

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER.....

BY JOHN FOOT

Photograph courtesy of the Thanet Times



A sea of ice off Margate

Jim Francis was a newcomer to the pilotage service, having recently been appointed by Trinity House to Cinque Ports, the southern arm of the Thames District. As a junior pilot his duties embraced any movements of shipping in and out of Ramsgate and

Whitstable, and to serve ships making night-time rendezvous off the Thanet coast bound for London.

There were 100 Cinque Ports pilots based at Dover and Folkestone, with the four juniors stationed on the Isle of Thanet

ready to move quickly, and also to deal with any ships giving no ETAs. The pilots prided themselves on a very efficient service. Ships were not to be delayed. There was further incentive in those self-employed days of the alphabetical roster. If the pilot 'on turn' could not be found, his turn was lost and the 'job' went to the next man.

The winter of 1962/3 was the severest for many years with snow and ice persisting for three months. The early hours of February 1st were no exception. Upon his arrival at the port of Ramsgate soon after midnight, Jim noticed that the ship for which he had been ordered, the 'Weserstrom', was enclosed by ice in the Inner Basin. There were numerous ice floes in the outer harbour and pack ice was piled high in the harbour entrance. But there were patches of clear water and Jim decided that it was safe enough to proceed to sea.

'Weserstrom' was a typical German coaster of 409grt and the manoeuvre in calm conditions, despite the ice, would present no undue difficulty for Jim. Out through the narrow lock, a sharp S bend through the harbour entrance, and then, once clear of the Quern shoal, down the ladder into his waiting pilot boat and back on dry land within half an hour.

That was the theory, but events that night took a completely different course.

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Having negotiated the narrow lock, it requires a cool nerve to build up speed whilst heading for the eastern breakwater before turning hard to starboard, through the entrance and into the NE running tide. Soon afterwards Jim had cleared the Quern shoal and brought 'Weserstrom' in a tight turn to port in order to provide a lee free of ice for boatman Bob Cannon who had been following in his wake. 'Stop Engines'.

Jim shook hands with the Captain, wished him 'Bon voyage' and was accompanied by a crewman down to the maindeck where the pilot ladder had been rigged for the 15ft. descent into the boat. Bulwark steps, with a pair of stanchions, had been placed against the ship's side. Jim mounted these and grasping the stanchions

firmly, turned and felt for the first rung of the ladder. In a fleeting moment, and too late, he realised his weight had levered the the bulwark steps off the deck. He fell backwards into a sea of ice with steps and stanchions on top of him.

The numbing cold and darkness focussed Jim's mind as he struggled to the surface. He was a young, fit man but he knew there was little time. Already he had been swept clear of the harbour lights, and whilst the tide flowed strongly, his strength was ebbing fast. Bob Cannon had quickly assessed the gravity of the situation, but several minutes passed before he could manoeuvre his boat to the drowning man still enmeshed in the steps and ice.

Bob put the engine in neutral and leant over the gunwale in a vain attempt to haul the 14 stone, 6ft. pilot aboard, but Jim was literally freezing to death. His heavy clothing and boots were weighing him down, his senses numbed. Immediate action was essential. The boatman passed a rope under Jim's arms, made it fast to a cleat, and towed the half-submerged, stiffening figure the half mile back to Ramsgate.

Meanwhile Ramsgate Hospital had been alerted. As soon as the boat came alongside the jetty with its valuable tow, willing hands carried Jim up the steps. By now his body was frozen and unbending and it was impossible to lever him into the waiting car. Without delay a van was commandeered, and the journey achieved in record time. The clothes were cut from his body and he was placed in a cool bath, and slowly brought up to body heat. After two hours sleep in a warm bed, followed by a hearty breakfast, Jim felt fully recovered and told Matron so. She was not so easily convinced.

'No, Mr Francis, we shall keep you in for observation for 24 hours. And anyway, you've got no clothes. They're still soaking wet!'

But after further persuasion, both Matron and doctor relented, and granted him permission to return home to Dover in hospital dressing-gown and pyjamas. A taxi was ordered, and a much relieved Jim set



off down the corridors, a rather bedraggled figure, carrying a sodden, dripping bag of clothing!

At the main entrance, the hall porter cast a critical eye at this strange apparition. 'May I ask where you're off to, sir?'

'Oh, it's all right, I've been released. I'll be bringing the hospital clothes back tomorrow.' The porter was not impressed. Grasping him firmly by the shoulder, he marched a protesting Jim back to the ward. Jim smiled grimly to himself as he compared his present situation to that of only three years ago when he had been in command of his own ship in the Union Castle Line.

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Meanwhile in Dover, Mary Francis, mother of two small children and shortly expecting a third, began the day with the usual routine, preparing breakfast and expecting to see her husband home shortly from his night shift. He might have taken a ship to London, or perhaps undertaken local pilotage at Ramsgate or Whitstable. She would be glad to see his return, for travelling conditions were again diabolical.

Further snow was falling on icy roads, and it was 5 degrees below freezing.

The telephone interrupted Mrs Francis' thoughts. It was a pilot's wife who, unlike Mary, had already heard the dramatic news from Ramsgate.

'Are you OK?'

'I'm fine thanks. Not long to go now.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, honestly. A check up next week, but no problems!'

'But what about Jim? Is he OK?'

'Oh yes. He's fine too. Been on duty all night, should be home soon. But we're both fine thanks.'

Mary put down the phone. How nice that people should be concerned over their welfare! After all, they had not been in the pilotage fraternity for long.

When Jim eventually arrived home later that morning, his wife took a long, hard look at his strange attire. 'What on earth have you been up to?' Jim sat down, poured himself a stiff drink, and described the interesting events of the night.

That might have been the end of the story, had it not been Jim Francis's

determination to ensure that similar accidents could be avoided. He approached the Pilots' Committee, and a sub-committee was formed to approach the Board of Trade, through the United Kingdom Pilots Association, with the aim of changing the rules on pilot ladder safety. His requests met with a cool response, and when The Merchant Shipping (Pilot Ladders) Rules 1965 came into force that year, no mention was made of any plan to outlaw this killer equipment.

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Matters came to a head on 3rd August 1967 when the tragedy waiting to happen occurred off Dover. The British vessel 'Afric' stopped off the port to land her Cinque Ports pilot, Jim Pearson. He had mounted the bulwark steps using the side rails for support, he turned with his back to the sea to begin his descent down the ladder, whereupon, the whole apparatus tipped under his weight, and crashed down into the boat below. The pilot landed in the water and according to the boatman, appeared to be swimming and then raising an arm as the boat drew near to him. That was the last movement that he was seen to make.

Further pressure on the government minister failed to make any impression, and it was not until a meeting with local MP for Folkestone, Albert Costain, that the pilots felt they had found a sympathetic ear. He encouraged media attention and there was a re-enactment of the incident, with television coverage of Jim Francis once again falling backwards into the water, this time from the relative safety of a ship in Dover Docks. But it was not until 1970 that

Cartoon contributed by Jim Francis



Costain, in a 10 minute Rule Bill in Parliament, succeeded in changing the Board of Trade's reluctant attitude.

Looking back over the intervening years, it is clear that Jim Francis's dogged determination has since saved the lives of pilots not only in the UK, but throughout the world.

From that small

beginning there are now in place strict regulations concerning ladders, clothing, launches and other aspects of pilots' safety.

Today that small ship leaving Ramsgate would have well lit access to the ladder, stanchions secured to the bulwark, and a crewman standing by with life-line and buoy. The pilot himself wears a reflective, inflatable jacket fitted with a powerful strobe light. The high-powered launch now has a two man crew, a mechanical hoist at the stern, powerful searchlights, survival kit and VHF communication between ship, launch and port control. No longer will that freezing body have to be lashed to the gunwale and towed more dead than alive, back into harbour!



An appearance on TV, 1963 - the Board of Trade refused to turn up! Left to right: Interviewer, Jim Francis (pilot), Gordon Greenham (pilot), Gilbert Costain MP.