...calling B-I

Issue no: 11 SEPTEMBER 2009

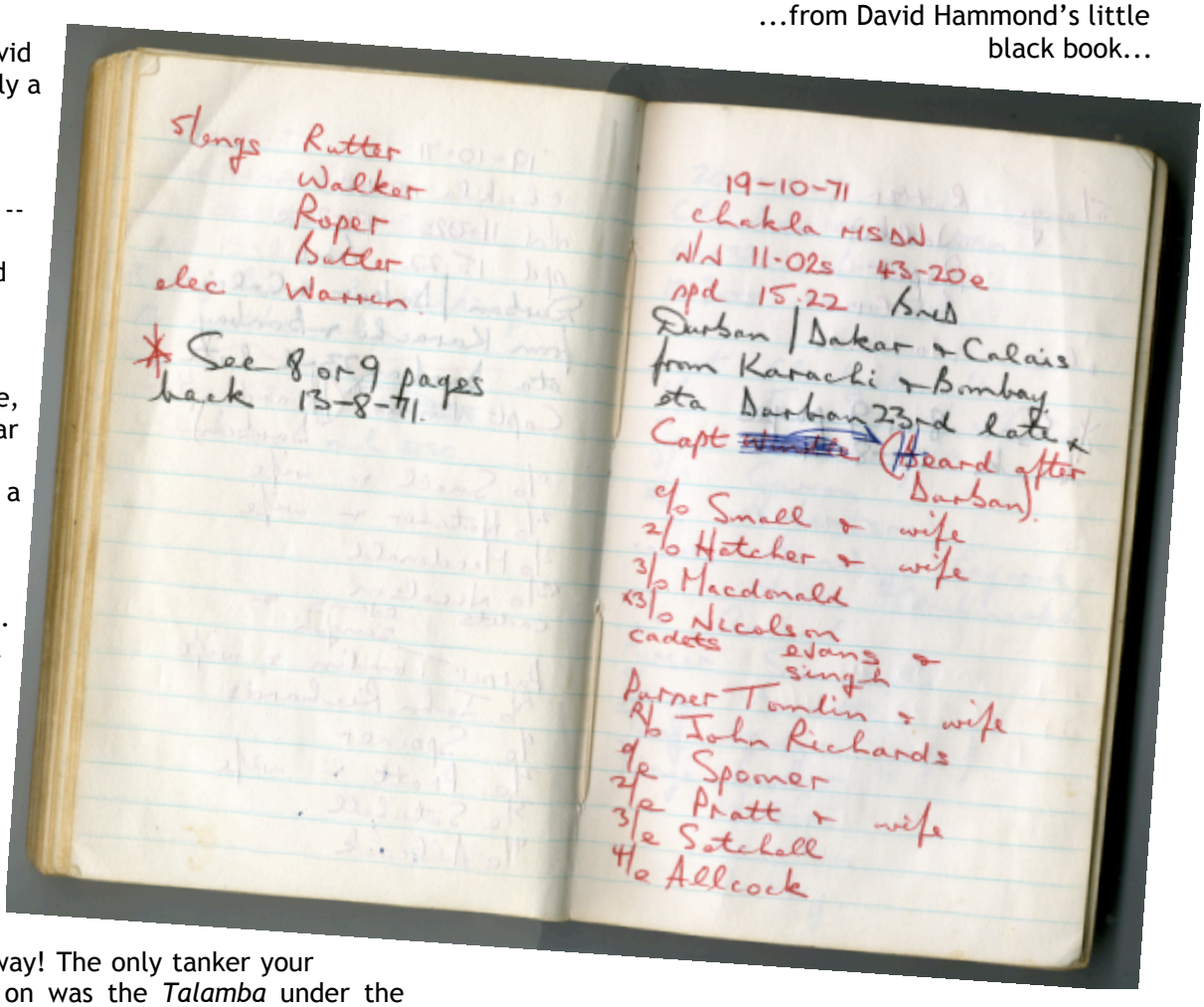
News of British India, its ships and staff, the history and 'histoires', of ships and sealing wax, nautical natters and a miscellany of maritime musings

available free of charge by application to callingBI@biship.com

FROM THE EDITOR

Your editor presents for your delectation a bumper issue this month. A whole seven pages, no less! He has many people to thank for this -- amongst them Tony Lister, Bill Ross, Rhod Mcneill, Chris Shelbourne and David Hammond. Certainly a span of history is contained here, ranging from the 1880s to yesterday -- that's the marine world encapsulated for you!

...from David Hammond's little black book...



We continue the story of Robert Lyle, in his own particular vernacular. He certainly describes a very different East African coast to that which your editor experienced. Can't imagine what Tom Kelso would have said to your editor if he got up to half the things that Robert Lyle claims to have! Third Mates under Tom in Mombasa didn't have much time to spare anyway! The only tanker your editor has served on was the *Talamba* under the Trident Tankers flag. He knew little of the predecessor carrying the name, so was fascinated to read the account of grounding in 1937. The nearest your editor came to experience such an event was in the old *Nowshera* in Genoa harbour. We'll look forward to the sequel next month.

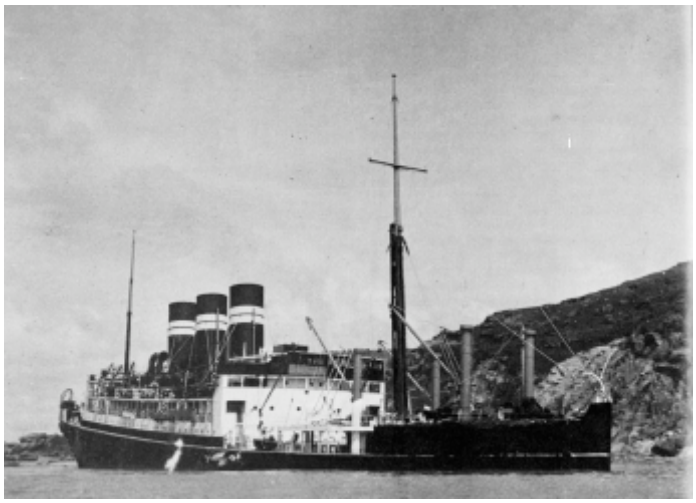
We bring you news of some social gatherings in the run-up to Christmas and we hope to have pictures and a report of the recent Engineers Association annual lunch in Glasgow for our next issue.

The "... calling BI" office walls are slowly being denuded of suitable photographs to use in these pages. Please send in some more! Your editor will be forced to produce some more of his holiday snaps, if you don't!

Later in this issue...

FROM THE BI NEWS...

Towards the end of August 1937, the *Talamba* was chartered by the Chinese Government to carry a full cargo of rice to Hong Kong for use of the Chinese Army (then fighting against the Japanese) and what a disastrous charter it proved to be.



Captain 'Bob' Sinclair was in command, I was Chief Officer. On arrival in Hong Kong, discharge took place in the 'stream' and on September 3rd, with still about 1800 tons of rice to discharge, instructions were received to go alongside and fill up with bunker oil. Whilst alongside signals were hoisted informing the port a typhoon had formed and all normal precautions were to be taken - in our case to proceed to an anchorage in Junk Bay. Unfortunately, our radio officer was ashore when we left for the anchorage and owing to weather conditions did not re-join us until after the storm. We were unable to see the shore signals after anchorage and so had no information of the intensity or whereabouts of the storm. Bob Sinclair told me long afterwards, had he known the intensity and closeness of it he would not have anchored but proceeded to sea. We were in good company at anchor, including the German *Scharnhorst*, *Rawalpindi*, *Asama Maru* and *Conte Verde*. It was dark when we were in our position in Junk Bay with both anchors down and a long length of cable.

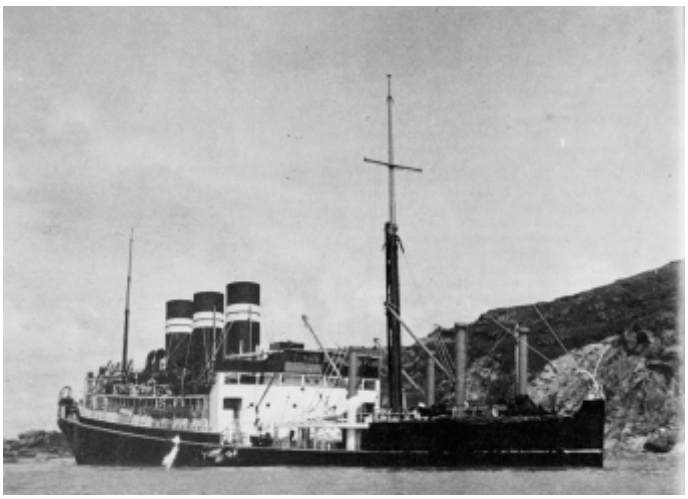
About 8 pm, it really started to blow. I went to Stations with the Carpenter, Serang and the odd Lascar or two, mainly to watch the cables to see if she dragged, as all shore lights were blotted out by torrential rain. To prevent myself from being blown overboard, I lay flat on the deck, head and shoulders through the lower rail and 'John' lying across my legs. It blew and it blew, I didn't know that wind could reach such a force. I was to learn it could blow harder.

About midnight the wind completely dropped, a dead calm, oh the relief of it - until I realised the significance of it. We were in the centre of a revolving storm - the wrong semicircle and no running away from this one. Then the nightmare of rain and wind started all over again; the only difference it was twice as bad.

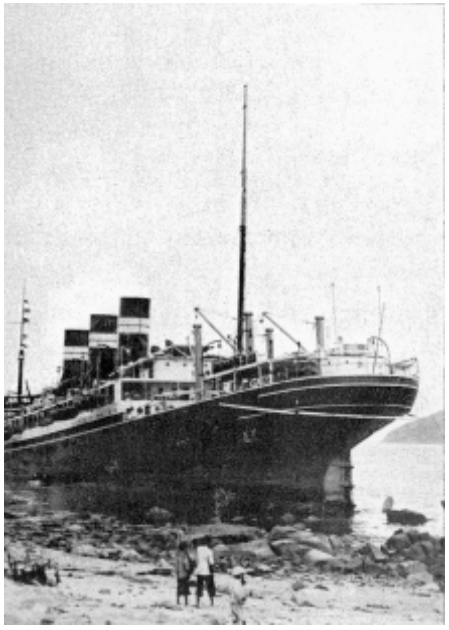
However, we were holding nicely but then out of the gloom, we saw what seemed to be a small town bearing down on us. We were off that foc's'le head in nothing flat and within seconds we heard and felt a terrible crash. We knew later of course it was the *Asama Maru* of 17,000 tons that had broken adrift and crashed down on us. She hit us on our starboard bow, passed down to No. 1 hatch, and then we drifted apart. As she cleared us, I went back to see the damage and soon realised that both cables had parted and we were adrift. I went to the bridge to report (our telephone was probably on the *Asama Maru*) and found they were having a very rough time indeed. The bridge was just a shambles, starboard wing blown away, all windows blown out. I was instructed to go below and see if any other damage had been done by the *Asama Maru* other than on the foc's'le head. I had not been down below very long when there was a terrific crash and shudder and water came pouring down companion-ways. I raced back on deck to find what seemed like Everest just about to topple onto us.

We had hit the beach on the port side, being swung round and driven astern high and dry by the force of the wind. The engine room was flooded within minutes of grounding

and emergency lighting switched on, although this soon failed owing to damage. All hands were mustered, and all found to be correct. Captain Sinclair had now come down from the bridge, and in spite of the situation, I couldn't help smiling, the wind had blown away his cap, leaving only the sweat-band, and he still thought his cap was on. I didn't realise I must have looked even funnier; my trousers from the knees downwards had been blown away. After swinging out the remaining boats that were undamaged, in readiness for a quick getaway, there was nothing to do but await the dawn.



When dawn came - what a mess. The damage done by the force of the wind was incredible. Boats lifted out of their chocks, rafts blown round like leaves (one was wrapped round the foremast), and the foredeck under water up to the height of the saloon deck. The ship was upright, but the bows were underwater and her stern high and dry ashore. One thing we did not know then was that we were lying on a very narrow ledge and we could easily have slipped off into deep water and become a total loss. The weather was still very wild at daybreak with a swirling sea between us and the cliffs, no means of communication, wireless or visual. I think we all felt very forlorn, just rugged cliffs and a wild sea to contemplate, but very soon we saw soldiers scrambling down the cliffs. They were from the garrison. One of them very gallantly swam over to us and he was given all particulars to pass to the Agents. Later we had the pleasure of attending the presentation of a gift from the Company to this very courageous soldier. It was not very long before contact was made with us and we learnt what a disastrous storm it really had been. Thirty-two ships were driven ashore that night, including *Asama Maru* and *Conte Verde*. The damage ashore was terrific and loss of life considerable. The anemometer at the University broke down when showing 150 mph. At the height of the storm the barometer fell sharply by one inch.



Russian and Chinese divers brought down from Shanghai surveyed all under water damage. Captain McKerrell, the company's Marine Superintendent, had flown in from Calcutta and the Dockyard was given the go-ahead to try and salvage the ship. The first thing to be done was to discharge the remaining cargo to allow damage to be sighted and closed up as necessary and, of course, to lighten the ship. This was a long and arduous business as the most holds, apart from the after one, were under water. It had to be handled by divers. It wasn't very long after starting to discharge that we were up against a dangerous hazard - one that was to be with us until we docked. Sulphuretted hydrogen was being generated by the rotting rice.

On board it was incredible to see what they had done in darkness under water. One of the most remarkable feats performed by this very fine team of men was to go down the engine room, which was completely flooded (cylinder tops being covered) to see if the submersible pump was workable. The man responsible was the senior Russian diver. To go down an engine room filled with oil and water in pitch darkness (never having seen the engine room before) to find one small section and see if one piece of machinery could work, was just

(The final part of this epic story of resilience will be in the next issue of "...calling BI")

FROM THE TAKING ACTION CREW...

We continue the story of BI engineer Robert Lyle, who has been diverted to work in East Africa.

Having said goodbye to our many friends, for friendships are easily made and as easily forgotten on board ship, we left the 'Ghurka' and went on board the 'Baghdad', a small steamer famous for nothing so much as bilgewater, cockroaches and rats. Nothing of special interest occurred until we reached Kismai, a port some 200 miles north of Mombasa.

At this time, the Sultan of the province was in somewhat strained relations with the British government. As we were not aware of this, four of us resolved to go on shore at Kismai and explore the place, with the result that we got into trouble. It was a blazing hot morning and all four were in high good humour and up for anything in the shape of fun.

On landing and proceeding to anchor our boat against the pier-head, we were immediately set on by three native police who, seeing we were British, evidently wanted to show their authority. Their appearance to us was irresistible, as we had not been accustomed to see policemen at home clad in nothing but tall hats and umbrellas. We greeted their interference, pointing at us and gesticulating, (of course they could not speak one word of English) with roars of laughter and as the morning was hot we decided to give them a good ducking.

Accordingly we threw the whole three over the pier-head into the water and were making all speed to gain our boat and be off when we found ourselves surrounded by crowds of yelling natives. The town garrison was called out and we were hustled through the crowd and promptly put in the lock up. To be sure, the room we found ourselves in was only guarded by four bamboo walls and we could easily, by giving a good shove, have knocked the whole thing over. But we didn't relish the thought of another promenade through the town unprotected, followed by a crowd of howling niggers, most of whom carry knives and know how to use them too, so we put on an air of great dignity and demanded to be had up before the Sultan himself. After a lot of palaver we at last got them to bring us to the Sultan's palace.

This was a substantial stone and mud building looking very imposing in comparison with the mud huts which form the ordinary habitation of the natives of Kismai. When we got inside we found the smell of burnt oil and beans very offensive, but after waiting a while we were at length ushered into the august presence of the Sultan himself. He was a very fat old Arab with hoary head, who squatted on the floor of his palace on a deer-skin rug and could not speak a word of English to save his life. I must say he was well-clad in flowing white robes, but his attendants who flocked around him, evidently struck dumb with wonder at our unusual appearance, were superior to the trammels of clothing of any sort, the only article of attire, it if could be called one, being a huge umbrella which each man held by like grim death.

The Sultan received us with very sullen looks but after salaaming a number of times and trying to look mild and respectful to his dignity, we at length succeeded, mostly by pointing, to get him to know that all we wanted was to see the British Consul.

It was a good while before he consented to send for this gentleman; meanwhile we squatted on the floor, and waited through the heat of the day, with what patience we could command, submitting to be gazed out of countenance by the Sultan's servants. Very different from the jolly day we had expected to spend on shore! It was not until six o'clock in the evening that the British Consul (I forget his name), hearing of our plight, sent word of it to the Captain of HMS 'Swallow', a gun boat which was lying just outside the harbour. The Captain immediately sent a boat's crew of sailors on shore to our relief and the moment the old wretch of a Sultan heard of their arrival he dismissed us with the request that we would make ourselves scarce in that port in future.

We regained our small boat, were cautioned by the Consul and beat rather an ignominious retreat back to the steamer. But when we told our story we were greeted with such roars of laughter that we became heroes of the hour and wound up what might have been a day of disaster with a real good jollification. Next morning we went on to Mombasa, our spirits of adventure being considerably cooled.

A word of explanation is here necessary, that it may be understood what sort of place Mombasa was in the eighties when I was there for the first time, and also what business we had to be there at all.

Mombasa consisted, when we first made its acquaintance, of three dilapidated houses out-flanked by rows of native mud huts. No government buildings, no municipalities, no schools, no anything, except the absence of all sanitary arrangements, which was the most striking feature of the place - at least it struck our noses with unpleasant persistence the first moment we set foot on shore. It stands on a coral island about three miles long and has without doubt all the qualifications of a very fine sea port. Here no horses or large animals can live, owing to the venomous fly peculiar to this district.

Like many other places now under British control, Mombasa was in former days one of the strongholds of the Portuguese, who by the way, I often wonder how they can be so friendly to our country if they ever look over their history and take a survey of how many places of their ancient glory have been quietly annexed by John Bull! The grandeur of the Portuguese is still to be seen in one or two fine old forts that surround the town, which in ancient times must have been impregnable. One, in particular, has been captured and re-captured again and again; built so long ago as 1594, taken by us in 1698, then restored, held till 1703, and finally yielded up by the native chief and put under British protection in 1823. After a time it was again abandoned by the British as being of no use and seized upon by the Sultan of

Zanzibar, who had now just ceded it back provisionally to the British East Africa Company.
Two years later, this company was made sole master of the place, together with a vast tract of land extending from the Juba river to the Umba, inland as far as Victoria Nyasa and beyond the frontiers of the Congo Free State. Thus, without bloodshed, in the quietest manner possible, in fact, almost without the knowledge of the average Britisher at home, did a trading company of Scotsmen gain possession for our government of a tract of country six times the size of Great Britain and Ireland put together - in all an area of 7,000 square miles. A country, beautiful, well watered and fertile, rich in mango groves and orange trees, yielding in abundance gold, copper, plumbago, iron ore, India-rubber, etc., and presenting opportunities for the erection of a harbour, the largest and safest in the East African coast.
Two years later when I again visited Mombasa, I was struck by the great advantages of British rule and industry in the place. We ourselves had laid the first rails for the line to connect it with Victoria Nyasa and it is now connected by telegraph with Zanzibar. Vast buildings had sprung up, government schools, churches, (unfortunately grog shops as well); in short, civilization had established itself, as is always the case where John Bull gets a chance of firmly planting his feet and Mombasa, with the surrounding district, is now one of our most lucrative and important possessions in East Africa.
To return to our particular voyage, after spending considerable time at Mombasa we were ordered to go down to Zanzibar in order to buy as many coolies as could be get together for an expedition to Uganda, to survey the country for a railway.


Tipoo Tib

Zanzibar is at the present day the largest town and trading port in the east coast of Africa and the station of the British India Company. Like Mombasa, it is built on a coral island which, with numerous other islands, studded along the coast line, was in 1890 formed into a British protectorate. The strip of mainland to the south of Zanzibar from the Umba River is administered by the German East African Company, while Britain administers the northern strip as far as the Juba River, as well as all the adjacent islands. Of a population of 125,000, nearly 100,000 are in the town itself. They are mostly Negroes, but the governing classes are Arabs and many foreign traders are settled there. The religion is Mohammedanism but a number of Christian missions are now established. As for the present Sultan, his power is reduced to nothing more than a name. The British allow him three lakhs of rupees for his private purse; the rest of the state income, chiefly derived from customs and dues taken off the ivory which passes through Zanzibar, is applied for police, maintenance, public works and the like. On arriving at this town, I had an interview with the famous Tipoo Tib, the great Arab slave agent, with whom I traded for 200 coolies. I may observe that he did me out of half of them, but their price was a small one.

After arranging for the transmission of the coolies, we spent a very pleasant week in Zanzibar. The Sultan was most friendly, the weather lovely, the shooting plentiful. The royal stables were placed at our disposal and we had unlimited use of the fleet-footed ponies of the country, and spent some delightful days riding among the clove and mango fields and making up shooting parties for the slaughter of snipe, teal and wild duck - familiar game that made us feel quite at home. We also had an invitation to the station of the London Missionary Society, where we were well received and entertained to tea and cake, making us feel as if we were once more in the regions of civilization.
Our business finished in Zanzibar, we returned to Mombasa, from there to start on our inland expedition. It was a beautiful tropical morning when we started inland on foot, and carrying all necessary provisions with us. In addition to what we should require on the way, we carried our tents and all the complicated tools and implements necessary to construct a wooden bridge, which we were to build across the Umba river in preparation for the railway to be constructed to Uganda.
There were seven of us Britishers, with Colonel Millar at the head; McKenzie, the Government Surveyor; Muir, a Glasgow man; Dr. Charters from Edinburgh, Neil and myself, engineers, and about 150 coolies. Each man carried about 28lbs. weight. Attired all in white with the largest topees to be got, on our heads, we made a start by crossing to the mainland and getting our last 'goodbyes' and 'good lucks' from the Church Missionary Society, whose faces were the last friendly ones we were to see for many a day.

The final instalment of this gripping tale will appear in our next issue of "...calling BI"

FROM THE "WHERE ARE WE NOW?" DEPT...

Our "where are we now?" photograph from the last issue of "... calling BI" attracted some wild and woolly guesses, but fortunately, Bill Ross in Victoria, Australia recognised it as Change Alley in Singapore and sent in this photograph of the "new" Change Alley. Somehow, your editor feels some of the magic of the mystic East has been lost a little!

Many thanks to Chris Shelbourn for this month's "where are we now?" picture. It shows the redoubtable crew of the Merkara in 1971 enjoying themselves at a well-known European drinking establishment. Obviously Chris enjoyed himself that night because he cannot remember many of his fellow shipmates in the photograph -- can anybody help us out with the location and any names?

FROM THE FREEZER FLAT...

It is regrettable to report that, in his time, your editor has been admonished by some Chief Engineers for leaving freezer cargo compartment doors open too long. Quite rightly. Especially when loading soft fruits and the like. He understood about raising temperatures, but didn't really think about mould spores entering the compartment. Now help is at hand for the likes of him, according to a new press release.

Purfresh, a provider of clean technologies that purify, protect and preserve food and water, has unveiled a solution that it says makes ocean transit a more viable option than air freight for highly sensitive produce shipped worldwide.

Purfresh Transport, based in Fremont, California, provides 'ripening control' with 100 per cent residue-free decay prevention. The key is in deploying 'ozone molecules' that kill mould, yeasts and bacteria without affecting the natural characteristics of the produce, explained a company statement.

The company claimed studies and trial results on mangoes, papayas, ginger and cherries "show significant decreases in mould and decay and an overall increase in quality, including fruit pressure, weight and sugar content."

The company says it monitors and manages the environment inside a refrigerated container throughout long ocean voyages to enable fruit and vegetables to arrive fresh at the destination.

"Shippers used to have to rely on costly high-speed liners and air transport to maintain freshness over long distances. Now, they can avoid rigid delivery timelines and expensive transport while ensuring safety and quality," explained Purfresh's CEO, Mr David Cope.

Your editor wouldn't recognise an ozone molecule if it hit him, but anything that stops a Chief Engineer shouting at him must be a good thing.

FROM THE AUCTION ROOMS...

Sold recently on eBay...
for just £1!

So that's all
memories are worth,
is it? Ah well...!

FROM THE SOCIAL PAGES...

Another call from the North Essex/South Suffolk's BI staffers to join them at the Thatcher's public house in Mount Bures on 27th November. Details from John Prescott.

Early reports from the Engineers Association annual lunch indicated that a good time was had by all -- as usual. We await photographs.

An early diary marking notice has been sent out for the next UK based reunion, which will be held in Newcastle on the weekend beginning 8th October 2010. Details will be posted on the BI staff website, but if you require direct notification, please e-mail Sue Spence with your details.

We are sure that with the usual end-of-year jollifications in prospect, there will be other meetings of like-minded BI folk around the world. Your editor will be pleased to publicise these for the enjoyment of all. Just e-mail him at "... calling BI" by clicking on any of the fleet calling sign logos in this newsletter.

FROM THE NEWSPAPER ARCHIVES...

This picture of Uganda was published in the Newcastle Evening Chronicle in January 2008, and was taken by a reader, Mr E Storey, on her return to the Tyne in 1983, after her service in the Falkland Islands campaign.

FROM THE SHIP'S LIBRARY...

In these politically correct times your editor is not normally given to posting pictures of scantily clad young ladies (indeed, Mrs Editor would have things to say about that!), but he couldn't resist this latest haul from the second-hand books store. But how can you justify this, I hear you ask? That, dear reader, is the subject of this month's competition. Just what is the connection between this racy-looking book and our august shipping company? To qualify for the usual glittering array of prizes, send your answers to "... calling BI". Many thanks to Tony Lister for this lead.

Don't forget that promise you made to yourself "...must send in that story and photograph to "...calling BI"! Do it now..! See you soon!