



Nils Haggård

Gripsholm and Kungsholm

Third Officer Inter

Sagaholm

Second Officer

My early years at sea with the Swedish American Line

I grew up in a small rural factory village, Årnäs Bruk, by the lake Vänern in western Sweden. There was a glassworks with two galleasses that were used to ship bottles to Carlsberg and Tuborg Breweries in Copenhagen. On one occasion at the age of seven or eight my father, who was an administrator at the works, took me with him aboard one of those vessels for a trip to another factory town, Forsvik. The journey through various lakes, canals and locks took the whole day and was very exciting for a boy of my age. When leaving school many years later I wanted to try a professional life at sea - to see other horizons beyond my home lake.

Said and done! Two times a year the Broström Shipping Corporation recruited command pupils: twelve for navigation and twelve for ship engineering. I was fortunate to become admitted to the navigation officer program. And so, my career at sea began in July 1959 when I signed on the school vessel of the Swedish American Line: M/S Stureholm. [Ed.Note: in 1946 the cargo ships of the Swedish American Mexico Line had been merged into the Swedish American Line. Subsequently, several new freighters were added to the SAL fleet].

My first transatlantic voyage onboard the Stureholm went from Norway to the USA, Cuba and Mexico and then back to Europe again, where we signed off in Gothenburg. We learned and practiced navigation, how to load and unload a cargo vessel and, of course, seamanship. My second ship as a command pupil was the M/S Tundraland carrying oranges from Israel to Sweden and

sometimes carrots from Cyprus to England as fodder for horserace horses. The following years as a command pupil were spent on various types of vessels belonging to the Broström Corporation in order to acquire as broad an experience as possible of Swedish shipping. In the beginning of 1960 I was assigned duty on a large tanker, M/S Fermland. We went from Amsterdam to the Persian Gulf to load crude oil destined for Australia. As the "crude" is dangerously inflammable I was made aware that all the tools on the ship were made out of bronze to avoid igniting sparks onboard.

It was exciting to pass the equator for the first time, seeing the Southern Cross raising higher and higher above the horizon. There was no GPS in those days. Hence, we relied entirely on classical navigation methods: the sextant and the chronometer. Knowing the exact time was key to determining the ship's coordinates and exact position. Therefore, the ship's radio operator reported the standing of the chronometer each day. Every second of deviation was important information for the bridge.

I signed off the tanker Fermland in Venice during spring 1960. The Broström's headquarters informed me I would be two months short of the 'required time at sea' for entering the navigation school next autumn. Instead they offered me an opportunity to sign on the school vessel M/S Stureholm again, to take a first class boatmaster's exam, privately. This way I got the chance to work and gain experience as an "unauthorized" navigation officer at a time when there was a general scarcity of authorized officers.

My first job with a boatmaster's certificate was third officer aboard the SAL freighter M/S Trolleholm. Being "unauthorized" I got the 8-12 watch so that the commander more easily could supervise and assist his unexperienced navigating mate. We left Gothenburg in the evening, heading for Oslo. The pilot disembarked and left us by the Vinga Lighthouse. It was my watch, meaning that I had to navigate from there to Oslo. There I was, 21 years old, with responsibility for this big ship. Still today I can recall the excitement and pride I felt inside of me in that very situation.

When I started in the Gothenburg Navigation School in the autumn of 1962 I had an advantage over my classmates from having worked a full year as an officer. And all the school holidays I used to sign on a ship to practice what I had learnt in school. The following year I graduated from the one-year navigation program with honors. And in the autumn I commenced the two-year shipmaster training for sea captain. After graduation I worked in the Swedish American Line, as third officer on both the M/S Kungsholm and the M/S Gripsholm.

When the Broström Shipping Corporation celebrated its 100-year anniversary in 1965 I served on the M/S Gripsholm. The ship was increasingly doing cruises from New York in the 1960's. This was a response to the irreversible trend in the market for transatlantic passenger traffic to become airborne. It was possible to cross the Atlantic in seven hours instead of seven days! Consequently, we made only two "classic" transatlantic crossings from New York to Gothenburg and back, per year: one in the springtime and one a few weeks before Christmas. Most of the cruises went from New York to the West Indies and took between seven and ten days each. Soon I had visited the islands from Virgin Islands to Trinidad and Tobago, as well as most of the islands in between too.

The longest luxury cruise of them all went all around the world. It took three months and many nautical miles to complete. We started out southward and passed through the Panama Canal before reaching the Galapagos Islands with its fascinating nature and wildlife. There I drove a tender with many elderly Americans along the shoreline - very close to a colony of sea lions, some of which happened to be mating just then. An old lady suddenly got excited, pointing her index finger, exclaiming "Oh, look, they are having coitus!"

After visiting Acapulco, three islands on Hawaii, Japan and Hong Kong we were on our way to Bangkok. The Vietnam War was going on in those days, which implied that we were often called by units of the US Navy. The communication was carried out with Morse code signal lamps. The Americans asked "What ship?" I replied "Gripsholm SKUA" (all Swedish ships had a four letter code starting from SA to SM). Next question: "What cargo?" I replied "Americans".

One of our passengers was Mrs. Rockefeller, mother of Nelson Rockefeller - former US Vice President. When the three-month cruise ended the passengers disembarked and left the ship. We moored in New York for two days preparing for the next cruise – a 30-day cruise to the Mediterranean, Ireland, Isle of Man, Scotland and back again to the USA. Believe it or not, but at the end of the two days Mrs. Rockefeller came aboard again to travel with us on the Mediterranean cruise. They were called "Repeaters", i.e. passengers that came back again and again. They were of course receiving special attention onboard. One day, in Taormina on Sicily, when I had gangway watch Mrs. Rockefeller approached me asking if she may invite me for a drink. Since officers of lesser rank like myself were not allowed to mix with the passengers I had to ask for captain's permission. I got the permission and then I was given rare insight into the life and highlights of a very influential US family.

A couple of weeks later we were mooring at anchor off the south end of Isle of Man. It was customary that the younger officers, such as myself, operated the tenders from the ship to ashore. After a few hours the wind started to increase dramatically. Soon the commander ordered us to winch up the tenders, then relocate the ship to the other side of the island in order to pick up the passengers from the leeward side. We had three tenders in operation. The first one was winched up without difficulties while the weather was all the time worsening. The Gripsholm "pitched" more and more, implying that the bow and the stern moved up and down heavily.

My tender was to be winched up as number two in line. There were two men standing on the foredeck and one on the aft. Myself, I was positioned amidships by the entrance hatch. The prow hook and the aft hook were attached and we started winching. Things went well at first, but the higher we came the shorter the wires and the faster our pendulum movement alongside the Gripsholm. Suddenly, at the height of Sundeck, 17 meters above the sea, a wheel on the davit broke into two. As a result the aft of the tender dropped heavily and unhooked itself from the aft wire. That, in turn, produced a heavy snatch unhooking also the forward hook. The tender fell aft first headlong into the ocean.

Fortunately, the tenders were unsinkable and we float up again - keel down, filled with water but without sinking. The seaman who had been standing on the aft deck was floating in the water right next to me. I managed to haul him up to prevent him from drowning. He was unconscious and he deceased later, when we were attended in the hospital onboard. The able seaman on the foredeck escaped without injuries while the young deck hand broke a collar bone. As for myself, I broke some ribs on my left side, but suffered no other injuries.

The third tender navigated by its own engine to the leeward side of the island, escorted by the Gripsholm, where the stranded passengers could return to the ship safely. The Gripsholm then continued to Glasgow in Scotland where I was signed off because of my injuries and I got a flight home to Gothenburg. The wrecked tender was salvaged. When emptied of water they found my pocket gold watch which I had lost during the accident. It was sent to the Broström Company in Gothenburg. However, the salty seawater had ruined the clockwork. I had inherited the watch from an uncle of my mother and it was too old for tracing any replacement clockwork in Sweden. When later I got it back, the company had sent it to Switzerland for repair. Nowadays I only use the watch

on formal occasions. It reminds me of the accident, keeping me aware that it might have ended differently...

A few months later, in the summer 1966, when I had recuperated from my wounds I signed on the M/S Sagaholm as second officer. In wintertime 1966 and -67 we made a series of voyages between Scandinavia and the North American east coast (USA and Canada). Each round trip from Gothenburg and back took six weeks. I can assure you that the best way to get rid of one's seasickness is to travel the North Atlantic in the winter. On one of our westward voyages we had storm every day except one when we had hurricane. In order not to sink the ship we had to head forward very slow, implying that we, in fact, drifted back towards Europe at the pace of one knot (!). Arriving in Boston we sent the cook ashore to buy lots of lobsters at 1 \$ US each. The lobster parties were always appreciated. After Boston we called at all major ports along the coast down to Newport News in Virginia before sailing back the same way again. Our longest stop for lading was in New York.

In the summertime we renewed information on a daily basis from the US Hydrographic Office, so-called "berg warnings", advising Maritime traffic where ice bergs might occur. The risk of ice bergs is greater in late summer when they are drifting south into the Gulf Stream where their top surface melts flat, making them invisible on the radar. We then order the engineers to keep a close eye on the outside water temperature. South of Greenland the sea temperature ranges 20-25 centigrade. When approaching an ice berg the temperature suddenly falls to below 10 centigrade.

My years with the Swedish American Line came to an end when I proposed to my wife in 1966, and she fortunately said yes – on one condition: I had to find myself another employment. She would not accept being married to a man who is away for months and sometimes even half a year at a time. Period!

And so I started looking for alternative job opportunities and within a year I found my new challenge: the Customs Services recruited personnel for the Swedish Coastguard. Soon I was hired as coastal overseer in Gothenburg and next I had to go back to school six months to study customs legislation and the Criminal Code. We handled both customs and maritime SAR (Search and Rescue) as well as supervision of military installations along the coast and also supervision of fishing areas protected against trawling.

As a trained sea captain I often had to prove my ability in intra-archipelago navigation, especially when chasing smugglers. Night and day we were not supposed to use the beacon-lit fairways but always find the quickest course amongst islets and treacherous shallows. Sometimes our assignments were so secret that not even the Police was informed. Overall, my duties with the Coastguard were diversified and never boring. Sometimes we were chasing boat thieves or smugglers, and next we were involved in dramatic sea rescue operations. We were often engaged as sea ambulance for sick transports from islands and ferries along the coast. And on a couple of occasions we also helped fighting oil spills at sea and cleaning up ashore.

My many memories from 30 years with the Swedish Coastguard is another story however. After seven years I advanced to Commander's position and I stayed with the coastguard all the way to my retirement. Although I enjoyed my early years with the Swedish American Line I have never regretted my decision. My wife and I have been married more than 50 years and we have two lovely daughters.

Greetings to all,



Nils Haggård

Ed. Note: This story is an extract and translation of a much longer and more detailed text about his 38 years at sea that Nils Haggård has written in Swedish language with special dedication to his daughters, Lotta and Annika. In 2018, Nils gave Tommy Stark and Hasse Gustafsson permission to edit a contribution on his behalf for publication on www.salship.se with emphasis on his years with the Swedish American Line. This story is the result of their collaboration.