



Photo: Kees Helder

An afterlife online

Old tankers don't die – they go online. On internet websites, two legendary oil company fleets live on, preserving such past novelties as bicycle races around the decks of VLCCs.

The people ensuring that this tanker esoterica lives on are Auke Visser and Kees Helder. Visser, now retired, was an engineer on Esso Tankvaart Mij's ships in 1967-73. Helder sailed on the Shell fleet in 1961-5.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, oil companies ruled the waves, or so it seemed. Major groups Shell and Esso each controlled 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 the UK and the Netherlands – have today moved into the hands of cost-efficient third-party managers and independent owners.

Visser's career, documented through his *Seaman's Book* (*Monsterboekje* in Dutch), included stretches on *Esso Rotterdam* (25,000dwt and built in 1959) *Esso Den Haag* (96,000dwt, 1963), and the early VLCCs *Esso Nederland* (1969) and *Esso Europort* (1970).

His VLCC voyages entailed loadings in Bandar Abbas and Ras Tanura for destinations such as La Coruña, Lisbon and Rotterdam.

Two months before the eight-year Suez Canal closure, *Esso Rotterdam* was nearing the Suez Canal on a voyage from

Mishaps and adventures aboard the 1962-built Vitrea are among a wealth of maritime history now available online

Ras Tanura on the morning of 14 March 1967. "I was working on maintenance for the aft deck-winch on the poop deck," he recalls. "I heard a very loud bang just beneath me, and this was followed by the engineer's alarm. The aft of the ship was suddenly shaking."

He then describes inspecting the steam turbine in the engine room, which normally ran at 104rpm. Anything above 40rpm caused severe shaking.

A view through a porthole just above the waterline revealed the cause. "We saw the propeller slowly turning and started to count. 1, then 2, then 3 and the fourth propeller blade wasn't coming."

Visser recalls a snail's-pace voyage through the canal. They finally reached Alexandria on 19 March. It then took another three days to tranship their cargo to a Norwegian tanker in blinding sandstorms. *Esso Rotterdam* then crawled off to a drydock in Genoa.

Visser's site (via <http://visseraa.topcities.com>) also provides unique onboard photos that give an insight into the European officers' lively social life, including the bicycle races around the VLCC decks.

Helder's travels on Shell's *Vitrea* (36,000dwt built in 1962, pictured) and the 19,000dwt ships *Abida* (1958), *Koratia* (1955) and *Kosicia* (1957) took him round the world. Helder recounts (www.helderline.nl) a rough maiden voyage on *Vitrea* in March 1962 from the Wilton-Fijenoord yard in the Netherlands to the Shell refinery in Curaçao, for example. Since launching the site in 2002, Helder has added a shipmate finder. ■ **Barry Parker**

Five years ago in Fairplay

13 June 2002

THE SPEED with which Singapore and the US have sealed a customs inspection agreement regarding screening of containers demonstrates the seriousness with which both countries view the lurking menace of terrorism.

With airports becoming virtually impregnable fortresses after 11 September, the sprawling seaports are obvious takeoff points for terrorists to infiltrate the US. What better hiding place for arms and men than a 20-foot or 40-foot transshipment container, which is just one among thousands stacked at ports such as Singapore and Hong Kong?

It worked for Odysseus at Troy (although he and his men hid in a four-foot container).

It is not mere coincidence that the US was very keen to strike a customs inspection agreement with both Singapore and the Hong Kong administration. From these twin transshipment hubs, over 2M teu wend their way to US ports every year.

Ultimately, the initiative would see US customs inspectors stationed at Singapore container terminals and subjecting marine containers to intense checks.

It would be natural for any country, proud of its technical and surveillance capability or jealous of its sovereignty, to object to such an arrangement.

It is easy, however, to understand why Singapore has so readily agreed to the pilot port status under the US Customs Container Security Initiative, the first country outside North America to do so.

Singapore has realised, thanks to some sterling work by its intelligence agencies, just how deeply it has been sucked into the maelstrom of global terrorism. Last December, Singapore arrested 13 alleged activists of a local group said to have links with the infamous Al-Qaeda. ■