

Brunei Revolt - Tales from the Engine Room



On the left, the Royal Navy badge for a Mechanical Engineer, First Class (aka Stoker)

On the right, the arms of Sarawak, based on the Hornbill, the national bird.

These two dits were first published in TON Talk edition 57, November 1995.

They have been reviewed and slightly revised to explain some Royal Navy jargon.

Mechanical Engineer Class 1 Tony Standish

Tony served as “Tanky” aboard HMS FISKERTON. In addition to carrying out his normal watchkeeping in the engine room and assisting with maintenance of machinery and running repairs, when necessary, he was responsible for monitoring the condition of tanks containing diesel fuel, lubricating oil and fresh water.

Tanky was a highly responsible job that required him to visit different compartments of the ship during day and night to check levels of these essential supplies, without which the ship could come to a full stop. In those days we did not have contents gauges, so Tanky would have to dip the tanks with a type of weighted tape measure to ascertain the contents. Tanky would advise the Marine Engineer Officer (a Chief Engine Room Artificer) of the levels and the MEO would liaise with the Commanding Officer to ascertain when replenishment, either alongside or under way at sea, could be fitted in with the ship’s programme and commitments.

Tony was also the ship’s unofficial cartoonist and his witty observations of life on board kept up all up to our marks. They also encouraged our sailors to read Daily Orders, so they could find out who was his victim today ...

After the Battle

The two landing craft returned to Brunei mid-morning on the day after the action (13th December) and came alongside the jetty where the minesweepers were berthed. They had on board the grateful released hostages and also the casualties among the Royal Marines. The dead Marines were covered in white sheets and lay in a line on the deck. I was among those detailed off to remove the bodies from the craft on stretchers, with due respect and compassion. One body of an unfortunate Marine had not been discovered until the craft was on its way back to Brunei. He was found in the after cabin, crouched by a window, with his head half blown away and by that time rigor mortis had set in, so we had a difficult time balancing him on the stretcher.

Four hostages came onboard FISKERTON; an RC priest, a Welsh banker, a woman missionary and a strapping American lad who was a member of the Kennedy Peace Corps. It was obvious that all of them had undergone a great ordeal and were still in a state of shock. The catholic priest was walking round, blessing everything in sight and the banker was dripping about all the money he had to leave behind, presumably locked in the safe ! In retrospect, I guess that shock takes people in different ways. The woman missionary seemed least affected. She declined she offer of a tot to steady her nerves, preferring a “nice cup of tea”.

Another Dawn Raid

Our C.O. Lieutenant Commander J.J. Black, had set up rota system calling for volunteers among the ships’ companies of the two sweepers to crew the requisitioned local craft needed for various patrols and responses to incidents. Hence a couple of days later I was a member of the crew of another craft under the command of Sub Lieutenant Chris Jowett, with two other ratings, tasked to transport a group of about 60 Marines to an inlet down the coast where rebel activity had been detected. It took about three hours to get to our destination. I do not recall being frightened but I must have checked the oil in the engines a thousand times as we sailed along.

It must have been about midnight when we arrived and secured to the river bank. The Royal Marine officer in charge ordered the engines to be shut down and advised the naval crew to take shelter below deck in the hold, where we were to remain in darkness and silence until

further notice. The Royals took post ashore and on the deck of our craft. We four sailors;, Subby, AB Booty from FISKERTON and another AB from CHAWTON, plus myself, tried to make ourselves comfortable in the empty hold. We had not thought to bring sleeping bags and were to remain below for about six hours. Every good Captain looks after his crew and JJ had provided Subby with a whisky bottle filled with Pusser's Rum. We sat in silence, taking it in turns to swig from the bottle, listening to the water lap against the hull. Someone dropped the metal cap of the bottle, which made a bit of a noise and caused us to be "Shushed" by the Marine officer.

Then our rum-induced slumber was shattered by the sound of gunfire from the deck. We emerged, gingerly, to find that it was early morning and we were blinded by the sun. Also we were alone, as all the Marines, bar a couple to defend us, had gone ashore and gunfire was coming from the edge of the jungle. We crouched down behind the sandbags we had earlier positioned along the edge of the deck and grabbed our WW2-vintage Lee-Enfield rifles, trying to remember what we had been taught last time we had been on the range.

The river was about 50 yards wide at this point and we were secured close to a large tree. After an hour or so the noise of gunfire and commands began to diminish and we assumed that the Marines were pursuing the rebels. All seemed calm, so we decided to have breakfast and opened our K rations. We relaxed in the sun, keeping a good look out. I leaned back against a 45-gallon drum of diesel oil, eating my breakfast 'something' when I felt a thud against the drum. I took no notice until I discovered that I was sitting in a pool of diesel, leaking from a bullet hole !

By mid-morning gunfire was very distant and peace had descended on our location such that we could hear birdsong, then our peace was shattered ! Two RAF jet fighters appeared from nowhere and buzzed the jungle at tree top height for quite some time. I don't know if they scared the rebels, but we were not happy !

Eventually we received orders to return to Brunei, without our Marines, but before we could get underway, we had a problem. One of the mooring lines had become entangled with the screws. and we were a long way from being able to call for a diver. Without even a facemask or snorkel, AB Booty ducked underwater repeatedly and, after a lot of hard work with his rigging knife, managed to cut us free. Luckily there was still a little rum left for hum !

The return trip downriver was rather nerve-wracking, perhaps we had been unsettled by the gunfire. I acted as lookout to starboard and the AB from CHAWTON as port lookout. We were conscious of the risk of ambush after what the Marines had told us happened at the hospital in Limbang. It took us some two hours to reach the coast and en route, the river narrowed to about 20 yards winding through seemingly impenetrable jungle, with only occasional clearings. In one there was a bit of a shack and I covered it with my rifle, only to see a family with children waving to us from inside.

Later on the port lookout gave us a start when he opened fire into the jungle. He later claimed that he was certain he had seen a rebel armed with a gun up a tree, but since there was no return fire, we guessed that nerves had got the better of him. Thinking back, none of us sailors had been trained in jungle warfare, nor in frequent use of rifles, so perhaps his nerves could be forgiven. Apart from that incident we arrived back in Brunei, in one piece, dead beat, but alive !

Daily Routine

After a few days things began to settle down, with regular patrols up the rivers, with the sweepers acting as Tactical HQ, liaising with the Royal Marines and Harbour Master. When not detailed off / volunteering for patrols in the requisitioned boats, the ships' companies were employed on their usual ship maintenance duties, but there were occasional additional tasks to brighten our days including Duty Driver for our requisitioned Land Rover and, for us stokers, stripping down and maintaining the outboard motors of the requisitioned craft. Our Chief Engine Room Artificer, Ginger Walpole, had set up an "Outboards Clinic" on the jetty, so many owners eventually received their craft and engines back in better condition than when they were requisitioned.

Although living under "war conditions", I do not think that a day passed without something to laugh about.

Film Show

One night we organised a film show in a big room in the port offices opposite our berth and invited the Royal Marines to attend as our guests. Dating from WW2 in the Far East, the Joint Services Kinema Organisation supplied a 16mm projector and loaned films, usually not too old if not the latest from Hollywood, to units on detached duty, including HM Ships. Danny, the Electrical Mechanic, and myself were the projectionists in FISKERTON so we rigged up a screen from someone's sheet and borrowed chairs from the offices.

We had a Full House of Marines, all with their rifles and ammunition to hand.

When we started the film, there was the usual fun and wise cracks "Good Old Fred" for the announcement of Fred Quimby as produce, preceding Tom and Jerry cartoons. But soon the Royals were falling off their chairs laughing, as the film we had found was Victor Mature in a war movie.

When we came to switch the lights on to change the reel, the EM and I realised we were all alone! We later discovered that the Marines had all left in complete silence, not because they did not like the film, but because they had been summoned for an alert.

Football and Carol Service

A young Welsh CoE padre visited us during our stay in Brunei. He was new to the Naval Chaplaincy and we were his first naval parish. 104 Minesweeper Squadron and the 10th Submarine Squadron, who were usually in Australia, shared his services and, being keen, he had come to us straight after arrival from UK, since we might be more in need of his professional services than his other parishioners. Rev Jones, known as Jonah to the lads, was the right man for the job and he eventually ended his naval career as Chaplain to the Fleet, retiring to become Bishop of Sodor and Man – no relation to Thomas the Tank Engine.

However, I digress ... Jonah was a great rugby fanatic and he decided, as Christmas was coming, that a football match and carol service would be good for our morale

The football match was played between the two ships' teams on a patch of grass outside the docks. The monsoon season had just started and it rained heavily most afternoons, and quite predictably, but our man of God knew better, so we turned out in a cloudburst. Predictably the pitch soon turned into a morass and any attempt at serious football had to be abandoned when a helicopter radioed it wished to land and ours was the only piece of grass close to the ships. Someone threw a clod of mud at Jonah, who retaliated and then everyone joined in. Within minutes everyone was covered in mud, including the helicopter!

The carol service was held on FISKERTON's foc'stle and was to be filmed by a TV crew - the idea being it would be shown on UK TV during a Forces' Round Up programme over the Christmas period.

The film crew had set up their equipment on the bows of the ship and the sailors' chorale was lined up in three rows in front of the bridge – not a great deal of space... However, the slope of the deck meant that the cameraman could not see the rear row of the choir. Jonah came up with the solution. The rear row could stand on crates of beer that we had recently taken on board ! Naval initiative came to the fore as the lads at the back passed the cans to the rest of us and it turned into the most enjoyable carol service I have ever attended, with everyone singing in full voice, but we were never told if we had appeared on TV.

Merry Chrimbo

DARTINGTON and HOUGHTON arrived in Brunei of 14 December to relieve us. On the 15th all four ships, supported by requisitioned craft surrounded Kampong Ayer to enable the police and army to search the settlement, as others have described, then we sailed for Singapore and had an uneventful passage.

We entered Johor Strait, leading to the Naval Base after sunset on Christmas Eve and as we transited Changi reach we observed that a Christmas party with music and gaiety was being held the RAF Camp at Sembawang. My own thoughts were "Don't they know there is a war going on. After all, the Hunter jets that had troubled us had probably been based there ? Marines were being killed but these people were holding a dance – It just didn't seem appropriate"

We berthed in the Naval Base just before midnight and several senior officers were there to welcome us and de-brief our C.O. J.J. Black.

JJ gave the word that traditional Christmas Messdeck Rounds would be held later in the morning, so we set to in preparation. It is a navy tradition that on Christmas Day, the youngest rating on board assumes the role of Captain, so chaos often ensues and the best decorated mess receives a Christmas Cake. Accordingly Junior Seaman Bob Shilling later donned the Captain's cap and was conducted round the ship, awarding penalties and receiving sippers of our rum ration, as he went. Our Chinese cook had made a cake during our return, which itself was rather a surprise, as he usually disappeared with sea sickness as soon as we left harbour. The Stokers' Mess won the cake, although we shared it with the rest of the crew. Our balloons really took the prize but I will leave you to guess what they really were..

After refit, we returned to Borneo in the following year, with a new C.O, Lieutenant Norman King. as did all the other ships in the Squadron as Confrontation gathered pace and patrols spread from the Malacca Straits to Tawau and Sandakan on the east coast of Borneo.

Chief Engine Room Artificer Stuart Johnson

Marine Engineer Officer, HMS HOUGHTON

We sailed from Singapore in mid-December in company with DARTINGTON to relieve FISKERTON and CHAWTON in Brunei. A wave of jaundice had swept through the ship, causing our C.O, Commander Staveley and Navigating Officer, plus several ratings to be sent ashore to sick bay so Lieutenant Martin Griffiths, our First Lieutenant, assumed temporary command. Lieutenant Commander Andrew Marx, C.O. of DARTINGTON, was Senior Officer for this deployment.

We arrived in Brunei on 14 December and next day participated in the big operation to search Kampong Ayer for any rebels that may have been hiding out there. My role in this operation was to venture out in our slow motor boat to rescue some Gurkhas in a dugout canoe whose outboard engine had failed.

After this operation FISKERTON and CHAWTON left for Singapore and our two sweepers took over their berth at the Custom House jetty. The monsoon season had begun and that afternoon it started to rain, almost non-stop for six days. The rain caused serious flooding up country, so the state of Brunei not only had to contend with an armed rebellion but also a natural disaster.

The shore-side water supply failed, which presented us with a few problems. TON Class ships cannot distill their own fresh water and although we carried about four tons, that would last only half a dozen days, even with rationing. So for the next few days, we sloped our canvas awnings and collected runoff rainwater to top up our freshwater tanks, collecting 1.3 tons in one 24 hour period.

Many of the boats returning from patrols upriver also carried rebel prisoners and it was interesting to watch how the Gurkhas supervised their disembarkation. They formed a circle round each batch of prisoners on the jetty, then a lorry was backed up to them. Then, without a word of command being spoken, the Gurkhas, with bayonets fixed, shepherded the prisoners into the lorry.

Christmas Day 1962 was quite unusual. We actually had a Christmas Tree on the messdeck !

Captain Moutrie, the Harbour Master had fixed it and he brought his wife down to the ship to distribute presents. But where did he find a pine tree in tropical Borneo ?

We eventually returned to Singapore for our scheduled docking and self maintenance and Commander Staveley and the others re-joined the ship. Later in the new year we returned to Borneo, but this time mainly in the very long Rejang River.

Initially we transported soldiers and supplies to forward bases and hill forts, that the army had established upriver. One particular challenge was a Land Rover wedged behind the Bofors. We then went on to Sibuluan, about fifty miles from the sea, arriving in time to attend a colourful local regatta. Our sailors manned on of the native boats, which resulted in great hilarity for them and spectators alike. We continued upstream to Kapit, about 160 miles inland. The river was deep and fast flowing. While we were at anchor in mid-stream both shafts were trailing at 50 rpm ! Occasionally a drifting tree trunk would become snagged in the anchor cable and could only be removed by paying out more cable and jumping on it to "jiggle " the trunk loose.

Fortunately the trees did not foul our screws, but large waterlogged trees were an ever present hazard off the coasts of Borneo and many of our ships encountered them as a large BUMP in the middle of the night. Some even had the nylon underwater covering stripped away by the collision.

From Kapit we had an opportunity to visit an Iban tribal longhouse. The Bomo (Shaman/priest) blessed our arrival by waving a chicken over our heads to dispel evil spirits. The chicken was then slaughtered and served to us ! The Iban flourished in a hunter/gatherer lifestyle, sourcing most of their needs from the jungle and river and only visiting larger settlements to trade for metal objects and finery with visiting Chinese traders. It is regrettable that this idyllic historic lifestyle did not survive Confrontation. The tribespeople soon got used to western goods and clothing. Transistor radios and tee shirts rapidly replaced blowpipes and bone necklaces !

However we had the privilege of observing that “stone age” lifestyle for real, not just its replica for tourist purposes.

Occasionally we would leave the river to refuel at the Shell jetty at Pending, while the crew enjoyed a run ashore in the capital Kuching. On one of these trips the C.O. pointed out to me the most famous mountain in the world: Mount Staveley !

HMS ALBION, the Commando Carrier, sent two LCAs upriver with a large number of soldiers and Marines. We heard remarkable stories of spotter aircraft carrying out silent “engines off” glides over the jungle at night to locate unsuspecting Indonesian forces.

HOUGHTON’s task was to stop and search any vessel travelling at night on the river. These vessels usually cooperated when we illuminated them with our signal lamp. Recalling the navy’s experience with gunrunners in Cyprus, bilges under the engines were considered to be suitable places for concealing weapons and ammunition, as they were often dirty, oily and difficult to reach. One vessel we stopped had a particularly pungent charcoal cooking fire which made your eyes water – was this to discourage a search ?

Some vessels carried a cargo of about 100 tons of loose gravel. How could we know what might be concealed in that ? We found two long steel bars which we could use as probes, because we certainly could not unload off of such a cargo. For all we knew, these heavy rods may have passed through the vessel’s hull, so we may have sent a leaking craft on its way !!

Back in Singapore it was decided that we should carry out a minesweeping exercise, so that we would not forget our true role. During this exercise we encountered the Indonesian Navy. One morning while we had the sweeps out an unknown destroyer appeared over the horizon. Our captain identified it as a Russian built RIGA class escort vessel, recently transferred to Indonesia and certainly bigger and more heavily armed than our little minesweeper. Luckily our destroyer DEFENDER, even bigger and more heavily armed, was within call and she shadowed the Indonesian ship until it left the area.

HOUGHTON became a flagship for possibly the shortest time on record when Admiral Sir Desmond Dryer, Commander in Chief Far East Fleet hoisted his flag in HOUGHTON for a brief visit to Kuching. We were all on our best behaviour for that trip. The signalmen regaled us with how the Admiral had sent a bottle to an aircraft carrier as we left Singapore for failing to recognise his flag afloat !

HOUGHTON returned to Singapore for a long refit, the ship’s company being accommodated ashore in HMS TERROR Barracks. During the refit, half the foc’stle deck planking was removed, together with generators and propellor shafts. Dockyard workers had decided to go on strike, so our own sailors had to do more of this work than expected but eventually the strike was settled, the dockyard mates returned to work and completed our refit.

HOUGHTON’s new Captain, Commander Reynolds joined the ship and it soon came my time to leave this interesting and exciting appointment as Chief of the Boat.

I flew home on 31st December 1963 with two ERAs from HARTLAND POINT, the engineering Support Ship. We reckoned that we had passed through three time zones so we could celebrate New Year on three occasions. In fact I think we did have three midnights, with toasts to suit.