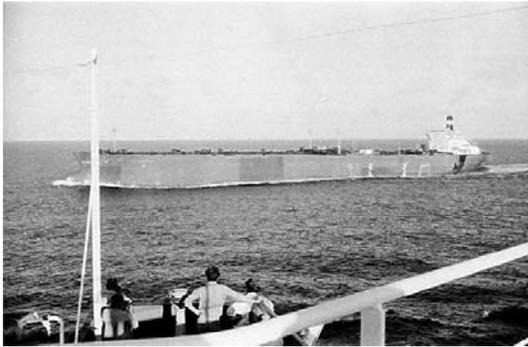


Shell and Esso Tankers



Back in the 1950s and 1960's, the oil companies ruled the waves, or so it seemed, with oil majors Shell and Esso each controlling hundreds of deepsea tankers through their owned and chartered fleets. For a combination of economic and regulatory reasons, the big tanker fleets, many flagged in countries like the UK and Netherlands, moved into the hands of cost efficient third party managers, and independent owners.

On the internet, these legendary oil company fleets live on, through the efforts of Mr. Auke Visser and Mr. Kees Helder. Visser, now retired from his service as an engineer on vessels of the Esso Tankvaart Mij. N.V. Fleet, from 1967 through 1973 and Helder, who sailed on the Dutch Shell tankers from 1961 to 1965, have both created websites which bring back the great oil company fleets.

Mr. Visser's career, documented through his Seaman's Book, ("Monsterboekje" in Dutch) included stints on Esso Rotterdam (25,000 tonner blt 1959) Esso Den Haag (96,000 tonner blt. 1963), and the early VLCC's "Esso Nederland" (blt 1969) and "Esso Europoort" (blt 1970). His VLCC voyages entailed loadings in Bandar Abbas and Ras Tanura for destinations such as La Corunna, Lisbon and Rotterdam.

But, in March, 1967, two months prior to the eight year Canal closure, the smaller "Esso Rotterdam" was nearing the Suez Canal on a voyage from Ras Tanura to "Fawley for orders" on the morning of 14 Th of March 1967, at 11.30. Visser says: "I was working on maintenance for the aft deck-winch on the poop deck. The following day we should be at Suez for going through the Suez Canal. I heard a very loud bang, just beneath me and this was followed by the Engineers Alarm. The aft ship was suddenly shaking."

He then describes a visit to the engine room to inspect the steam turbine, which maybe had somehow been damaged. But the turbine, normally running at 104 RPM, was fine. Anything above 40 RPM would cause severe shaking. A view through a porthole just above the waterline revealed the sad news- "We saw the propeller slowly turning and started to count. 1, then 2 , then 3 and the fourth propeller blade wasn't coming. So, at that point it was clear, we had only three blades, instead of four !!" Visser then went on to recount a snail's pace voyage, on reduced RPMs, aided by a tug so they could keep pace with the convoy up moving up through the Canal. They reached Alexandria on March 19 th.

It took another three days to trans-ship their cargo to a Norwegian tanker in the midst of blinding sand storms. "Esso Rotterdam" then continued the slow crawl to a drydock in Genoa. Aake Visser notes, "... the weather condition was very bad and the Pilot had to



stay on board. We were going to Genoa for a Docking time of 3 and half weeks and to replace the propeller.” But the crippled vessel took an extra passenger, with Visser continuing “...the Egyptian Pilot could finally leave the ship in Genoa. Despite asking several times, if he could be transferred to an other ship, sailing in the opposite direction. We arrived in Genoa on March 31st”

Visser’s site also provides insights into the European officers’ lively social life, including the bicycle races around the deck of the VLCC’s, through a unique set of onboard shots.



A photo taken from the bridge wing of “Esso Nederland” passing “Esso Europoort” on the port beam is eerily reminiscent of the P&O VLCC “Ardshiel’s” similar encounter with “Esso Albany” described in Noel Mostert’s classic book “Supership”- penned during a round the Cape transit in the early 1970s, just prior to the first big oil shock. A special section on Visser’s site highlights the ice-breaking tanker “Manhattan” and its economically non-viable Northwest Passage voyage in 1969, which predated the Alaska pipeline by eight years.

Kees Helder’s travels, on Shell’s “Vitrea” (36,000 tonner blt 1962) , and the 19,000 tonners “Abida” (blt 1958), Koratia (blt 1955), and Kosicia (blt 1957) took him around the world. Mr. Helder recounts a rough maiden voyage on “Vitrea” in March 1962 from the Wilton-Fijenoord yard in Holland to the Shell refinery in Curacao, with a full load of fresh water. He tells Fairplay: “When we were anchored, another tanker collided against our anchor chain and we shot forward and touched with our nose the accommodation of that tanker. Considerable damage to our nose of a brand-new ship was made. Then on the next voyage, we could not open the Suez light cover, because of the damage. The Suez light had then to be placed on the front deck. At the following docking time, the nose was replaced.”

Mr. Helder’s site also includes an interactive “shipmate” finder and a Guestbook, which Shell alumni can feed via email. Scrolling through the entries for the Dutch built “Vitrea”, five dozen crewmembers of Dutch nationality who sailed between 1962, when she was built (including Mr. Helder), and 1985- when she was scrapped have registered in the database. Meantime, a scroll through the British flagged “Varicella” (35,000 dwt, blt 1959 at Swan Hunter) shows a similar complement of lads, with English names, through 1979.

Since launching the site in 2002, Mr. Helder has added news items, regarding Shell’s maritime activities. Of special interest are photos in a special section detailing a helicopter visit to Shell’s “Myrina”, a 300,000 tonner (blt 1995 at Daewoo) at anchor off the Dutch coast. At the time, the vessel was still owned by Knightsbridge Tankers, which

then took the ship back a year later, renaming her “Kensington”, when Shell did not extend its charter. She now trades for Tankers International as “TI Quindao”.

“Myrina” is iconic, representing many changes over the past 45 years since Mr. Helder joined the 36,000 dwt “supertanker” Vitrea. Then, oil companies set the standards. Later, complicated financial structures, and public company listings, both featured in Knightsbridge (with ships financed through the UK Tax leases that emerged in the mid 1990’s), came along, as did a wholesale move out of national registries. The Daewoo yard where the ex: “Myrina” was built, did not exist in the 1950’s. Neither did the whole industry of third party managers, strange financial entities such as Knightsbridge Tankers (financed by equity, yet paying out like a bond)- whose ships were lacking that distinctive yellow scallop on the funnel.

Sidebar: The Sites

The sites both contain vast photographic archives of their respective fleets, but differ in a number of important respects.

Auke Visser main site <http://visseraa.topcities.com/>

Each vessel is illustrated with as many pictures as are available; many were company commissioned, but some shipspotter snaps have also been posted. The site, really a compendium of multiple company scrapbooks that were built separately, contains listings of 740 vessels, overall. Visser also provides a detailed database, in both MS Access and Excel, listing all the vessels. Visser also maintains a “Supertanker” site and has been working on a T2 tanker site.

Kees Helder site <http://www.helderline.nl>

Finding a particular vessel is easy on the Shell site, cleverly named Helderline, because all vessel entries (which include vessel particulars as well as one picture of each vessel) are keyed from a central database. Because the nearly 1100 ships, mainly owned but with some chartered tonnage, in the database are all linked together, it is possible to trace Mr. Helder’s career as an able bodied sailor, starting in 1961 aboard “Abida”. Database functionality also enables a search by “Manager” with Bonny Gas Transport Bermuda Shell revealing 11 LNG’s built between 1975 and 2005.

