

readers' letters

Athlone's 1939 camouflage job

Sir,

Picture archive number 12 in the February issue of the magazine had a special interest for me. The *Athlone Castle* left Cape Town for home on September 1, 1939, soon after copies of the *Cape Argus* giving news of the invasion of Poland had been delivered on board. We were a full ship, including a university boat crew—Cambridge I believe.

There was already little doubt about what was coming, and a supply of sand, and material for making sandbags had been shipped at Cape Town. On September 3 we received the expected official notification from London that Britain was at war with Germany and as I hurried from the radio office to tell Captain Vincent, I saw the first officer, "Nobby" Clark, stepping on to the sun deck from below. He knew what we had been waiting for, and I gave him the thumbs down signal. It was indeed thumbs down for poor Nobby—a fine shipmate.

Under Nobby's direction, the passengers were organised into painting and sandbag parties, and everybody co-operated eagerly. Nobby drew the camouflage outlines on the structures, not having any guidance beyond his 1914 war experience. First class ladies could be seen wielding paint brushes with gusto. One mature lady of serious aspect was treating a winch near my office in a manner which suggested she felt it was Hitler himself who was getting the benefit of her determined dollops.

The ladies also measured, cut out and

stitched hessian for sandbags, which the university and other male passengers filled and stacked around the bridge and radio office.

Blackout screens had already been made by the carpenters and it was an eerie, though not particularly eventful voyage to Southampton. Our arrival on September 18 did, however, create a certain amount of wonderment. Other ships in port were a uniform grey, whereas we looked like something turning up from 1918. Nobby's carefully-planned camouflage was soon obliterated to conform to the fashion of 1939.

J. HODGSON,
24 Kennedy Road,
Maybush,
Southampton.

Safety appeal from pilots

Sir,

May I, as a Trinity House pilot and former deck officer for eleven happy years with Union-Castle Line, draw the attention of your readers who are concerned about safety at sea?

Boarding ships at sea is for most of the time not the easiest or most pleasant of tasks. It is only natural that we pilots who have to accept this as part of our calling are hopeful that at least it can be done without risk, even if it cannot be done without difficulty.

The dangers, especially the gunwale steps/stanchion combination, are obvious, and one aim of the pilots is to have the stanchion removed and connected to the ship's structure. Many instances of the necessity of new safety measures could be quoted but the following well illustrate the point.

While disembarking from a ship, I mounted the gunwale steps to the gunwale rail to gain easy access to the ladder, holding the stanchion that had been put there for support. The result was that the whole gunwale steps/handhold stanchion combination tipped up and I plunged into the sea, followed by the steps.

Recently an associate of mine was disembarking off Dover, using the same type

of gunwale steps apparatus. At the inquiry it was witnessed that the pilot held the stanchion then the whole apparatus pivoted on the ships rails as he fell overboard. Less fortunate than me, the pilot was caught up in the propellers.

Pilots wish this apparatus banned by law, and want a rule, backed by over 20 countries (5,000 European pilots alone) as follows:—

Deck arrangements. To permit ease of access from the head of the pilot ladders to the deck of the ship, two stanchions passing through the top of the bulwarks should be securely fitted into sockets on the deck of the ship. A flight of steps inside the bulwarks and hooked on to the bulwark steps is recommended.

Unfortunately, the Board of Trade do not seem to appreciate the danger of the combination. The above rule is unacceptable because it is too precise and does not give room for manoeuvring.

A. P. Costain, MP, has taken up our cause, and on June 23 has been allocated a ten-minute rule bill. I am preparing a brief, and should any one wish to comment on the above rule, I would be most pleased to hear from them.

At the same time, the national newspapers and magazines are showing support. Favourable front page articles have been printed. Television has recognised the opportunity to film. I have offered to demonstrate by climbing a ships pilot ladder, in the harbour, and taking the combination into the sea with me. We all hope it goes down with a splash.

Those who know Captain (Councillor) Longman, will be glad to hear he is now a familiar sight striding round Dover, getting younger every day. In the Cinque Ports Pilotage we have Messrs. Jones, Knowles, Mattocks and Muir who are all fit and well.

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8 Harold Street,
Dover,
Kent.

Stornoway disaster information wanted

Sir,

I had a conversation with a Mr. McKenzie of Edinburgh who has found himself extremely interested in a disaster in Stornoway harbour after the first world war, in which a fleet auxiliary, *Amalthea*, and the *Iolaire* were involved. The writer is quite ignorant of the whole affair, to his shame. Mr. Mackenzie is anxious to have particulars and photographs of *Iolaire II*.

She was Sir Donald Currie's private yacht, second of the name and was taken over by the Admiralty at the start of the 1914-18 war. The story of the disaster became more interesting the further Mr.



■ One of J. Hodgson's own pictures, taken during Athlone Castle's unusual camouflage voyage, shows the 1914 dazzle effect applied to superstructure.