

# Lighthouses, Keepers and Ships I have Known

By Jack Secker

In 1969, whilst driving over the Story Bridge, Brisbane, I saw a very good-looking ship moored on the far side of the river. This vessel called to me, and I just had to find out more about her. I eventually found my way to Merthyr Road, New Farm. There at the end of the road was the berth of the MV Cape Moreton, Lighthouse Tender vessel. To me she looked beautiful, and I was going to join this ship if I could. My search took me to the Australian Merchant Navy offices in Brisbane where I was told, "you don't have enough sea time to join the regular Merchant Navy" 10 years in the British MN wasn't enough, but the 'Cape Moreton' wasn't anything to do with them anyway. That was a Commonwealth Government concern.

This led me in turn to various Government offices until at last I arrived at the office of the Commonwealth Dept: of Lighthouse Services. Here I was asked relevant questions regarding my sea time. My discharge book was perused. After a couple of interviews I was given an entry pass into the Lighthouse service depot in New Farm and told to board the Cape Moreton and speak to Commander H. Chesterman, (Ex R.A.N.)

I walked into the depot and down to the wharf and was not challenged nor even asked for my pass. After boarding, no gangway watchman, my instincts took over and unerringly steered me to the Captain's accommodation. My interview with him was short to say the least. He asked my name, what sea experience I had, looked at my discharge book and the certificates therein and told me to start next morning. The main reason for such a quick decision, I had a genuine lifeboat ticket. Apparently I was the only one on board that had such a thing. Good on yer Vindi!!!

My work on this vessel was so varied, that it is a story in itself for some other time perhaps. This one is about the Light keepers and their families and the style of living, moving around and sometimes their woes. In the main, they were a good bunch of people, most were families, very few were just couples. This hardy group of characters lived on the light stations and just had to get on with each other. Most lights had three keepers and officially they worked 8 hours on and 16 off. However, in any sort of emergency, all were on a 24-hour call. Their lives generally were pretty idyllic.

Each family had it's own house, usually furnished, but most families had furniture of their own. Some more so than others. When a keeper was moved from one lighthouse to another, it was almost always for a step up the ladder. It, of course, always entailed the movement of the whole family, including furniture, kids, pets, plants and anything else that was considered as part of their household. We sometimes had a family aboard for as much as 3-4 weeks, depending on where they were going from and to. The keepers of course were expected to join in our work as we made our way to their destination.

Cape Moreton light was the most prized destination as it was only a couple of hours by boat from Brisbane. A couple of times too, when a medical emergency happened there, a light plane was landed on the ocean beach at low tide to recover the patient. Of course as time went on, helicopters were called into use when needed.

The next favourite place was Low Isles, a few miles North East of Cairns, another wonderful place. There were always some visitors at this island so the keepers never lacked much of a social life. Next on the 'want to go to' list was, I think, Pine Islet. This is a very pretty place with heaps of pines, small, secluded beaches and some great rock fishing. The keepers of course all had their work to do at all times. Not only did they maintain the light, but also the machinery around the place, and the grass mowed and flowers growing. All the stations were well looked after. The brass and chrome, polished and gleaming and paintwork always seemed fresh. The men, and the women, kept everything clean and tidy.

One keeper and his family that we moved, from Dent to Booby Island, we had on board for almost 4 weeks. They had three mini 'whirlwinds' with them. They called them their children. After 24 hours we had our own names for them, not one of them polite enough to say in front of the lady of course. They didn't seem to see what a problem they were, and the potential trouble they could get into. The least of which was to see one or all of them disappear over the side of a moving vessel.

Dad didn't seem to bother himself with the kids too much. He was with a crowd of workmen all day, and most evenings. Mum was absolutely flat out just trying to keep an eye on these three imps (two boys and a girl in the 7-10 year age bracket). Eventually, for their own safety, the skipper took control. He laid down rules and guidelines, and penalties for noncompliance.

The kids tried it out of course, but they had NO chance of cheating. They now had nearly 30 pairs of eyes watching and reporting. Each was found guilty of noncompliance in the first couple of hours. The penalties, which the kids had agreed to, ranged from, peeling spuds to making bunks to scrubbing (washing) decks. Capt Chesterman was a very inventive jailer.

He certainly could find things that the kids didn't like to do, but had to work through to completion. I think that was what hurt them the most. Once they started a penalty, it had to be completed, even if it stretched into the next day. Suddenly, our little whirlwinds became just puffs of wind and every one heaved a sigh of relief.

Our most entertaining pet came from Pine Islet. This was the pet goat of the wife of a lightkeeper that was retiring. They were both elderly and had decided to pull the plug and find a quiet place on the mainland to spend their time.

They lasted less than 12 months, and were back again the next year and back to Pine Islet. They said they couldn't stand the noise and the hustle and bustle of Hervey Bay. This was in 1970-71. At that time, Hervey Bay was a real sleepy backwater of a place. Anyway, back to the goat. We all knew about goats. Some of our islands abounded with them. They stank. So when we were told that there was a pet goat boarding, there was much consternation among the crowd. We wondered, 'where was this beastie going to be housed'.

It was learned that the Lady insisted on keeping it in their cabin. Now our lovely MV "Cape Moreton" is totally air conditioned, with about a 60% of air re-circulated. What was goat going to do to our comfort? Much speculation. It was suggested that we drop said goat, accidentally, over the side during embarkation. This idea was scotched as the Lady carried the beast in her arms.

It was gradually noticed, as people passed this goat, that there was no 'goat' smell. In fact it smelled more like a well-tended baby. Well, it was a baby goat. The light keeper arrived and explained, that his wife's 'baby' had had an operation to take out the scent glands, this of course stopped the smell. It also effectively made him into a eunuch as the lady goats are apparently attracted by the male smell (stink?).

Anyway this little goat was gradually accepted as a normal pet and would go all over the place on the ship. Up and down the ladders to all decks. It loved to jump up onto chairs, benches and hatches to have its ears rubbed and stroked. Now, on our after mooring deck, there was a hatchway for loading stores down to the galley. The goat was particularly fond of jumping up on this hatch lid and dancing around and listening to the noise it made. The clacking hooves and the thumping echo seemed to please him. It was also a good seat for three or four bods whilst having smoko.

Then one morning at smoko, goatie rushed around the corner of the housing and leapt onto the hatchway. No one even had a chance to tell him that the hatch was open. There was not even a bleat of terror, just a horrible thump as he hit the deck some 12 feet below. At that moment "Mum" came around the corner. No yells, No screams. Just a horrified silence as around 20 guys looked at her. She moved to the hatchway, with the bosun in close attendance and looked down. Next instant she was yelling, 'what the hell do you think you are doing'

**Bosuns report.** "That stupid goat was sort of standing there looking up at the mistress and whimpering. After a fall of about 15 feet, including leap, hitting a steel deck, it was actually standing up. It was rescued by the crew and restored to owner. It did have a broken foreleg".

**General report.** The Lady didn't exactly say those words, but owing to the delicacy of our reader's sensibilities, the author refrains from stating actual wording. (Use your own imaginations. It was however flowery to say the very least).

When the ship visited these outposts of civilization committed to the safety of all mariners, it was a gala day for the inhabitants. Although the main purpose was to restock the supplies of the light station,

it was also a time for the ladies to show themselves and their culinary abilities to a fresh group of people, namely, the deck crew of the Moreton. We were always on a time limit of course, but morning and afternoon smoko was a must.

I think the lady keepers would have made 'Chesty's' life a misery if he hadn't time budgeted for those. It was always a feast of cakes, cakes and more cakes. Tea was of secondary consideration. Even with all the bonhomie going around at those times, we had to be careful neither to compare the food NOR to compliment one lady more than any other.

The islands that had kids on them, which was most of them, had a holiday when the Moreton turned up. The kids were normally allowed to come on board for a couple of hours just to get off the island for a time. These were all young kids. Once a child got to high school age, they were sent off to boarding school to get the education.

This wonderful ship that I sailed in, the Cape Moreton, took over her duties from the Cape Leewun. I never saw that vessel, but some of my shipmates who had been with her indicated that she had been a fine vessel. Our duties included, everything. You name it, we done it. The equipment gave us the ability to be concreters, brick layers, scaffolders, builders in all materials, repairers, painters, rock breakers/climbers, scuba divers and many other types as well. We could build anything and also repair anything. We actually built from scratch, a 15 foot x 6 foot radius concrete tower. Installed a fiberglass box with fittings for 3 gas cylinders and a gas-operated light on the top.

All completed and in working order, in six days. No trucks of concrete delivery job their mates. And we had to erect our own scaffold, carry our own cement, sand, gravel and water.

Our grandest feat was the building of the light tower on Euston Reef. That is about three hours fast boat ride north of Cairns. The base started approximately one fathom below sea level at high tide. When the tide was out, things was much easier, the water was only half a fathom deep. This whole structure was prefabricated in Brisbane, and we carried it with us from Brisbane to the Euston Reef. Even the formwork for the bases was on board along with all the sand, cement, gravel, reinforcing etc. There were four bases to be constructed, these were circular, about 4 feet radius. There were three layers of formwork which made it all about 8 feet high. The reef itself was suitably modified to accommodate these things. We had an explosives expert on board, he had taken a two-week course through the Government sources. ie. the Army.

As the demolition of the reef took place, we did manage to acquire some quite large blue Parrot fish, that just happened to get in the way. It took us a couple of days to pour each column and our mechanics mounted all the anchor bolts for the base plates. That really was the most labour intensive part done. We then unshipped the bits and pieces of the tower. It was like a big Meccano set, each piece made with precision to just bolt on to each other, too easy, indeed. The modifications were made on the spot, some were pushed, shoved, heaved, forced, with different appliances, into the right conjunction. Others had to be persuaded more gently with oxy-acetylene and a 7lb sledge hammer. Bit by bit, it was put in place and bolted in, up, over, through or around and in some places, together. There was a Works Dept mob of steel erectors with us to do the hard parts, like putting the slings on to the pieces and then helping us by getting out of the way whilst we manually hoisted the pieces into place.

They really came into their own then, standing safely on the bases and hurling instructions as to how things were supposed to be done. As work progressed, we were informed that they were not allowed to go higher than 10ft from the ground without suitable scaffold and safety belts, nets etc. Fair enough, there was only another 115ft to go to the top deck. As far as we were concerned, they may just as well have gone home. Our deck crew were 11 AB's, 2 OS's and a bosun. Take out 2 guys for the 'Larc', the OS's to look after the bridge, 1 AB for the crane. That left us with a working crew of 6. A little unfair, the bosun worked with us, and a welcome addition he was too. There were about 8 works dept stiffes. I have to admit, they did do the pile driving. It was their barge and their motorized pile driver, but our engineers that kept the thing going, Oh yes, we had 2 Chippies too.

Well there we were, all seven of us, going higher and higher. No safety harnesses, belts, or nets. One of the guys, Spike, had no fear of heights and a superb sense of balance. Each level had a built on

platform, even so that still meant that someone had to ride the next piece into place on a very jury rigged piece of equipment that we laughingly called a crane. It was two long lumps of 6"x 6" timber, very tightly lashed in place. Block and tackle on each that attached to the bit to be placed. Then with Spike hanging on and guiding us with much shouting and profanity, he would ride the thing into place, and, standing on nothing, or that's what it looked like, he would put one maybe two bolts into place and call for the next section. Then when it was almost in place, he would walk across the brace, grab hold of the section and push and pull it into place then ram in a bolt or two. I thought I was pretty good with heights he was simply amazing. Anyway, everything went well. Even the weather was kind to us that trip.

During the six weeks constructing, we had one evening when it blew real hard and one wet day when it showered. We completed the whole thing in 5 weeks 5 days and Spike was given the honour of tightening the last bolt of the lamp. The whole thing, including light, was exactly 130 feet above sea level. We stayed there for one more day checking every nut and bolt on it, and suddenly the works jerks could climb to the top and put the bulbs into place. The ladders all had safety hoops and there was a guard rail around the light. We stayed into the later evening and watched the light commence its working life and producing a safety net for mariners around that reef. Before this light, there was only a very old 20ft high wooden structure that had an aluminum reflector attached at the top. On the last day there, the Larc and crew were given the privilege of collecting the reflector and destroying the wooden tower. By the way, that was a 7-day a week job, but the evenings were our own and the fishing was stupendous, mostly.

## **Ships I have Known**

I sailed on a few, some are very forgotten and some never to be forgotten. Like my memories of all my trips, I only remember the good parts. When ever I think back to my sea time and my ships, the first one that comes to mind is/was Aberdeen and Commonwealth lines Morton Bay. One of the Famous 'Bay' boats. There was also the 'Largs' and of course the valiant "Esperance" I am not sure if there was a fourth one or not. (Open to info there). My Bay boat was an immigrant ship. We carried many hundreds of "£10" Poms. I was proud to become one myself some years later.

Anyway, she was a big Green hulled bas...d with four hatches. Our main cargo outbound was migrants, and the main cargo homewards was mainly Australian Lamb and Mutton, frozen of course. We also carried some unhappy migrants back to the UK and other passengers. The outwards trips were always good. People-wise I mean, everyone looking forward to a new and better life in Australia and she only carried English migrants. The future would show me why. The trip would take us four months all round and that included about 10 to 14 days in Brisbane at the Cannon Hill meat works. No passengers there, 'Cor, the pong was enough to put an AB off his ale.

There were some interesting people on board on some of those trips. For instance, there was one young? Lady whom we dubbed as the 'Blonde Bombshell' No two ways about her, she was a veritable honey, with all the accompanying flies. She could have her pick of any man on the ship. Her method of getting the attention of the man that she wanted to be her pal for a while was rather unique. She would map out his habits, like where and when he walked mainly. Then she would lay her trap. She would wait at the top of a deck ladder somewhere on his route and as he started to climb up, she would start to descend the same ladder. He would of course stop, to admire the view, and she would then stumble and descend very rapidly down and into his arms, always with such momentum that they would subside to the deck in a jumble of torsos, arms and legs. This never failed to get his attention and she never failed to get her man. What we could never figure out, was why the heck didn't she break something during her descent of those ladders. After all they were all steel construction, and she was not a rubber ball.

Then there was the man that flipped his lid. That was really scary. He thought his wife was playing about and his brain snapped. He went on the rampage after arming himself with a fire axe. You have never seen the deck of a ship clear so fast as that one did. He was out to find his wife, and he wasn't going to give her no haircut neither. The passengers locked themselves in their cabins, and the lady in

question and her two kids were spirited away to the Captain's cabin. The stewards all disappeared, so did the deck officers. Even the Master at Arms was nowhere to be found. So the Bosun turned out the off-watch A.B's.

Orders were to catch this maniac without hurting him, (and him sporting a flamin' great axe.) Well, some one devised the idea of taunting him enough to make him give chase. Then as he rounded some deck housing he would be tripped and the rest of us would pounce and pin him down. It worked well. A fast moving EDH confronted and taunted the guy.

To this day I don't know what he said, but it worked. He took off after the EDH like a rocket. He was fast, but the EDH was faster, that is until he rounded the deck-housing and got tripped. The maniac was going so quick that he actually rounded the housing and had to jump over our decoy. After his jump, he realized who was down on the deck and tried to turn round to have a swipe at the unlucky EDH and fell over his own feet. Before he could recover, the Bosun, and a very big and hard Stornawegien, grabbed him and planted one right on his chin. He went out like a light and we bundled him into an empty cabin and locked the door.

A guard was put on the door with orders to not open the door for *any reason* whatsoever. We were heading for Aden at the time, three days out. The watchman was relieved every two hours, and they all said the same thing. The guy was pleading to see his wife and begging to be let out.

The Skipper was taking no chances. He was going to be handed over to the authorities in Aden. One day out and the night guards reported that there had been no sound from the guy All night, and at 8 am his breakfast was taken to the cabin under the usual guard of four A B's. The steward didn't like going there any more than we did. We opened the door to an empty cabin with the porthole wide open. We had no idea when he had got out, but there was no point in backtracking. He was listed as missing at sea.