

Big Cats at Sea – John Marshall ([MarshallJ59](#))

The year was 1968 (52 years ago) and we were homeward bound on MV Badagry Palm (1) with nearly a full load of West African Produce weighing approximately 7,200 Tons deadweight, which consisted of such cargo as Logs, sawn timber, plywood, bags of Cocoa beans, bags of ground nuts, bags of bones, and other items as well as two deep tanks containing about 600 tons of palm oil.

We had successfully completed our voyage south to various ports in West Africa discharging general cargo which had been loaded in UK, and were now returning homeward bound for England.

At this time I was Second Officer, keeping the 12 - 4 watch, and the ship was sailing in a northerly direction towards Dakar which is located in Senegal, and was a major bunkering port and probably still is. The day before we were due to arrive at Dakar to take on bunkers which would give us sufficient fuel to reach England, Captain George Holyman the ships Master came onto the bridge shortly after lunch, while I was on watch, he was carrying a radio message in his hand which he gave me to read, saying to me "do you think this is genuine, or some kind of a joke ? "

The radio message which had been received by the Radio Officer, was from the Palm Line's Agent in Dakar and addressed to the Master MV Badagry Palm. It asked 'do you have sufficient space on board for the following cargo - 100 anchors ranging from half to one ton each, one cage of monkeys, one cage of Lions, one caged Leopard, two Vintage cars and a stuffed alligator?' 'I couldn't help smiling as it was a most unusual message. In this day and age all communications between ship and shore was via a radio room which was located next to the bridge and manned by a Radio Officer who used Morse code to send and receive messages. VHF was in it infancy and only had a range of about sixty miles and Telex, GDMSS and mobile phones were still a long way in the future. It was decided that the message could be genuine so a provisional stowage plan for 'this cargo' was drawn up accordingly.

At about ten am the following morning we reached the port of Dakar, picked up the Pilot and approached our allotted berth, from some distance away a large truck and trailer could be seen, parked on the wharf, and written in large colourful letters on the side of the truck was 'JIMMY CHIPPERFIELD'S FILM SERVICES.' Seeing this answered some our questions as most of the crew knew that CHIPPERFIELDS was the largest and most well-known Circus family in England.

After berthing and clearing customs etc. a young Lady came on board to see the Captain and discuss the loading and stowage of her precious animals, this ladies name was Mary Chipperfield, she was dressed in smart khaki suit with matching hat and carried a whip, she looked the part and was very business-like. We already had logs loaded on deck at several hatches, however there was sufficient deck space adjacent to #2 on both sides to load all of the anchors there, they had apparently been used to secure buoys etc in the port area and were so old that they had been sold for scrap. It was decided to load the cage of lions and the Cage with the leopard on number four hatch which was immediately aft of the accommodation.



This would afford the animals with the best protection from the weather, the vintage cars were put on number five hatch and covered with tarpaulins, and the stuffed Alligator was put in the tonnage hatch. The cage of monkeys never eventuated.

The lions were not happy being swung through the air hanging from a derrick, so Mary Chipperfield decided that she would take the Leopard out of its cage, put it on a leash and walk it up the gangway while it's empty cage was being loaded onto number four hatch. This was done and the animal behaved like a well-trained dog, meanwhile most of the native shore labour wisely took cover behind the cargo shed, and all of the crew kept out of harm's way, myself included.

Mary Chipperfield explained how these animals came to be here and why they were being shipped to England. The story was that the animals were all trained circus animals born and bred in England and had been shipped out to Dakar about nine months before to be used as props in the making of a movie called The Northern Star, which was a movie set in about 1920 or so and featured Ursula Andress the Swedish actress who also starred as the first Bond Girl. An animal keeper/trainer joined the ship to look after and

feed the animals for the journey to Avonmouth, England, and sufficient suitable meat was also loaded to feed the animals.

The voyage proceeded uneventfully and the weather was a relatively calm. I have memories of feeling slightly uneasy when standing in the dark on the wing of the bridge on a calm night in the tropics at two am or so in the morning and hearing a low growl, so I instructed the AB on watch with me to check the lions cage on a regular basis.

The only regret expressed by some of the crew regarding this unusual cargo and story, was that we didn't get to meet Ursula Andress.