

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

Interviewee: Obi Okeke

Interviewer: Nick White

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File Name: OOHB001

[00:01] Reasons for joining Elder Dempster; background of Biafran war, had to leave secondary school; [02:10] aftermath of war, conditions in Nigeria, opportunity to go on scholarship from Nigerian Port Authority to study navigation; [04:30] Came to UK on 5/01/1973, study at University of Southampton; School of Navigation book [showed in the interview, see attached photographs]; [5:16] Definition of navigation; [6:00] circumstantial, wasn't planning to be a seafarer, it wasn't in family; family reaction. [6:55] Pay, Conditions; as students, we were not interested in pay or conditions, pay was simply scholarship allowance from Nigerian Port Authority while we were cadets; [7:55] Qualified as 3rd Officer, began to be paid as a worker for Elder Dempster; [8:50] National Insurance Number, pension scheme; change in accommodation, no longer living in company hostel in Aigburth; started pension scheme [10:25] Chief Officer pay rate £8000, first officer in 1976/7 earned £4,500, it was good money; [10:55] coming back from sea, would buy brandy in Lewis's, there was enough money to go around, it would be a lot of money now. [11:30] Relationships with Elders Management for me were very good, they trained me well, got on well with all the captains; [12:15] Reports from Captains of ships sailed on [in Cadet Record Book]; all good reports, worked hard and didn't have anything to complain about; [13:10] End of voyages, go to head office in India Buildings to get whatever money owed or cash advance...they were good to employees; [13:55] Never went on strike, happy on the ship...[14:10] Comparison with Nigeria, worries about family back in Nigeria re: poverty, hunger; [15:00] Comparison with white officers' experience, family responsibilities. [16:00] Nigeria after the war, no houses, no farming, collapse of banks; Mother, brothers, sisters, search for work, little education; [17:30] Trading as a way of life; [17:45] Opportunities in the UK and responsibilities in Nigeria, sending money back for education, food; [19:20] Practicalities of sending money home – difficulties of finding someone to bring the money back to Nigeria; [19:50] Communication with family, wrote letters initially, after a time letters were not safe, money could be stolen out of the letters en route; [20:40] no more letters by post, only depending on people travelling back, but no means of contacting those people. [21:25] Most challenging jobs working for Elders, 'Every Day Labour', but at least you get paid; most challenging was going for examinations; [22:30] Anecdote about oral examination in Liverpool; [24:20] Bad weather conditions, cargo in bad conditions, affecting ship stability, having to go out on deck and to relash the cargo. [26:20] First voyages, found sealegs quickly, background meant no other options; first voyage on MS Fulani from Tilbury Docks in London, rolling with the ship; [27:40] English channel, terrible southwesterly winds, confused swell; [29:00] Christmas Eve from Liverpool, poor weather, 3 knots (slow speed); [31:15] working life, crew autonomy; ships crewed by different nationalities, segregated living, eating, washing facilities; cooperation between nationalities while working but separate from other nationalities and other ranks; ranks lived together in their own quarters, a loose connection between ranks; [34:00] Living quarters, senior ranks' cabins with bedrooms, offices, toilets; [35:30] cabin space with bed, wardrobe but space was devoted for cargo carrying.[36:40] Diagram from Logbook illustrating accommodation space and also the bridge, Monkey island for magnetic compass [See photos]; [38:00] Interracial relationships, everyone just 'mind your business'; Freetown Kroo speak Freetown language, no conflict between them and European offices; work together, play

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separately; relationship was good as there was no room for conflict. [39:05] Social Life on board; mostly rest when not working, sometimes drinking but never drunk; games room, swimming pool, especially when wives were aboard; cadets also had to do homework for correspondence courses, after maybe throw darts in the bar; Ashore cargo work, maintenance on ship; [41:30] 'Mission to Seamen' where people can spend their money, social club, church services, play games; transport provided to the social club ashore by the agent particularly in strange places like Japan, South Korea; Importance of the agent in these situations; 'Supernumerary', (meaning wives, tourists) took tourist trips ashore; [43:20] Ceylon, trip to tea plantations and factories. [44:00] Prior knowledge of UK as a country close to paradise, with people who are clean, truthful; [45:30] classmates at Uni of Southampton didn't understand accent and made no effort to understand; [46:20] Change of impressions over time; had positive impressions of lecturers from the outset; [47:00] People begging, homeless, thieves, Nigerian family wouldn't believe; [48:00] People are the same everywhere. [49:15] Favourite country, the best place or worst place depends who you are, depends on integration; [50:45] Newcastle, Australia, white officers fit in....[51:30] Other west African countries visited – firstly island of Las Palmas – small narrow streets, plenty of vegetables but salty water; [52:30] Dakar – most westerly point of Africa, Senegal, a holiday destination for Nordic people, abundance of fish; haven't stopped in Guinea; did stop in Monrovia, Liberia, not tourist spot; [54:00] inland – Elders never took sailors; Abidjan in Ivory Coast – busy port for EDs, ED didn't recruit there due to French native language; [55:40] Freetown, most popular recruiting space; [56:30] Ghana, Takaradi – loading timber for America; at USA dock, the workers couldn't unpack timber as was packed too tightly, had to fly in Takaradi workers to unpack the load; [57:20] Lagos major recruiting port; Nigerian deltas served by EDs; [58:55] Port Harcourt, narrow channels, you could see ships through the trees; [59:30] Cameroon, timber loaded there; [59:50] the Congo – Matadi, general cargo, rich in minerals, diamond and gold trade; [54:00] Angola, Lobito; [1:02:00] conditions in Belgian Congo, workers marching in lines, cruel conditions; South Africa, white uniform. [1:02:28] Problematic Cargo, cargo below deck, batten the hatches; Bulk grain from Australia to Iraq, shifting caused problems if not properly loaded, poor stability; [1:04:20] Deck cargo, containers on deck, difficulties climbing ladders; [1:05:40] officers observe dockers and approve of lashing of containers. [1:06:20] Japanese workers very reliable to do job properly, Liverpool workers/dockers difficult to manage, work not done properly, quick to go on strike; [1:07:05] Anecdote re: Liverpool dockers, sugar loadings – hooks in sacks, damaging cargo; bees in the tropics attacking the ship; [1:08:30] Hong Kong workers – moving rubber, ammonia, latex; diligent, hardworking; [1:09:30] Unknown cargo placed on deck, potential explosive; [1:11:00] cargo affecting magnetic compass; difficulties of managing cargo on deck; [1:12:00] Mix between general cargo and containers on deck; early '70s no containers; started with 8ft or 10ft containers, increasing in size; useful for expensive cargo; [1:13:10] need to be sure of weight of container, heavy containers at first, lighter later, to ensure stability; later special ships built exclusively for containers; [14:00:00] Explanation re: stacking and securing [1:15:30] Problems with dock workers [1:15:50] unique problem of Liverpool workers, unlike anywhere else in the world; pilfering, skiving off, often went unchallenged; '78/'80 Free Enterprise – all companies moved away from Liverpool, ships didn't want to be diverted to Liverpool; invisible cargo in Liverpool today; [1:18:10] Twice visited New York, also New Orleans, Baltimore, never experienced docker problems, very tall men [1:19:45] Strongest ED memory – opportunity granted after university; well-treated until redundancy; experienced a lot of the world; [1:21:30] well-equipped to work; [1:21:40] Anecdote re: flight to Baltimore - complimentary brandy on the plane, meeting a Captain in airport, demonstrating the reputation of ED training. [1:23:04] Comparison with other lines – Training reflected in all aspects; NNL, political appointments; NNL ill-equipped, not trained management; [1:25:15] Anecdote re: NNL and flying to Korea with 20 ordinary sailors. [1:30:00] End of Elders – Competition between Elders and national companies over sharing of

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cargo; silent war of cargo; [1:31:00] Relationship between Elders and NNL – competitive relationship; UK WAL conference between Elders and West African companies on how to share cargo; ship farers not aware of tensions; [1:33:00] Empty containers, bribery, corruption; Elders know how to do business; [1:34:40] Keeping in touch with former colleagues – relationships change once ashore; difficulty of finding work as a navigation office, retraining as compass adjustor; Travel to Tilbury to get work; [1:36:40] had to leave, keep in touch with Merchant Navy Association, attend functions.

Clarifications: 'Monkey Island' – highest deck point – Navigation bridge on ceiling of bridge on Monkey Island, where magnetic compass is housed; radio is also there, less obstruction; also funnel from engine room; also open space away from structures which might interfere with radio and compass.

END OF INTERVIEW