

HOMeward BOUND – A LIVERPOOL-WEST AFRICA MARITIME HERITAGE INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: Ken Birch

Interviewer: Nick White

Date: 09/03/2016

File Name: KBHB001/ KBHB002

TRACK ONE: KBHB001

[00:40] Overview of career – interview for deck cadet, failed eyesight test; trained as purser; seagoing career for fifteen years; ashore to job in marketing dept.; [04:00] Management career in various departments; posted to West Africa; six years in Hamburg with family; [05:30] eventually became Managing Director of Elder Dempster; chairman of UKWAL during 1980s; [07:45] early seafaring career – description of role of purser at sea, wages, admin, cargo calculations; changes after ‘Nigerification’; [10:10] Anecdote re: British Council lady in Nigeria; [12:00] recollection of Nigerian independence in 1960; [13:40] no particular reason for joining EDs; [14:50] family history of seafaring – uncle an engineer at sea; childhood experience of the sea, family relocation to Southport due to bombings in WWII; [17:30] Pay and conditions £132 p/a; superannuation and pension deductions; generous leave arrangements; [20:00] relations with management – distant; occasionally fractious; [22:45] dual personalities of officers on shore and at sea; anecdote re: chief engineer and his wife, difficult for wife; [25:00] joined by own wife for seven months; reflection on how too many wives changed atmosphere on board; [27:30] Training – typewriting course, clerical training; [28:20] Passengers from Port Harcourt, initially priests and missionaries only; later more West Africans, also British civil servants; [29:30] description of ‘Kroo boys’, conditions of work, internal organisation; [31:50] changes to pay when going ashore to work; Nigerian colleague met in training; [33:30] Strikes in Liverpool docks, anecdote re: deciding to drop cargo in Manchester; [34:30] description of office apparel; [35:00] comparison of pay & conditions at onshore vs at sea; [37:00] most challenging jobs at sea – increased capacity in cabin class, also challenges of integration in cabin class dining room; [38:30] Anecdote re: Liverpool sailor’s painting attire; [40:00] difficulties with passengers, mixing between first and third classes; [42:00] family life while at sea – support of wife; family travelled together to Nigeria and Hamburg; schooling concerns in Nigeria forced move back to UK; [44:30] onshore career challenges – unrest in Nigeria; negotiating rates at docks; effects of containerisation; long-established relationships between ED and traders helped;

END OF TRACK 1 KBHB001

TRACK 2 KBHB002

[15:00] Early experiences at sea – got sealegs quickly; early voyages hard, felt unhappy, uncomfortable with Nigerian steward; [1:30] Autonomy – ship operated as a unit, limited communication via Morse code [04:10] Race relations on board – ethnic problems between Nigerians; tribal issues managed by Nigerians themselves; [06:30] prior knowledge of West Africa, first visit in 1951; [07:20] trip to Ivory Coast; [08:10] changes in West Africa after independence – went downhill; description of formation of Nigerian National Lines ; [10:45] coups in Nigeria; anecdote re: NNL managing director ejected at gunpoint; [13:30] new MD installed at NNL; [14:10] Anecdotes illustrating corruption in Nigeria; military problems; ‘dash’, a form of bribery; [20:40] negative recollections outweigh positive memories; [21:10] personal experience of bribery involving plane tickets to UK; [21:30] contrast with French colonial rule – corruption via ‘the bag man’; [24:00] Cargo – bulk cargo for stability; salt exports

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impacted by Biafran war; [27:20] cargo homeward bound – logs from Ghana; stability affected on return journey; anecdote re: cargo tallies; [29:10] containerisation – ED behind in race to containerisation; Guinness shipping malt in 9ft containers; [32:00]Effect of containers on labour – ED’s own stevedoring company; anecdote re: union problems with closure; [35:30] Liverpool compared to continental ports – continental ports more advanced; description of workers queuing in Toxteth and Brunswick docks hoping for work; poor treatment of labourers in L’pool; L’pool labourers reputation as militant and difficult; [37:30] description of labour trouble in Lobito; [40:00] no labour troubles in New York; awareness of race and racism in New York; [41:00] Anecdote re: inspection of sailors in NY for STDS – sufferers sent to Coney Island in quarantine; [41:50] trip to Las Palma, 40 passengers; role of cabin boy to polish brass; [44:00] first experience of gay stewards; [45:00] trips to US with cocoa, no return cargo; charter for coal to Las Palmas; challenge of moving coal on ‘tween deck; sailors visiting brothel in Las Palmas; [48:00] Sierra Leone – favourite West African country, trustworthy workers; anecdote re: Kroo boys saving toilet paper allocation to trade in Freetown; minimal trips to Ivory Coast or Ghana; deterioration of Nigeria post independence.

END OF INTERVIEW