

Kjell Smitterberg

Commander on Gripsholm, Kungsholm and Lindblad Explorer

Born in Stockholm in 1937, young Kjell got his first job at sea as sailor on board *Karlsökungen*, a small motorboat belonging to Axel Pettersson "Bopparn" at Bopparve estate on Gotland, taking tourist passengers from Djupvik to Lilla Karlsö [a Swedish island near Gotland in the Baltic Sea]. Already at the age of 7 the idea had begun to sprout in his mind about a career at sea. His father had a grocery shop, and one morning in November 1944 a customer came in with the news about the Swedish passenger ferry *S/S Hansa* that had been torpedoed and sunk on its route between Nynäshamn [south of Stockholm] and Visby. Very few survived. The catastrophic news impressed very much on young Kjell who from that moment decided to become a sea captain. And indeed he did: in due time Kjell would become commander of some great ships, travel afar across the seven seas, docking and mooring in 160 countries.

Kjells career at sea and on the bridge was not a coincidence. The family name Smitterberg is linked with a long tradition of skippers and seamen with kinship in Gotland. One Smitterberg was a captain in 1885 (and 1915) aboard the *S/S Klintehamn* (1876-1935), a liner servicing the trade between Visby and Stockholm. And another, or perhaps the same Smitterberg, was captain in 1887 on the steamer *S/S Gotland* (1868-1951) that linked Visby with the mainland Sweden. And both of them just happened to work for the same shipping company that would later employ the teenager Kjell too, namely, *Ångfartygs AB Gotland* [Steamship Company Gotland], founded 1865.

Kjell left Gotland and went to sea from the age of 15, and did not return home for a year and a half. In the summer of 1952, shortly after his fifteenth birthday, he signed on for a summer job as deckhand on the passenger ferry *M/S Gotland*, connecting Visby with the Swedish mainland. Soon Kjell moved on to work on ships of the Swedish shipping

companies *Salén* and *Broström* until attaining his navigating officer's degree in 1957, subsequently graduating as a Master Mariner just before Christmas 1958.

Among other unforgettable memories, Kjell served one winter aboard the Swedish naval schooner *HMS Gladan* during its cross-atlantic sailing to the West Indies: from Göteborg – Cadiz - Cape Verde – to the Caribbean, "which [says Kjell with a happy smile], was a fantastic experience!" Being there, the entire crew was even invited to a reception in Bahamas on the private island of the reputed Swedish industrialist Axel Wenner-Gren, founder of Electrolux.

Kjell enrolled aboard the old *MS Kungsholm* already in 1958, working as 3:rd officer junior at the age of 21. After an interruption for military service in the Swedish Navy in 1959, Kjell came back to SAL where he advanced to chief officer on the *MS Gripsholm* in 1966-67, at 29 years of age. The following years he alternated as chief officer between the Gripsholm and the Kungsholm. And in 1972, shortly after his 35th birthday, Kjell became promoted to commander, for the first time, of the Gripsholm. He was then the youngest commander ever on a SAL passenger liner. He continued as captain on board the Gripsholm and the Kungsholm interchangeably until the autumn 1975, when both ships were sold and the *Swedish American Line* was shut down.

Kjell remembers an episode from the North Atlantic in July 1974 when the Gripsholm received an emergency message from a nearby British ship 200 nautic miles away. It was a modern combination carrier, the *M/V Tyne Bridge* en-route to Japan via South Africa having a boatsman onboard with suspected bleeding gastric ulcer, in coma with heavy blood loss and in urgent need of care.

The Gripsholm had an experienced surgeon, Dr. Nils Liedberg, 72 years of age, onboard, so the ships agreed to meet on the high seas and transfer the patient over to the Gripsholm. It was night, pitch dark and growing seas at the rendezvous when the unconscious patient was transferred on a lifeboat across to the Gripsholm. However,

there was no equipment for soft X-ray onboard in those days, only for fractures. But skilled Dr. Liedberg managed to locate the wound by using a method that hadn't been practised in 30 years, i.e. taking out the intestines temporarily and then sealing the lesion to stop the internal bleeding. Amazingly, two days later the patient walked around the sick bay all by himself, puffing on a cigarette! And when offered a cup of tea he refused it with the motivation: "I'm a Scotsman, I prefer coffee!".

A crucial action in that life-saving operation was performed by the US Coast Guard, also at nighttime. Several litres of blood was parachuted down to the Gripsholm with extreme precision from one of their aircrafts, landing in the dark sea only 50 meters from the ship where it was picked-up quickly by Kjell's seamen from a life raft.

With reference to the Kungsholm, Kjell can't recall any particular incident for a story, but he remembers: "She was a good ship that always kept herself with a decent amount of deep water under the keel."

The years 1976-77 Kjell took over as commander on the *Lindblad Explorer*, which gave him an extraordinary opportunity to bring the little red cruise ship and its passengers deeper into exotic places, such as the Antarctica, Amazonas, Galapagos, Alaska, South Seas, Japan and the Falkland islands. "Adventure cruises of that kind were a novelty in those days", Kjell adds.

During almost a decade from 1978, Kjell worked in various countries for the *Neptun – Röda Bolaget*, a Gothenburg-based tugboat company specialised in marine salvage and towage. Kjell acted as a nautic inspector in Stockholm, and was the managing director of Röda Bolaget in Gothenburg and in London. [From 1984, Röda Bolaget was renamed *Scandinavian Towage and Salvage AB*, in short "Scan Tugs"].

On Christmas Eve 1979, the MS Explorer (ex Lindblad Explorer) ran aground in the Neumayer Channel in Antarctica. Kjell participated with the Neptun Company in making the disabled vessel tight enough to be relocated safely from its unlucky position.

And two years later, in February-March 1982, under the leadership of the Neptun company, Kjell assisted in the salvage of *MS Navarino*, ex Gripsholm 2, in Scaramanga in Greece. There, the docking went wrong. The wreck slid over to starboard, leaning against the dock's wall. The entire equipage was about to overturn and capsize, but then the seafloor held back and the leach stopped at 45 degrees' inclination. As the dock sank deeper and deeper into the seafloor the leach became reduced to 13 degrees, "...although it took a few months!" says Kjell. The ship was waterfilled from prow to stern. The cylinder heads of the main engines were submerged into water. But eventually the salvage was completed. A successful salvage with active participation of Kjell who himself, by the way, had been captain of the salvaged ship ten years earlier.

In 1985, Kjell returned to the world of cruise ships signing on with Admiral Cruises as commander of its *MS Stardancer*, carrying 1,200 passengers and 420 crew members. The ship changed owners twice and became renamed *MS Viking Serenade* when in 1989 Admiral Cruises was fused with Royal Caribbean Cruise Line, RCCL. A year later, in 1990, Kjell changed over to the *MS Nordic Empress*, another recently built first generation RCCL cruise ship, subsequently becoming the *MS Empress of the Seas*.

When Captain Smitterberg was off duty from the RCCL, on short leave of absence for some months in the late part of 1990, he and the staff captain Lennart Jonsson got an assignment from a Taiwanese shipping businessman to start up new routes for the *MS Cora Princess* [NOT the Coral Princess!] from two major ports in Taiwan - Kaohsiung and Keelung - to Hong Kong and Macao. With those routes the ship almost stopped all air traffic to the Kai Tak airport in central Hong Kong...! And on one occasion when cruising from Taiwan to Hong Kong in the typhoon season the *Cora Princess* was about to sink and go under. The main engine on the starboard side came loose from the ship's hull,

letting in sea water into the engine room as a consequence of the bad weather. “We had one typhoon on each side of the ship” Kjell remembers!

From 1993 Kjell was stationed in Singapore serving as managing director and responsible for a fleet of 42 vessels in the ship management company *Sembawang – Johnson*. The fleet consisted, among other vessels, of casino ships.

Captain Kjell Smitterberg retired in 1997 at the age of 60 in the small village Ljugarn in his native Gotland, Sweden, later moving to live in the capital city Stockholm. As a retiree he is a frequent visitor at *Katarina Sjöfartsklubb* in Stockholm where he occasionally, as he also does at *Visby Skeppargille* in Gotland, tells open-handed stories from his adventures at sea, and then not only from his time with the Swedish American Line.

As a captain Kjell has met a lot of people and celebrities aboard his ships. “Among others, I have had the founder of Cornflakes, Mrs Merriweather Post as passenger, and also the founders of IBM and McDonalds”, he reveals.

During his life Kjell has probably spent more time at sea than ashore. Among his best memories are the visits to Antarctica. “I love ice and especially large icebergs”, says Kjell. “That is why I loved to go there to see all those penguins. You don’t see ten, a hundred or a hundred thousand penguins there. They are a million penguins!”

Greetings to all SAL friends from,

Kjell Smitterberg, 2014-02-07

This text and the accompanying pictures have been edited with support of Tommy Stark & Hasse Gustafsson (former Kungsholm crew members) in close collaboration with the captain himself.

External sources (in Swedish only):

1. Turlista 1885 publicerad i Gotlands Tidning 1885-05-16 (p.2) omnämner kapten Smitterberg som befälhavare på SS Klintehamn, och en C. Smitterberg som rederiets kommissionär på Gotland för ångarfartyget Thjelvar:

http://magasin.kb.se:8080/searchinterface/page.jsp?issue_id=kb:171341&sequence_number=2&recordNumber=&totalRecordNumber=

2. Notis 1887 om kapten Smitterberg från Stockholm och ångfartyget Gotland:

<http://gutarforr.tingstade.com/index.php/1887/5819-18870716-strandning>

3. Artikel i IDUN, 1915, om kapten Smitterberg på SS Klintehamn:

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4. For more information and photos from the MS Navarino salvage process:

<http://www.tugboatlars.se/NavarinoDT.htm>

5. Artikel 2007-11-24, helagotland.se, om MS Explorers förlisning:

<http://www.helagotland.se/nyheter/artikel.aspx?articleid=2586488>

6. Fredagsreportage med sjökaptten Kjell Smitterberg:

<http://www.gamlanyheter.se/post/68462704083/fredagsreportage-med-sjokapten-kjell-76-ar>

7. Gotlands Allehanda, Lars Schill. Publicerad 2009-03-03: *Mustiga sjöfartsminnen med kapten Kjell Smitterberg*.