

A Tow to Remember – A Personal Odyssey

By

Geoff Walker

11th 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 2nd Mates examinations, so I had secured an interim job as uncertified 3rd Mate for a 4 month trip on a Hong Kong registered cargo ship named "**Asia Fir**" (later renamed "**Asia Breeze**"). We were chartered to load a full cargo of Copra from around various ports in the Philippines – a pleasurable voyage in the making for my first job as 3rd 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 eventually finding her way to new owners in Hong Kong.



I joined her soon after she was placed under the management of John Manners & Co of Hong Kong. The ship was completing a period of maintenance prior to resuming her trading life and her intended future name change to "**Asia Breeze**". The Master, a Geordie I believe, was a gentleman of unfailing courtesy, modesty and 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 an amiable 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 "San Miguel" 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 with 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 required to return to the anchorage because of a repetition of the same problem. This situation caused me to ponder over a similar incident I had experienced when an apprentice, with the ship suffering a Crank Case explosion and engine room fire, the root cause being melting Thrust Pads – not an episode to be repeated.

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 Marine 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.

Following 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 empty, 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 some other Philippine 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 in order 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 its 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. Our passage had been slow, but safe, and we eventually anchored in Manila outer harbor. Once our local 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 our hatches were fitted only with basic wooden hatch covers, canvas hatch tents were rigged 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. I recall the entire exercise of transferring and trimming the cargo having lasted around 2 weeks.

Now in a light ship condition our engineers, in cooperation with the Engineering Superintendent devoted their entire time and efforts in troubleshooting and trying to rectify the engine defect. Alas, despite the very best of efforts by our shipboard engineers, several more engine trials proved unsuccessful even in light ship condition, resulting in us returning to the same anchorage at the conclusion of each engine 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 Economy Opposed Piston Engine and Taikoo Dockyard were a licensee of Doxford. Henceforth, preparations were made for the pending tow. It did not therefore come as any surprise; 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.

“**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 her legendary and highly regarded Master who had established himself a fine reputation for being a superb seaman and one of the foremost salvage experts in the Far East; which accounted for him becoming synonymous with the Tug. There is an excellent book, “**No Cure No Pay**” which gives a most readable account of the “**Taikoo’s**” salvages and exploits in the China Seas.

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 China Seas, 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. At other times she was kept

usefully employed within the confines of Hong Kong waters or assisting 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 knots (bearing in mind we were in light ship trim) the passage should take us around 5 or 6 days.

Over the ensuing 2 days there were a number of meetings between Masters, Warrantee Surveyor and our Engineering Superintendent to agree and draw 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 as was normal in such cases. 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, the same as for the earlier tow from Cebu. 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 as is the norm. 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 according to my memory 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 reason behind the decision made to select

this route 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 cleared all the land and into 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 close 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, continually maintaining that magical speed of just over 5 knots.

On the 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 was an expert on all matters concerning ocean salvage and towage particularly the area in which we found ourselves, so 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 5th day, 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 as well as weather station. It 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 on a short tow line, 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**” once having released 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 a jetty at the dockyard.

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 intended repairs would likely take 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 in the 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, during a Typhoon, whilst under different ownership. 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 completed so I signed off and prepared to go to college.

As mentioned, the vessel changed name to “**Asia Breeze**” after which she continued to serve the owners for a number of valuable years prior to being on sold to other interests for continued trading.

End

Image Credits:

Tug “Taikoo” – Swire Group Hong Kong

“MV. Asia Breeze” – John Manners Group Hong Kong



The Iconic Ocean Salvage Tug "**Taikoo**" in Hong Kong waters



The "**Asia Breeze**" (ex Asia Fir) depicted whilst loading a cargo of Copra at Cebu, Philippines.



A fine image of the "**Asia Breeze**", following engine repairs and having resumed normal trading.