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POSTAGE STAMPS OF THE GREAT BITTER LAKE ASSOCIATION

BY CAPTAIN BRYAN HILL

GREAT

BITTER

LAKE

14 SHIPS



**Postage
Stamps
of the
Great
Bitter Lake
Association**

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of the Great Bitter Lake Association**

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WHERE DOES ONE start and where does one cease in recording those innumerable good souls— mostly G.B.L.A. members — who have had to cudgel their brains to recall idiotic details about why such-and-such a stamp was produced several months or even years earlier; let alone how many of them were actually circulated. Strangely some of these G.B.L.A. mortals have even gone so far as to crack open bottles of the finest French vintages, Czechoslovak vodka, Polish brandy and Bison Grass vodka, spirituous liquor from Bulgaria and really unimaginable quantities of good bottled beer, to share in the process. Or was it to shut this pestilential Englishman up in an alcoholic haze? That this history was ever started is testimony to the author's moderation in partaking of these temptations! But then such was G.B.L.A. goodwill to all men. Boarding someone else's ship one would always ceremoniously shake hands with whoever one met. Leaving, the same courtesies were extended to any who happened to be about, together with much waving of the hand as one's boat left that ship's side. Our friends!

This reminds one of an excellent recipe for G.B.L.A. *Iced Punch*, to be enjoyed preferably towards the end of the heat of an Egyptian day rather than the heat of the moment!

Obtain at least three capacious clean cans — those usually used for holding five or six Imperial gallons of milk are very suitable — from the Catering Dept. Collect twelve gallons of the best Australian Red Ruby wine — casks containing this beverage had a sad habit of leaking at regular intervals, due to the dryness of the Egyptian atmosphere, thus, to avoid contamination of the bilges, the leaking wine was carefully collected. To each three gallons of this base add four bottles of Gordon's gin, four bottles of French vermouth, the juice of twenty oranges, the juice of twelve grapefruit — both being the fresh natural fruit, no substitutes! Make two porous bags from clean mutton-cloth or muslin: fill one with Australian sultanas to the weight of five pounds avoirdupois; the other similarly with Australian raisins. Submerge both these bags, and leave, in one of the cans of the resultant liquor. Repeat the process with the other two cans. If a slightly more subtle flavour is desired, then extract all the juice and flesh from two or three mangoes — only ripest fresh fruit will do — and gently stir into one can. Repeat the process with the other cans.

The three containers should then be stored in the Chill room at a

temperature of 35° F (2° C) for a period of not less than seven days. It is recommended that but strictly one trustworthy person sip to taste the liquor each day to ensure correct maturing is taking place. At the same time he should be escorted by two even more trustworthy persons, who are to ensure that the official taster only sips a taste! The Chill room should of course be double locked.

Before serving remove the porous bags of sultanas and raisins — hand them to the Catering Officer to provide ingredients for Christmas Puddings — and strain into large punch bowls. Add ice cubes to keep the Punch chilled. This quantity should provide pleasant refreshment for a modest band of 100 hollow-legged seafarers.

Particular assistance with this book has been given in different ways by the following good people, to whom I am sincerely indebted. They are recorded here alphabetically with their home locality in order to indicate from what distance this assistance has travelled.

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Capt. Starkey President & Hon. Secretary of G.B.L.A.

Postage from The Great Bitter Lake, Suez Canal, by the Fourteen Ships of Eight different nations whose Officers & Crews comprise The International Great Bitter Lake Association

IN ORDER TO properly record for the G.B.L.A. historical records and to officially catalogue the considerable number of G.B.L.A. postage stamps and their G.B.L.A. Post Office Cancellations this documentary has been drawn up by Captain Bryan Hill, who was in command of both the Blue Funnel ships, M.V. *Agapenor* and M.V. *Melampus*, between April and August 1968. The original research was carried out by the author during that period and covered all that was known about G.B.L.A. stamps on the Lake at the time. This was typed into a Copyright pamphlet of about seventeen foolscap pages, a copy of which was presented to each of the fourteen ships on the 14 August at a farewell party, on the night before the *Agalampus* crews were relieved. Accumulation of further information has since been added to the greatly expanded first attempt at recording the stamps. In addition the original text has been corrected and rewritten entirely in parts. Thus the present book has been brought up to date as far as accessible information will allow. In its present form this book covers a complete five years with the inclusion of the *Muwinikies* 5th Anniversary Issue of 5 June 1972, and items to July 1974.

A brief assessment is as follows:

G.B.L.A. POSTAGE STAMPS IDENTIFIED				
Year	Definitely Catalogued		Details Required	
	Number of Issues	Number of Stamps	Number of Issues	Number of Stamps
1967	9	57		
1968	47	342		
1969	72	267	5	52
1970	19	47	2	8
1971	23	46	4	32
1972	13	18		11
1973	6	6		
1974	1	1		
	190	784	11	103

It is possible that this covers more than 95 per cent of the G.B.L.A. stamps actually minted and issued, but the author feels that 90 per cent may be nearer the mark. The publication of this book will draw attention to the inadequacies and hopefully will force into the open some of the hidden issues. The above list has not taken into account the linocuts which decorated the special envelope covers, of which those by Marian Kasprzyk are the most numerous, nor the similar rubber stamp cancellations.

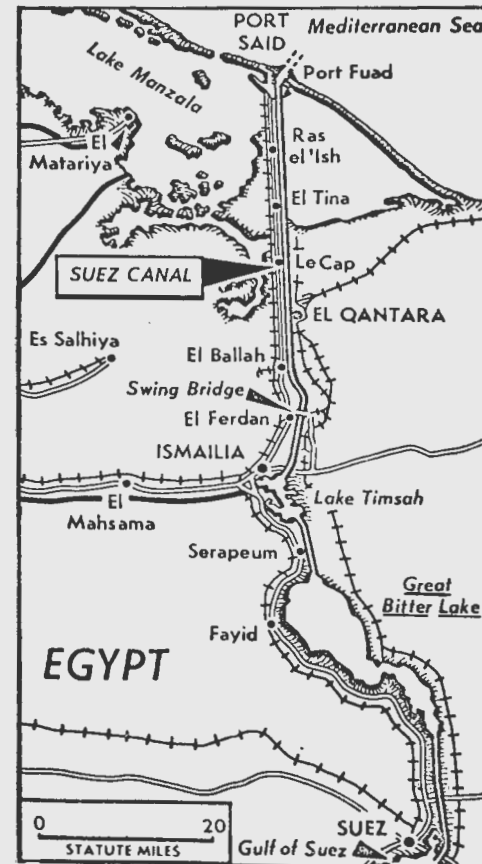
Historical, Geographical and Political background of G.B.L.A.

ON THE 5 JUNE 1967, the beginning of the Six Day War between Egypt and Israel, a curious situation arose which was a by-product of that short war and one that has remained unaltered for over five years. At the end of the six days the two opposing forces were still hostile and drawn up at the dividing line of the Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Suez and the adjoining Red Sea. The Canal itself was built in 1869 through a low neck of desert between Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula and had its course constructed to pass through three lakes. The first Lake *Timsah* is 42 miles from Port Said and on its west bank stands the large town of Ismailia. A further 10½ miles further southwards at the canal signal station of Deversoir the canal enters the Great Bitter Lake.

This natural salt lake at its greatest width is some 6 miles across; and its north to south length is 9 miles. At the south end it slightly contracts at the canal signal station of Kabret a distance of 12¼ miles from Deversoir. Thence it passes through the Little Bitter Lake for seven miles to Geneffe signal station in a dredged channel. It is a remaining distance of 14½ miles from Geneffe in the canal to Port Tewfik, where the canal enters Suez Bay a short distance from the town of Suez itself.

The northbound convoy on that hot June day of 1967 steamed into the canal from Suez Bay where it had arrived as single ships during the preceding twenty-four hours. From that anchorage the heavily laden tankers were the first to enter from the first light of day. The cargo liners from the Far East and Australia followed; all the ships' officers and crews being in a worried state of uncertainty in view of the mounting tension between Egypt and Israel. The ships were ordered by the Egyptian-controlled Suez Canal Authority to enter the canal and pilots and mooring boats had been provided; thus what began as a normal day-to-day operation set the stage for a grand international calamity. No one then knew that the southbound convoy was already being cancelled at Port Said, due to the lightning air strikes of the Israeli air force.

Normally the overnight southbound convoy entered the north end of the Great Bitter Lake after the northbound convoy had arrived from the south and anchored. On this occasion the pilots on the leading tankers were advised by their ships' radios from Ismailia that they should



continue northwards to Port Said without stopping, as there was no southbound convoy. This the tankers did. However the cargo ships were all ordered to anchor in the Great Bitter Lake and await instructions.





Facing Page:

- M.V. *African Glen* U.S.A. built 1945
- M.V. *Agapenor* British built 1947
- M.V. *Boleslaw Beirut* Polish built 1957
- M.V. *Djakarta* Polish built 1961

- M.V. *Killara* Swedish built 1966
- M.V. *Lednice* Czechoslovak built 1966
- M.V. *Melampus* British built 1960
- M.V. *Munsterland* W. German built 1960



Above:

- M.V. *Nippon* Swedish built 1962
- M.V. *Nordwind* W. German built 1958
- M.V. *Port Invercargill* British built 1958

- M.V. *Scottish Star* British built 1950
- M.V. *Sindh* French built 1956
- M.V. *Vassil Levsky* Bulgarian built 1944

One peculiar incident took place at this stage. All the cargo ships anchored with two exceptions. At the end of this convoy there were apparently two Russian cargo vessels. These, instead of anchoring, turned round and steamed back southwards to Suez — and so out of the canal. The question will always be asked, 'Why did the Egyptian Canal Authorities order the Russian vessels out of the danger zone and not the other cargo ships?'

The eventual result was that the Russian ships were able to escape a trap which may well have been purposely set. Also the tankers, whose oil cargoes had all originated from Arabian countries which had Egyptian sympathies, all cleared the canal to the north at Port Said. Thus the cargo liners from eight nations were completely trapped and were available to be used as pawns in the political game that Egypt was playing to involve the direct interests of countries that were not implicated in its war.

It was several days before the full implications of the situation were recognised on the ships. The Canal Authority pilots remained aboard for a few days, but were withdrawn together with the mooring boat crews as the war came closer to the Lake. The bombing from the air of the Egyptian airfield behind the Kabret signal station provided a most uncertain spectacle to the crews of the fourteen cargo ships and their future. Later as the remnants of the defeated Egyptian army, hungry, thirsty, bootless — they had cast them aside to flee more swiftly over the desert sands in their hardened feet — and without their guns, arrived on the Eastern shore of the Lake. The motor lifeboats of some of the British ships towed over additional lifeboats to the exhausted Egyptians. They provided them with water and then towed the overcrowded boats the 6 miles across to the western shore, where they were received by their own people who live in the cultivated strip of land on that side.

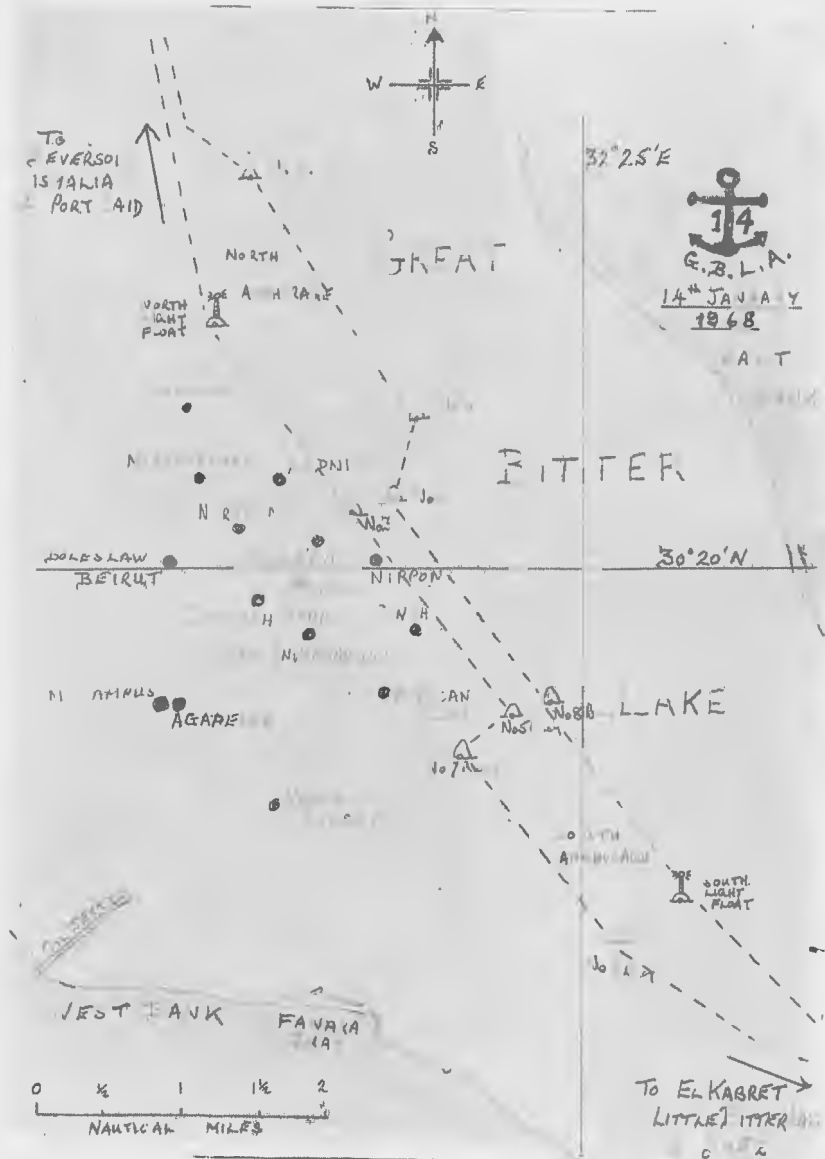
The names of the fourteen ships which were thus trapped and their nationality and ship owning companies are:

- M.V. *African Glen* — American (Farrell Lines)
- M.V. *Agapenor* — British (Blue Funnel Line, Ocean Steamship Co.)
- M.V. *Boleslaw Beirut* — Polish (Polskie Linie Oceaniczne)
- M.V. *Djakarta* — Polish (Polskie Linie Oceaniczne)
- M.V. *Killara* — Swedish (Transatlantic Line)
- M.V. *Lednice* — Czechoslovak (Ocean Shipping of Czechoslovakia)
- M.V. *Melampus* — British (Blue Funnel Line, Ocean Steamship Co.)
- M.V. *Munsterland* — German (H.A.P.A.G.-Lloyd)
- M.V. *Nippon* — Swedish (Swedish East Asia Co.)
- M.V. *Nordwind* — German (Nordstern Reederei)
- M.V. *Port Invercargill* — British (Port Line)

- M.V. *Scottish Star* — British (Blue Star Line)
- M.V. *Sindh* — French (Cie des Messageries Maritimes)
- M.V. *Vassil Levsky* — Bulgarian (Navigation Maritime Bulgare)

These vessels thus not only found their access to either the Red Sea or the Mediterranean denied initially by the Egyptian authorities and later by the complete closure of the canal through hostilities, but also they had become trapped in a watery no-man's land, for the Egyptians were left holding the west bank of both the canal and the Lakes, whilst the Israelis were holding the east. For even a period of some months after being trapped it was generally anticipated that it would not be long before the ships would be released. However these hopes faded with experience for the Egyptians, whilst eventually facilitating the interchange of crews and the mutual benefit of allowing Egyptian ship chandlers to provide stores to the seafarers living on the ships, had no intention of allowing these pawns in their political game to escape from their neutral prison. Typical incidents where attempts to provide an exit southwards to Suez, which were mutually agreed by both Israel and Egypt, initially, were always foiled by the Egyptians at the last moment creating an inflammatory incident guaranteed to provoke Israeli firing.

So time dragged on. However, on the ships, the outside political situation had created a feeling of mutual inter-dependence. The need to discuss the situation regarding the immediate need of foodstuffs, which were unlikely to be obtained from Egypt after their great military reverse, brought the ships' captains together. The examination of their collective cargo plans revealed that considerable quantities of frozen and canned foods were at their disposal for a long stay. Fresh vegetables and salads and replenishing of water were the greatest needs: somehow these must be obtained from the shore. Thus the problems were jointly solved and a great spirit of friendship in the face of adversity grew. The *Nippon* had frozen hake, shark and other fish from Japan. The *Munsterland* had frozen lamb carcasses, beef steaks, butter and fresh eggs from Australia. The two Blue Funnel ships had cases of tea, canned chicken, canned oranges from Japan and Ceylon. The *Sindh* had an unbelievable range in sizes of frozen prawns and shrimps. The *Port Invercargill* and *Scottish Star* had Australian chilled apples and pears, dried fruits, canned fruits and wine in casks. The Polish ship *Djakarta* had the great benefit of a doctor. The *Killara* could make fresh milk. This was but the beginning of a new society. The respective ship owners agreed to the interchange of these necessary items by radio cables and receipts were duly given at the interchange.



Map of Ships' positions



Above: British relief crews before start to the lake at London Airport on 23rd August 1967.
Below: Returning from Great Bitter Lake, December 1967

This multi inter-ship business produced social calls and the consideration of boosting the morale of the men in the ships was discussed. Table tennis and darts matches, car and horse racing meetings, shuffle board games, and film shows were organised with suppers and drinks. Swimming competitions, water-skiing and regattas with ships' life boats under sail were another feature. Before long these events became an integral part of life for the seafarers of eight different nations and the natural way in which many great friendships were formed was bound to culminate in a specific society. On Saturday, the 7 October 1967, a special meeting was convened aboard the M.V. *Melampus* and it was then that the Great Bitter Lake Association was officially declared; the idea having been born at an earlier party. Its membership was for all the international seafarers who served aboard the fourteen ships in their trapped state in the Lake.

The Association developed and continued with the interchange of crew reliefs. In England Peter Wilson — 2nd Engineer from a Blue Funnel ship — arranged for the production of G.B.L.A. ties, car badges, blazer badges, beer tankards etc. A special *Water Baby* tie was made for any member who inadvertently lost his balance — sober or otherwise — and fell into the Lake. Later at the Little Olympic Games in the October of 1968, which was organised by the Polish ships, special medallions were made for the events in Poland and Germany. Football organised on the *Port Invercargill* merited the arrival of representatives of the English paper *The Daily Express* in June 1968, when they presented a fine Silver Trophy Cup to be played for. It was 'Suez Little World Cup' and provided fine competitive sport. Regattas, table tennis matches and other events had special trophies made for them aboard the ship which was organising the event. A special Captain's Pennant was made in Germany, to be flown by any Master who had been in command on the Lake, thus it is not surprising that to further boost morale the G.B.L.A. issued its own postage stamps and set up its particular Post Offices.



Opposite: Blazer badge, tie and car badge bearing the insignia of the Great Bitter Lakes Association. Upper Tie for "Water Babies" who fell in the Lake.

Facing Page: Map on a postcard showing the Canal North/South.

'Die Bitter Lake Story'

Details from 'Der Sammler Dienst' by Kapitan J. Fischer and Apotheker G. Muller. Translated by Mr Arnfrid Beier

This interesting booklet was kindly given to the author by Gerhard Muller for use in the preparation of this book. It first had to be translated and this task was generously undertaken by Mr Arnfrid Beier of Messrs Glen Line Ltd., in a limited time in May/June 1972. In order to give as balanced a view as possible of this extremely intricate question of the G.B.L.A. Postal System, it is considered the best policy to quote this translation from the German text in its entirety.

Although the continuity of knowledge about the stamps produced on the Lake has been astonishingly maintained right through to the middle of 1972 (much credit being due to Kapitan Fischer not only turning out many issues himself, but also taking the trouble to record all that he knew during his three separate spells of duty in command of both the single vessel M.V. *Nordwind* and the five ship group *Muwinikies*) it is felt necessary to make a few commentaries on this excellent record.

First is the use of the terminology of 'Vignettes' for the G.B.L.A. postage stamps. According to the *Oxford Dictionary* a vignette is an ornament or an engraved illustration. It is a fact that a lot of envelopes sent through the post had ornamental designs imprinted on them — usually by means of linocuts as the work of Chief Officer Marian Kasprzyk of the *Djakarta* — which gave these envelopes great character and interest. However the whole idea of the majority of the G.B.L.A. postage stamps was that they should eventually be properly recognized as postage stamps in their own right and not as just an attractive decoration to the envelopes. I have laid out the close reasoning on this question in the section entitled 'Legal and Official Recognition of G.B.L.A. Postage'.

It is felt that the philatelic use of the term 'vignettes' which is often given to unusual 'Cinderella' stamps, should not be used with regard to G.B.L.A. postage stamps; particularly as the G.B.L.A. has a constitution which makes it an International Federal Republic in both its geographical and sociological concepts.

Secondly, in the *African Glen's* crew were some six men by August 1968 and by Kapitan Fischer's time had been reduced to the two men he lists. A further point discovered about this ship in 1972 by the author from Kapitan Jurgen Katzler was that the vessel had been sold by the Farrel Lines and renamed *Endeavour* by her new owners the Cargo Brokerage Corporation of New York in July 1970.

Thirdly and perhaps the greatest addition to the knowledge of G.B.L.A. stamps is the detailed descriptions by Kapitan Fischer of the actual processes used in minting the various issues of which he had particular knowledge. This covers forms of both printing and the application and cutting of the true perforations.

Fourthly, the warning by the Swedish Post Office to Swedish sailors about the use of G.B.L.A. stamps only i.e. without covering Egyptian stamps is the sort of official bureaucratic attitude one is bound to expect to find on occasions. A similar attitude has been observed by the British Post Office in regard to the Rhodesian stamps of recent U.D.I. years. However the British Post Office was generous enough to pass the G.B.L.A. postage stamps on to the recipients without any additional charge or warning. The same has been the case in Germany, France, the USA, Czechoslovakia and Poland. It is important to put these official reactions in their proper place, for they are invariably the hidebound and unimaginative stand of an organisation which cannot understand that there are other viewpoints of more modern and formative associations which are outside the orbits that they themselves control.

The Bitter Lake Story — J. Fischer and G. Muller

When on the 5th of June, 1967 the Israelis invaded Egypt in their six days Blitzkrieg, a campaign which was carried out with Prussian precision, the world was shocked and greatly concerned. The radios of fourteen ocean-going freighters later to be trapped in the Suez Canal sent their signals and messages on all frequencies as far afield as to be picked up by Radio Norddeutch and Kiel warning the German ships.

The entire convoy en route from Suez to Port Said was trapped in the Great Bitter Lake. Today the Egyptians occupy the west bank and the Israelis the east bank. This turned the Great Bitter Lake into a kind of no-mans-land of six by nine miles (approx. ten by fifteen kms) in size.

On 7 October, 1967 a meeting was held on board the *Melampus* of all the masters and crews, and on this occasion the 'Great Bitter Lake Association' was founded. All sailors who were working on the vessels in question at that time and who are still working there now have become members of this Association.

The oldest and most comprehensive source of information is provided in the book (copyright) by Captain Bryan Hill, commander of the *Agapenor* and *Melampus*. This includes his 'List of the G.B.L.A. — Stamps, Suez Canal' of 5 June 1967 — 5 June, 1968 with 149 stamps (vignettes) already issued during that early period.

By mid-June 1968 all ships used similar ship's stamps showing, within two circles, the words 'Mailed on Board', the vessel's name, and in the centre the motif of the anchor, the figure 14 (number of trapped ships) and 'G.B.L.A.' In addition also the old stamps, such as 'M.S. *Munsterland*' or 'M.S. *Nordwind*' would be shown and as a rule covering one line only.

The letters (posted on board the ships trapped in the Great Bitter Lake) of the 300 sailors were franked with Egyptian stamps, or they would be brought home with or without a postage stamp, but at least adorned with a ship's stamp, and then posted in the home country.

G.B.L.A. special covers showing ship's and Bitter Lake motif printed on envelopes were created by Captain Marian Kasprzyk of the Polish *Djakarta* as well as by Captain Fischer of the *Muwinikies* who, at a later date, published a book on this subject.

The first vignettes were created, from autumn to December 1967, by Captain George Kudrna, Master of the Czechoslovakian *Lednice*. All these early issues are his work.

Of the early 149 issues 1967/68 with up to 200 samples per piece and which were sent all over the world, 25%, according to an estimate by Captain Hill, have been saved by collectors and 75% were destroyed by disinterested people. Approximately 750 letters have survived. This is, of course, rather a vague figure, if one considers, the fact that up to and including the year 1971 a similar number of letters has survived out of a total of something like 3000 letters.

The following single ships and convoys were eventually trapped in the Great Bitter Lake:

1. *Muwinikies* (collective name for five ships)
2. *Ledmelaga* convoy consisting of three ships
3. *Djakkier* convoy consisting of four ships
4. *Vassil Levsky* a previously German-owned freighter which had to be transferred to Bulgaria after the Second World War. She has 4975 GRT and belongs to Navigation Maritme. Crew: 12 men.
5. *African Glen*, 6116 GRT, of the U.S.A. Farrel Lines. Crew one Lebanese and one Greek.



Above: On the Lake
Below: Ships *Agapenor* and *Scottish Star*

These are the 14 ships belonging to G.B.L.A. with an overall 110,000 GRT. These vessels form a circle around a big buoy, a maritime symbol with an anchor placed on the top. The ships have now been completely unloaded, all the more so, since many of them were on their homeward voyage, without any cargo anyway, but partly because perishable goods, such as foodstuffs had to be thrown into the Bitter Lake, as the Egyptians proudly refused to make use of these goods.

The position of the ships can be seen on the sketch below, A northerly wind is supposed to be the cause for the two ships *Vasil Levsky* and *African Glen* pointing towards the North. The *Muwinikies* and the *Djakkier* convoy are held by anchor in the general direction of 138 to 318 degrees, while the *Ledmelaga* convoy roughly lies on a direct East-West Line.

Using the *Muwinikies* group of ships as an example, we shall explain by what means they are secured. The *Nordwind* is secured with two anchors with about 230m of chain to each anchor and pointing with her bow towards North-West. The *Munsterland* which lies beside the *Nordwind* points with her stem towards South-East. She, too, is secured with two anchors each of which has about 200m of chains. Then, closer towards the Egyptian side of the Lake, the *Nippon* lies anchored pointing with her stem towards North-West. Her anchors have about 250m of chains. Then follows the *Killara* pointing towards South-East. She has about 300m of chains to each anchor. Finally we have the *Essayons* also pointing towards South-East with 240m of chains to each anchor. Each vessel is tied to its neighbouring vessel with perlon ropes, manila and wire. Between the ships, fenders have been placed just above the surface of the water thus preventing direct friction between the individual vessels. As the wind veers from one direction to another the weight on the various anchors is either increased or decreased thus turning the ships into the most favourable direction.

How badly the ships have been damaged is quite impossible to estimate. That must wait until a later date, when the ships will be examined in drydock. The extent of depreciation depends largely on the amount of plumbing that had to be carried out in tanks and engine rooms, as these areas have been under constant attack of the extremely salty water. A Swedish insurance expert estimated that it might cost about DM 800.000 to refloat the *Nippon*. As far as the *Scottish Star* is concerned the sum which will have to be sunk into repairing this vessel by far exceeds the original purchasing value of the ship: for the entire insulation of the reefer chambers would have to be completely replaced. The costs would amount to about DM5,000,000. The purchase price of the *African Glen* for

instance is supposed to have been something like DM 6,000,000. The ship's only possible future is, to be sent to the scrap yard. It is hoped that the Great Bitter Lake is not going to become a cemetery for ships.

The crews are exchanged every 3 to 9 months, i.e. flow in from and to Cairo. Before I describe the life on board these ships, I shall still have to say several things about philately. As long as ships have been known crossing the oceans of the world, there has been a ship's post. It is by no means a postal institution tied to the sovereignty of any particular nation. All mail sent from a ship must be franked and stamped in the port of that country, where it is supposed to be posted. In our case it is Egypt. For this reason every ship is entitled to make use of semi-official ship's stamps.

Large vessels from 5000 to 10,000 GRT onwards often have a small printing press on board for the circulation of messages among the crew, for forms and other document, etc. Equally, on board the *Muwinikies* and the *Djakkier* the printing of vignettes has contributed to making the otherwise quite tedious life on board more exciting and interesting. Then the crews use these stamps to adorn their letters, which they send home to their relatives and in which they describe life on board their ships.

Airmail letters cost up to July 1971 8 piaster, then 11 piaster. Air letters to Cairo only take two to three days, but there they are frequently delayed, by one or two weeks, on account of red tape, until 'Ali' or 'Ahmed' has made the relevant arrangements for a van or a boat to collect the mail. Letters direct from the Bitter Lake often reach Europe within a few days.

Techniques of Printing

When in March 1970 the one thousandth day of our imprisonment in the Great Bitter Lake was 'celebrated', the Polish Captain took this occasion to design and print the vignette veering the motive of 'The little sea horse'. The printing block was made of 'Moltotill'. Into this was cast the appropriate metal alloy, which was removed at a later stage. The result of this procedure was a perfectly workable metal printing block. The yellow colouring — butter yellow — was contributed by the ship's baker, just an example as to how inventive you had to be in order to produce some basic colours. The vignettes dated 1 May 1970 also stem from the Polish captain showing his initials 'T.J.'.

The vignettes of the *Munsterland* dated 1969 were produced in a completely different way, showing a much paler, rather pastel-like tone. The motif 'Ships anchored in the Great Bitter Lake' was first drawn on special paper; this was then rubbed on to a roll of 'Speck' (German type of cooking fat); this roll had the function of a duplicating machine. The

result of this effort based entirely on the capacity of a 'Speckroll' was a modest one. Another technique was the transference of idea and design on to a sheet of linoleum which served as the negative. For each colour a linoleum sheet would be needed. These sheets or rather cuttings must be very carefully and thoroughly cut. They must in fact fit into each other without showing a rough edge. The actual print itself was carried out by hand. For the vignette 'Totenschiff', I needed as much paper as twenty-two envelopes, until I had eventually discovered the best and most economic way to carry out my printing. An attempt to apply the necessary pressure by means of a lever failed, because the colours were not equally distributed on the surface of the stamps. I tried several types of material from rubber to plexiglass. After five hours I nearly gave up the whole project. On the following morning I went back to my work with a fresh spirit of enterprise. I placed the material on the floor of the cabin, the envelope treated with fixative and the printing block covered with colour. Again I had to go down on my knees. I placed the block on the envelope and then — stepped barefoot on to the block resting on it, with the seventy kilos of my body's weight. And, a miracle happened, — it worked!

I eventually printed all my envelopes in this very same fashion. This vignette block 'Totenschiff' was directly applied to the envelope as opposed to almost all other vignettes that had to be put on the envelope like any ordinary stamp, this vignette block then was for the first time stamped with the red 'Mailed on board' stamp. There are only nine samples of these first experimental prints. Three main colours, red, green and black are used in the printing of the envelopes, because black is the colour of mourning. And four years trapped in the Great Bitter Lake is something to be mournful about.

The reverse sides of these envelopes do not bear the manifold ship's stamps of all the trapped ships, but only the red ship's stamp of the *Muwinikies* and a longish red stamp which I would want to be regarded as a seal. In the right hand corner you can read the words: 'O Mother Nut. Spread your wings over madness as the passing stars.' These words are inscribed on the sarcophagus of the King Tutankamon in a slightly different form: 'O Mother Nut, spread your wings over me like the eternal stars.' In the left hand corner of the seal one can find the following words in Egyptian hieroglyphics: 'May he live in all eternity'. These words bring back a memory of a recent visit I paid to the Cheops Pyramid. In other words, they are not a symptom of my having gone mad in the scorching sun of Egypt.

The words on the vignette block 'Das Totenschiff' are from the novel by B. Tavern, and are inscribed over the entrance to the mess on the ship

Yorrike: 'He who enters here, his name and being shall be blotted out. He shall be gone with the wind!'

Underneath these words in the centre part of the seal the following can be read: *5.VI.67 4 years of hatred and folly — 5.VI.71*. In the right the emblem of UNO and in the left part the G.B.L.A. barrel with anchor and the figure 14 (14 ships forming a tie around the anchor shaft.). Behind that the narrow strip of green land along the Suez Canal and the chain of hills of the Sahara desert set against the blue sky.

The most important Vignettes

Most vignettes are more or less coarsely perforated by means of a sewing machine and an injection needle. A small number just cut around the edges and, rather rarely, stamps printed directly on to the envelopes. Amongst these the most beautiful is perhaps the 'Totenschiff Vignette' and the 'Vatertag 71'. The most frequent motif is that of the anchor symbolising the imprisonment as well as life at sea in a general sense (approx thirty vignettes). Furthermore there is the Brandenburg series commemorating the M.V. *Brandenburg* sunk on the 12 January in the English Channel. Then there are the 'War and Peace' vignettes showing that a seaman's life is always, either directly or indirectly, threatened by war. And at last but not least the 'Lady Motif' representing their out-of-love men for so many months.

Apart from the vignettes printed in the Great Bitter Lake a certain Italian press under a Mr Zapala also specialised in producing Bitter Lake vignettes, which showed much greater expertise but which were of course not G.B.L.A. vignettes. These Italian prints were perhaps meant to start a more lively trade in Bitter Lake stamps. 'European Ships'. 'EXPO Osaka' 'Mexico 70.' franked with the ship's stamp of the *Nordwind* was for example not produced within the G.B.L.A. and perforated.

Christmas Mail. — Christmas vignette with the stamp of the M.V. *Munsterland* perforated and produced outside the Great Bitter Lake.

Four vignettes *Djakkier* of the Polish ships *Djakarta* and *Boleslaw Bierut* show ship's silhouette at anchor in red, blue, yellow, green, high format, perforated, produced on board the *Djakkier*, stamped M.S. *Munsterland*.

New Year vignettes of the *Djakkier* with *Nowry Rok* — 'Happy New Year', showing Soviet star, pine branch, candle and christmas tree decoration, the richly confused combination of a pious communist. Four different colours showing the ship's stamps *Vassil Levsky* and a stamp with cyrillic letters and M.S. *Sindh*.

Sport-vignettes. Even though the ships are rotting and disintegrating

the crews have decided that they themselves will not take part in that and dedicate themselves to a number of types of sport, such as angling — whereby it is not important how heavy the fish but how many can be caught. Then there is sailing, football, handball, volleyball, table tennis, and running over ropes, chairs and hurdles.

Faust-vignettes. 'Hugo, we are coming!' For the first time a vignette that I have produced not showing the Bitter Lake theme. About two months ago Hugo-Stinnes Reederei Ship-owners went bankrupt. Since social insurance had not been paid any more. Since January the families of the sailors had run out of money, which had after all been earned by their husbands with hard work. When the company fully collapsed in the very end of the 74 year old owner is said to have stated that he was not very much concerned as to what was going to happen to his sailors any more. This news I read in the magazine *Stern* and they occupied my mind so much that I decided to produce a vignette marking this occasion. When a few days later I held an Egyptian stamp in my hand which you can see on the letter below, the vignette and its future shape suddenly crystallized before my mind's eye. First I produced the blue vignette, followed by a trial print in light green hues which however did not turn out too good, as the colour could not be applied to the paper in an even distribution, then from light green, a dark green tone was developed. Of the blue and green vignette I produced about 120 each in groups of 10 pieces. When I intended to proceed to the perforation I discovered that I had come too close to the fringe of the paper with at least two stamps per group. So I produced 24 cut vignettes which have to be deducted from the total of 120. Of the light green stamp there were only 10 left which I could not even distribute officially, so that this type of vignette is a mere bonus for my penfriends. I franked these vignettes with the 'Mailed on board' stamp of the *Muwinikies* and the *African Glen*.

Labour Day vignette 1971 of the *Djakkier* has been produced in three different types and these are all perforated. The producer, an officer of the *Djakkier* intended originally to print 200. During his work he hit himself with a hammer however so that he was compelled to discontinue his work temporarily. So he gave the already produced stamps to the other ships last Sunday with the result that the Poles had nothing to show and simply had to wait. Then he discovered that he had not enough colour left to accomplish his work so that only 40 were produced ultimately instead of the planned 2000. And even these stamps were used on all the other ships rather than on the Polish vessels.

Hammer Anvil vignette motif : Ship between hammer and anvil. The red vignette with four different postage values. This stamp belongs to the

category of the 'War and Peace' collection and appeared on the market at the end of the armistice negotiations in March. If one replaces hammer and anvil with the two inimical brothers then the situation is appropriately described.

Hour glass vignettes. Four letters carry a group of stamps showing an hour glass. In addition the words 24.X.70 and below 24.II.71 are shown. The last crew came to the Great Bitter Lake on the former date and stayed until the latter. The end of this period is symbolised by the hour glass. This group of stamps once again shows the peculiarities of its production methods which are all alike with regard to the stamps that were produced on the *Djakkier*. The printing block consists of contact carbon, the colour is stamp pad colour. The ground is invariably red, green, blue or violet. The motif with text is always in black.

Mother's Day vignette of the *Djakkier*. In Poland mother's day falls on 8 March. As a result the Polish 'girl vignette' was produced. It is perforated and appears in red, yellow and blue colours, the pretty head of a girl all in white except for the blue vignette where this is held black. This vignette is said to have gone down particularly well among the crews.

Lenin vignette of the *Djakkier* in three shades varying between red, lilac and green showing the head of Lenin, 1970 and ship's stamp of the *Munsterland*, *Nordwind*, and *Sindh* (now *M.S. Essayons*).

Some of the most beautiful vignettes are the red-green-yellow-black vignettes with the motif of a ship's bow at anchor and reflection on the surface of the sea. In front of this, in each case, one of the most familiar birds to be found in the Great Bitter Lake area, such as pigeon, a gull, a stork, and a swallow. Production in blocks with 6 vignettes.

'First man on the moon' vignettes of the *Djakkier*, perforated; in red, green, blue, lilac *Djakkier*, 5.II.71, *G.B.L.A.*

Airmail vignettes of the *Muwinikies*, perforated; red, green, yellow and in three different groups showing in each case one marine swallow, one stork and one gull.

Stamp of the Great Bitter Lake Map. Even the Brunnen Moses' (literally translated : Moses of the Well) has been hinted at. This stamp has a little story to it. In september 1969 the Captain of the *Scottish Star* published a vignette showing this very motif. The stamps were coloured, for instance, a green strip along the left bank, the desert standing out light brown, and the water shown in blue. As the master of the *Scottish Star* had no coloured pencils available, the brown colour of the desert was effectively brought out by applying coffee dregs on to the paper surface; whereas it was possible to lay one's hands on green and blue pencil bits. On his return home at a later date, he had a number of the vignettes

printed according to his design, and in addition he had a rubber stamp made for his purposes. Then he handed all these articles over to the crews in the Lake.

Suez Little World Cup vignette. On the left name *Djakbier* is placed while on the right the name *Muwinikies* appears. The 's' in 'Muwinikies' has been printed upside down. The centre of the stamp is filled with a cup, which served as trophy for the various football teams on board the ships, and for which these teams fought in their monthly competitions. It is called 'Suez Little World Cup' and was donated, a few years back, by a big English daily paper. At a so-called 'Prize-giving-party', which in times gone by used to be held every month, the winning side of the various competitions had to drink out of this cup. For this occasion it was then filled with Australian port wine which still flowed from the cargo of the *Port Invercargill* and which became part of the Great Bitter Lake history under the name of 'Steam'. For every sailor who finished up in the Bitter Lakes became, at one point or another, acquainted with this sweet and strong wine, and many of them were knocked out by it in the course of the festivities. From the first to the last drop all those present chanted the words 'Chaque Lac' and clapping their hands incessantly. This word is inscribed at the bottom of the cup as well as the word 'Peace'. The producer of this cup perhaps had in mind the exemplary friendship between Poles and Germans in the Bitter Lake. It's sort of practised coexistence. The colours on these vignettes are red, blue, green and lilac.

Letters sent into the Great Bitter Lake Area are of course 'pendants' to those that come from the Area. When Achmed, the chap at the agency brought fifty-seven letters one day after a delay of several days, containing mainly philatelist wishes, the crews expressed their anger. In most cases, especially those that have no international reply coupons in lieu of the postage stamp, about DMI,00, just get forgotten and left to disintegrate like our ships. And that is quite unacceptable.

Life at the Great Bitter Lake

Two days ago the armistice negotiations were concluded 24th February 1971 and now the war is on again, although nothing is happening yet. No shots or explosions as it used to be the case before. The only thing we began to feel more strongly than ever before, was the solitude and seclusion from the outside world.

Our friend, the agent did not come round to see us for nearly ten days, although he should have come at least three times during that period of time. Yesterday he did at long last appear in the company of an officer who was sitting next to him all day and every minute lest he might miss

some very important issue. (Quite idiotic, perhaps people in Europe are better informed about what is really going on down here, as we ourselves only listen to Radio Cairo). Their absence was explained by the agent as a result of two or three breakdowns; once it was their boat and twice their car. I accepted this explanation with a smile. As the Israelis can observe exactly who is coming into the Lake, and as it is more than likely that they know when the agent is due to call, his irregularity must needs rouse some suspicion among the Israelis. Well, our Egyptian friends never learn.

The rest of the stamps are brought over to us every Sunday morning by visiting crews from the neighbouring ships. These visits have been recorded by the name of 'Church' in the history of the G.B.L.A. This name was coined by the English, who under normal circumstances would probably be found in their local pubs at that time.

On the bridge at about 11 a.m. the crew usually meet for a 'drop'. It is here that the five bells are hanging as well, bells that come from the ships we are forming a convoy with. As soon as a boat of visitors comes over, all five bells are rung at the same time. A verger would die for noise. In the adjacent room they are queuing from 11.00 to 13.00 hours, in order to stamp the vast heaps of letters. This is the official post office but the most curious ever known.

Part of our daily routine work is the anti-rust fight. With only three men on deck not much can be done, since one of them has still got to be set aside as the night watch. The two other sailors dedicate themselves to cleaning up the vessel, such as scrubbing the decks. After all it must be said that it is not desparate as far as the rusting of metal on board is concerned. The dry air, which also conserves mummies in their tombs, prevents the rust from spreading too rapidly.

Many thanks for the offer of newspaper cuttings about the political situation in Egypt and Israel. It is good to know that somebody back home thinks of us in that way as well. However, I do receive, although with a little delay, the German Paper *Die Welt* regularly so that I can occasionally read out an odd article about the general situation in and around the Bitter Lake. In addition I tune-in to the daily news casts and commentaries emanating from the *German Wave* at Cologne. That's quite interesting. In the mornings, for instance, you hear on Radio Cairo that Minister Moller has resigned. After that the *German Wave* tells us that a number of Egyptian ministers have resigned, and only after that the resignation of Minister Moller is mentioned. The notorious art of keeping the truth from the public reveals a number of other interesting aspects.

We also receive the weekly *Stern* and two soccer papers. Much to my amusement I always find the relevant news of navigation included in this

batch; a small booklet drawings one's attention to the correct way of adjusting buoys and beacons of signal fires on charts. Isn't that a little too optimistic?

The magazine *Stern* occasionally does not reach us. We assume that in such cases articles in favour of Israel must have been in such issues. But that is invariably the wrong assumption. The *Stern* always arrives if it contains a very limited selection of pictures showing naked girls, no matter how much is said about Egypt or Israel, I could only suggest the the Israelis to bomb the Egyptian lines with pornomagazines instead of with real bombs. They might be even more successful, and before the Egyptians could detach themselves from such magazines the Israelis might have thrust as far ahead as Morocco.

Only ship's merchants and the agent are allowed to come to the Bitter Lake. This is the only possibility for us to obtain Egyptian stamps. Unfortunately they are not such educated people as we employ in Germany in the postal organisation. They have apparently never seen any stamps other than their own 2,3,4,5, piaster stamps. I order, for example, stamps for the sum of £10, that is Egyptian stamps, in writing of course, as the agent would forget on his way to Cairo. A fortnight later I receive the requested quantity, and I am curious to see if there is a new stamp among this lot. But in most cases they are the same old stamps.

When, however, the new crew was flown into the Lake in April, these gentlemen had brought with them an ample supply of stamps. This gave me a good idea. I described the motif on the surface of the stamps and ordered a number of them by this means. The agent returned my written request yesterday with the remark that nobody had the vaguest idea as to what to do with it. Now I have just spent half an hour describing and explaining the writing to him. I soon realised that whatever I said, just would not want to get into his head, and how he thought desparately hard about the possible way he might himself re-explain everything to his colleagues in Cairo. I gave up in the end, got hold of a set of stamps of one of my colleagues and handed them to the agent as a sample. You should have seen the relief on his face when he left.

Some issues do not show the word 'postage' before the nominal value of the stamp. Some editions use the English shilling and pence system, while others show 5,10,15,20,25 as based on the continental European decimal system. There are even vignettes that show no postal value or the word 'postage'.

Official ships' stamps: These stamps are normally used in connection with shipping transactions, they were, however, also used in order to frank the stamps on the various trapped ships. In order to increase the

official, as well as philatelic interest in these stamps, some envelopes were stamped with all existent ship's stamps. Such envelopes were preferred by philatelists, who were corresponding from all over the world with crew on these trapped vessels. The number of these letters is however limited, and it should be pointed out here that it is quite a venture to regularly visit all the 14 trapped ships spread over an overall distance of 11 miles only to get hold of a few stamps. This would have cost a lot of sweat and effort.

At a later date a stamp office was set up on the *Nordwind*. As on Sundays a church service is held on board this ship the various crews brought their stamps with them on that occasion thus taking the opportunity to have as many letters stamped as they needed. This office is still in existence today. In times before this office was set up, the big officer's mess never offered sufficient room for the endless queues of 'Stampers', now the chart room with its few square metres offers more than enough space.

Postage channels of G.B.L.A. letters: there are two entirely differnt channels through which the G.B.L.A. letters find their way into the international postal network. Of course, by far the greatest number moves via the ships' agents in Egypt, bodies which are responsible for the connection between the ships and the outside world. For this reason the letters move through a post office either in Suez or in Cairo. In that case they are franked with Egyptian stamps, since the vignettes (compared with many another similar venture) actually have no franking value. It has however been established that a small number of letters franked with vignettes only have reached their destination. Author's note: There is a letter in the possession of the Swedish post office by which Swedish sailors have been warned that it is legally prohibited to send off G.B.L.A. letters that are only franked with vignettes.

The second possible way: homecoming crew members take the letters with them to their respective countries and post them there, so that as a result you can get letters with vignettes as well as proper stamps of U.S.A., Germany etc.

Captain Fischer had taken up the production of the black and white girl vignette before he was relieved in mid-august 1971. A kneeling girl, around her the words *14 — Great Bitter Lake Association, Prohibide de amar* (Forbidden to Love), *Por eso sale Capitan* (Therefore go home, Captain). If the proportions of the young lady were not quite successful, then it must be said that after six months isolation mistakes of this kind may well creep in.

The question of the construction of postal stamps, (known in stamp making simply as 'Mache — Job') cannot be left out here, especially as far

as the printing of vignettes outside the Bitter Lake is concerned, for example as a side line of an Italian bookpublisher with the sole objective of producing more letters (for philatelic purposes of course) than were actually required at any time.

The letters emanating from the Great Bitter Lake are correctly franked with Egyptian stamps. The ship's stamps on either side of all of the letters are not only authentic, but they are also an innovation brought about by the local political circumstances; because new convoys with such names as *Muwinikies* and *Djakkier* were brought into life.

There remains the problem of the vignettes. According to the philatelic handbook by Heering these are described laconically: 'Private special stamps commemorating special events. Not official stamps.' Compared with the so called special editions that legitimately appear in the postal trade and considering the most primitive methods of production of these miniature stamps, not to mention the fact that they have been entirely produced by laymen, then the G.B.L.A. vignettes must be said to have reached quite a high standard. The fact that the vignettes tell the Bitter Lake story in their own limited language, can, of course, not be denied. In the first place they do represent — with the help of the ship's stamps on legitimate airmail envelopes — philatelic documents of a part of history which never existed in this form before and which will never exist again after the re-opening of the Suez Canal.

G.B.L.A. Postage & Cancellation Addenda

Lifebuoy Issue 'Muwinikies' — Summer 1972

Printed on white paper, this neat and effective design uses three colours — red, green and black — probably employing the linocut principle.

All are vertical oblong stamps, size over perforations 5.6 cm x 3.5 cm. Outer edge of design size 5.0 cm x 3.0 cm. A red band 1.0 cm wide across the top holds the word *MUWINIKIES* in white letters. A red band across the bottom, of same width, holds *GBLA* in white letters. The central design is 3.0 cm square having a green background; on it is set a large lifebuoy in red and white its outer diameter being 3.0 cm and its inner 1.5 cm. Connecting the top and bottom red bands is a thin red line on each side of the green background, thus framing it. In the top right corner of the green square is the value 10, and in the bottom left corner the ubiquitous 14.

Individual stamp differences — The names of the ships and their ports of registry appear on the lifebuoys in the following manner. As there are two red sectors and two white sectors on lifebuoys in normal use, the white sectors are used to carry the ship's name and registry port: the lettering curving to the shape of the lifebuoy, with the ship's name at the top and the port's name at the bottom. Those stamps examined in this issue have been entitled —

- (a) *Agapenor* and *Liverpool*.
- (b) *Melampus* and *Liverpool*.
- (c) *Lednice* and *Praha*.

In the centre of the lifebuoy is a small black outline of a ship. In the stamps (a) and (b) the view of the port side of a cargo ship with midships accommodation appears in stylized form. In stamp (c) a single mast forward, midship accommodation and funnel.

'Lednice' Issue - October 1972

Amongst the redoubtable stalwart seafarers who volunteered for more than two tours of duty on the Lake was the Czechoslovakian gentleman, Captain Klement Benda of the *Lednice*. Between 1967 and 1972 it has been his uncertain lot to be the Master of the ever popular little *Lednice* for a considerable number of months, probably far more than any other G.B.L.A. member; it has been suggested that he has put in more days on