

SHELL TANKER TALES



In June 1952 I arrived as 3rd Radio Officer on the Dutch passenger ship ORANJE in Tandjong Priok, Indonesia. Radio Officers In those days had to serve a minimum term of 2 years in the Far East or similar lengthy periods on the high seas away from home ports as a condition of employment.

To start my stint in the Far East I was transferred from the ORANJE and given a temporary shore posting at the Radio Holland Far East HQ in Tandjung Priok and accommodation in the Zeemanshuis (Seamen's Club).

Rooms in the Zeemanshuis were Spartan, definitely not designed to motel or hotel room standards, only a hard bed with mosquito net, no toilet, shower or sink, only a communal mandi room – a bathroom of sorts with a large tank filled with cold water and a ladle to pour water over one's body -.



Zeemanshuis – International Seaman's Club – Tg. Priok

At the time of my arrival "Radio Holland" did not have a ship available and I was delegated

to assist the Inspector and technicians with their duties on the ships in port. The only form of entertainment was the local bar strip called Kampong Kotja where the other guests in the Zeemanshuis and I went at night time for a drink and copious portions of sateh. It was a real experience to go into these atap covered huts transformed into little bars for a cold beer, something to eat and entertainment! Very romantic those oil lamps, the fragrance of the tropics at night but in full daylight it was a disappointing mess.

After a few weeks I received my sailing orders. I had to fly to Palembang in Sumatra to take over on a Shell tanker from a colleague who had been hospitalised in the Shell company hospital in Pladju. The ship was ready to sail and my presence was urgently required and only late in the afternoon I was told to get there in a hurry; "Your flight to Palembang has been booked for tomorrow morning, leaving Kemajoran Airport at 7 am. Make your own arrangements to get there, we have no transport for you".

Unbelievable really, such high-handed attitude would not be acceptable this day and age. Anyway, I organised for a local bedjak (bicycle taxi) to pick me and my luggage up from the Zeemanshuis around midnight; that happened without a hiccup and a few hours later, at the crack of dawn, I arrived at Kemajoran.

Naturally the booking office was still closed, I paid the bedjak driver and made myself comfortable outside the front door till the flight counter opened.

Booking in only took a minute, the aeroplane itself was an old Dakota DC-3 freighter with benches on the sides for the passengers and cargo stacked and secured in the centre.

Passengers and cargo apparently had an equal status!

At some time later I learned that the early morning flight to Palembang was referred to as the "Palembang Milk Run".

Upon arrival in Palembang I found out that there was no one to collect me and transport me to Pladju. Needless to say that once again I had to arrange my own transport.

After a frustrating search I finally got through to someone in the Shell Marine Office in Pladju. It turned out that they did not know about my transfer and that they had never received word from Radio Holland in Tg. Priok about my arrival. I spoke to the Shell Marine Superintendent who was very apologetic and promised to send a car straight away and to make arrangements for me to stay in the Guest House in Pladju until the ship returned to Pladju.

No sooner said than done! The Marine Office in Pladju arranged transport, put me up in the Shell Guest House and when my ship, the SAIDJA, came in a few days later I went on board.

The Guest House in Pladju was luxurious compared to the Zeemanshuis in Tg. Priok and the swimming pool and bar were welcome diversions during the few days that I stayed there waiting for my ship.

I did not know what to expect because when I told people I met that I was waiting to join the SAIDJA they all grinned and said: "Ah, yes, you'll be playing in Bela Ola's Gypsy orchestra".
..... Bela Ola's orchestra ???

As it turned out the Chief RO was a Hungarian named Bela Ola with the same name as the leader of a very well known Gypsy orchestra in Holland at the time.

Bela came to work for Radio Holland at the start of WW II and had worked on Shell tankers ever since. Obviously he was well known to the Shell fraternity in Pladju and because he had two junior Radio Officers under him the trio got the name of "Bela Ola's Gypsy orchestra".

However, I never became a musician, when I joined the ship Bela had long since gone.



s.s. "Saidja"

In the nineteen-fifties era the Post, Telegraph and Telephone (PTT) infrastructure in Indonesia was anything but reliable. It could take up to three days for a telegram sent from Indonesia to reach Singapore and vice versa. For an organisation like Shell this had created a huge problem and was clearly not acceptable.

At the request of Shell Company to overcome the telecommunication problem it was decided to have three Radio Officers on board a ship that operated near Pladju and for that ship to relay all messages between the Pladju refinery and Shell HQ in Singapore via the ship's radio. Three RO's were to keep a 24 hour watch at sea and in port. As the SAIDJA already worked the Musi River she was selected as the relay ship and at times when the SAIDJA went into dry-dock her sister ship SAROENA would take over the tasks for that period.

From there onwards all telegraphic traffic between the Pladju refinery and Shell Headquarters in Singapore was sent from Pladju Radio – PKM via the SAIDJA to Singapore Radio - VPW and traffic from Shell Singapore through VPW via the SAIDJA to PKM and Shell Pladju.

Traffic was extremely busy during office working hours and contrary to normal procedures a 24 hour radio watch was kept in port.

I certainly earned my spurs on that ship, the operators on Pladju Radio – PKM were always in a hurry and they sent their long, coded and plain word messages of 200 words and more at a speed of at least 25 words per minute.

So that we did not have to retype the long text of received telegrams on official forms used for sending telegrams we had a roll of carbon copying paper with 3 copies. Long hand writing and copying of messages would have caused delays and therefore taking messages faultlessly direct on the typewriter was the order.

After receiving telegrams addressed to "Master Saidja" we would glue a carbon copy on the Send form and write on the first line of text "From Shell Pladju quote" or "From Shell Singapore quote" and address it to either Shell Singapore or Shell Pladju before re-sending it. We always had priority for our traffic over other ships with VPW - which by the way was a very busy coastal radio station - and we always got VPW's top guns to work with. In hindsight a wonderful experience, albeit difficult and tiring work at the time.

Both the SAIDJA and the SAROENA were of a very broad beam design for their tonnage and with a relatively shallow draft they were perfect for their special function on the Musi River. Large tankers with cargoes of crude oil from Miri in Brunei or the Persian Gulf bound for Pladju could not proceed up the river if they were fully laden and were dependent on the tide.

To solve this problem Shell had acquired a large pontoon, called Mulberry Pierhead, permanently anchored off Muntok. The large tankers and the SAIDJA would come

alongside the Pierhead and transfer part of their cargo into the SAIDJA. After the transfer was completed and depending on the tide both ships would then proceed upriver to the Shell refinery in Pladju to discharge their cargo.



Banka, Muntok (Mentok) & Pladju (Plaju)

Mulberry Pierhead was a relic left over from the Allied landings in Normandy, it had been purchased by Shell Company and towed from Normandy to the roads of Muntok opposite the Musi River estuary.

Mulberry Pierhead was manned by a Dutch Shell Chief Officer who was in charge and a number of Indonesian crew. His name was Kees Cupido, a cheerful Terschellinger who always had a smile and a friendly word for everyone. I always had to laugh when he introduced himself to the captains and officers of foreign tankers that came alongside. He would then say: "My name is Cupido – See You Pee Eye Dee Oh", which to Dutch ears sounds quite musical and catchy.

Quite often we would anchor outside or stay alongside the Pierhead waiting for the next tanker. For some unknown "atmospheric" reason there always were a lot thunderstorm activities on the Muntok Roads, thunder and lightning often made it rather frightening to be on watch in the radio station. Although we isolated the equipment and earthed the antennas sparks would still fly in all directions through the radio station. Even on calm days it was often impossible to receive because of atmospheric noise interference.



Saturday night Dance – Shell Soos Pladju

The captain always found a good reason to be in Pladju for the weekend, for us it was something to look forward to because every Saturday night there was a dance on in the Shell “Soos” (Members Club) with enough pretty nurses from the Shell hospital present to brighten the place up even further.

A Norwegian tanker, the BJÖRN STANGE, traded regularly between Miri and Pladju. The attraction of the BJÖRN STANGE was the female Radio Officer who always came on board for a talk when the two ships were alongside the Pierhead. She was a divinely beautiful Nordic and I was in love with her, the only trouble was she was happily married to the Second Mate of the BJÖRN STANGE !

We were allowed to buy “Tjap Kuntji” or “Bintang” beer through the Shell Company Cooperative Store at the ridiculously low price of 1 Rupiah per bottle. The beer was OK, it was brewed in a Heineken managed brewery so we did not complain. To top it all off, we could sell the empties to local traders in sampans on the river for 1 Rupiah per bottle. Sounds alright? Free drinks forever!.

After serving for a year on the SAIDJA and SAROENA I was relieved in Pladju and transferred to a Stanvac tanker waiting for me in Sungei Gerong at the Stanvac refinery right next door to Pladju.

For 2 more years I sailed on the STANVAC DJIRAK to ports in Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore, Thailand and French Indochina (now Vietnam) before I finally went back to Holland in 1955 - again on the ORANJE as 3rd RO - for a long, deservedly holiday.

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