

2019 TALL SHIPS REPORT *by Peter Sofatzis*

Breaching whales, playful dolphins, ominous volcanoes, beguiling thermal-springs, hopeful sunrises, crazy comrades, tired sunsets, sail-tearing gales, conquering the mast and staring mindlessly at that giant bowl of water! These memories are just some my treasures from a 32-day transatlantic voyage onboard the Lord Nelson.

It was the evening of the 27th of November 2018. My phone lit up began to ring – it was Richard Tighe! Richard was the chief interviewer of a panel of members from Australia Britain Society whom I had sat in front of earlier that day. With great trepidation, I shuffled to my room, shut the door and paced up and down. For a moment, however, I stopped pacing and stood still. An ear to ear smile grew on my face and a rush of endorphins filled my body. Richard had just informed me that I was the Tall Ships Award's winner for 2019! A couple weeks or so later, Richard informed me I my voyage was to be from Bermuda (Yes! Like the triangle!) all the way to the Weymouth in England! Whipping open Google Maps, I was taken aback when the Earth looked like a basketball when zoomed out to see both countries at the same time!

Fast forward to March 2019 and I was sitting in a window seat of an A380, gazing out wide-eyed over the River Thames. I had been granted two weeks before (and two weeks after) my voyage for private travel, which I used to connect with my heritage in the UK and Greece. I had a great desire to visit the UK as my mother was born and raised in England. I had many cousins there too and yet I had never been. So I spent the first week of my trip staying with my aunty and cousins in North London. I quickly got accustomed to the rattle and screech of the Tube as I explored the old but new, familiar but foreign city that is London. I spent the best part of the next week in a very different environment, kicking back on a small Greek island called Lemnos, in the village of Thanos where my father was born. Interestingly Lemnos was used as a naval base in the Gallipoli campaign due to its proximity to Turkey. I paid a visit to a small ANZAC grave site while I was there.

From one paradise to another, I traded in the calming Mediterranean waters of Lemnos for the crystal turquoise waters of Bermuda to begin the nautical part of my journey. For many people, with its pastel coloured houses, charming waters and relaxed atmosphere, Bermuda is a picture perfect paradisaal holiday destination. For me however, it was something different – it was the birthplace of an adventure. As I hopped off a local bus (a kind local paid for my ticket as I didn't have the right change) and approached the wharf where the Lord Nelson took her berth, a gentle rush of excitement came over me. I felt as if I were the ship's namesake, Lord Nelson himself, about to race the French Admiral Villeneuve across the North Atlantic to the English Channel in the build-up to the Battle of Trafalgar!

The first couple days of the voyage were used for introductions, safety briefings and ship maintenance. One of these introductions was meeting my watch (Aft Port) with whom I was to share many cold and wet hours! We also had the chance to explore Bermuda. One of my most memorable moments was when Ryan, a young 19-year-old American, and I decided that despite the water still being chilly from winter we couldn't give up the opportunity to swim. Finding a nice little spot called Tobacco Bay, we slowly waded into the cold water. I took the plunge first and encouraged Ryan to follow suit. Rising to the surface with his long hair wet like a mop he exclaimed, "Wow, it's so salty!" Thinking to myself that it was no more salty than beaches at home, I asked him what he meant. He explained that being from Kansas he had never swum in the sea!! I felt privileged to share that experience with him!



Nelly moored in St George's Wharf Bermuda



The Aft Port watch (I am front right)

On day three we piloted out of safe harbour and slowly but surely, the all-encompassing deep blue of the ocean welcomed us with outstretched arms. I took delight in staring at the horizon, breathing in fresh air and doing all I could to stave off a bout of seasickness. The ocean, however, had other plans. The rocking and lurching of the ship motoring upwind (trying to beat a storm coming from the South-West) was exacerbated by Nelly's heavy keel swinging her back upright. My eyes and my inner ears' semicircular canals soon got out of sync and I found myself relegated to the sick bench throwing up into biodegradable bags!

Having found my sea legs a couple of days later, I soon set my sights on climbing the main mast. At the Australia-Britain Society's 2018 Christmas Luncheon I was fortunate enough to meet His Excellency The Honourable David Hurley the then Governor of NSW (and now Governor General!). In our brief exchange he gave me a mission saying "Get to the top!" - and I wasn't going to let him down. On the Young Endeavour I had just about overcome my childhood fear of heights - but Nelly's masts were taller and her upper ratlines more 'dynamic'. Alongside me in achieving this goal I had Sue - a member of my watch (Aft Port) who was also eager but apprehensive about reaching the top. On our first attempt, I reached the second platform



Ryan and me on the rim of the "Caldera"

before feeling weak in the legs, whilst Sue was happy acclimatising on the first. On our second attempt, we mixed it up and had a stab at the foremast. Again with Sue chilling on the first platform, I clambered up the rope-ratlines up and over the futtock to platform number two. At this point I heard a call from down on deck asking me to stay put while they set some sails. That was an awesome experience not just because I got to see the sails and ropes in action from up in the rigging, but because dolphins appeared on the Port side! We watched them move up playfully to

the boat before drifting off into the distance where I saw one shoot up from the water and go completely airborne! Thankfully we saw many more dolphins over the course of our voyage. Now having been in the sun for a good 40 minutes, with my upwards momentum gone, I looked up and then down and then up before concluding it was time to head down. Determined that it was going to be third time lucky, the plan was to reach the top of the main mast by simply not stopping at the second platform. Placing my feet on the ever-narrowing foot ropes, I timed my steps to the sway of the boat. I pushed up, telling myself “just put one foot in front of the other” and I soon found there was no more rope to hold and that I had made it to the top! I had climbed 30m above deck on a rocking boat and “hit the button”! After taking in the view and smiling for a photo (now lost on a water damaged camera) I headed back down and watched Sue conquer the mast too!!

Another great event happened the day I reached the top of the mast. For out of the unusually calm glass-like water rose at least two whales! At their closest perhaps only 15 metres away from the bridge where I was standing! This was super exciting for me as I had missed out on an earlier whale-sighting being below deck. Though this was the first time I saw whales, it wasn't the last! I recall one incident later in the trip when a whale breached the water, nose first rising up and then splashing back down! Ecstatically beside myself, I pointed and exclaimed loudly “It did the slappy thing!!!” much to the amusement of those around me.

In the first half of the trip, before reaching the Azores, watching bio-luminescent algae momentarily light up patches of water with a green light in no predictable pattern did wonders to amaze me and help pass the cold and wet nights. Another breathtaking night-time natural wonder was the sighting of a complete 180° moonbow! Moonbows are like rainbows but appear at night when rain is lit up by the moon! Being so faint and delicate it, like some of the best things in life, trying to capture it on my camera proved futile.

Having been at sea for two weeks, our itch to touch still and dry land was crushed when our first attempt at stopping in the Azores failed. We tried to take a berth on the Island of Faial, however surging currents made mooring Nelly too dangerous. Captain Darren made the decision to sail instead for another day east to the island of Horta. Though disappointed, coming close to harbour did give us a brief opportunity to get a phone signal and connect with the outside world! As we approached Horta the following day, I was asked by my watch leader if I would like to replace a lady in the mooring team who was feeling unwell. Jumping at the opportunity gave me the chance to whiz around in the ‘dotty boat’ ferrying crew and helping to push the bow of the boat into position. Horta was a lovely village built upon an extinct volcano. It had a beautiful harbour coloured with a myriad of ensigns from the many ships that have taken refuge there. At the top of the village in the centre of the volcano was a 400m deep hole called the Caldera which Ryan and I had a good 2-hour or so walk-jog around! Horta also had a really interesting scorched patch of land where a volcano fleetingly rose from the ocean 60 years ago before sinking back into the water. Not without honourable mention is a pub famous amongst transatlantic sailors called Pete's Cafe Sport – of all things – where we had a merry time :)

From Horta we sailed south-east between the islands of Pico and Sao Jorge toward the capital of the Azores, Ponta Delgada. That evening the wind and waves picked up giving us some of the largest on the trip. Waves would rise intimidatingly right up to the height of the bridge before Nelly would effortlessly rise over them. At one point, staring out the back of the boat, I cried out in childlike fashion, “Sue, we're surfing a wave!” That night Nelly got picked up by a number of waves surfing them for what felt like minutes at a time. Ponta Delgada was an exciting island with alluring thermal springs, waterfalls, tea plantations and deep black volcanic rocks which extended out into the ocean. A highlight was swimming in a little inlet from the ocean which was hot in

parts, warm in others and would very quickly become uncomfortably cold when a wave of fresh sea water swept in!

Setting sail from the Azores felt like we were on the home stretch – though we still had a good week and a half of sailing to go. This saw us settle back into our daily routines of taking watch, being on mess duty and taking part in the much awaited ‘happy hour’ (time allocated for upholding ship cleanliness). Also high on the priority list was fighting the all-important battle against fatigue. When we weren’t being rocked to sleep like a baby, sleep time was rather interesting. For the bulk of the journey, to stop rolling out of my bunk and falling the 1.5m to the ground, I had my side board in place. The side board, however, didn’t stop me from rolling from one side of the bunk to the other in rougher seas. To solve this issue, I took advice from Hamish, a young Scotsman, and adopted a fetal position lodging myself sideways between the side board and the ship’s hull. Though usually being a sound sleeper, this together with the chinking and clanging of harnesses hung up around the fore-mast, ropes bouncing off the side of the hull, the occasional pounding of Nelly charging into waves and being woken up in the guts of the night for watch, made for a very character building experience! It’s amazing how grateful one can be for a quiet, undisturbed bedroom that doesn’t rock about!

Incorporated into the Tall Ships Award is the Leadership at Sea programme offered by the Jubilee Sailing Trust. This programme gave me the opportunity to grow as a leader by taking on new responsibilities. One such responsibility was managing the ship’s multi-week long ‘Murder Game’ where each crew member was tasked with eliminating a random crew member from the game by having them accept an arbitrary object, in an arbitrary place! Other leadership opportunities involve being watch leader for 24hrs and co-hosting the voyage trivia night, containing an Australiana section composed by yours truly with a packet of Tim Tams for the winners! Another aspect of the programme was to spend a few hours getting about the ship in a wheelchair, and also trying to navigate the ship blindfolded using the audio compass! I learnt that the large amount of attention received being in a wheelchair or blindfolded, whilst it showed people cared for me, also served as an obstacle to living a normal life. I think finding a healthy balance between offering support and allowing for independence is a real challenge when seeking to care for people with a disability.

Leaving the Azores and moving toward the continental shelf saw the onset of some rougher weather. We officially went through an Atlantic gale with wind speeds up above 40 knots. Safety netting went up along the side of the ship and I took great pride in helming the ship when its speed over ground broke 10 knots with no engines (well above the usual 6-7 knots). Over the span of only a couple days we had 3 torn sails! Sails which had been around the world! Whilst, tearing sails unfortunately meant a good bit of motoring was required to reach Dartmouth, it also meant that we had the chance to get up the mast and help replace the fore topsail! It also meant that we got to purchase and bid for bits of sail to take home as souvenirs to remember the ship by (the proceeds of which went to support the Jubilee Sailing Trust).

After reaching English waters, we stopped first in Dartmouth. This was a fantastic occasion! We arrived for the Easter long weekend, the sun was out and the quaint seaside village was buzzing with life! On Easter Sunday we motored out of the Dartmouth River and headed out to have some fun sailing practising setting manoeuvres. Ironically, just as Captain Darren had set out the game plan, the breeze died and the water went still as glass! Though disappointing, this made for excellent jellyfish spotting and a lovely Easter Sunday BBQ on the stern platform of the boat overlooking the coast of Devon.

From here we trundled over ever so casually to our final destination of Portland (amended from Weymouth). In something of a tribute to all the dolphins we saw on our journey, arriving in Portland we had our own special dolphin as a welcoming party! It played around right next to Nelly and got a bit too close for comfort for the guys in the dotty boat – at one point it jumped up and out of the water three times in succession right next to them!

Amidst the hustle and bustle of packing up on our final morning on board Nelly, a bitter-sweetness scented the air. For on the one hand there was a feeling of pride and accomplishment in having sailed across the Atlantic and reaching our final destination! Yet at the same time leaving the boat would be closing the book on one of the most amazing experiences of my life and saying goodbye to the many amazing people I had shared it with! The end of the voyage meant a return to many of the creature comforts of living on land, like a quiet stable bed and a mobile data connection! Yet it also meant saying goodbye to Nelly in whom I had created such vivid memories. Despite all this, one thing was for certain, it was time to say goodbye and let a new adventure begin!



Safety Netting up for the gale



In my wet weather gear!

After saying my goodbyes and obtaining signatures on my patch of torn topsail, I headed out to make the most of my remaining two weeks in the UK. I grabbed a lift with my climbing buddy Sue out to scenic Cornwall where I began my exploration. From there I caught a train to see relatives in Brighton and Bexhill (near Hastings). I then headed up north to see Heywood (near Manchester) where my mum grew up, and to see relatives who still lived in the area. It was there in the quaint town of Ramsbottom where I was asked to be a male model for a wedding photo shoot!! My great aunt and I laughed so much that day!! To top it off, in return for my efforts I received a very fine £250 suit! From there I visited York and Edinburgh before heading back down to London to see my aunt and cousins before flying off home!



This journey has been one of exploring foreign lands, but also my heritage. Of being pushed to overcome physical exhaustion, but also my fears. As I leave university behind and join the workforce, this voyage has helped me grow into a more grounded, resilient and (hopefully) wiser adult as I dare to tread a meaningful path through life. I am truly grateful to the Australia-Britain Society and their associate organisations Young Endeavour, Jubilee Sailing Trust and the Association of Sail Training Organisations for this incredible opportunity!

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