



Indonesian Reflections

by the late Hugh Bostock (50-51)

In 1963, the Freight Conference chartered a Black Sea Russian freighter (*right*) to load general cargo in Indonesia for discharge in Europe and to be operated by Blue Funnel. I have no record of the ship's proper Cyrillic name but remember it was pronounced 'Heebeenee'. She was a basic, unmodified Baltimore 'Sam', built in 1944 and quite well maintained by her Russian owners.

As the Blue Funnel Wharf Superintendent at Tandjong Priok, I was told to go with the ship as it loaded in various Indonesian ports and show the Master and Chief Officer how to stow the cargo in accordance with prevailing Blue Funnel practice.



I was made most welcome; the Chief Officer in particular made sure I was treated as a privileged guest. But conditions were pretty basic and any Blue Funnel white crowd would have found the food quite unacceptable. The staple diet was a watery borsch served three times a day - cold at breakfast and hot at lunch and tea. Fresh fruit was non-existent and the few fresh greens were cooked to destruction. Bread and butter went with every meal to soak up the borsch. The main source of vitamin C was dried berries, issued by the doctor and eaten at the end of the meal with tiny dried salted fish the size of large sprats. Tea was served with every meal to which one added butter or a good helping of turnip jam.

Communication with the Deck Officers was surprisingly easy because the Chief Officer and 4th Officer had good English and were easy-going types, keen to learn as much as they could about the job and also about Britain. The 2nd Officer had little English but willingly cooperated. English was taught intensively at nautical school and all ships carried a bilingual library of Shakespeare and Dickens, with English on one page and Russian on the facing page. Because they had never been allowed ashore in Britain, they firmly believed the Dickens' books accurately described life beyond the dock gates - not hard to believe when one considers just how squalid were some aspects of British docks in the '50s and '60s.

I was given the Radio Officer's cabin which was so badly infested with cockroaches that I had to spray every inch with insecticide 'borrowed' from a 'Bluey' lying just astern. I did this secretly at night so as not to offend my hosts. Next morning, I swept up three dustpans of cockroach corpses and ventilated the place to get rid of the smell of insecticide which, oddly enough, the Russians either did not notice or were too polite to mention.

The Russians didn't wear uniform and seemed not to care about their clothing which was rarely washed and never ironed; all too soon, I found that washing and laundry facilities were primitive and less than hygienic. At least this discovery let me come fully prepared when I 'joined' the ship on Christmas Eve ready to sail that evening. I took the top tier of Blue Funnel 3rd Officer Mandagie's wedding cake for delivery to his mother, who was sharing a villa with the legendary Daisy O'Keefe in Makassar. I also took 12 sets of 'whites' to give me a daily change of clothes. Christmas was a complete non-event for the Russians and I had been warned that New Year would involve a fearsome amount of vodka and that I could not expect anyone to be sober that day.

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The Master was in his mid forties and struggled with English; so he had difficulty making best use of the British Admiralty Pilots, which were the only guidance available besides his British Admiralty charts overprinted in Russian. He was quietly proud of his position and was quick to say that this was only possible because of the Communist Party - his grandfather had been a serf who could be bought and sold with his sheepdog. The Communist Party Commissar was an ex-school teacher with no nautical experience whose job was to guide the Master and the Chief Officer in their dealings with the crew! This man was often seen in deep conversation with the 3rd Officer who was the Comsomol (Young Communists) cell leader on board with an uncanny ability to appear from nowhere whenever I talked to other officers; this arrogant young man was the only crew member suspicious of me and reluctant to take my advice.

Apart from the bosun and lamp trimmer, all the seamen were ex-Red Army conscripts who had been sent to sea on demobilisation, soon after the Cuban crisis. There were three female crew - the doctor, 2nd cook and stewardess. The doctor was a coarse, heavily-built woman, who cared nothing for her appearance and wore the same dress for a week - one did not hang about down wind of her! The 2nd cook was a statuesque blonde with unkempt, greasy shoulder-length hair; I never saw her without a cigarette dangling from her lips even when bent over the galley stove. The stewardess was a pretty wee elfin 18 year old who only ever wore thin gingham dresses which left nothing to the imagination, particularly when she leant over the table to serve meals in the saloon.

The general atmosphere was a bit too relaxed, with much careful 'clock watching'. The worst example was when the 3rd Officer downed tools at 1700hrs while mending the gyro compass, despite the fact that we were sailing at midnight and he could have finished the job in two hours - which he did when we arrived at the next port. Interestingly, both the Master and Chief Officer took it in their stride and didn't seem to be concerned that the gyro compass could and should have been checked and serviceable before sailing.

There were plenty of Liverpool 'Blueys' in Indonesian waters (right: *MV Antilochus*) and twice I visited them to have a decent bath and get some 'whites' laundered. I was anxious to show my Russian hosts what life was like in the British Merchant Navy and so took some of them for lunch on board. The first lunch, when I took the Chief Officer and 4th Officer - their English was the best - was a great success. However, there must have been considerable discussion amongst the Russians later because I was very firmly told who was being allowed to join me for the next Blue Funnel lunch -



needless to say, one of them was the Commissar, who pretended he had no English but could speak German; he wrecked the meal by constantly wanting his fellow Russian to translate. Later when I wanted the 4th Officer to come with me, to measure some logs on the wharf, I was told the Commissar and the Comsomol cell leader (3rd Officer) had decided no-one was to leave the ship with me unless accompanied by one of them! The Commissar fooled me completely with his pretence that he had no English until, near the end of my stay, I surprised him talking to an Indonesian in perfectly good English!



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After Tjirebon and Semarang, we reached Makassar (*right*) on New Year's Eve morn. Work stopped at 6pm and would not start again until 2nd January so I left my hosts to get on with what was already looking like a horrendous drunken orgy. I had sent a message to Mrs Mandagie and Daisy that I had the wedding cake; they invited me to see in the New Year with them and their friends, so the agent drove me to the villa where, although I had never met them, I was greeted like a long-lost friend and told that I must stay the night!



What a night that was; it went on until past 5am. They had laid out a magnificent buffet in which the wedding cake took pride of place. Other guests came and went, including two Indonesian Army officers who arrived in a limousine, escorted by two jeeps bristling with machine guns, and stayed until well after midnight. Much reminiscing and laughter was the order of the night; an amazing selection of drinks and fine food slipped down all too easily and I felt as if I had been listening to a Conrad novel. Daisy was keen I should see the black gibbons in their native habitat in the foothills and she mentioned this to one of the Army officers, a colonel, who spoke remarkably good English; he wanted to know all about my Russian sailor hosts and why I was sailing with them. As he left, he said he wanted to organise an escorted day trip into the mountains, so that I and two Russians could see more of his beautiful country as well as the black gibbons. And so it was that the Master, the Commissar and I were collected by four jeeps, commanded by the Colonel I had met at Daisy's. The first and last of the jeeps were filled with armed soldiers, which caused a stir with the Russians who thought they were being taken off to some awful fate! That sorted, we set off on the three-hour journey to an old Dutch hill resort high in the hinterland. We passed through old, run-down rubber plantations, before climbing into the foothills covered with thick bamboo groves where we saw many black gibbons, which ignored our little convoy. Higher up, we had our first glimpses of pine forest, way above us, and soon caught the unmistakable scent of fresh pine resin and felt a distinct chill. After the dense forest, we emerged into open grassland dotted with pines and stunted shrubs, and finally arrived at our destination - a sad-looking village resort consisting of bungalows and villas in various states of disrepair nestling in a sparse grove of pine trees. We were ushered into the largest and best maintained villa with a huge open verandah overlooking the mountains and valleys to the west. Unfortunately, thick cloud completely obscured the magnificent view. Everyone was feeling the cold so we hastened indoors to an enormous log fire. After some local beer, the entire party, including the soldiers, sat down to a huge nasi goreng with all the trimmings.

The run back to Makassar was interrupted, for a few heart-stopping moments, by an overturned log lorry on a hairpin bend which the soldiers thought might be an insurgent the unfortunate driver, who had a broken leg but was otherwise none the worse. We were miles from the nearest village so he was put in the rearguard jeep and taken back to Makassar with us, while one unlucky soldier was ordered to stay behind with the lorry driver's mate.

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After loading, we sailed to Surabaya from where I returned to Djakarta by overnight train. When the ship returned to Tandjong Priok, the Master invited my wife and me to a party on a modern Russian ship, the *Red October*. (No! It wasn't a submarine and Sean Connery wasn't the Captain!) as thanks for the 'Blue Flue' lunches and to celebrate my birthday which they had discovered was later that week. They were very keen to show me that Russia had some fine new ships where the living was up to the standards they had found on Blue Funnel ships. So, Margaret and I found ourselves in the Master's cabin of *Heebeenee* where a spread of exotic 'small eats' was laid out. After toasting my birthday, they gave me a 1Kg tin of finest black caviar and then we, with the Master, Chief Officer and Commissar, walked over to *Red October*. At the gangway, we were stopped by an armed Russian sailor and had to wait while he phoned for instructions. Quite quickly, we were escorted to the Master's spacious cabin. The Master, a tall, lean man in his mid thirties, greeted us warmly and invited us to tuck into yet another spread of 'small eats', just like the ones we had already had. After drinks, we moved to the saloon where several *Red October* officers were already seated at three large dining tables, spread with spotless white linen and loaded with an amazing selection of food including four different types of caviar. Bottles of pink and white champagne-type wine were placed on each table - no bare tables, borsch or dried berries here!

Two muscular stewardesses, who would have been at home in a Bavarian bierkeller, began opening bottles and filling glasses. Details of the meal escape my memory but I do recall it was a constant struggle to fend off endless attempts to refill glasses and plates! All the Russians, apart from the two Masters and our *Heebeenee* Chief Officer, seemed intent on drinking as much as possible in the shortest time and it was inevitable some would fall by the wayside even before the meal was over. The first to go was a *Red October* man who fell headfirst into his food; no-one noticed, except the Master, who pressed a bell for the stewardesses who, without a word, pulled back the chair, grabbed the man under each shoulder and dragged him backwards out of the saloon. The next man to go was our *Heebeenee* Commissar, who received exactly the same rough treatment.

After this, there was a noted relaxation in the atmosphere and *Red October's* Master, who spoke good but heavily accented English, began to talk freely about his fine modern ship, keen to show that Russia could build something as good or better than the West. He had been with her since she came out of the yard, and her maiden voyage had been to Cuba in 1962 when she carried two rockets and was turned back by the US Navy. We were



Tandjong Priok in 1963



A United States Navy P-2 of VP-18 flying over a Soviet freighter



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astonished to be shown pictures of the huge rockets, stowed on either side of the long foredeck, and then several pictures of two US Navy destroyers, not more than five cables away, apparently 'escorting' his ship at full speed in a moderate sea - truly dramatic pictures. The Master was anxious to show us round. The tour revealed that the whole ship was fitted with a comprehensive, built-in, pre-wetting system; the bridge and part of the adjacent accommodation had a self-contained re-circulating air conditioning unit, complete with CO₂ scrubbers, with a similar arrangement for the engine room control centre, situated above and abaft the main engine. Remember, this was at the height of the Cold War. Quite clearly, this merchant ship was designed to sail through a nuclear fallout area, although obviously we were not told that - the pre-wetting system was described as an aid to washing down the ship, and the bridge and engine room 'citadels' were purely for the health and wellbeing of the duty watch keepers; the need for the CO₂ scrubbers was never explained and we were careful not to ask.