

Cocos Islands Rendezvous

...So near and yet so far !

by Neil Robinson (R364755)

We'd no sooner cleared Colombo harbour after our scheduled day's stay when on every notice board on the ship, passenger as well as crew, the following advice appeared:-

"P&O RMS 'Strathaird' will, 3 days hence, stop off the Cocos or Keeling Islands and will rendezvous with small craft which will come offshore from Home Island. Their purpose is to uplift mail, newspapers and stores. Anyone with reading material such as newspapers, magazines and books which are no longer required may hand it in at the Pursers Office for transfer to the inhabitants of Cocos Islands. The ship is expected to be standing off Home Island at 0700, the stop scheduled to be of 1 hours duration. Weather conditions are forecasted to be fine in the area enabling a trouble free transfer of items from RMS 'Strathaird'".

But - it didn't turn out quite like that ! "The best laid plans... etc.."

At 0700 on the day we were standing about 1 mile off from Home Island with a strong sea running. Now and again a BIG sea would roll down the side of the ship causing the 'executives' aboard some concern and doubt about a 'smooth transfer'. The wind too was a cause of some furrowed foreheads, blowing as it was at about Force 7 according to the Chief Officer who was officiating and directing operations in the Pursers Square. The starb'd Gun-Port door was opened and cargo nets secured and hung from that point, down the ship's side. From the deck above a pair of block and tackle purchases, likely 'jiggers', hung from the rails, the hooks secured either side of the GP door entrance, ready for lowering away the oiled canvas covered packages stacked nearby.

It was a gloomy morning, the cloud base very low with rain squalls frequent. The tropical islands didn't look all that inviting with coconut palms thrashing about on the high winds. A dodgy place to be, swanning about under that lot I thought to myself.

There was communication between the Chief Officer to the Captain via the phone in the Pursers Office and I gathered an advice had gone by radio advising Home Island that in view of conditions the venture should be called off.

But apparently the boats had already departed the lagoon and sure enough within a few minutes 5 boats were seen heading out to us... all under oars. Not visible for much of the time being down in the troughs, they made seemingly easy work of the job of getting out to us. They would surge up onto the crest of a sea and then totally disappear for disturbing amounts of time. That they were shipping water was obvious from the amount of baling going on.

Within 20 minutes or so they were all in the lee of the ship, each boat, of skiff type, carrying 5 men. Each boat had a European coxswain and 4 Malays manning the oars. Their expertise in both handling and general seamanship was very obvious.

John Clunies-Ross, of the family which had owned the islands from the previous century, was the leader of the group.

His boat came in first and using loudhailers the Captain and he talked strategy and order of operation, the other boats "aheading" and "backwatering" to keep well clear of each other in the surging seas.

It should be explained that my role in the "general scheme of things" was twofold. As the Bugler I had my calls to blow but the Chief Officer had sent for me after the 0600 "tick on" and informed me he wanted me to assist with transfer operations from the Gun-Port door. I was 17 at the time but a very fit 17 and not short of 'bulk'. This the result of dedicated attendance as a member of the Manchester YMCA Wrestling Team for 4 years. (young sprogs division) The Chief Officer was no fool. As mentioned elsewhere I was bigger than any of the Deck crowd - all Lascars. None of whom was short on toughness, I might add !

The C/O had organised a clean white boiler suit from one of the Storekeepers and I changed into this in a passenger bathroom nearby. My white uniform etc., and bugle, were left hanging in the Pursers Office, out of sight.

Prior to this lot I had gone around the ship blowing the call for Breakfast and by the time I'd changed into the b'suit and taken up my position in the Gun-Port door space, passengers aplenty were moving into and through the Pursers Square on their way to the Dining Saloon. Naturally most were curious about what was taking place and seeing the open G-P door were intrigued to know just what was going on. It got so congested in the square with folk that it began to resemble Piccadilly Circus and the comical Asst. Purser, ever the humourist, came over to me and suggested I might "get the bugle and blow 'The Retreat' and we'll get these silly buggers out of here !"

The 'sphere of operations' was then screened off with canvas awnings and final preparations made to get things under way re the transfer. Everything was in place, purchases from the deck above, cargo nets secure, lifejackets & lifelines round those of us in the G-P door opening. All getting wet from the driving rain, I might add. Fortunately it wasn't cold. We'd crossed the 'Line' a day or two previously. Seemingly, everything was in place for a trouble free transfer.

But it wasn't ! An important and vital piece of gear had been missed.

Sharp eyed, ahead of me A.B's etc., will smartly realise what it was when I say the first boat, of John Clunies-Ross came almost alongside, standing off the ship by about 3 feet and the first parcel went down on the hook with me fending the tackle as far outboard as I could, held securely by the lifeline. Before the parcel reached their level a BIG sea rolled under the boat, lifted it and thrust it against the ship's side and in a trice it was in pieces, the crew swimming ! Unbelievable - that a boat could come apart so quickly especially as all 5 looked new, freshly varnished etc. The tackle hauled on and the parcel retrieved and out of the way, we got on with hauling aboard the swimmers - John Clunies-Ross being the first, hauled inboard by yours truly. His 4 oarsmen came next - scrambling up the net with 'bowlined' lifelines around them. All were uninjured despite having been in amongst some fairly large portions of wreckage.

Now - at this stage, what should have happened was that each man rescued should have been given a life-jacket, the nearest boat called in to stand off some 25 feet from the ship and the rescued men either swim, or be hauled on a heaving line, to it. And then...they all go home !

But it wasn't to be like that, was it ?! Hindsight is a wonderful thing as we ALL know but I have to wonder at some of the strange decisions made on that day, 50 odd years ago.

Boat No. 2 came in to do... what, I don't know ! Communication to the Bridge from the G-P door was out of the question because of the wind so the C/O departed to talk with 'aloft' on the Pursers phone. The Serang talked to his lads in his own lingo about things and there was a strange lull in proceedings. Just nothing - was happening !

The still dripping rescued, having been brought bath towels, were busy drying off in the square.

"What's happening ?" came an American voice to me from the nearest boat. I shrugged my shoulders and raised my hands the way you do ! I then went to ask John Clunies-Ross to come to the G-P door and answer the American gentleman.

Now - finally, the missing piece of gear should have been thought of. That a 'strongback' from a lifeboat or some other long length of timber or steel section or pipe could not have been rustled up and rigged to lower the parcels well outboard, is amazing. Rigging such would not have taken more than a few minutes, with all the gear at hand. But it hadn't been thought of... Incredible !

Why also were the parcels not taken up to the forr'ard well deck and the ship's gear used to lower them...well outboard from the ship's side ? Bit dodgy of course - but it could have been done. Thought of, the 'strongback' solution would have been simpler, more effective and certainly more 'economical' in light of following events.

Orders came from somewhere and someone, and unbelievably boat No. 2 came in, in exactly the same manner as No.1 and copped EXACTLY the same treatment from 'La Mer', which had not abated one bit. Nor the wind - which seemed to be rising !

More wreckage... and 5 more hauled aboard. To see those boats come apart in the way they did fair made my eyes POP ! Quite astonishing it was to be watching all this happen, from my vantage point, just feet away from the action.

You could be forgiven shipmates for wondering why the 3 remaining boats didn't just bugger off and head for the lagoon and safety. They could quite reasonably have imagined the Captain would have lowered the Emergency Boat to take the 'survivors' and that which they'd made the trip for, back to the island. If this was so... they were fresh out of luck !

Seemingly the Skipper was not prepared to do this in the conditions prevailing.

So we have 10 men aboard and a further 15 sitting in boats standing off from the ship wondering no doubt what the hell is in store for them.

Not wishing to draw this narrative out and have it become boringly repetitive I'll shorten it by saying that the remaining 3 boats, all in turn, performed the self same 'suicidal' manoeuvre as those before them with exactly the same result. The sea was a mass of wreckage - oars, lines and tanks amongst the flotsam & jetsam. That nobody was lost, or even seriously injured was

a miracle. From memory 2 or 3 of the Malay lads required a day or so in Hospital, cuts, abrasions, bruises etc., Nothing worse as it happened, ... quite miraculous !

But... 5 smart boats totally destroyed and absolutely sod all achieved. Was I dreaming or what?

Like the Lascars, I was soaked through from the rain squalls and hauling the survivors inboard. The Chief Officer told me to "pack it in" and go have a shower in the passenger bathroom nearby. He wanted to give me a shot of spirits but I refused politely. I was only 17 and didn't want him to be copping flak from any source. He hadn't asked my age - I hadn't told him. I wasn't old enough for a 'tot' yet, being a 'lime juicer' still, officially !

Whilst in the shower, and I took my time about it, I felt the vibration of the ships' engines and thought " the Skipper is positioning for launching the 'E' boat after all !" I was ... WRONG !

When I was 'uniformed' again and back in the Pursers Square to collect my bugle everything was quite normal again in that area. The G-P door was closed, all gear cleared away and the deck mopped and dried of all evidence of dripping survivors. Normal business was being carried on at the Bureau. I retrieved my bugle and the Purser told me the C/O had said I should go to Breakfast - which, I was well and truly ready for...! It was 0915...I'd had a cup of 'Rosie' and a slice of 'Holy Ghost' at 0545 !

Conclusion. Mail Ship time is important. RMS 'Strathaird' left the area of the Cocos Islands for Fremantle, our next scheduled port of call, with all 25 survivors aboard. They would not be "home for lunch", as expected on the day.

They would not be home again - home being just about 3 miles distant, until they had completed a round trip of over 3000 miles to Fremantle and back. How or when they did get back to Cocos I never did hear.

The cost of the whole exercise, in every sense, must have been nothing short of... ENORMOUS !

Very expensive reading material indeed, I'd say !

"ALL FOR THE WANT OF A 'STRONGBACK' !"

Note. All the details of the morning's events would have been recorded in the Ship's Log.

In an attempt to establish the actual date of the event I have been in contact with the P&O Company Historian in London and also the National Library of Australia in Canberra, ACT.

The Log is in the hands of a private collector, I'm informed. Enquiries continue. Hundreds of photographs would have been taken of the events by passengers from decks above and crew from the well-deck forr'ard. I never saw a single photo anywhere. Do YOU have one of those pictures ? The incident occurred in 1948 or 1949.

In a PERFECT position myself to take pictures I'd not thought to take my own box Brownie along !!! - How I've regretted that error !