

# A Tow to Remember

By

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11<sup>th</sup> January 1965 was a date for me to remember. I boarded a Walla Walla at Blake's Pier for the short ride out to join my new ship laying at one of the Typhoon Buoys, close to Stone Cutters Island, in the scenic Hong Kong harbor. I had recently completed a short leave at my home in Hong Kong upon the completion of my Indentures with Bank Line. As I was not yet 20 years of age I was too young to sit for 2<sup>nd</sup> Mates examinations, so I had secured an interim job as uncertified 3<sup>rd</sup> Mate for a 4 month trip on a Hong Kong registered cargo ship named **Asia Fir**. We were destined to load a cargo of Copra around various ports in the Philippines – a pleasurable voyage in the making for my first job as 3<sup>rd</sup> Mate, so I thought.

**Asia Fir**, being of 5328 GRT and 9270 DWT, had acquired her own history of tramping the oceans over the years. She had been built by Charles Connell & Co at Scotstoun in 1949, as the **Carronpark** for the Denholm Group, before having been sold off in the early 1960s and finding her way to new owners in Hong Kong.



Left, image of **MV. Asia Fir** (r/n **Asia Breeze**).

I joined her soon after she was placed under the management of John Manners & Co of Hong Kong. The ship was completing a one month's period of maintenance, prior to resuming her trading life and her intended future name change to "**Asia Breeze**".

(Courtesy John Manners Group-Hong Kong)

The Master, a Geordie I believe, was a gentleman of unfailing courtesy, modesty, fair-mindedness, who lived life with a good sense of fun, balanced with an ever-present concern for the welfare of those who served under him. The Chief Officer a Hullensian, I recall had an extraordinary knowledge of horseracing. Our Chief Engineer was of Anglo-Indian, a decent, fellow, whilst the remaining crew, apart from me, consisted exclusively of Hong Kong Chinese. The ship was nicely presented, both in and out, one

memorable feature being the large fridge on the Captain's deck which was continuously replenished with bottled beer – withdrawals were based on an honor system which worked very well.

Unfortunately, after several days on board, whilst I was descending into one of the tweendecks to check on some work in progress, I slipped and lost my footing on the ladder, causing me to fall heavily on to the deck below. To cut a long story short, I injured my right leg which necessitated me being hospitalized. I spent about 10 days in the Canossa Hospital before flying to Cebu to rejoin the ship, which had obviously sailed from Hong Kong without me.

Having rejoined the vessel, over ensuing weeks we transited various Philippine coastal Ports and working anchorages, with captivating names such as Jose Panganiban, Tacloban, Iligan, and Iloilo loading parcels of the dried coconut kernels as we progressed, before ending up in Cebu where we were scheduled to top off our load. Having completed loading we made our departure but soon afterwards had to return to the anchorage due to engine trouble. It took our engineers about one day to try and fathom out the cause. Apparently, it was something to do with the Thrust Pads seriously overheating. Believing the engineers had rectified the defect we set off a second time but once again we were obliged to return to the anchorage, because of a repetition of the problem. A third attempt yielded a similar result. Over the next several days our engineers toiled endlessly in their efforts to resolve the issue. By this time, the Company's Engineer Superintendent had arrived on scene from Hong Kong. He wasted no time or effort in endeavoring to investigate and rectify matters, but unfortunately it was not to be, despite a variety of spare parts being flown in.

After several more days swinging around the anchor, with the engineering staff striving to overcome the inoperative main engine, followed by further engine trials; it soon became apparent it was proving to be an exercise in futility. Henceforth, remedial action was taken and the Master informed us of the edict from our Head Office in Hong Kong which instructed that the ship would be towed by a local Tug from Cebu to Manila where we would discharge the entire cargo into another chartered vessel so that attempts could be carried out to repair the engine when the ship was in light ship condition. Furthermore, it was also reasoned, more comprehensive engineering support was available in Manila, should it be required.

Suitable Tugs must have been scarce at the time because the following afternoon a dingy looking tug arrived from another Philippines Port, to tow us from Cebu to Manila Bay. I think the term "dingy" was an understatement because the tug looked very rundown and shabby indeed. However, as time was of the essence, we wasted no time in preparing for the tow and over the ensuing hours we disconnected one of our anchors and placed it on deck. We made a good connection with our anchor chain to the tugs towing wire under the watchful eye of a Warrantee Surveyor, who had been appointed by the insurers and flown in from Hong Kong. In typical Board of Trade fashion, an emergency towing arrangement was also rigged and made available for quick and ready access should the main tow part, unexpectedly.

Our departure from Cebu was hastened to avoid the predicted onset of adverse weather. Once the tug had assumed the full weight of our loaded vessel, reached unrestricted open water, and lengthened her tow line, we settled down to slow but safe progress along the planned tow route, which had been pre-

approved by the Warrantee Surveyor. We had a peaceful trip; the only requirement was frequently checking the navigation whilst under tow to ensure we maintained track and keeping a watchful eye on the main towing arrangement for any signs of excessive wear which could lead to imminent failure. Time passed slowly and it was unusually quiet on board without the “thump, thump” of the main engine with only the diesel generators being active. I remember additional lookouts were posted to minimize the risks of being boarded by Pirates, especially due to our slow speed through Pirate prone waters. Although our passage had been slow, but safe, we eventually anchored in Manila outer harbor. Once our tug slipped the tow we reconnected and housed the anchor we had previously placed on deck.

We lay at anchor for what must have been a week before the vessel that had been chartered to accept our cargo, arrived. It was a Philippines President Lines ship and she expertly hipped alongside us ready to commence the transfer of our Copra cargo. As it was anticipated that cargo operations would be round the clock, and since our hatches were fitted only with basic wooden hatch covers, canvas hatch tents were rigged for all hatches to facilitate quick access to hatches or to afford rapid protection of the cargo in the event of sudden rain squalls.

Cargo was transferred from ship to ship using ships gear rigged with one ton, clam grabs. In retrospect the operation was trouble free other than for the occasional snag with the cargo winches which was only to be expected under such relentless working conditions. Once our cargo holds had been devoid of the Copra, the laden PPL vessel did not lose any time in departing and proceeding on her voyage. In retrospect, the entire exercise of transferring the cargo lasted approximately 2 weeks.

Now in a light ship condition our engineers, in cooperation with the Engineering Superintendent enlisted their time and efforts in troubleshooting and trying to rectify the engine defect. Alas, allowing for the best of efforts by our shipboard engineers, several more engine trials proved unsuccessful even in light ship condition, resulting in us returning to the anchorage at the conclusion of each trial run. Eventually, the owners decided that the vessel would be towed back to Hong Kong for extensive engine repairs at Taikoo Shipyard. This was likely influenced by the fact that the **Asia Fir** was fitted with a Doxford Engine and Taikoo Dockyard were a licensee of Doxford. Henceforth, preparations were made for the pending tow. It did not come as any surprise, therefore, within 2-3 days the Salvage Tug “**Taikoo**” arrived in Manila to tow us back to Hong Kong. She hipped up on our starboard side for ease of access because there was much planning to be done between both vessel’s Masters, and the Warrantee Surveyor (who would certify the tow) prior to commencement.



Left, salvage Tug “**Taikoo**” in Hong Kong waters.

(Courtesy Taikoo Dockyard – Hong Kong)

**“Taikoo”** was a supreme tug for her day, having carried out numerous all weather salvage operations in the South China Seas under the command of the celebrated and highly regarded Captain, who had commanded her for numerous years, and a Liverpudlian, from West Derby. Over many years the Tug’s Captain distinguished himself with a fine reputation, for being a superb seaman and one of the foremost salvage experts in the Far East, resulting in him becoming synonymous with the Tug.

Built by Taikoo Dockyard in 1950, and operated by the Swire Group, she soon carved out an exemplary history of salvage exploits, especially in the South China Sea, which became the basis of her iconic reputation. She had an oil - fired steam engine and at approximately 12.5 knots had a range of about 3500 nautical miles. When actively engaged in salvage, she carried a full crew of about 33, including salvage personnel. At other times she was kept usefully employed within the confines of Hong Kong waters or assisting in the berthing of dead ships at Taikoo Dockyard.

The **“Taikoo”** looked every bit the part of an ocean warrior – a true salvage tug; robust and impressive in her construction she immediately symbolized the type of work for which she had been designed. I understand she was the third such vessel to proudly bear the name within the Swire fleet and served the Taikoo Dockyard faithfully over a valuable working life of some 23 years, eventually meeting her demise in 1973 when she succumbed to the breakers torch.

By this time, it was approaching mid-March, so we were past the worst of the volatile North East Monsoon and Typhoon season in the South China Sea. Typically, the Northeast Monsoon sets in over the South China Sea in early November and lasts through to early March. As we were now in the inter-Monsoonal or transitional period which is usually characterized by light winds, overcast skies and occasional squalls, we were anticipating a relatively good ocean passage over the distance of approximately 630 nautical miles between Manila and Hong Kong. At an average towing speed of say 5.5 knots (bearing in mind we were in light ship trim) the passage should take us around 5 days.

Over the ensuing 2 days, there were various meetings between both Masters, Warrantee Surveyor, and our Engineering Superintendent, to agree and draw up the passage plan so that courses could be laid off on the charts. The Towing Master (Master of the tug **“Taikoo”**) would be in overall charge of the tow. Weather forecasts predicted reasonable conditions for the intended voyage, so we were all prepared to proceed.

The day arrived for our departure. Our crew, assisted and supervised by those from the **“Taikoo”**, required several hours to connect one of our anchor chains to the towing wires from the Tug. This was a classic Board of Trade arrangement – well proven rig over many years. An emergency towing arrangement was also rigged. Once outward Port clearances had been received for the combo we set off, cautiously moving from our anchorage in South Harbor, out into Manila Bay, escorted by another Port Tug until we cleared the breakwater. As we entered more open waters, we slowly increased speed and the Towing Master progressively lengthened the towing wire. By the onset of darkness, we were making a reasonable 5 knots with the tow wire set at about 500m until we were well clear of the coast, into open Ocean when it would likely be lengthened even more. The length of the towing wire was set by the Towing Master and depended on weather and sea conditions and how well the tow was

performing. Twice daily the tow line was to be “refreshed” by a few meters either way to eliminate excessive wear and tear and chaffing of wires in one spot.

Our progress was a little slow but once we had cleared San Nicolas Shoals, we transited the South Channel between the Island of Corregidor to starboard, and Carabao Island to port. The south Channel was slightly deeper and wider, hence the decision made in preference to the Northern Channel. By the time we had cleared the South Channel we had been under tow for about 6 or 7 hours. Once having entered the South China Sea, our Tow Master set a more North Easterly course, the towline was lengthened somewhat, and we continued making a steady 5+ knots. True to form, the skies were overcast and grey, but we were blessed with only light variable winds and low seas. Naturally, we were predominantly occupied in frequently checking the towing connections, maintaining good VHF radio contact with our Tug and continuing our navigation as if on a normal passage, taking Sun and Star sights, and comparing our calculated position with those determined by the “**Taikoo**”, which were generally in complete alignment with their own, but their confirmations were always reassuring.

Ensuing days saw little change in the prevailing weather as we continued to make steady progress towards our destination of Hong Kong, always maintaining that magical speed of just over 5 knots.

On our third day under tow, we started to sight the distinctive sails of Chinese fishing junks on the northerly horizon. These junks usually sailed in sizable fleets when engaged in fishing and it was a sure signal that we were now closing in towards the China coast. Sailing junks engaged in fishing seldom ventured more than 200 miles offshore; otherwise it would take too long to get their catch back to port even though many were fitted with auxiliary engines. The increased shipping activity was also evident by the smudges of smoke observed on the distant horizons, all pointing skywards as if reaching for the heavens.

Our Tow Master, being an expert on all matters concerning ocean salvage, towage and in particular the South China Sea, it was like second nature for him guiding the tow, ensuring we maintained a safe distance from such notorious dangers like the Scarborough Shoal, Macclesfield Banks and the Pratas Islands. So it was, during the afternoon of our 5<sup>th</sup> day under tow, Waglan Island emerged from the haze. Waglan Island is the easternmost Island of the Po Toi Group which mark the southeast approaches to Hong Kong and features a powerful light house, is extremely rocky and steep so makes for an excellent Radar target for vessels approaching, as in our case. Before our arrival off Waglan, our Tow Master had already commenced shortening the towing wire ready for us negotiating Lye Ye Mun passage and ultimate arrival at Taikoo Dockyard.

As we approached Lye Ye Mun we were accompanied by two other tugs belonging to the shipyard. Their function was to escort us through the relatively narrow harbor entrance and assist the **Asia Fir** whilst releasing the towing gear, as we were a completely dead ship. Once complete they would take us under tow and place us alongside a lay by jetty at Taikoo Shipyard to await repairs to commence. By 1700 Hrs we were safely secured alongside at the dockyard and our electrics plugged into shore power.

We lay alongside for about 2 days before the vessel was placed in the drydock. Our engineers still had not determined the exact cause of the engine problems, but we did glean that the stay in drydock would

likely be for several weeks. Meanwhile, expert engineers from the engine manufacturers supervised the strip down of the main engine. Most officers and crew signed off and were transferred to other vessels within the fleet. I was lucky and stood by the vessel from 8am to 6pm during the day, then went home every evening. Unverified rumors soon surfaced that the cause of the thrust pads seriously overheating was due (going by hearsay) to issues with the main engine bedplate. Deflections taken reportedly indicated some distortion which was put down to a grounding, which the vessel had sustained a year or so earlier whilst under the management of different owners. True or not it took about 4 weeks, for the shipyard working around the clock to rectify the defects.

A few days before the ship was due to be refloated and undertake sea and engine trials, my contract was completed so I signed off and prepared to go to college for my ticket.

As mentioned, soon after the vessel changed name to **Asia Breeze** and continued to serve the owners over a period of valuable years prior to being sold for continued trading.

End

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