



MANCHESTER CRUISING ASSOCIATION

A RADAR-ASSISTED COLLISION

NIALL GOLDING

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After the matter of the weeping polar bear (don't ask) it was good to get back to a tale of the sea. And this was no ordinary “we sailed from A to B via C”. This was A to OOPS! via most of the rest of the alphabet and it began in 1959. That was when Niall joined the *Niceto de Larrinaga*, a modest general cargo vessel, as a rookie Cadet on her maiden voyage from Sunderland. A photo of Niall, his cap pushed back at a jaunty angle with a carefree air generally as he raced up the gangplank, would have been nice but it wasn't to be.

Instead we had plenty of photos of the *Niceto* on an eventful cruise. Caught alongside in a hurricane on the west coast of the USA she ran aground while running up a river for shelter. Later having run milling machines to Mao's China (with a spell in Columbo for repairs) they loaded 10,000 tons of fraternal rice for Cuba and took it around the Cape to Havana. Heroes all, they were feted by the Cubans and Niall met Raoul Castro – the country's First Mate.

The obvious cargo from Cuba was sugar but it took weeks to find enough and even then it didn't work out too well. By the time it reached its destination the humidity had turned it into a solid lump – like a giant toffee apple. 10 kilotons of that breaks an awful lot of teeth.

In Hong Kong he was promoted to Acting Third Mate and got a room of his own. But by then they had been away from home for 15 months (having signed on for two years) and thoughts were turning to Europe. The skipper was run over by a taxi in Freetown (which must auger badly) and was in plaster from hip to toe but this proved a turning point in the cruise (I'm sure I shouldn't be calling it a cruise) because just then they were ordered to pick up a cargo of iron ore. They did this with great joy and celebration because the destination was Ijmuiden with the real prospect of a ticket home after a quick discharge of the cargo.

All went well, ploughing along at 17 knots, until they reached the Channel when the visibility deteriorated rather quickly as they passed north of the Casquets on 23 September 1961. Keen to make Ijmuiden to unload the cargo to schedule the skipper kept up the speed.

The ship had radar but with none of the modern aids: to get an accurate picture of the course of other vessels you had to make a continuous hand plot from the screen. The Captain and First Mate were on the bridge but the Captain had his plaster-encased leg on the chart table and the Mate couldn't manage the ship, the radar and the plot so they worked directly from the screen.

They became aware of an echo just off the port bow and altered course 20deg to starboard and stopped the engines. The other vessel stayed fine on the port bow. After another bigger

turn to starboard and putting the engines full astern the seemingly inevitable happened and the two ships collided. The *Sitala*, a large French tanker, sliced off around 100 feet of the forward section of the *Niceto* killing the two people on watch at the bow (including Niall's best friend). The bow section with its iron ore disappeared leaving the *Niceto* depending upon one of its bulkheads to stay afloat.

This it did and made slow progress to Weymouth Bay where it was met by Dutch salvage tugs for a long slog to IJmuiden and discharge of the remaining cargo. There Niall said farewell.

In the inquiry into the accident it became clear that while the *Niceto* was travelling too fast for the conditions (the skipper lost his ticket) they had made the mistake of not making a drastic and obvious turn to starboard early on in the encounter. Whether this would have helped is debateable because the *Sitala* seems to have made the dreadful error of turning to port, towards the collision.

Niall heard of the *Niceto* being involved in another collision some years later when he was working in Hong Kong and managed to have a look around. She was later extended before being scrapped in 1981. Niall hasn't been extended noticeably and certainly hasn't been scrapped. So much so that he had some rather passionate advice for us cruising folk: don't turn towards a collision and use your VHF to contact any big vessels headed your way. Put out a Mayday if all else fails.

Delivered with style and authority and some nicely-judged asides, the talk was accompanied by really good photos of the ships, of the *Niceto* after the collision and under tow and of the radar plot in those decisive minutes. I propose we invite him back soon. Seconded!