

MARCH 17, 1988

Hernando Magellan discovered this passage we are in now in 1519. Fifty years were to pass before Sir Francis Drake became the next European to sail through here. Last night on the Atlantic, we got a preview of why sea captains were so slow to follow Magellan's route. About parallel with the Falkland Islands, winds of gale force, or over 53 miles per hour, made me believe that the ship was going to buck out from underneath her rigging and pitch the anchor overboard.

All four of Magellan's ships put together probably weren't as big or as heavy as ours. However, I wasn't able to find out much comparative information between our voyage and Magellan's. Everybody I tried to talk to was in a hurry to get to their cabin to attend to their sea sickness. The ship's doctor is a big phoney, I think. He gives these folks little disks to paste behind their ears. Every hombre I ever saw that was sea sick wasn't able to stand upright long enough to know or care whether he had an ear or not.

To sail in the straits and narrows of the Island of Tierra del Fuego, two pilots of the nationality of the territory being sailed have to be on board. During the big winds last night, we passed from the South Atlantic Ocean into the mouth of the Strait of Magellan, and came under Chilean jurisdiction, so two Chilean pilots had to be brought on the ship.

A boat about the size of those shrimpers seen on gulf coasts came bobbing along on our starboard with her smoke stacks tilting and her red and blue pennants straining to break loose from their ropes. Our captain refused to anchor his ship. He's one of those Greek guys who probably descends from 29 straightbred generations of seamen. I learned after the pilots finally made it aboard that in the process of the boarding the captain was giving the driver of that little boat plenty of promises as to what was going to happen to him if he scratched any paint off his ship.

In such high seas, whether the blue and white colors of Greece were rubbed off by that rusty tub of a boat wasn't, I'm sure, too important to those two pilots who were watching for a chance to catch the safety net and the crashing waves on the same upswing. With or without the Mediterranean ship pilot on the bridge discoursing over a bull horn over his parking policy, the truth was, and the truth remains, that the bottoms of those waters were covered with so many shipwrecks that the barnacles down here are thought to be the healthiest in the world.

It is a big social honor to be invited to have dinner at the captain's table. But I don't make friends that fast myself. One night I spotted the captain and his first mate ~ating alone in an alcove off the kitchen. A big plastic bottle of Pepsi Cola was sitting between them.

A sea bird called a Giant Petrel has been following the ship since away back up the coast, and a couple of octogenarians from Maine have been out on deck in all of the weather. The first time I catch either the bird or those folks from Maine showing signs of seasickness I'm going to ask the captain to take me ashore, because it'll be too late to take that doctor's remedy of treating a queasy stomach through the mastoid.