Christmas with Mr Sandman and Pannetone in Egypt.

Over the Christmas and New Year period of 1998 /1999, I was on a boat rather glamorously named the Flying Enterprise, in the Mediterranean off Alexandria in Egypt.

The boat was neither flying, nor very enterprising, in fact it was an ancient Greek anchor handler, seemingly lost and forgotten far from home, with its Greek Captain, Bosun and Chief Engineer, also seemingly lost and forgotten.

All three wore grimy and sweat -soaked peaked Merchant Navy officer’s caps, almost like the ones for sale in Spanish holiday resorts, but for real.

The captain was dark skinned, with weather lined face, permanently unshaved and looked like Anthony Quinn, who was of Greek descent I think.

Me and my English colleague also Jim, had been brought out for a 10 day rig move job, on 1 December 1998.

We were taken from Cairo airport to the Sonesta Hotel in Port Said, at the Mediterranean end of the Suez Canal. In fact the plinth which originally held the statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the engineer behind that magnificent civil engineering project, was almost within the enclosure of the hotels outdoor swimming pool.

The great man’s bronze likeness in heroic pose, had overseen the comings and goings through his Canal from 1869 until the Suez crisis, when the Egyptians removed him and claimed credit for its building and maintenance, and President Nasser shut it down.

The 10 day rig move never materialised, quite possibly never existed, so us Jims stood by in the comparatively luxurious hotel for 20 days, until ordered off shore to the quite definitely un-luxurious Flying Enterprise, on 21 December.

In truth either of us could have refused to go, and demanded to be repatriated for Christmas, but money was money, and we both decided that we needed it more than to be at home.

Had we demanded, I doubt very much that we would have been paid full day rate for our time luxuriating in the hotel, where, incidentally, a table in the restaurant was permanently reserved for the great Omar Sharif, a Jewish native of that overwhelmingly Muslim city.

In all the times that I stayed there, I never saw the actor, but there were many signed photographs of him on the walls, so I believed that he had eaten there more than once.

The ride out to the flying enterprise at anchorage several miles offshore at night (of course) on a small motor launch during a December storm was hair raising, and the transfer from the soaking wet and slippery as an ice rink wooden deck, of the small boat, onto the somewhat more stable but far higher and awash deck of our boat, was nothing short of miraculous.

Bags were thrown across in the hope that the crew would catch them, and stow them above the sloshing water, and then, me first, timed the rise and fall of the boats and launched myself when we were as close to level as possible.

Happily I was caught by many hands, and hauled on board soaked from the waist down.

Trying to apply some coordination to the second Jims transfer was impossible. The Egyptian crew, supervised and utterly confused by the Greek bosun, and further disordered by a sprinkling of Italian surveyors and divers, had their own lack of methodology, and

Jim 2 came across in much the same way that I did, by sheer blind luck.

The Mediterranean was pitch dark and cold, so someone going into the water by accident, if not crushed between the two boats, would freeze and drown very quickly.

Thankfully, no one died, but we were both tired and wet after a long day of customs formalities, and tossing around on the small launch for four hours, while the skipper tried to find our destination boat, amongst the many containerships and tankers at anchor, waiting to use the canal.

So dry clothes, some hot food, an unexpected shot or two of grappa to warm us up, a cup of genuine espresso, then a couple of Peroni beers before bed, eased the transition from Sonesta Hotel to flying Enterprise, somewhat.

On our way into the galley we passed the Idrotec (our employer) surveyor ROV, the exact same type, and as it turned out the exact same one from Mexico.

It was sitting on a pallet on the deck just outside the accommodation.

We found empty berths in one of the large six or eight men cabins, I really had no idea of how many people shared my room that night, and I could have cared less.

I crawled in to my bunk and fell into a dead sleep.

I was awoken the following morning by the violent heaving and jerking of the boat, and the ear-splitting noise of a heavy chain on metal.

We would begin to heave as if we were climbing a wave, but then we would be jerked violently backwards by the anchor, which they were either trying to recover or deploy, judging by the noise of the chain as it moved through the hawespipe, such a deafening din that it sounded like it ran through the centre of my bunk.

Presumably, to assist in the retrieval or deployment of the anchor, both the main engine and the bow thruster were being used to thrash us noisily, forward backwards and sideward.

I pulled on my coveralls and boots and weaved my way unsteadily out through the swaying galley onto the completely awash deck.

The ROV, still attached to its pallet, was being washed with great force back and forth across the deck, holding grimly on by one loose cargo ratchet strap, which ran through a securing eye on the deck.

One of the Italian surveyors, holding a coil of rope watched ineffectually as the ROV surfed across and back, restricted only by that one ever loosening restraining strap.

In heavy weather at sea, if a load is not tightly secured, even the tiniest of movement allowed by a loose rope, cargo strap or chain, will be worried and worried until the tiny movement has become significant, significant enough to break whatever is supposed to be securing it.

Between the two of us we managed to get one end of the rope attached to the ROV and run through another securing eye on the deck.

Then by hauling on it, we were able to restrain the ROV enough to tighten up the ratchet on the cargo strap, and then when we had everything reasonably secure, up to our thighs in water much of the time, to lash it all down properly.

Everything would continue to be bashed by the waves crashing over the deck, but for the moment that could not be helped.

We were still in the waiting area for the canal, but Giuseppe the Italian surveyor told me that they were trying to lift the anchor, to go to shelter near Alexandria.

It was daylight, just barely and we were in the teeth of a gale.

The sky was flat grey, almost black, and it was difficult to tell whether it was raining or not, the air was filled with the spray being whipped off the powerfully heaving, deeply dark white capped sea.

It was lucky that I had come on deck when I did, and found the surveyor with the rope.

If we had not secured the ROV, we would have either lost it overboard, or it would have smashed itself to bits on the fenders

Eventually we made it to shelter and we spent Christmas and New Year there.

Jim and I had a lot to do during that time, the ROV, the workshop and the control van had been dumped on board weeks previously, so power and data cables had to be run in, and everything needed to be hooked up to the ship’s power.

We were told by the Impresub superintendent, Piero, that there was no rush; the weather was due to be bad for weeks, so we took our time and I even welded together a raised platform for the ROV, sea fastened to the deck ,which kept the machine above the worst of the pounding waves, that sometimes washed over everything.

Of course this all meant that we stood by in shelter over Christmas and New Year.

Jim and I came from the same traditions pretty much, Christmas music decorations and Christmas dinner.

The Italians and Sicilians came from the tradition of Natale, which was starkly different from ours, and then there were the Greeks and the Egyptians, who didn’t seem to have any particular traditions of their own, and were quite prepared to fall in with the fusion of the Western European and Italian.

Jim and I needed Christmas music, so we scoured the hard drive of our Windows 98 computer for anything even remotely Christmassy.

The best we could come up with was the Andrew sisters singing Mr Sandman.

There were bells in the introduction, and the whole song had a quality to it which could be very loosely associated with the season of goodwill.

We adopted it as our official ‘Christmas music’ and we played it in the shack incessantly.

We used highlighter pens and printer paper, to make sprigs of holly, Christmas angels and paper chains, which we hung liberally around our working area.

On Christmas morning I made a Santa Claus mask and stuck it to the front of the ROV, with the main camera serving as Santa’s nose.

Everyone thought this to be great fun, and many photographs were taken of the entire crew joyously around our Christmas ROV.

The Italians had prepared far more assiduously for Natale.

Music may not have been at the heart of their celebrations, but from the time we came on board, every evening before dinner we had ‘Panettone time’.

All would gather in the galley, and then a light sponge currant cake roughly the same size and shape as a Christmas pudding, the Panettone, would be ceremoniously brought in, to apparently surprised exclamations of, “Ah Panettone!” Everyone had at least one thick slice along with a plastic cup of chilled, what I thought was Champagne, but which actually was the Italian version can, Spumante or Frizzante. Champagne belonged to the French and was grossly overpriced.

Every evening, up to New Year’s Day and including Christmas, was the same “Ah Panettone!”

In preparation they had brought on a 10 foot container full of Panettone and Spumante, and of course there was also the 10 foot container of Peroni beer.

On Christmas day, after photographs with the Nativity ROV, and a few hours with the Andrews sisters, smoking cigarettes and drinking Peroni beer.

We were treated to the most amazing Christmas dinner, created for us by the Egyptian cookie, which had no tradition of Christmas dinner whatsoever.

As an entrée, each of us was served a bowl of chickpea soup, with ‘Natale 1999’ spelled out in something red, piped into it.

Afterwards we had turkey, ham, Spaghetti, roast potatoes, vegetables and gravy, all washed down with Spumante (who cares that it’s not champagne) and good red and white wine.

For dessert, of course we had ‘Ah Panettone’ and real espresso coffee.

Our captain, dressed in his three ringer Masters navy coat for the occasion, still unshaved and with his dirty merchant Navy officer cap seemingly affixed permanently to his head, gave a little speech in Greek. Of course we all applauded loudly, despite the fact that only two people in the audience understood a word of what he said.

We spent that entire festive season, and a week or two into January 1999, sheltering off Alexandria, and then when the weather moderated and the sun returned, we went into the port to reload with provisions, which included a container of Peroni.

The Panettone, Spumante and Mr Sandman season, was over for another year.

I was so impressed with ‘Ah Panettone’ time, that I bought four of them and four bottles of Frizzante in Rome’s Fumicino airport the following November, on my way home from a job in Civitavecchia.

We had several Panettone times over that Christmas, which I spent at home.

Then the next year, or the year after that, Panettones began showing up in Marks & Spencer’s, and before we knew it Lidl and Aldi had introduced their own version, followed by Dunnes Supervalu, Tesco and Spar.

I am not sure if the rise of Panettone time in Ireland, sparked the sudden interest in the Italian version of champagne, but of course you can’t go into an off licence these days at Christmas time, without tripping over the pallets of reasonably priced Spumante.

I don’t think that I can claim responsibility for introducing the tradition to Ireland, it was pure happenstance.

But I do think that we were probably one of the first Irish families, to incorporate it into our Christmas celebration.

Mr Sandman still comes around occasionally on my seasonal playlist, and I really don’t care that it’s not about the festive season.

For two Jims in this world, that song will be forever associated with Christmas.

The end, To telos, Fine.