had to find our way back without being noticed. We got a taxi to take us to the ship, and had to lay out of sight on the floor of the cab, until we were in a safe area. Unfortunately, the cab was stopped and we were questioned. After trying to explain to the white police officer the reason for the visit to a township, and it being our first visit to South Africa, he gave us a warning never to repeat the 'error' again. I also think it would have been a bit difficult explaining to a large shipping line that two of the women crew were in custody. We both thought that if we had asked permission it would have been refused.

Why should we need to ask anyway? Repeating the same journey at a later date led to the two of us being detained in a cell overnight, with the Master at Arms (the ship's on-board police) having to come to the station to retrieve us. We were treated well in the station, but there were serious consequences when we returned to the ship. We lost a day's leave and a day's pay and were warned to behave or it might be our jobs next time. We still made the journeys, but it was decided between a few of the women to take turns so it was not obvious. We were always back before dark and kept quiet about our exploits. The Master at Arms would often say 'Go carefully'. We did!

The family and friends in the township of the student back in Scotland were so kind to us. What little they had they wanted to share. I really felt so privileged to meet people who had so little but wanted to give so much. There were so many injustices. I would like to find out what hap-

pened to them and how the family got on, but have mixed feelings about the prospect. I would like to see the outcome, but am frightened because the thought of the worst happening would leave me in despair.

My time at sea was not all gloom and doom, some very funny things happened as well. With four women to a cabin, you had to be able to get on with each other and luckily enough in the main we did. All wearing the same type and colour of uniform, our start time, before the 1966 strike, was 5.30am. It meant you needed to be on your toes, which I was not always. One morning I was trying to get into what I thought was my uniform, only to discover it was my cabin mate's: she being 5ft 2in and myself 5ft 7in, my feet size six, hers size two. I wondered why my feet had swollen so badly overnight, perhaps caused by some terrible disease!

I was very fortunate to meet Trevor Huddleston, much later in his life and mine. By this time he had been appointed a bishop and I was a union activist working in local government. He spoke at the annual conference of the National Association of Local Government Officers<sup>2</sup>. I was not too sure if I should speak to him: to tell him that the reading of his book had made such a difference to the whole of the way I lived my life. I did tell him, and I am glad I did. This tireless campaigner against apartheid died in 1998.

The strike in 1966 was another learning curve. I remember waiting in the line-up for my strike pay and the picket duty roster. I had to make it very clear that, as a woman, I still wanted to do my share of duty on the picket line. The officials did not want women to take such an active role in the strike. I did my turn in high heels and the best coat and hairdo I could afford. You could be a well-groomed woman and activist! My poor brother who was also in the merchant navy tried not to worry too much about his older, mad sister. At least being on strike at the time enabled me to see England beat Germany in the 1966 World Cup on a beautiful, sunny day.

Marriage in 1968 brought an end to my seafaring career as, at that time, women who married were discharged from the service. A person whom I met while on that strike, came passing through my life again much later. When I did meet him again it was at Ruskin College in Oxford. He was there to speak at a public meeting in 1996. When our paths crossed the first time, he was a leading figure in the 1966 seafarers' strike. He went to Ruskin College, was later elected to parliament and then became deputy prime minister. It was John Prescott. Much later the years 1995-96 were significant in my life when I also went to Ruskin College, enrolling for the Diploma in Women's Studies. Years after my time at sea I am still trying to understand the causes of inequality: not just in gender, but in race, class and education. Today I am still seeking answers. The time I spent in the merchant navy was a very good learning curve, although I did not realise what a difference it would make to my future life and how I lived it. My experiences proved useful yet again: knowing how to live in a community was very handy at the college. But Ruskin is another story, for another time.

#### Notes

1 Trevor Huddleston, *Naught for Your Comfort*, London & Glasgow, Collins, 1957.

2 Now part of Unison.

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