

1.
COPY OF LETTER SENT

ss "STANBROOK"

TO SUNDAY DISPATCH APRIL 29 At Oran

2-3/4/39

I have been Master of vessels trading to Republican Spain for the past 12 months and on my last two visits to Spain I have been Master of the STANBROOK:

The STANBROOK is a small vessel of 1383 tons gross with a length of 230 feet and a beam of 34 feet: Her speed is about 11 knots. She is of course essentially ~~xx~~ a cargo vessel and has only accommodation for her crew of 20 hands all told:

On the 17th March last I received instructions from my Owners to proceed in ballast to Alicante and after leaving Marseille the voyage to Alicante proceeded without incident except that we had some trouble in avoiding a Franco Destroyer which had instructed us not to go into Alicante: However with the aid of a rain squall and some bad weather we eluded the Destroyer and entered Alicante at about 6.0 pm on the 19th March last, and made fast alongside the quay in the harbour shortly afterwards.

I then went ashore to report for instructions but on account of the dislocation of business everywhere I could get no instructions as to cargo I was to take or anything else and this went on until the 24th March. On the 25th March I again endeavoured to find out about my cargo without success.

On the 26th March I proceeded to Madrid and ascertained from officials there that the cargo for my vessel was in lorries on the way. I then returned to my vessel at Alicante when I received a telegram from my Owners informing me that unless there were prospects of my getting cargo I was to proceed to sea forthwith.

The next day some cargo arrived consisting of tobacco, oranges and saffron which was put on the quay: At about the same time about 1000 refugees arrived at the Custom House in various forms of transport and from all parts of the provinces of Republican Spain, and at the same time I received a request ~~xxxx~~ from the port officials to take these refugees aboard and take them to Oran as they were in dire straits and I was told that their passports were in order and that they could be put ashore in Algeria without any difficulty:

Amongst the refugees were a large number of women and young girls and children of all ages; even including some in arms. Owing to the large number of refugees I was in a quandary as to my own position as my instructions were not to take refugees unless they were in real need. However after seeing the condition of the refugees I decided from a humanitarian point of view to take them aboard as I anticipated that they would soon be landed at Oran;

Amongst the refugees were all classes of people, some of them appearing very poor indeed and looking half starved and ill clad and attired in a variety of clothes ranging from boiler suits to old and ragged pieces of uniform and even blankets and other odd pieces of clothing: There were also some people both women and men who appeared very well to do and whom I assumed to be the wives and relatives of officials. A few of the refugees appeared to have all their ~~xxxx~~ worldly possessions with them carried in suitcases; bags of all descriptions some tied up in large handkerchiefs and a few with suitcases:

Shortly afterwards the refugees commenced to come aboard in an orderly manner and their passports were inspected by the Custom Officials. It was now about 9.0 pm and of course quite dark.

After about 800 or 900 refugees had come ~~xxxxxx~~ aboard for some reason or other and while there were still many more to come aboard the guards and Custom Officials on the quay appeared to lose control at the gangway so that it became choked with a struggling mass of people, which included some of the guards and Custom Officials who at this time decided to join the throng of refugees; and threw down their arms and equipment and joined in the stampede to get aboard. Seeing this sudden rush of people I was almost inclined to let down the gangway and get my vessel away from the quay, but realising that if I did this at least ~~xxxx~~ 100 people or more would be thrown into the water I decided from a humanitarian point of view to let them all come aboard, as I knew it would only be a matter of about 20 hours run to Oran when they could be discharged ashore. The number of refugees coming aboard made it almost impossible for anyone to move on the vessel itself, as the hatches had been opened ready to load the cargo and consequently the refugees could only stand ~~xxxx~~ about on the deck. In spite of my appeals I could not get the refugees to go down below in the holds thereby making more room although later on a few did go down thus making a little more room, but their places were immediately filled by further people coming on board.

Eventually at about 10.30 pm the last of the refugees were aboard and I had long ago abandoned all hope of ever getting any cargo on board. I should estimate that at this time there were about 2000 refugees aboard and I subsequently ascertained later on that there were 1835 in all. When the refugees were all on board it was practically impossible to give an adequate description of the scene my vessel presented, and the nearest approach I can give is to say that she looked like one of the Thames holiday steamers on a Bank Holiday only many times worse. A troopship leaving England laden with troops was not to be compared with my vessel. In fact in all my experience at sea covering some 33 years I have never seen anything like it and I hope I never will again. Apparently this last rush to get aboard my vessel was caused through a rumour that the place was to be bombarded or a large air raid; I did however manage to keep the refugees off the navigating bridge and I then gave orders for the moorings to be let go the gangway was fastened alongside as it could not be brought inside and I manoeuvred my vessel out of the harbour entrance and commenced the voyage to Oran. We had only just got clear of the port when the air raid rumour or bombardment proved to be true and within 10 minutes of leaving the port a most terrific bombardment of the town and port was made and the flash of the explosions could be seen quite clearly on board my vessel and the shock of the exploding shells could almost be felt.

However we proceeded on the voyage and during the night some of the refugees went down below into the holds to get some sleep but hundreds had to remain on deck and these had to stand all night as there was not even room for them to lie down. Others were huddled around the base of the funnel for warmth and in fact any little place where warmth could be got. The night was clear but cold and I think that the sufferings of these people standing on deck all night must have been pretty bad.

The saloon was also filled with refugees of all classes some of whom were lying on the floor and others on the table; I had given them permission to go there to relieve the congestion on deck and elsewhere. I had also given up my own cabin to help some of the weaker people and so also had some of my Officers. It was turned midnight when I at last managed to snatch a few hours sleep.

I came on deck again at daylight and found the numbers of the refugees had come on deck. As we proceeded great difficulty was experienced in keeping the vessel on an even keel, as whenever another vessel was sighted either on the port or starboard side, large numbers of the refugees would struggle across to that side in order to sight the vessel with the result that we took a ~~slight~~ list one side or the other. Apparently the refugees appeared to think that every vessel which hove in sight was a Franco vessel coming to intercept them and as large numbers of the refugees were armed I was rather alarmed at what might have occurred had we sighted a Franco vessel. Many of the refugees stated that if a Franco vessel did intercept them they were prepared to sell their lives dearly. Fortunately however we never sighted any hostile vessels.

As regards food I had only been able to supply the weaker refugees with some hot coffee with a little food to some of them; The vast majority had sufficient bread etc to last them until Oran. Later on during the forenoon when practically all the refugees had come on deck it was almost impossible to move on deck. During the course of the day a few cases of illness were reported to me mostly fainting etc caused by overcrowding which I was almost powerless to prevent. Indeed it is a wonder to me that serious casualties had not occurred before this. The remainder of this day passed without further incident and we arrived off Oran at about 10 pm on the 10th and moored in the Bay 20 hours after leaving Alicante. We moored in the outer bay but as we had no authority from the port officials to enter the port we had to remain outside and spend another night under bad conditions. Fortunately the weather still remained fine and whilst large numbers of the refugees went down below into the holds the remainder had again to remain on deck and sleep as best they could. These people had only their clothes they stood up in and I think their privations must have been terrible. Again some of the refugees were huddled round the funnel and some even penetrated the engine room but these had to be ejected on account, of the risk that they might do damage or injure themselves.

So passed another nightmare and at 8 o'clock next morning I noticed other Spanish vessels in the harbour with refugees on board but not crowded like we were. I then hailed the first motor boat I saw and went ashore to telephone my Agents to get permission for the refugees to land as owing to the conditions on board I considered it imperative that they should be taken off the vessel not only from the point of view of comfort but also from a health point of view as the sanitary arrangements were entirely inadequate for the refugees and I feared an outbreak of disease if they were not soon put ashore: I was however given permission for my vessel to be brought into the port but not for the refugees to land; I understand the reason for this was that the authorities had no place to put them in. I then returned

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to my vessel and brought her into the harbour and put her alongside the quay but all the refugees spent another night of extreme discomfort still huddled up together and sleeping or lying down x wherever there was room;

The next day I again went ashore and eventually managed to make arrangements for practically all the women and children to be taken ashore to a camp and arrangements are in hand to have the remainder of the refugees put ashore.

At present the vessel is still crowded with refugees of all classes who throng the sides of the vessel and barter money and goods with people in rowing boats, etc for a little food cigarettes etc.

Many of these refugees cannot have had a ~~xxx~~ wash since coming aboard my vessel and some long before that;

Yours truly,

Chas

A. Dickson
Master
S. S. "Stanbrook"

The Editor
Sunday Dispatch.
LONDON.

P. S. This is now the sixth day that the remaining refugees have been on board; - there are even now about 1,500 on board. Arrangements have been made to supply refugees with bread by local authorities, ~~and a few~~ before women and children disembarked, the ship's officers and myself supplied them with small luxuries, such as milk, chocolate, sweets etc: all men refugees are still on board and their appearance is really pathetic, especially as they have not been able to wash or shave. None of them have even taken off their clothes.

A. D.