

Extract from a Journal

A Passage on the [Søren Larsen](#) - June 1984

The following is an extract from my journal of my first seagoing voyage describing my impressions, the duties of a deckhand and the joy and excitement of fulfilling my dream of being a sailor as many of my family. It led me to sailing down the East Coast of America, the West Indies and the Mediterranean, as well as in British Waters. If you dream of an adventure, never mind how big or small, whether you are old or young, whatever it is, give it a go and surprise yourself.



Friday 8th June

Arrived at Southampton about mid-day full of excitement and a little trepidation. My first sight of the Søren Larsen was "What a beauty". Into the Jubilee Sailing Trusts office to sign on as per Board of Trade regulations, and to have a few things explained, but far too excited to take a thing in. Out into blazing sunshine to go over to Søren Larsen and board her.

They have a neat way of getting wheelchairs aboard using an L shaped contraption which fits under the seat of the chair. Each corner has a steel ring and a hoist with four locking hooks attached to each corner of the contraption which is then lifted into the air. You are then swung through the air until you hover over the deck and are gently lowered onto the deck. It's then the realisation strikes you that it all done by muscle power.

My first impressions are very muddled, an incredible complication of ropes and rigging, furled sails and wooden decks, and I'm aboard the ship with an enormous number of people.

Down below decks, I find out which watch I'm in, what my mess duties are, and where I sleep. Mandy, who is the nurse/purser, smiles at us and sorts us out. She can't deal with us all at once, so takes the two starboard watches first while the port watches go above. I'm starboard aft watch with Jill, Natalie and Peter, who is the watch leader, and I'm sleeping in the cabin shared by Mandy and Nicky the cook. Mandy buddies up everyone, so that we each have someone who looks out for us and we for them. Mine seems a very nice woman called Joyce who has a twinkle in her eye. Mandy tells us all the things which will help us to settle in, and explains the reasons behind some of the odder ones so we understand why they are important. She shows us the safety harness, how to stow the bunks, what our mess duties will consist of, how the lift must always be left in the down position so the mess deck gets ventilated, to leave the head doors open for the same reason, and not to leave taps running and lights left on so as to conserve water and electricity. It seems a lot to remember. Mandy releases us and it's back into the sunshine for a nice cup of tea.

Tea finished and the port watch goes below and we, starboard watches, assemble aft and are addressed by Joe Clay the sailing master. Then, like a line of ducklings, we move for'ard, where one

of the two mates show us what ropes are what. Will I ever remember that halliards raise sails and downhauls do the opposite? Do sheets change the angle of the sails? If they do what is “manning the braces”? And what is the difference between clewlines and buntlines? Some of my fellow crew look very knowledgeable and nod their heads wisely, but my expression, so I’m told, is a look of worried concentration.

It’s six o’clock and we go below for dinner, the cook is a genius, the food wonderful. I’ve seen the galley, it is tiny, and from that she has produced a superb meal. After dinner, just as I am relaxing, the emergency drill goes into action. All power is assumed to be lost and I’m swung up the galley stairs in the emergency hoist, by what seems a throng of willing people, and lifted into one of the deck wheelchairs (which are to be used in rough weather). It takes about two minutes and I’m then shown where the life jackets are kept and how to put them on. We are beginning to act like a crew already. The Captain seems pleased with our response and gives us a short address, we are going to France and the Channel Islands. This is much better than I hoped for.

After the captain has gone Joe, the sailing master, calls all hands for some practice in manning the braces. Is he mad? But he’s not and neither are we for we actually enjoy sweating and fumbling our way round the various ropes. Its importance is that we are thrown together, able and disabled, to learn to work together. We really are going to be a good team, I feel. After we coiled away all the ropes and left everything tidy, it’s down to below for a nightcap at the ships bar and an early night.



Saturday 9th June

The ship is very quiet at six o’clock in the morning. No-one is stirring, so I decide to take advantage of the early morning and get up. I don’t want to miss a moment of this trip if I can help it. I can use the time to study the watch and mess duty rotas which are on the wall by the galley stairs. One of

the problems of being in a wheelchair is having to wait for the generator to be turned on so I can get above decks using the lift. Looking up the lift shaft I can see it promises to be a fine day.

After breakfast my first introduction to happy hour, which is when the Soren Larsen starboard watch were below decks sweeping and polishing and cleaning the heads. We all worked hard and it wasn't long before we were finished. The generator was turned on, so up on decks to see us departing England's shore.

About 10.30 we cast off and began to move slowly away from our mooring. I really felt very excited and we hadn't gone more than a few yards as we moved further away from the docks and not into the river proper, when many small boats and yachts came swooping around us to have a closer look. We would give them a wave and they would wave back. All very friendly until I heard that sometimes they were a nuisance crossing under the bows and putting themselves in danger of being swamped. By 11.30 we were called to stations and to watch duty. I was glad we had the practice the night before, not that it seemed of immediate use as I couldn't remember what was what. Eventually everything got sorted out and I had my first practical in hauling on the ropes.

Lunchtime passed and I was on watch. The Soren Larsen has a special chair for those steering, into which I was assisted. So on our first day at sea I was at the helm. By this time only a faint edge showed where land was. I watched intently to see how we steered, a combination of watching the sails and steering by the compass. As the land disappeared, the day seemed fine but the temperature had dropped, away from its shelter. Suddenly a heavy mist descended and clothing and hair were covered by a fine web of tiny droplets of moisture. We started sounding the foghorn, for by now we were crossing the shipping lanes, and a sharp watch was kept for small yachts which did not show upon the radar,

By four o'clock, when our watch ended, I was tired and more than a little cold but felt exhilarated. The heavy mist was beginning to lift and we could see a faint sun coming through. My next watch was at midnight and I wondered where we would be. I felt silly asking when we would arrive in France but I summoned up the courage and was told that everything (the winds and tides and weather) staying as they were, it seemed that about midnight was the most likely. I decided that as soon as dinner was over I would lie down on my bunk and get a couple of hours sleep so as to be fresh for the next watch.

I woke up feeling wonderful at about eleven and wrapping myself up made my way on deck to watch our arrival in Cherbourg. On deck I could see in the distance faint and twinkling lights. We were not going to dock in Cherbourg itself, as locks to the inner harbour would not be in operation until the morning, but would anchor in the outer harbour for the night, and would make our way in, as soon as the locks were open for business, the next day.

I was on watch when we finally anchored, doing look out duty. We kept an anchor watch which is not so full as a sea going watch. At three o'clock, when I turned in, Peter, my watch leader, manually wound the lift up and then manually wound it down with me in it. A wonderful day over.

Sunday 10th June

I missed our final docking in Cherbourg inner harbour by a few minutes and arrived on deck just as we tied up. It was a misty morning with the promise of a very hot day. Everyone seemed to have got up to see our arrival, so we got on with happy hour duties and were finished by seven-thirty, a world

record. Down to breakfast where we all discussed what we would do with our duty-free allowance when we got ashore. Mine is going on a present for my husband.

On deck, Dan Yates asked for volunteers for baggy wrinkling, promising an interesting time. By now I had worked out that anything that sounded that good must be awful but, as I was determined to try every opportunity I was given, I said yes. I was glad I did, because although baggy wrinkling is fairly boring it goes easily and you know you have contributed something useful to the ship. Baggy wrinkling is knotting four-inch pieces of old rope to some very thin string. When you have a sufficient length and quantity, it is wrapped around the stays and acts a buffer between the stays and the sails, thus prolonging the life of the sail.

We went ashore for about an hour around midday and then back on board for lunch. Later on it was sanding down and repainting and varnishing the name plates of the Soren Larsen.

All day long from first thing in the morning the locals came alongside and look at us and the Soren Larsen. It was very much like being on display but, most people were so friendly and genuinely interested in a ship with disabled crew members, that it was impossible to take offence. Some asked to look the ship over and all those still on board tried to act like hosts. One visitor in particular was a young Frenchman in a wheelchair who we got on board who seemed to get a lot of pleasure at seeing the Soren Larsen at close quarters. Later he came back with a box of ice creams and lollies as a THANKYOU. These were gratefully accepted as the day, as promised, was extremely hot.

After dinner we went ashore, this time to explore Cherbourg in small groups. The group I ended up with had a lot of fun visiting a small funfair and joining in a procession of bands and lanterns. We all ended up in a small bar just off the main street. It was full when we got there but somehow room was made for all of us, and drinks were handed round. Much to the amazement of the French in the bar we started singing sea shanties. When we stopped for breath the French gathered themselves together and began to sing. We sang turn and turn about for a couple of hours. The French seemed to enjoy it as much as we did. One old man came up to me after we had sung 'Jean Francois' and told me the whole history of that song in French. Luckily someone who spoke pretty good English helped translate what was said or I would have missed a story which I found interesting. (Since then I have scratched my head trying to remember...too many glasses of vin ordinaire.)

We ended the evening singing the 'La Marseillaise' and the French attempted to join us in singing 'God Save The Queen', and we all finished up singing 'Auld Lang Syne'. We made our way back to Soren Larsen tired and happy....and so to bed to dream of what would happen the next day.

Monday 11th June

What a shame we have to leave Cherbourg, everyone has been so friendly. We seem to have had people of many nationalities coming to talk to us, including a veteran of the D-Day landings who was perhaps not so enamoured of the French as he had expected. Again the weather is fine and we are on our way to the island of Alderney,

Today we are taking the opportunity to catch up on some lost sleep, crewmen coming off watch make their way to bunks, the rest of us are basking in the sunshine.

We arrived at Alderney about four in the afternoon, the island looking peaceful and quiet in the sunshine. Most of the shops are inland from where we are berthed, up over a steep long hill. There is just one store and several pubs with a fish-and-chip shop near the harbour. Out of film for our

cameras we decide to go ashore to the store and renew supplies. When we get back to Soren Larsen the tide has turned and we have to go through three inches of water to get to the hoist. Much laughter as everyone tries to beat the rising tide and get the wheelchairs aboard.

After dinner we go ashore again and take a long leisurely walk around the island. The variety of plant life is amazing. Fennel growing wild in huge clumps and clover of the brightest pink that you seldom see along the dusty sides of English roads. The people are open and friendly and stop to talk to us, they are very proud of their island.

Inevitably we head for the pubs, again the same friendly welcome and more singing. The number of new songs learnt are buzzing around in my head. Because of the age range of the crew, we have a wide repertoire to draw on and we sing World War One songs, and folk songs and music hall songs, sea shanties, and rugby songs with equal gusto. We left to the words of 'Come back and see us soon'.

When we got back to the ship the tide was on the turn again and we were swung in the pitch dark over the edge of the quay, from the yard arms and down onto the deck. It's much more fun being hoisted aboard at night as you get a wonderful sensation of flying. After a quick game of championship Scrabble, to bed.

Tuesday 12th June

We are all now well into the rhythm of shipboard life, and our happy-hour duties are a minor irritation to be done as quickly and thoroughly as possible. We weighed anchor and Alderney faded in the distance and the wide-open sea was ahead. It was impossible to feel seasick aboard Soren Larsen in such lovely weather. Our appetites have not diminished and I seem to need less sleep than I did at the beginning of our trip.

The highlight of this day was in the morning, when I was offered a ride in the dinghy when we were nudging the Soren Larsen away from the quay. It was an opportunity not to be missed, a chance to see the S.L. from the waterline. As I was lowered down into the dinghy, cries of "take my camera" and "take a photo for me" echoed all around. In the event I forgot my own.

Back on board, the doti boat secured, we headed for the Torbay area of England and I felt a little bit of disappointment as it was home ground and, for a moment, I felt an acute lack of excitement.

I was on watch in the bows (it was my turn) but in my wheelchair I could not see anything and needed a standing crew-member to see. We were once again crossing the shipping lanes. My face must have shown how I felt and Jamie Green, the bosuns mate, noticed. Jamie asked what the problem was so I explained that I couldn't see anything as I was too low down. Jamie gave it some thought and asked if I would be able to manage it if he rigged a bum strap across the bow. I jumped at the chance to find out if it would work. It did! I was lifted up and tied in place with a view to die for and able to see clearly and keep watch on my own. It was wonderful to scan near and far the horizon, singing softly to myself as I swung gently to and fro. Jamie became my hero and I had many further voyages with him in the future.



In the afternoon, not being on watch, several of us got together and began to compose our own song in honour of the Soren Larsen and the permanent crew. It was sung to the tune of the 'Rio Grande!' and we planned to serenade the permanent crew on our last evening afloat.

During the evening I had a go at using the charts and a compass to work out our position and the course we needed, as we moved steadily along the coast towards our anchorage.

Only one more full day aboard the Soren Larsen. We all feel the same, it's been a wonderful passage so far.

Wednesday 13th June

It's the last full day on board and we are all feeling a little sad. We are making way slowly along the coast towards Cawsands Bay where we will be anchoring for the night. It has been the most marvellous experience and one I want to repeat. The whole crew has become one large family and I shall be sorry to leave them.

The highlight of the trip!! I'm going up the mast. Suddenly it looks far too tall and slender. I've taken it for granted up until now, but suddenly it seems menacing. I haven't told anyone that I'm scared of heights, but they may well guess from the white look of shock on my face.

Out of the wheelchair and into the bosun's chair. Onto the galley roof, one of the crew is standing there steadying the chair before the main haul. I hope everyone has plenty of strength in their arms. We start the second stage. Joe has climbed onto the rigging to give me some encouragement. I'm past him now and the swaying is more violent. Loud cries of encouragement from those watching below, and I venture a look down and wish I hadn't. A quick look above and there is Danny balancing like a cat and giving me a smile, I dare not move a muscle and just take a very shallow breath of air. WE ARE AT THE TOP.

"Are you OK?" asks Danny. I smile, a little tightly, and say in a conversational tone of voice, "You get a good view from up here". Very carefully I remove the camera from my pocket and without looking down, take a snap of the Soren Larsen's deck....then a quick snap of the view from the top of the

mast. Not that there's anything to see, just a fading view of the sea at eight o'clock. "Had enough?" asks Danny. "Yes" I say, and he signals our descent. Down we go with Danny following, I thought "but I've conquered one of my fears with the help of the permanent and paying crew."

What a wonderful thing to have happened! I can't take in the grand feeling of satisfaction through the tremors of relief to be back on fairly stable ground.

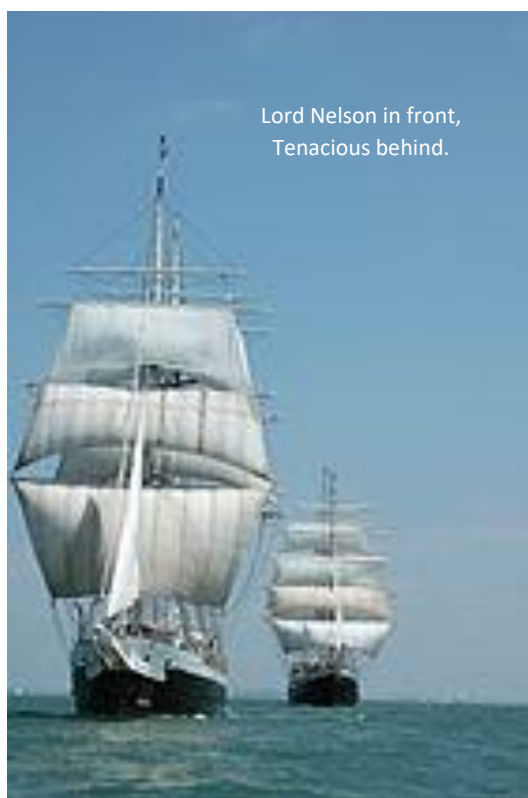
Down below for a little noggin of something and the last sing song of the trip. We serenade the crew with our composition, and we all laugh uproariously at the lyrics. We make our way to bed still laughing.

Thursday 14th June

The last day of a memorable working holiday. The Sailing Orders have been tampered with and now read "Fancy dress will be worn". As we approach Falmouth we all get dressed up as pirates plus one Paddington Bear. We have hoisted the 'Jolly Roger' much to the Captain's amusement. There is going to be a TV crew to see us come in. We pass a Royal Navy ship and wave and shout piratical sounding talk at them. They laugh and wave back.

We moor the Soren Larsen and, one by one, collect our voyage certificates and sign off. Luggage is packed, taxis are rung for, timetables of trains are checked and, in ones and twos, the Soren Larsen's crew disperse, with tears and laughter.

I'm going to board the Soren Larsen again in the future and, in time, the Lord Nelson when she is built by the Jubilee Sailing Trust. I've learnt such a lot and met so many nice people and re-learned that, no matter your physical abilities, a willing spirit can do almost anything it wants.



Postscript 14th April 2021

Lord Nelson is lying up in Bristol. You can walk along the harbour and see her there. [The Jubilee Sailing Trust](#) is hoping that she will find a home where she will continue to have a new life. Tenacious is still sailing and you DON'T HAVE TO BE YOUNG AND FIT to try a different kind of holiday.