

ROMANCE DAYS



The world voyaging Brigantine ROMANCE

After completing the restoration of ELISSA's rig and sailing her on her maiden voyages as mate, I headed down to the Caribbean to unwind and maybe do some sailing. I landed in Charlotte Amelie in the US Virgin Islands and ran into Ebon Whitcomb whom I had met through Will Gates. We had a nice gam then, at his suggestion, I joined HARVEY GAMAGE for a short time. I didn't fit with the crew, whether they felt threatened by me or were just an uptight bunch, it obviously wasn't working. It was the first time I had met Captain Peter Boudreau who was driving, but it was his crew I was uncomfortable with.

I thanked them for their hospitality and jumped on the Bomba Charger going to Tortola, BVI, at my first opportunity. As soon as we docked I noticed a newspaper stand with big, bold headlines saying simply, "TEXAN HUNG!" Well, I had just come from Texas, had a Texas drivers license and Texas address on my passport. It gave me an uneasy feeling as I read that he had been smuggling guns and was hung in Her Majesty's Prison, Tortola, BVI, my newly arrived destination.

I shouldered my seabag and duffel and headed into town towards the guesthouse I had reserved. The first thing that I noticed was Her Majesty's Prison on my left. It looked something like an old, wooden fort straight out of the wild west and it gave me the creeps thinking that was where they hung that fellow.

A short while later I heard a voice from above saying, "Hey man! Cotch diss." I looked up just in time to see a coconut being tossed down at me from up in the treetop. I dropped my duffel and caught it rather than getting hit by it. As soon as I set it down at my feet there was another, then another. There was a growing pile at my feet when a burly fellow came up to me and said in a thick, island patois, "Hey man, what you doing? Does are my coconuts! You stealing my coconuts!" Well, that was all I needed to hear so with visions of a vacation in Her Majesty's Prison I grabbed my duffel and took off. Welcome to Tortola!

I checked into the guest house then set off to explore Tortola. Had a few beers in some of the local pubs, then found a nice place for dinner. After a good nights sleep I awoke and headed for the harbor. I had heard of the world voyaging brigantine ROMANCE and her legendary skipper, Arthur Kimberly, and there she was, laying at anchor out in the bay.

The harbor was full of yachts and assorted craft so I asked a couple of fellows if they could give me a lift out to ROMANCE in their dingy as they were setting out. They said to hop in and shortly we were alongside ROMANCE. Donald Lindsay met us as we came up and he took hold of the painter, inquiring what it was that brought us alongside. I asked if Captain Kimberly were aboard and Don asked whom should he say is calling, so I gave him my name.

Don disappeared below and moments later Skipper popped up on deck, waving his copy of the magazine Sea History that had just been published with a story about the restoration of ELISSA. He hollered my name and said to the other crew "Steve Hyman, do you know who this guy is? He's the one who rigged ELISSA!" I was flabbergasted. He said come aboard, come aboard. What brings you here? I

thanked the yacht guys for the lift and stepped aboard ROMANCE for the first time.

After a brief conversation with Skipper and the other lads, Mac Coombs the mate, Angus McCamy, Phil Brotherton, and Donald, Skipper asked if I would like to sail with them. I was delighted to accept, gobsmacked would be a better choice of words. I think it was Don who ferried me back to shore in order to gather my things from the guest house and return to join ROMANCE.

We got underway the next morning and I got my first taste of what sailing that legendary vessel was all about, hard work, then more of it. The anchor and chain had worked itself well down into the mud during their stay in the Rhode Town harbor, and that pump brake, log windless took some pumping to get it free. It seemed like days to break it out, bringing up one link at a time. We finally got her up and down and then it was up aloft to loose sail. Off we went as my adventure began.

The foc's'l was full so Skipper lodged me in one of the side cabins. We would sail during the day and anchor every night. First thing every morning Skipper would come forward, knock on my cabin door saying "coffee is ready Steve", take another step and mutter a muffled curse as he cracked his head on the mast partners just past my cabin. I had interrupted his routine, and this was a near daily occurrence.

I got on well with the other lads and had some great talks with Skipper about ELISSA and other vessels. He often referred to "his bride" whom he missed but would be joining the ship soon. Before I met her I had a very different mental image of one of the most fascinating women I have ever known. She was a rather large and imposing figure whose feet didn't look as if they had worn shoes in their entire life. I quickly learned of the pejorative names she was called by some of the shipyard workers, but I found Mrs. K, as we called her, a fascinating and delightful person. I reveled in her stories of her friend, Margaret Mead, and the fact that she carried a shopping list for friends on Pitcairn Island just in case they sailed that way again. The Kimberly's had already made two circumnavigations in ROMANCE!

I loved sailing with these folks and I was in awe of Captain Kimberley's boat handling. ROMANCE was an extension of himself. We would sail to anchor every night and off the hook again in the morning. I will never forget the way he drove her through the crowded anchorage leaving Bitter End, Virgin Gorda, under sail

alone, and off through the gap at Moskito Island. Those were heady days, and I was probably in the best shape of my life thanks to my mornings on the mindless, I mean the windless.

Skipper would lay out about a shot and a half of chain just about every night. I remember one morning anchored off Spanish Town when I looked over the side I could see the anchor, sitting on it's crown and the chain, all in a neat pile next to it, and the marks in the sand where the ship had swung around it with the change of the tide. Then it was click, click, up down, one link after another until we had everything back on board.

I picked up the bad habit of smoking in Texas, after having quit for around eleven years. Everyone smoked in Texas, or so it seemed. I had come aboard with a fresh carton of cigarettes and just run out when we put in to Charlotte Amalie on St Thomas, back in the US Virgin Islands. I'd been painting the inside of the starboard bulwarks after we anchored when suddenly I felt as if I was suffering from sun stroke or something, because the brilliant white paint suddenly turned grey and the sun seemed to go dark. I looked around and it was as if the entire world had turned grey. It was only then that I realized I was looking at the immense side of USS CARL VINSON that was slipping silently close by, to anchor, and was blocking out the sun. She looked like the death star from my vantage point and dwarfed ROMANCE that now appeared so tiny and insignificant.

After we secured our vessel I asked Skipper for permission to go ashore. He looked at me quizzically with that one eyed stare of his and asked why I wanted to go ashore. I told him that I had run out of cigarettes. Now, I had never smoked below decks or when I was on watch and the captain and crew had never said a word to me about smoking. After a rather long pregnant pause Skipper said, "OK, (pause), OK, well, (pause), go get your gear." It took me a moment to fathom what was happening before I stiffened, and asked if it would be OK if I just stayed on board and finished painting the bulwarks. He smiled and said, "No problem Steve, we love having you with us. You are welcome to sail with us as long as you want."

I had just smoked my very last cigarette. What a remarkable man.

I don't remember if I have ever shared with you the most important life lesson that I have ever learned about ecology, thrift and forward thinking. It was when I was sailing out of Tortola with Captain Kimberly aboard the brigantine ROMANCE.

Shortly after joining the ship we were underway, sailing south in the Anegada Passage and he asked me to show the lads how I did a wire seizing. We slacked a lee main backstay and swung it inboard where I suddenly realized I was no longer in my own rigging loft, with a vice on a turntable that I could walk around and a handy-billy above to stretch the wire, and helpers to pass the coil, but instead, I was faced with a machinists vice bolted to an oak table lashed to the mast, schooner style, on a moving boat! In a bit of a sweat I set up the throat seizing and began, passing my own wire, unlike my previous experiences where I had someone to pass wire for me and plenty of room to maneuver.

In spite of the difficulty I turned in a decent seizing, did my crossing turns and snapped the wire off in the crotch. As I stepped back, rather pleased with my handiwork, I unwound the 18 inches or so of leftover seizing wire from my well used heaver, stepped back to the rail, and pitched it over the side.

As you may imagine the scene, Skipper watched the arc of that piece of 7 cents a foot wire until it hit the water. He then turned and glared at me, a piercing glare that I had never before or since experienced, spun on his heel and went below - for the rest of the day! The other lads were just as stunned. The mate came over and took me by the shoulders saying, "Oh, Steve, we never throw anything away on the ROMANCE! That wire could have moused five shackles in the middle of the Pacific Ocean! You can't just go down to the square-rigger store and buy that stuff when you are out at sea!" Gloria, Skippers bride and partner who had joined the ship by then, didn't say a word but took over the con.

I thought that my sailing aboard ROMANCE had met an untimely end. Not knowing how to make amends, or if it was even possible, I went below and spent the rest of the day cleaning out the "awful." At least that's what the lads I sailed with called the locker with all the odds and ends, bits of wire, pieces of blocks, and scraps of canvas that had been accumulated over time to deal with anything that came up. It was nasty. Parts and pieces just crammed in and nearly overflowing with rust and disorganized stuff. Well, I pulled it all out, cleaned everything to the greatest extent possible and put it back in something approaching an organized fashion. It must have worked.

Later in the day, Skipper reappeared on deck and brought us to anchor, under sail of course, just off the Bitter End Yacht Club on Virgin Gorda. He never said a word to me about the incident and I continued to sail with him that spring learning from that wonderful man every day. I look back upon those days with incredible fondness; long rambling conversations with Arthur while I was doing my trick at

the helm, him watching every turn of the spoke; talks with Gloria about Pitcairn Island or Margaret Mead and all sorts of other topics.

I always smile when I think of her making hot chocolate for the crew as we came down from aloft, shivering, from furling sails during a sudden squall. I had sprung to the clewed up royal weather yard arm and furled the sail by myself then helped the lads with the lower sails. I received a warm smile from Skipper when my feet hit the deck. There were water spouts off to port and a quickening breeze. We were all shivering with the sudden drop in temperature from the front as we came into anchor near Spanish Town, BVI, in the setting sun. The temperature had dropped to 72 degrees Fahrenheit and the hot chocolate was quite welcome! Ah, the tropics.

I was totally unaware of my celebrity status aboard. I just wanted to become a member of the crew, sail the ship, and learn all that I could from this legendary shipmaster. The lads had a totally different perspective on the situation. As Donald has written, I was a special supernumerary and the fact that Skipper and Gloria were impressed with me had them somewhat in awe.

Here is what Donald has written:

“Well I think complete transparency would include that after lunch we were all sitting there with open mouths gaping at everything you said for a protracted length of time until the mate Mac Coombs motioned for us to continue working. Suddenly looking around Mac said WHO’s washing the dishes and one of us said Steve Hyman. Then Mac said where’s Skipper and we said he’s down there with Steve while he’s washing the dishes. Then every day we’d go to work after the meal and Steve’s washed the dishes until we weighed anchor.

When Gloria returned we did the same thing and immediately after the meal Gloria turned around with a sharp tongue and said “who’s washing the dishes?” And too stunned to answer we gaped stop her until she repeated herself and finally the Mate Mac Coombs in his most polite and humble voice said “Steve’s washing the dishes.” To which she replied Steve Hyman the Rigger?” And we all nodded sheepishly until muttering she went below to verify that that was in fact true. Then she came back up on deck and with a humph! Said “he is washing the dishes.”

That’s the way I remember it.

Fucking-A you washed the dishes every day at least breakfast and lunch until after Gloria returned.

The details might have been wrong about Mrs. K. She might have still been sitting at the table and said woah woah woah who's washing the dishes? And then said "Steve Hyman the Rigger?" And then said "this I've got to see."

Can't remember for certain. Either rendition is true enough. The point is she had to verify that a rigger of renown was washing the dishes in her ship. Then Skipper of course mentioned something to the effect of "that's right dearie Steve's been washing the dishes all week." The 900 lb. gorilla in the room being that everyone in the ship desired you to sail with us at least until shipyard. Only Gloria's approval would allow that."

We continued to island hop, sometimes with a cargo of "white people" as the lads called the passengers, sometimes just with crew. It was a magical time for me.

The first time we put into Jost Van Dyke Skipper said that I could go ashore. I didn't wait for the other lads as we were anchored in fairly close, but I dove in and swam up to the beach where I came upon a palm thatched hut, Foxy's. Turns out it was a legendary beach bar owned and manned by a cantankerous islander.

I ordered a rum and coke and pulled some wet US dollars out of my pocket. Foxy took a glass from the back of the bar, filled it to within a smidgen of the rim with local rum, and added a splash of coke. I took a sip as he was replacing the bottle of rum on the backbar, and nearly choked on the local product.

As he turned around I asked if I could get a little more coke in my drink. Foxy leaned his elbows on the bar, looked towards me, stared deeply into my eyes, and said, "What's a matter wit you, you wanna make me go broke? Dat stuffs expensive!" Welcome to the Caribbean.

As the idyllic days of spring wore on toward summer it was time to head to San Juan and dry dock ROMANCE. We left Tortola and headed west. When we were passing Soper's Hole and West End we saw that PHOENIX, who had just come off the ways, was making sail going our way to Puerto Rico. Skipper set all plain sail and we were off with our dirty bottom, in a race with PHOENIX.

We sailed on toward afternoon when Skipper called Donald aft and said, "break out your gear!" Don broke into a huge smile as he and the other lads broke out the stuns'l gear and we swayed it aloft. Apparently it was one of the only times that



ROMANCE under stuns'ls

Skipper had set the stuns'l's in the Caribbean and Don later told me that he had done it for me. I was thrilled because it was also the first, and only time, I have ever sailed under stuns'ls. We got everything rigged and set and we were sailing West, bound toward San Juan, Puerto Rico.

It was quite the sight, rolling home under stuns'l's, something I shall never forget.

PHOENIX passed us sometime during the night, our foul bottom not conducive to a fast passage, despite the stuns'l's, and we struck the gear and sailed on through the night.

I left the ship in San Juan after we dry docked her. I did not particularly want to but my asthma was acting up and it became apparent that I was in need of some medical attention rather than scraping more bottom paint. I reluctantly said my goodbyes and thanks for one of the adventures of my lifetime.



We sailed with
PHOENIX from West End, Tortola bound for San Juan



Captain Arthur Kimberly, known as Skipper taking a sight

It was a special time in my life and I will always regret that I didn't attend any of the reunions in Detroit, Erie, or the Caribbean, but they came at challenging times....