

39) Fort Walsh 14087 GRT  
Singapore 16/1/83 - 19/3/83 Singapore.  
40) Fort Walsh Re-signed on articles.  
Singapore 19/3/83 - 24/4/83 Rotterdam.



This ship carried mostly timber, loading it in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore for Europe. The timber was either packaged or kiln-dried, or it was in various rolls of veneer or sheets of plywood. Loading was either direct from the factory (with barges whilst at anchor in the river) or at various ports around the coast. Timber is a rather pleasant cargo to carry. It's relatively clean, takes a long time to load and discharge and has some delightful scents when freshly cut. The long load and discharge times mean that Jolly Jack has time to go ashore, and have a break from just watching water. As the ship had its own cranes, we could go to undeveloped ports without cargo handling equipment, or lie at anchor, and discharge ourselves. Some of the areas we visited were hence really quite primitive.

We arrived in Indonesia with a cargo of phosphate fertiliser. This is a white granular powder, which finds its ways into eyes and ears and is not that pleasant to discharge, particularly as it was done by hand, with the aid of bulldozers and slings. This in itself took a long time. After all was discharged, the cargo holds had to be cleaned and swept out ready for the timber cargo.



Whilst we were in Indonesia, we met up with some English "Ex Pats" who were working in Belawan, supervising the building of a concrete factory. They worked for Portland Cement as planning engineers. We were invited to their "Ex Pats group" called "The Hash House Harriers" which comprised quite a number of European families working in and around Belawan in various supervisory capacities. In the evenings and weekends, there were all sorts of private parties. One of these was a so-called fun run or hash race. This was essentially a paper chase through the jungle to a specific spot, where

refreshments (a truck full of cold beer!) would be available. Quite a number of us from the ship volunteered to take part. The lure of cold beer was almost irresistible. We were driven from the ship to the starting point just outside Belawan in the late afternoon.

Driving in Indonesia is a nightmare. They seem to drive on whichever side has less traffic! - or maybe sometimes not even that. I saw a couple of horrific accidents. One involving a bus, overturned in the ditch beside the road, the other involving two trucks which had met head on. Sometimes the roads are unpaved, with huge pot-holes. Outside the main towns there is no illumination at night, which makes night driving decidedly risky. We were driven by official drivers employed to drive the Europeans around. They all agreed it was too dangerous to drive themselves.

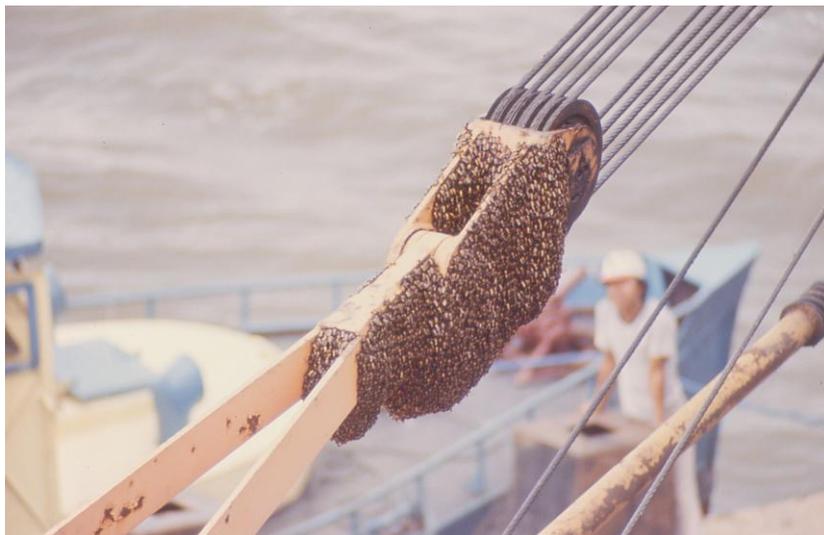
On arriving at the start of the race, we could see the beginning of the trail which had been laid a few hours previously, leading into the trees. At the command, we all started off, running along the trail. At times it stopped, or there were false trails laid. When a trail was found, the finder would call "on-on" so that all could converge on the correct trail. It was not too strenuous, as a number of older people also took part. It lasted about two hours. It lead through some light forests, skirted rubber, pineapple and peanut plantations and crossed a couple of streams. On reaching the finish in a clearing, there stood a

huge truck filled with ice and (full!) beer bottles. There was a barbeque and various other goodies laid out on camping tables. We were presented with T-Shirts emblazoned with the "On-On" cry on one side. On the other was a beer bottle with legs and "Belawan Hash House Harriers" printed underneath. Everyone made it to the finishing point eventually, and much beer and food was consumed. At the end, it was us sailor types and a few of the Ex-Pats who remained, standing around a paraffin pressure lamp (Tilly Lamp) drinking and talking until well after dark. We were regularly "buzzed" by some pretty huge moths and other beasties. In the shadows around us we could see the eyes and teeth of the local children glowing in the lamplight. They all thought it great fun observing the "mad dogs and Englishmen".



When the truck left with its load of empty bottles, the party moved on to one of the private residences. It continued until well into the small hours. The drivers were then woken up and told to take us back to the ship (about an hour's drive). We met up with the group several times in the two weeks we were there. Just before we sailed, we had a party on board in which we tried to reciprocate for all the good times we had had.

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We spent over 2 months on the Indonesian coast loading the timber. There were continual delays due to various uncontrollable factors. A lot of delays were due to the weather. The timber was often of high quality, and must be kept dry at all costs. This required the loading to be stopped and hatches closed if the weather looked at all like rain, even if it didn't. Heavy thunder storms were quite common, with prolonged heavy showers. One unusual delay was caused by a swarm of bees which decided one of our pulley blocks was the right place to build a nest. No one would go near this area of deck until we got them removed. Another problem was the lack of communications. Each port has its own radio station, but it is probably only open half an hour a day and of low power. Quite often, the Morse is almost unrecognisable, the transmitter on the wrong frequency, unstable or with a queer chirpy note that made it almost unreadable. The operators were also not often of the best, and language difficulties were common. Sending messages via any other station usually meant it would be delivered days later - possibly (if one was lucky) even by post! Although the ship's radio station is normally closed when in port, we had no other reliable means of communication, so I was always busy sending and receiving telex messages, even if this was not quite legal. Sometimes the supercargo (cargo superintendent) was rather impressed by the very quick replies we got to his queries, we were even live "on line" direct to London office at times for instant answers. Considering where we were, this was a real luxury for him!

One incident may illustrate local conditions a bit. I wanted to phone my wife Christine. I managed to find the local post office-cum-telephone exchange. It was not difficult - an imposing building with a large antenna mast on top. On looking closer I couldn't believe my eyes. The telephone section was in the almost unlit basement, and was flooded with well over a foot or two of water. A small stage had been built up over the water at one end, on which was a table, some batteries and phones. A plank of wood led from the entrance across to it. An official also sat there, writing down the details of the call under a dim desk lamp. I only had to wait about ten minutes for a connection to Germany, (which was nothing much short of a miracle), but it was a novel experience talking to my wife, standing on a wobbly plank, in an unlit basement room over a small underground lake in Indonesia. I even had to negotiate my own rate for the phone call! I found out later that it had been flooded for over 3 years, and nothing had been done about it since.

The stevedores lived on board, sleeping on the deck or anywhere they could find room. They brought their own food, chickens and cooking utensils with them. Hygiene was a problem, and the ship began to smell, and in places, also to look like a rubbish tip. I sometimes used to wake up thinking I was on a farm. The smells of cooking and the early morning crowing of the chickens and cockerels kept on board were all pervading.

We were always careful to keep anything even remotely valuable under lock and key, and the accommodation doors were kept closed and wherever possible locked. The stevedores were mostly honest, but we tried not to tempt them. They didn't earn much, and some of our possessions must have been totally out of their reach.

Bribery and corruption is rife in Indonesia. If the various officials don't get their whisky and cigarettes from a ship, then nothing gets signed, and some essential things just don't take place! One Captain I sailed with didn't agree with bribery and refused to give out the few packets of cigarettes and bottles of whisky needed. After a few days' delay, which cost far more than the bribes would have done, he had to give in. You cannot buck the system. What a country.

Piracy is endemic around Southern Philippines, Indonesia and Borneo. They did not - at that time - prey on the big ships very much, but refugees from various civil strife and illegal emigration were fair game. We had to rescue one such group as they had run out of fuel and their boat was slowly sinking. We saw them a long way off, not moving. As we got closer, they waved a piece of white cloth to attract our attention. We circled them, our Captain, being well aware

of some of the tricks pirates play to lure unwary ships close, then open fire with modern automatic weapons, was not willing to stop or go closer. We observed them carefully through binoculars, and could see men, women and young children packed aboard. This is what decided us in the end. Pirates do not usually have young children with them.

With some difficulty, we got them all on board our ship, about 20 in all, but had problems communicating, as they spoke little or no English, and their local dialect was difficult to understand. Eventually using our Philippine cook as interpreter, it turned out they were from the Southern Philippines and were trying to reach Indonesia where living conditions and availability of work was much better. Also, they were fed up with the continuous fighting between rebels and government troops going on in their area of the Philippines. They had all paid a lot of money for the trip, but the boat was leaky, and had been stocked with insufficient fuel, food and water for the voyage. They were very lucky we picked them up. Others have disappeared without trace, or were set upon by pirates, and robbed of all they possessed - and sometimes killed too. We took them with us to Indonesia. There they were arrested by the authorities and sent back to the Philippines again. They of course had no official papers, and we were certainly no passenger ship. Their adventure having cost them all their savings, and probably a heavy prison sentence on their return. At least they were not killed - this time.