

Second Mate Combe's Omba Journal - 1894

S.S. Omba 1894

February 10th. 1894 There seems to be very little prospect of any cable being laid at present, so instead of wasting my time on board the "Silvertown" I have decided to see Mr. Gray and get his advice about leaving. This afternoon I saw Mr. Gray who was very nice, he has given me leave to look for another ship and when I find one to let him know and he will let me go.

February 11th. Have been up to London today to see Messrs. Wright Bros., they are Shipowners, they have engaged me as 2nd Mate of the new Screw Steamer "Omba", on condition that I join her tomorrow evening at Sunderland, so I at once came down to Silvertown and saw Mr. Gray who gave me an excellent testimonial. I left the Telegraph Company there and then went straight up to my rooms at Forest Gate and packed my chest.

February 12th. I left Forest Gate this morning, had a good lunch in the City and caught the 3 p.m. train from Kings Cross for Sunderland, arriving there at somewhere between 9 & 10 p.m. I went to the Commercial Hotel and found the Chief Engineer of the "Omba" staying there, he was a perfect stranger to me, but not a bad sort.

February 13th. Had to get up at 5 this morning to be on board by 6. I found the Ship laying in the river off Laing's Shipbuilding yard, that is where she was launched from on January 7th., just about a month ago, the Dimensions are - Length 320.0, Breadth 42.8, Depth 18.1, Freeboard 6.8, Horsepower 237, Registered Tonnage 1908, Gross Tonnage 2980, Official Number 102,839. As soon as I arrived on board I found everything was in a beastly mess, everything smothered in coal dust. The Captain was not on board, so I hunted up the Mate and reported myself to him, he was down in the after hold cleaning out the bilges, after a little talk with him, he said to me "take your coat off and lend us a hand" of course I did and said nothing, but thought a lot. You can imagine my feeling at the idea of stirring up beastly stagnant water with my hands and baling it out with a bucket. What a contrast to me, after having come fresh out of a good old homely ship where it was my duty to put on a frock coat and walk the quarter deck. Well anyhow I spent the day at this and was glad when it was over. At 6 p.m. I went back to the Hotel and had a good nights rest.

Feb. 15th. This morning we signed on our crew at the shipping office, The crew consisted of the Captain, Mate, myself and the 3rd. Mate, 8 able seamen, a boatswain, Cook, Carpenter and Steward, that is 16 hands all told. This same afternoon we were towed down to the coal tips and commenced loading bunker coals. At midnight we had steam up and all our coal aboard, so we got underway, steaming to the entrance of the river and let go anchor, as it was too foggy outside to go any further.

Feb. 16th. At 8.0 this morning the fog lifted, so we hove up and set on full speed for Redcar, running our trial trip between the ports. We managed to get 7.8 knots out of her instead of 8.5 which was considered very bad. At 5 p.m. we arrived off Redcar wharf and made her fast there. At 8.0 p.m. we commenced loading pig-iron, working all night at it, so had no sleep, we continued working this pig-iron all the next day right on to Saturday night.

Feb. 18th. Sunday a day of rest. Edward [Basil's brother] came up from home to see me, so we spent the day together.

Feb. 19th. Loading pig-iron all day. Edward came aboard at 7.0 a.m. by the butcher's boat, during the day he made himself very useful about the decks by hauling on ropes, helping me to get some stores aboard, reeling up log and lead lines etc. and in the afternoon I think he had had enough of it as he went ashore. At 5 p.m. we had taken in 1000 tons of pig-iron so we got underweigh again and steamed up to Middlesbro.

Feb 20th. Commenced loading general cargo for Japan.

March 10th. From the time we arrived here up to today we have been loading our cargo, it consists of Girders, Locomotives, Engines, Iron tanks, Boilers, Wheels, Sheets of iron, Iron rails and the 1000 tons of pig-iron, a lovely cargo I can assure you. Well we sailed from here at 4 this morning, it was a terrible morning, raining hard. When we arrived off Dover we discharged our Pilot and set on for our long & tedious voyage to Japan.

March 12th. 1894. We had passed Ushant and were well into the Bay of Biscay by noon today. At sunrise this morning the weather looked very threatening, at 8.0 a.m. the Barometer began to fall and the weather set in thick with rain; At noon we had a fresh and increasing breeze from the S.W.; at 4.0 p.m. the Barometer had fallen considerably and the wind and sea were getting up all the time; this showed us we were running dead into a S.W. gale as our course across the Bay of Biscay was S.S.W. At 8.0 p.m. there was no mistake about it, we were in for a howling S.W. gale, the wind was whistling through our rigging and the sea running high. I had kept my watch on desk up to 8.0 p.m. when the Mate relieved me as the 3rd. Mate was not allowed to keep a watch. I went to sleep at 9.0 p.m. but at 11.0 p.m. I was called out of my bunk to come on deck at once, so I went on the bridge half dressed, thinking something serious might have happened, as soon as I got up there the Capt. sung out to me "Loose the Foretrysail"; so up I got aloft, but did not like the idea at all as it was pitch dark, raining hard and blowing a gale of wind. I felt very strange up there, not having been aloft since I had left the "Orion", any how I loosed him and got him set, but only for 10 minutes as he got blown to pieces by that time, there was nothing but rags left. At midnight we had to ease her down, then she began to roll so heavily and to take so much water aboard we were not able to get along the decks. It was just about 1.0 a.m. when we were struck on the starboard bow by a tremendous sea which almost swamped the ship, this sent us away off our course 6 points, right into the trough of the sea and there we were at the mercy of the wind and water, getting knocked about in all directions, she rolled terribly, the sea broke over her as if she were a half tide rock. We were helpless as the ship would not answer to her helm then, we lay in this position for at least half an hour, every one was hanging on for grim death, wondering what would happen next. We had not to wait long before we were aware that the cargo was adrift in the hold; although the wind was howling we could distinctly hear and feel the heavy machinery come crashing against the ship's side, smashing everything before it, then would come the heavy thud as if we had run on a rock or something. As soon as we were aware of our cargo being adrift we ordered the Carpenter to sound the wells, which he did, finding four feet of water in the main hold which was dry at 8 that night. As soon as the sailors heard that they all crawled aft, the best way they could get along and ordered the Captain to run her back to shelter; so the Captain called the Mate and I into his room and there we decided to run for Plymouth, so we got some tarpaulins up the fore rigging, hoisted up a jib, put the helm hard a

starboard, setting her on full speed, at last she came round, but we were almost swamped in doing this, but that was our only chance left; when once we got her round she went along all right, as dry as a bone. We then took the hatches off and found that the ends of one of the bridge girders had burst the tweendeck port, so we got tackles on it and hove it back again, the water was pouring through the port, so we had to stop it the best way we could and then set the donkey pump at work. Nothing of any importance happened after this and the time we arrived in Plymouth, only, we blew the rest of our sails away.

March 14th. At 6.0 a.m. we arrived in Plymouth looking a terrible wreck; at noon that same morning we commenced to discharge our cargo so as to be able to re-stow it.

March 20th. At 8.0 a.m. we had finished our repairs and re-stowing our Cargo, so we got underway once more. We had fairly good weather crossing the Bay this time, but when we came to Cape St. Vincent we found they had the Southern Cone hoisted, well in the course of the next twelve hours we came in for another gale, which was not so bad as our last in the Bay. We carried this gale right into the Straits of Gibraltar. We got as far as Tarifa Point, but could get no further, the wind was blowing through the Straits as though it were coming through a tunnel, so we turned her round and ran out to sea till the worst had blown over, then came through without so much trouble this time.

April 6th. At 5 this afternoon we arrived at Port Said, after a passage of 17 days from Plymouth. We commenced to coal at 8 p.m. and finished about 1.0 a.m. At daylight the next morning we proceeded up the Suez Canal.

April 9th. Passed Suez and entered the Red Sea. (The Suez Canal is 365 miles long)

April 13th. Passed Perim Island and signaled all well. From Perim Island right away to Singapore we had splendid weather, but it was rather hot.

May 1st. At 7.0 p.m. we came alongside the wharf at Singapore and commenced coaling at once. We were there only 12 hours so had no time to look around. We sailed from there early the next morning and set on for Kobe, Japan. Whilst in Singapore I bought four monkeys at 6 shillings a piece.

May 5th. On our way to Kobe we ran into a Chinese junk about 2 a.m. I was on the bridge at the time, but as they had no lights up or any sail set I could not see them, they must have been asleep aboard, but they were very soon woke up and made a fearful row, screaming and shouting out as soon as we struck them, but I do not think we did them much harm, in fact I never stopped to see what damage was done.

May 15th. We arrived at Kobe this morning, Kobe is the Eastern entrance to the Inland Sea. It was about 5 a.m. when we arrived and as the Captain found we would not be able to work any cargo till tomorrow, he gave all hands general leave and \$5.0 each to spend, they had orders to be on board by 6.0 a.m. the next morning. At 6.0 a.m. we commenced discharging our cargo. All the sailors turned up but one, so we put a warrant up for him, it was two days though before the Police could find him; as soon as he was found he was brought aboard in a very drunken state, he had only a shirt on, he having sole the rest for drink; we put him in the forecabin and left him and three hours afterwards we found he had put on someone else's clothes and cleared out of the ship again, having gone down by a rope this time over the bows. The next morning we found him laying on the wharf dead drunk, we hauled him on the deck and let him lie there, he lay for about two hours and then he began to

rave about the decks with his sheath knife, perfectly mad. Well as the Captain was not aboard, the Mate and I took charge of him, we put him in irons and chained him up to the wheel chains; after having done that we poured a bucket of water over him to cool him, the same way as we do a mad dog; we left him there till 5.0 p.m., then the Captain came on board, so we unchained him and took him to the Captain, whilst we were taking him along I saw something in his pocket so took it out finding it to be a lemonade bottle, half full of whisky, with the head of the bottle knocked off, he must have knocked it off whilst he was chained up, because we found the head of the bottle on the deck; well I took the bottle and poured the contents down his back; we took him to the Captain who punished him and fed him on bread and water for 5 days.

May 16th. At 6 this morning we commenced to discharge our cargo, finding a tremendous lot damaged by salt water.

May 27th. At noon today we had discharged all our cargo for this Port, the remainder was for Yokohama, so we hove up anchor and set on at full speed.

May 29th. We arrived at Yokohama early this morning and as everything was ready for us we commenced discharging the remainder of the cargo within three hours after our arrival.

June 3rd. This being Sunday we had a general holiday, but I had to stay aboard to look after a lot of Chinamen, who were painting the ship outside. The decks were smothered with curiosities which had been brought on board by the Japs to sell, there were tea sets, tables, boxes, vases, in fact a little of everything. I bought several things amongst them a Japanese poodle. I also sold my monkeys that I bought in Singapore, I sold them for 5/. a piece making 4/6 on each. In the afternoon about 6 one of the men a fireman came aboard worse for drink and wanted to fight every one, so we put him in his bunk and locked the door, but that was no good, he burst the door open, and came aft, he went to the cabin and asked for the Captain who came out, no sooner had he spoken than the Captain made a violent rush at him and knocked him down, he got up at once and ran to the rail, took off his coat and jumped overboard, when he got in the water he sung out for help as he found he did not know how to swim; we left him alone and let him float away; there was a boat coming round the stern so they picked him up, as soon as he got into the boat he threw the Chinaman, who was in charge of the boat, overboard, this made the little Chinaman very wild, he soon got into his boat again and got behind the fireman who was standing aft in her and knocked him into the water again; this time instead of picking him up at once he held him underwater and nearly drowned him, then hauled him aboard and brought him alongside, he came up the ladder quite sober and asked the Captain to forgive him which he did. These are the kind of men we have to deal with at sea.

June 7th. We finished discharging all our cargo today and filled our water ballast tanks ready for sailing early in the morning, which we did at 5 a.m. We had orders for Ito Ito, that is in the Island of Panay, one of the Phillipine Islands.

June 16th. Instead of going around the group of Islands, as most ships do, to come up the main channel we came through the Calanduanes Channel entering it at 11.0 p.m. We had a lovely moonlight night which was a great blessing as there are no lights or Pilots in the place and what is more, we only had a very small chart, we had to go by what we could see, sounding all the way. The reason we came this way was to save time; we should have taken two days longer had we gone around the proper way; we were dodging through a lot of small islands all the next day; at 10 p.m. we had got

into very shallow water with shoals all around, so instead of going any further that night we let go anchor. At 6 the next morning the Captain told me to go and heave up the anchor, a thing I had never done before, as I went forward I asked the Carpenter how much chain was out, he told me two shackles, so I said heave away then, after heaving away some time I saw one shackle come in and knowing by what he had told me, there was another 30 fathoms to come in so I looked over the bow, watching the chain rattling in, when just as I was expecting the 2nd. shackle to come in, to my surprise I saw the anchor at the water's edge. I sung out vast heaving and looked aft to the bridge for the Captain to tell him the anchor was up, but no one was there; by this time the ship had drifted a good way as there was a strong tide running, so instead of waiting any longer I let go the anchor again and came aft and asked the Captain whether I should heave it right up, he said not yet, but just heave her short, which I did, so no one was the wiser as to what had happened, but the Carpenter and myself. The Mate came on deck then we hove up and managed to find a way out of the shallow water without grounding at all and were safely anchored off the little village of Ito by noon and commenced to load bags of sugar the next day.

June 30th. 1894 Finished loading sugar, having on board 131,000 bags. We sailed in the afternoon, this time going through the main channel as it was nearer that way and as we were bound for Singapore for coals and from there to the United States, Delaware Breakwater, for orders.

July 1st. Just at the entrance of the Channel we came across the S.S. "Windsor" which had run on a coral reef and by all appearances she would become a total wreck; she ran ashore the day before we got there - all hands were saved.

July 7th. 1894 Arrived at Singapore, coaled ship and left again the same evening. Whilst there I went ashore and bought a little monkey. "Judy"

July 12th. This morning at 6 we sighted the Maldiv Islands, but as the weather was hazy we could see but little of them.

July 24th. At midnight last night the wind freshened up from the N.E. and by 8 this morning there was a living gale of wind, we had little or no indications of this gale, we managed to get star observations ay 5 a.m., by them fixing our position, at noon the weather was thick, all day long the wind blew fiercer, but towards the evening it took off slightly. We were not able to get observations till noon the next day and by the results of these positions we had been driven 90' (miles) dead to leeward in about 30 hours. There must have been an extraordinary current as the wind could not possible have blown us that much.

July 30th. 1894 At midnight we passed Aden and got a four point bearing of the light. The next morning we passed and signaled off Perim Island. It was just before we passed the Island that my Japanese Poodle died, so I gave him a watery grave.

Aug. 9th. We passed the Suez the day before yesterday and arrived at Port Said at 8 this morning. As we had to coal we moored the ship in the sideway, making her fast to a buoy forward and to mooring posts aft. We finished coaling at 6 p.m. As soon as the coal hulks were clear of the ship we let go our after moorings and commenced to heave away on our starboard anchor, as we had let that go before picking up the buoy, we slipped our buoy rope and rung up into the engine room "Stand By" the Engineers were not ready, so they did not answer the telegraph, just then when the ship had got way

on her by us heaving away on bower chain, another Steamer, the S.S. "Aldgate", came round the point at $\frac{3}{4}$ speed, coming straight across our bows, we saw that if we kept on heaving we should run into her, so we paid out on chain again and rung up "Full Speed Astern" which the Engineers did not answer, I ran off the bridge and sang out down the engine room "Full Speed Astern", the Chief Engineer said we were not ready, we cannot move the engines; the ship still had way on her and we could not stop her; all this time the S.S. "Aldgate" was coming across our bows; when they saw us hauling out they set on full speed to cross our bows, but were not in time, we had too much way on and struck him amidships with our stem and our bowsprit, and our bowsprit carried everything before it, carrying away houses, boats, awnings and rigging, but there the bowsprit got twisted and snapped off like a carrot, as soon as that went it took with it our figurehead and all head gear. I think we did more damage to the S.S. "Aldgate" than to ourselves, anyhow we did not wait to see, we hove up our anchor and set on out to sea, picking up the wreck on the way. We managed to get the figurehead and bowsprit on board again and stowed them away down the hold.

Aug. 11th. Two days after leaving Port Said I commenced to get a very sore throat, which got worse and worse till I was not able to eat anything but bread and milk, consequently I got weaker and weaker and on the 17th. I had to lay up altogether, as my face had swollen up a tremendous size and I found I had a large abscess in my throat which would not let me even swallow milk alone, I had to get some one to hold by head whilst I tried to drink anything. I used to lie in the saloon day after day without seeing anyone except when they came aft to meals.

On the 19th. I was worse than I had been before, I could hardly breathe, my face got quite red, I was so weak I could not stand. This same afternoon we passed Gibraltar. I asked the Captain to put me ashore, but he said no I was not ill enough to leave the ship, so I had to lie there and suffer. From there to S. Miguels we had very bad weather and I shall never forget the way I was thrown about, not being strong enough to hold on. I often thought I was a gone coon.

Aug. 24th. At 7 this morning we arrived S. Miguels (one of the Azores or Western Islands) I was still as bad as ever, my throat had swollen more, though I had not eaten or drank anything then for two days. In the morning two Portuguese Doctors came aboard and wanted to cut my throat, but I said, no fear not by you, I would sooner let it take its course than be cut about by any Portuguese doctor, so they left me. We sailed again about 10 that evening after having coaled the ship, and from there we shaped our course to Delaware Breakwater.

Aug. 26th. Two days after leaving the Azores all the medicine on board the ship was finished, even the linseed was gone; I had had about a dozen linseed poultices and that had finished all there was in the ship, so I had to have soap and sugar poultices on my throat instead, well I can tell you they gave me fits, they proved to be better than the linseed, because after using six of these my abscess burst in the throat and from that very hour I began to pick up strength again and by the time we got to Delaware I was practically well again and able to keep a watch.

Sept. 7th. This morning we were 200 miles off the Delaware Breakwater so we pushed as fast as we possibly could so as to get to the entrance of the river at daylight the next morning. We had lovely weather all that day but at 11.0 p.m. it came on foggy, by midnight there was a dense fog, so we had to ease down and keep the steam whistle blowing. I came on deck at midnight to keep my watch till 4.0 a.m.; the Captain was up there looking out for the light ship which he expected to see about 2

a.m., or before if we had been set in towards the land by the current. I kept the steam whistle going till I blew the top off it, so we had to use the mechanical fog horn till the Engineers put a wooden plug in the steam one, and then we were able to use it again. At two o'clock we were straining our eyes to try and pick up the light on the Light Ship, and listening for the fog horn, but heard or saw nothing. We eased her down to 3.0 knots, so as not to get too far up before daylight. The Mate relieved me at 4 a.m., but instead of going below I stayed up there as we had not seen any lights whatever and I knew we must be very near the Light Ship, by the noon observations the day before, and the run we had made since. There was still a dense fog on, one could hardly see the length of the ship. Well we went on this way till 5.30 a.m. when the Captain came up and stopped the ship, telling us to get a cast of the lead and to expect about 30 fathoms, so we got the lead well forward and let it go, the boatswain was standing in the fore rigging with a coil of lead line in his hand ready to let go when he felt the lead and sing out "Watch thee, Watch" meaning that the lead was coming aft and I had to look out, but instead of him letting go his coil he hauled in line and got an up and down sounding of 7 fathoms, which told us we were mighty near the beach. The Captain at once put her full speed astern and turned her round. This sounding put us entirely out of our reckoning, we did not know which way to go, just then as we were well round on an opposite course, the lookout sung out "Buoy right ahead sir", we stopped her again and crawled up to the buoy, taking another cast, finding this time 6 ½ fathoms. The Captain ran down to the chart room and looked at his chart for a buoy answering the description of the one we were along side of, there was only one buoy marked on the chart and that was a shoal of 5 fathoms, 8 miles inside the Light Ship, so all we could do was to take this one to be the buoy, trust to Providence and shape a course for the Light Ship from the buoy, along the chart, and steer by it. We steamed along very slowly casting the lead all the time, finding on this course we were getting into deeper water. At 8 a.m. we saw something looming right up ahead, which proved to be the Light Ship, so then we felt safe again. We hung by her for two hours, then the fog lifted and we set on at full speed for the Breakwater which we sighted about 11.0 a.m. and at noon we were safely anchored off it, in 12 fathoms of water, awaiting our sailing orders for what port we had to go to. We must have passed the Light Ship about 2 a.m. not more than 3 miles off, to have got into the position we were in at 5.30 a.m. but we never heard or saw anything the fog was so dense. We had to wait here till 4.0 p.m., then a small boat came off and brought us orders to proceed up the Delaware River to Philadelphia; we set out at once, expecting to get right up by the flood, but at 2.0 a.m. as we were turning a sharp point we got too close to the bank and stuck there. We lay there all night till next high water, when we managed to get off with the assistance of a tug and got alongside the wharf about 6 that evening.

Sept. 16th. This being Sunday we had a general holiday, so I took the train up to New York and spent the day with an old friend of mine and returned on board about 4.0 a.m. on Monday.

Sept. 23rd. This morning about 10 we had discharged all our sugar, so we got up steam and set off for Baltimore in water ballast.

Sept. 24th. At midnight just as we were rounding Cape Henry at the entrance to the river to Baltimore we were caught in the tail end of a cyclone, so instead of proceeding up the river, we turned round and ran behind the Cape and lay there as snug as a bug in a rug till it was all over. Then we got underweight again by about 4 p.m. on the 25th. We were moored alongside the grain tips all ready to take in grain the first thing in the morning.

Whilst lying here loading our general cargo we had a lot more trouble with our sailors and firemen again. We put two firemen in irons for fighting with shovels on board, they both had very bad cuts on their heads, there were two sailors also caught fighting the same day but they fought with knives, they were neither hurt very much. One morning, about 6, the Mate had an occasion to go ashore, so told me to see the men turned to their work. I went forward and saw they were all at work but one man and I found him drunk in his bunk, I hauled him out and told him to dress and come on deck, as he did not come out, in about 10 minutes I went into the forecastle again and found him with all his clothes on, but in his bunk. I got him by the leg and laid him on the floor, he got up and wanted to fight. I gave him a gentle push which sent him half out the door, then I lifted his legs over the door step and shut the door, he got up and went at me with a capstan bar, but somehow or the other, every time I touched him he fell down. Well I got tired of this sort of thing, so I went and got a pair of irons out of my room and chained him up to the foremast, got a bucket of water and washed him down, just to cool him a bit. Well I must tell you now, that after that, he was the best man I had on board the ship.

October 4th. We had finished loading our general cargo today, it consisted of Grain, Flour, Tobacco, Timber, Tinned Provisions, Hogs hair, and on the upper deck we carried 230 Bullocks. We sailed for Glasgow that afternoon.

October 19th. We came in for a heave gale and lost a few of the cattle. My cabin got washed out and my little monkey "Judy" was found half drowned, washing about the floor, I put her in a blanket and took her to the galley, she soon recovered.

October 22nd. We arrived in the Queens Dock, Glasgow about noon, after a passage of 18 days from the States.

October 23rd. We all signed off from the ship this morning and at 9.0 p.m. I left Glasgow taking "Judy" with me in my pocket.

October 24th. Arrived home, finding all well. I think this voyage in the "Omba" has been the most uncomfortable trip I have ever made.

Captain B.C. Combe

Basil Charles Combe (1871 - 1926) served for many years on British cablesheips, eventually commanding CS's Dacia and Restorer. He retired in 1923.



During the early part of his career (which began in 1886) he sent letters home which were transcribed into a journal. He joined the S.S. Omba as 2nd Mate on February 13th 1894, and relates here another horror story in dealing with storms and rebellious crew, until his return to England on October 24th of the same year.

This extract from Combe's journal is published here by kind permission of Roger Barclay, Captain Combe's grandson, who also transcribed the text from the handwritten original.