

BLUE FLAGS



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To Bob, Sarah, Isabel and Janet

Blue Flags
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CHAPTER 1

The explosion was heard or felt everywhere. To me, a nineteen-year-old engineer cadet lying in my bunk on the main deck amidships, the thud seemed to have emanated from somewhere deep in the bowels of the vessel and was accompanied by a shuddering of the entire 10,000-ton motor ship. I realized immediately that something had gone seriously wrong but Chief Engineer James Robinson sitting in his cabin one deck above, knew immediately what had happened. He had experienced the same effects once before, over twenty years previously. He jumped up and dialed the Captain on the ship's phone.

"What in god's name was that, Jim?" The Captain's voice was strained.

"Tony, I believe we just had a crankcase explosion. It's big trouble. I'm on my way to the engine room right now, whoever was down there is likely critically injured. Get the nurse and sick bay mobilized and close the watertight doors, we've got a fire to put out." The ship had lost all way and was wallowing in the heavy swell of the Indian Ocean. They were approximately 1,500 miles from the nearest port and from the assistance of a tugboat if that was going to be needed.

Word quickly spread around the ship of the serious injuries to two of the engineering crew members, a Pakistani oiler and the third engineer who had both been on watch at the time of the explosion. A junior engineer also on watch had been down the propeller shaft tunnel to pump the stern gland bilge. The blast wave from the explosion had largely dissipated by the time it reached him and he was able to escape by using the vertical ladder from the bilge valve area up to the poop. Although badly shaken up, he avoided injury. The oiler soon died from the head trauma and burn injuries he had received when he was struck by a door blown off the side of the crankcase by the explosion. The third engineer was also seriously burnt and concussed. When I was eventually allowed down into the engine room, the smell of burning oil was overpowering, I could not believe the havoc the explosion had caused. I was scared witless, there was still a fire burning even though the automatic fire suppression system inside the crankcase had been activated. The fire team, including the Chief Engineer, appeared to be getting the upper hand on the flames which they were fighting with foam filled fire extinguishers. The fire was eventually put out about two hours after the explosion. Fortunately, of the three diesel generators in the engine room, only one had been put out of action by the explosion and so we still had electric power all over the ship. But the vast main diesel engine used to drive the single propeller that could move the ship through the water at up to an 18-knot speed, was totally disabled. This 8,000-horsepower behemoth was over five stories high and filled the center of the engine room for a distance of 70 feet fore and aft. It soon became clear what had caused the explosion. A white metal bearing where side rods connected the upper piston

of the opposed piston engine to the crankshaft, had failed. The metal-to-metal contact had generated sufficient heat to vaporize oil in the crankcase and ultimately a spark had ignited the flammable oil gas.