

A Seafarer's Salute

Remembering the Last Days of a Rebellious Lady

~ Notice to Mariners; 21 October 2000 ~

BELOFIN-1 (ex-MONTEREY, ex-MATSONIA, ex-LURELINE, ex-BRITANIS) sank in 2,000-plus Fathoms at 1704 GMT, fifty nautical miles west of Capetown, South Africa while under tow by the Russian tug IRIBIS; destined for a salvage yard in India.

This simple, stark and unemotional notice marked the sad ending of a great ocean liner that had enjoyed an extremely long, varied and distinguished history. Obviously, she preferred a watery grave to an ignominious dismantlement. To better understand the circumstances of her loss and to appreciate a touching salute to her by a seafarer named Sergey Tyumentsev, it's necessary to first review her multiple service careers.

The SS *MONTEREY* was one of a trio of ships that were built in the early 1930s for the Matson Line. They were specifically configured to provide passenger and cargo service between the West Coast and numerous ports in the Far East.



These vessels were designed by William Francis Gibbs and built by Bethlehem Steel Shipbuilding Corp., Quincy, Massachusetts.

Between her maiden voyage in the summer of 1932, and the fall of 1941, she shortened the nominal running time between San Francisco and Australia by a third, and scored high marks for establishing a new standard of service and comfort on this lengthy route.

MONTEREY was chartered in the summer of 1941 by the United States Maritime Commission and was dispatched to rescue refugees from China, Japan and Korea. Then, she was stripped of her luxurious appointments and fitted to accommodate 3,500 soldiers. Unlike most other liners-turned-troop-ship, she retained her original name. During the years that she served as a United States Army Transport, her peacetime "SS" prefix was replaced by "USAT".



She had her share of near-misses during her period of service as a troopship, but always escaped without damage. *MONTEREY* was returned by the US Navy to her owners in September of 1946. The next year, Matson's financial problems halted her reconversion work in Alameda. She was laid up for five years, then sold to the US Government and placed in a reserve fleet in San Francisco Bay.

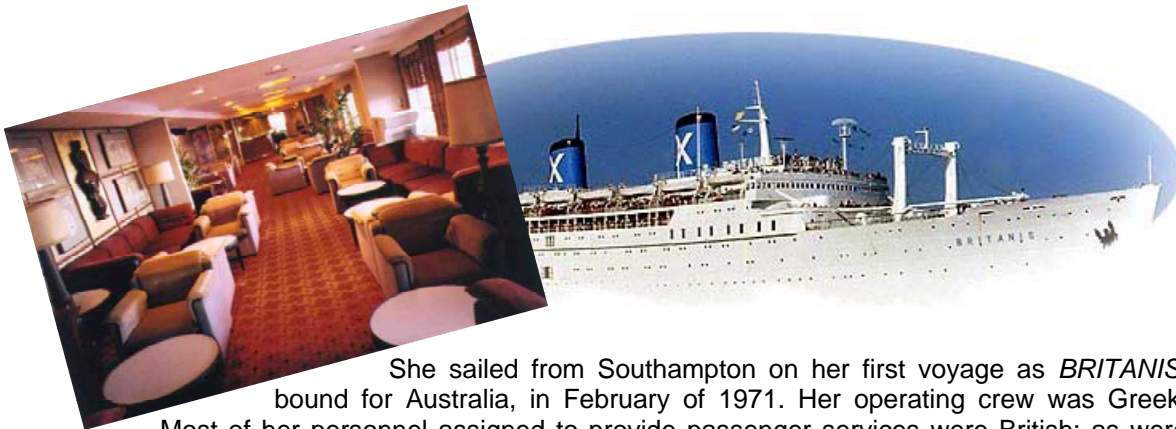
By 1955, the Matson Line was in much better financial shape, and a sister ship was operating in the Pacific at 97% capacity. The Government sold the *MONTEREY* back to Matson, who arranged for her to be towed to Newport News Shipbuilding on the East Coast and completely rebuilt. That work was accomplished under the direction of her original designers. She emerged looking better than ever, sporting a new 'clipper' bow and slightly streamlined stacks.

Because the Matson Line had assigned her name to another vessel during her period of lay-up, the vessel was renamed *MATSONIA*. With Hawaiian-themed accommodations for 761 passengers, she returned to service in June of 1957. But, just a few years later, falling passenger revenues forced the steamship company to lay her up once again in September of 1962.



The next year, Matson sold a sister ship, the *LURLINE*, to Greece's Chandris Lines for use in the Australian migrant and cruise service. In 1963, *MATSONIA* was returned to service once again, after assuming her departed sister's name. Unfortunately, by the end of the 60s, operating losses forced Matson to also sell the newly-named *LURLINE* to Chandris. Renamed *BRITANIS*, she sailed for Greece in June of 1970.

Upon arrival, she underwent what was a typical conversion for Chandris in those days, more than doubling her passenger capacity. Cargo holds were converted to passenger use, larger cabins were divided into smaller units and her superstructure was expanded forward, creating still more cabins. Her smokestacks were further modified and her towering foredeck mast was replaced by a set of large kingposts, forward. Following another standard Chandris practice, she retained much of her Matson Line era public space décor which had a very distinctive Hawaiian theme.



She sailed from Southampton on her first voyage as *BRITANIS*, bound for Australia, in February of 1971. Her operating crew was Greek. Most of her personnel assigned to provide passenger services were British; as were the large majority of the passengers themselves.

After 1974, she began winter cruising in the Caribbean and summer cruising in Europe. A major refit in 1986 extended her life and parts of her two sister ships, which had already been scrapped, were utilized in that effort. *BRITANIS* then returned to cruising, operating from Florida year round until November of 1994.

That year, she was chartered to the US Government and utilized as a barracks ship for military personnel at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Two years later, she was returned to her owners and laid up in Tampa. She remained there, under the minimal and perhaps indifferent care of a skeleton crew until January of 1999, when she was sold to AG Belofin Investments of Lichtenstein.

Although the historic liner was renamed *BELOFIN-1*, she never steamed a single nautical mile under that name. After considering several possibilities, including restoring her for use as a waterfront attraction and hotel in her former homeport of San Francisco, her last owners sold her for scrap. A Russian firm dispatched their tug *IRIBIS* (Port of Registry: Vladivostok) to Tampa, which towed the 68 year-old vessel out of Tampa Bay on July 3, 2000, bound for India. No underwater inspections or repairs were undertaken beforehand; typical for a ship sold for scrap.

One of the tug's crew members, Sergey Tyumentsev, recently shared electronically his memories and some photographs taken during that fateful voyage with Carol Mavroidaki, a former crew member of the *BRITANIS*. Sergey contacted Carol after seeing her web site that is dedicated to the memory of 'her' ship. In his own unaltered words:

"My name is Sergey, I from Russia the city of Vladivostok. It will be possible to you interestingly: I a member of a crew of an ocean salvage tug "Iribis" which towed in "last voyage" Britanis. I have a number of photos of this voyage, and as video recording of all route, from a berthing wall up to a place of destruction.

"Sorry for my English."



One of the photos Sergey subsequently shared depicts him on the stern of the *IRIBIS* as she towed the *BELOFIN-1* under the Tampa Bay Bridge.

Subjected to wind and wave for the last time, on the end of a tow line, the aged liner developed some leaks. Members of the tug's crew boarded the ship several times to make repairs. Following a stop in Rio de Janeiro, the *IRIBIS* and her charge commenced the next leg of their voyage; crossing the South Atlantic, bound for the Cape of Good Hope.

As the tug and her tow approached the West Coast of South Africa, the tug's crew daily on-board inspections of *BELOFIN-1* discovered additional and serious leaks that could not be stopped. Progressive flooding resulted, and the vessel took on an alarming port list. The tug was forced to drop the tow, her crew helpless to do more than witness the liner's death throes.

Sergey's commentary continued, following an emailed question from Carol with respect to the following photo:

"Yes, this is my ship in your photo of Britanis sinking. I think, that this photographer was onboard a tow from Cape Town."



As the sea made its way from compartment to compartment, hour after hour, the stricken ship's port list continued to increase, and she sank slowly, stern-first. The last view of her afforded to the handful of mariners watching from nearby vessels was the tip of her bow, disappearing forever.



Several days after she sank out of sight, a grim reminder of her washed up on an isolated South African beach; a section of Lifeboat #8, still bearing her last in-service name.



A sad and inadequate substitute for a more suitable marker for her watery grave.

But fortunately, Sergey has provided a better, albeit bittersweet, seafarers' salute when recently reflecting on the experience of seeing the huge ship sink:

"You know, to me was very sick to look as "Britanis" left under water, our crew very long struggled for its life, but that weather put to us has not allowed to rescue it! During towage we made daily surveys "Britanis", me the internal beauty, grand pianos, pictures with the image of all twelve constellations of the zodiac were especially remembered. I was in delight.

"I often show video recording that towage to the friends, after viewing - grief and silence. In a word it is very a pity, that so has occurred."

[signed]

Sergey Tyumentsev

~ *Postscript* ~

Carol Mavroidaki (nee Hewlett) was a *BRITANIS* crew member during the early 1970s. She knew I'd be interested in seeing the results of her dialogue with Sergey. She understood better than I did, at first, that I would be inspired to write this essay after reading those email exchanges.



Introduced several years ago via the Internet by a ship enthusiast living in New Zealand, Carol and I often share information about such things. We have never met in person, but we have enjoyed a few telephone calls. On the telephone, she sounds as British and bright as this 1973 photo indicates.



Carol and her husband, George live near the sea in Southampton. They met onboard *BRITANIS*, Carol was a sea-going hairdresser; George was the ship's chief plumber and could easily be mistaken as a relative of Zorba the Greek. They first met when he responded to her call to fix a severe leak in the ship's beauty salon. That meeting effectively ended her maritime career...

From time to time, they still go to sea together, although such voyages these days are enjoyed by them as pampered passengers on the finest of Cunard's cruise ships.

The informational exchanges upon which this essay is based, as well as most of the ship's history and all of illustrations, are due to the magic of the Internet. Plus its unending usage by individuals all over the world who also really like ships!

Bill Lee
January, 2009