

News of the BSN company, its ships and staff, its history and *histoires*, of ships and sealing wax, nautical natters, maritime miscellanies and swinging of lanterns

## FROM THE EDITOR...

Welcome dear reader to the issue of endings. We finish the sad story of the grounding of the Talamba in 1937 in Hong Kong harbour, so kindly sent in to us by Rhod McNeill. We also finish the long-running story of BI engineer Robert Lyle in the 1890s, who left Scotland to join a ship and then ended up buying slaves.

Saddest ending of all comes from the reported death of Capt Eric Plowman, with whom your editor had sailed on the *Uganda* in her educational cruising role. Many memories of this respected Captain have been posted on the BI staff website ([www.BIship.com](http://www.BIship.com) and click on the "BI staff group log in" button). Your editor's favourite memory revolves around Eric Plowman's love of a good gamble. We were in the Madeira casino one night, and Eric was down to his last 100 escudos or whatever. In a cavalier manner, he slapped his chip on the double zero and went to get his coat to return to the ship. He was gently tapped on his shoulder and presented with an enormous amount of chips -- his 00 had come up! So he cheerily lined up at the *caixe* to transform this into real money, when yet again he was tapped on the shoulder. Without realising it, Eric has left his chip on the 00 and it came up again. I believe he had the good grace to pay for the taxi back to the ship. Goodbye, Eric, it was a pleasure!

One of Eric Plowman's dictats was that his desk officers should maintain an excellent weather reporting log. He would therefore have enjoyed this story emanating from the UK Met Office and the University of Sunderland that they are to 'digitise' nearly 300 Royal Navy captains' log books from

voyages dating back to the 1760s. The weather details recorded in the logbooks are proving to be a vital tool for modern day climate researchers who are using them to build up a picture of weather patterns in the world at the beginning of the industrial era. The researchers are cross referencing the data with historical records for crop failures, droughts and storms and will compare it with data for the modern era in order to predict similar events in the future. The logbooks include the voyages of Charles Darwin on HMS Beagle, Captain Cook's log from HMS Discovery and Capt Bligh's journal from the Bounty. What wouldn't Eric have given to join such an illustrious crowd!

If all this research could have helped your editor on his recent trip to his favourite get-away-from-it-all spot in UK, the Lake District (where the rain was horizontal at times), he would have much appreciated it. It's taken him some time to dry out, and so delayed this edition of "... calling BI". Many thanks as always to the contributors to this latest

issue . We carry with delight photographs from the recent Engineers lunch in Glasgow, although space limitations (and the courts) do not permit publication of the *really* good ones! Thanks to James Slater for these and for organising what appears to be a good BI bash! Your editor's social diary now turns to his own local hostelry in darkest deep Essex, which is shortly to host (on 27 November) a small gathering of BI staffers, in what may turn out to be a dry run(?) for Christmas! Hardly! Hopefully we'll get another issue out before then!

Have a good time and a good read!



Did you buy any of these Dubai commemorative stamps when they were issued? Your Editor was tempted, sure that they would represent an investment, but an impending bar bill prevented him. They feature Bombala, Chandpara, Sirdhana and the older Bamora amongst other transport modes. He need not have worried - the flying boat stamp sold for \$10 recently and a dealer is offering \$6 for a set of four. Nostalgia has little value these days!

## FROM THE BI NEWS...

*In issue 11, we left the Talamba aground and flooded in Hong Kong after a hurricane, with divers engaged to pump out the flooded holds, with poisonous gases being given off by the rotting rice cargo. The story of the salvage continues...*

Until the cargo was out, nothing could be done to install the pumps. Gas was our bugbear. By cutting holes in sections of tween-decks, it was found the rice was banked up in the wings and much of it could be discharged by ordinary labour - but what a to-do that was! Several of the men engaged in this work collapsed and were brought out - our first indication of the gas. We - the ship's officers - were the guinea pigs, time after time going down in smoke helmets with the 'good old moorghie' to prove everything was OK. I must tell of one personal experience: I had gone down with the chicken as usual, holding it over the bags in various places with negative results; Up I came - "there you are John, everything fine" - to the foreman. Oh no, that wouldn't do him. He insisted I went down again and move some of the bags before 'applying' the chicken. Down I went with ropes and hooks, fixed in the hooks with them doing the 'pulley handing' from topsides, put my chicken in the first spot where bags had been moved; the chicken dropped dead. Up I shot to be met with a look from John Chinaman that I can see even now -- "You think my men bloody fools". Even the fully clad divers were being brought up unconscious; it was found the contaminated air was being pumped into them.

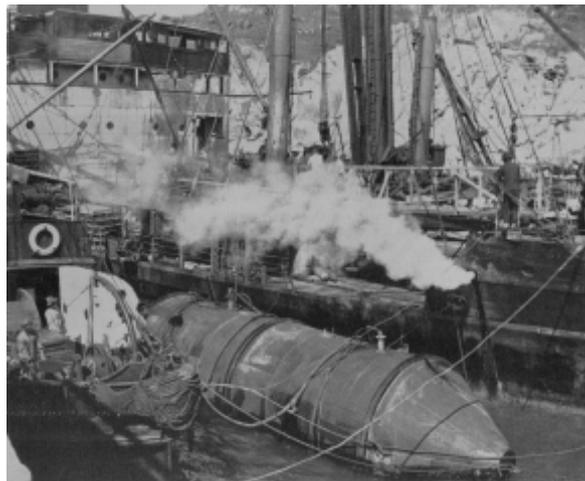
One day Captain Sinclair and Fourth Officer Harris heard calls for help - two mechanics had collapsed in a confined space. Both of them went down immediately, Captain Sinclair burning himself badly on a steam pipe in doing so. The two men were brought out, sent to hospital but never recovered consciousness. Captain Sinclair was also detained. I do not think he ever fully recovered from this experience. He and Harris received Royal Humane Society commendations. After the death of

these two men, we were visited by the Port Health Officer, who brought with him the Public Analyst. After an inspection by them, I was given a packet of small papers, similar to Litmus papers, almost white, and explicit instructions that before men were allowed to work in any confined space one of these papers was to be thrown in and if it began to turn brown it was too dangerous to enter. I put this packet in the safe in my cabin, which was on the Boat Deck. Next morning, before work was started, I carefully opened the sealed packet, took out several papers, put them on the top of the safe whilst re-sealing the packet and replacing it in the safe. When I picked up the papers they were nearly black! The work went on.



Apart from the tragic deaths, the greatest problem to overcome in the salvage operations was the gas. Conditions on board from it became so grim that Capt. McKerrell gave instructions that officers were to do 48 hours on board and 48 hours ashore. The gas caused all paintwork to go and all shipping to give us as wide a berth as possible. A polecat had nothing on us!

It was impossible to discharge all the rice whilst on the rocks and so the gas remained with us until docking. The basic object was to keep the water in all holds under control as the vessel was



The starboard 'Camel' buoyancy cylinder

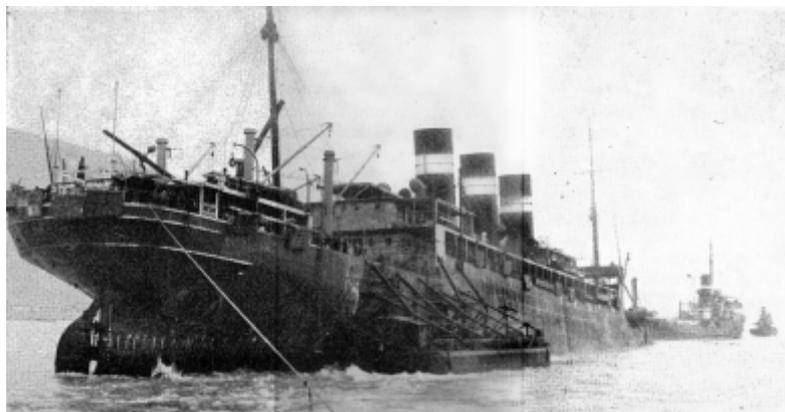
towed to the dock. This was to be done by pumps (over 50 were used), and in No. 2 and 3 holds by air pressure. These holds were sealed by heavy plates held in position by girders. The divers were fully employed in sealing as much hull damage as possible. But there were other important 'sidelines' to salvaging the ship. One was to raise the bow up as the attempt was made to float her; this was to be done by the air of two 'Camels' - two very large cylinders capable of being filled with water, and then pumped out. They were secured by heavy chains as far down as possible, filled with water, and then to be pumped out when necessary to give added buoyancy. Another important matter that had to be kept in mind was the possibility the vessel capsize when water borne. One precaution was to have a large 'sealed' lighter to give the necessary support alongside on the starboard side just about abreast of the after end of the saloon deck and No 4 hatch. Very complicated calculations were performed by Dockyard staff to find out the angle at which the 'arms' from the ship were to be welded on the ship's side in order to rest on the lighter as the vessel was floated.

As there was no power of any description available on board for working the pumps, the *Henry Keswick*, then one of the largest tugs in the world, was chosen for this essential work. Through a specially invented universal joint, she was to be attached to the bow through which air, steam, water and electricity could be supplied. She was to do no towing but



be towed by the ship. All superfluous top weight, including boat davits, was removed from *Talamba*.

Second Officer Williams had the ticklish job of charting the course to be taken from Lye Mun to the dock, allowing for a draught of 50 feet, yet not being too far from shoal water in case it was necessary to beach the vessel in case of an emergency - and that emergency did arise. November 21st 1937 proved to be the great day. Pumps were set going. Camels pumped out and slowly the vessel was moved forward until she was actually afloat. She was held in that position for quite a considerable time, to see if she was stable and that the pumps were capable of containing the water. Slowly, oh so terribly slowly, we made the trek up the harbour. As we approached the dock it was found that the draught was more than could be handled there. Although the pumps were working to full capacity, it was obvious the incoming water was winning and so it was decided the vessel be grounded on a



sandbank to see if more of the damaged hull could be patched up. As she grounded, she listed badly to starboard, the sealed lighter being forced under water. By now it was dusk and orders were given to abandon ship. It was a terrible blow after all the hard work that had been put in to see it all being lost. By the time we were landed it was dark.

At daylight we were all down at the dock and there we could see the *Talamba*. Although listing badly, the position was no worse than when we had abandoned her. The hull was thoroughly examined and was now more easily accessible to the divers, and a split of over one hundred feet was discovered. Work on this was immediately started and other jobs were put in hand. In particular the bulkhead between nos. 1 and 2 was bulging ominously. The bulkhead was split more or less right across at about shelter deck level and quite an amount of water poured through into No. 1. The pump working in No. 1 was just about

containing the water in that hold. The bulkhead was shored up and the large wooden beam used for this was also used by the gang of divers from Shanghai as a platform for caulking the split. They were not working as divers this time but as ordinary skilled workers - they were not wearing any diving gear at all. One morning we heard shouts coming up from No. 1 hold where we saw four of the Chinese divers floundering in the water. We quickly realised they had been overcome by gas and had fallen from the beam into the water in the lower hold, and our only hope of saving them was to get a fully rigged diver down to them.

This was very speedily done but it was dreadful just watching them struggling. The four men were brought up on trays followed by the diver now in a state of collapse - gas laden air having been pumped into him. Prompt medical attention was given but the four men were beyond aid. As the caulking progressed so the inflow of water was reduced and the pump -

which was working continuously - was beating the water and lowering the level in the hold, exposing the rotten rice and our old enemy, the gas, rose, overpowered the men on the beam and they fell. The verdict at the inquest was death by gas and not by

drowning. It was all so very sad.

We were on the sandbank for about a fortnight before finally docking. One other hazard had to be faced before she was finally safe. This was the change over from the tug *Henry Keswick* supplying all necessary power to the shore establishment, a very tricky and anxious time. The vessel entered stern first, the change over accomplished and so completed docking. What a relief when she was finally secured after such a long, trying but exceedingly wonderful salvage operation by Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Company. It was just dark as we finished and so time for all who had taken part in the operation for the odd drink to celebrate.

Next morning it was back to work again. What a sight was the underpart of the hull. It was inconceivable that the vessel could have floated and made that journey up the harbour. Another sight not for sore eyes was the smashed rudder and propellers. It was weeks and weeks of major repairs, things not always going to plan, then suddenly she was a ship again and after trials we sailed from Hong Kong on March 17th 1938 for Calcutta after five and a half months of hard work.

As she lay in Calcutta she looked fine, painted throughout and from truck to keel. Our first trip after the disaster was to Rangoon with a cargo of COAL!



## FROM THE ENGINE ROOM...

On 17<sup>th</sup> September this year sixty members of the BI Engineer Officers Association attended the annual reunion luncheon at the Ramada Hotel in Glasgow.

Proceedings were opened by our chairman, Ken Paul, when he welcomed everybody and in particular four new members who were attending for the first time. He then announced the names of those who had crossed over the bar in the last 12 months. Sadly there were eleven members who have made that final voyage.

The afternoon continued with a very fine lunch. This was followed by the treasurer's report from Alistair Wells, always short and to the point. James Slater then gave the secretary's report, read the various letters and salaams that he had received from shipmates round the world.

After lunch a number of our good ladies returned from whatever it is that ladies do while their husbands lunch and reminisce about old times. It has been noted that their presence keeps the bar bill down to more manageable proportions.

By about 5pm we have to vacate the function room and repair to the main bar to continue 'pulling units', fixing boiler feed pumps, remembering runs ashore etc. etc. The drinking and talking invariably goes on well into the late evening.

We are always pleased to meet with any of our friends from the deck or purser side of operations and this year Tom Kelso dropped in to say hello before lunch.

Membership now stands at 274, in the preceding year 7 new members joined.



## FROM THE TAKING ACTION CREW...

*We conclude the story of BI Engineer Robert Lyle, who originally was travelling to Calcutta to join his ship at the end of 1888, but was re-directed to East Africa to attend to unspecified company business. Having bought 200 coolies from a slave trader, Robert has now set off for 'the interior'.*

That first day's march was a very trying one to us all. Our chief difficulty was to keep the coolies in order and making them march in some kind of line, also settling the squabbles always arising among them. The track was fairly good, but the sun was sweltering and it was with weary feet we encamped only 10 miles from the mission station after all our exertions. However, a good sleep set us all to right and the next morning we breakfasted on wild duck shot on the way yesterday, cocoa and biscuits, and were ready packed at 6:00 a.m. to put our coolies in line and start for the second day's march.

The second day was rather better than the first - by dint of determination and with tremendous exertions we encamped gratefully at sun down in a cool green glade surrounded by mangroves. Here, after tea, the remains of the wild duck and some biscuits, we took out our guns to cater for the next day's dinner. With so many natives to feed and our own enormous appetites, we required to be well provisioned. Happily we were all good shots and we never suffered from lack of stores or fresh meat during the whole time.

This particular evening we were lucky in capturing two boars. On bringing these back to camp, a jolly good supper was prepared after which, considering all things, we slept well. The worst feature of the nights out there was the mosquitoes that never ceased to buzz around and bite the whole night through. These gave us more exercise than we desired to keep them off and the language that was used would hardly be suitable for the ears of Church members. Add to this the noise of the coolies who

sat round their big camp fires and made nights hideous with their drums and tom-toms.

On the third day of our march we fell in with a slave caravan. This is a common occurrence to meet Arab traders with companies of men, women and children, bringing them to the coast to be sold as slaves. It is rather a mistaken kindness to do as Stanley sometimes did, that was, to rescue them from their owners and set them free, as they are often four or five hundred miles from their native villages with no prospect of getting back and they must either make their way to the coast themselves or die of starvation. We let them pass.

Continuing our march we came to the Masiah (Masai?) tribe, formerly very hostile to all whites, and at first we met with a very sullen reception, until we were taken before the chief. We looked through our stores to see what we could offer him and pleased him very well with a present of brass wire and some brooches and bangles. He presented rather a queer figure. His dress consisted of a tunic of dried grass, plenty of bangles on his arms and ankles, and a big handful of feathers on his head. He possessed about 40 wives, who all lived in his kraal with him. Bangles and umbrellas and about two yards of gaily coloured calico completed their rather fresh-air costumes; their beauty was little to our taste, with their hair thick with coconut oil, thick lips and of course negro features, and that vacant stare that denotes the want of intelligence of the race. Our camp was outside the village, and we occasionally ventured in to buy dried fish and mangoes in the bazaars. The morning we left, four or five dozens of them followed us, gaping, for miles on our way and so we said good bye to the Masiah tribe.

After a march of nine days we reached the Wamba river, a tributary of the Uмба. This was the end of our expedition and our orders were to build a wooden bridge of 100 feet long across this river. You may guess it was a troublesome operation with only coolies to do the work. First we had to cut down the trees, then prepare the wood, which was called iron or dead wood, and which we had great difficulty in getting to float. While engaged at this work an event occurred which saddened us all, and cast a gloom over our small company - no less than the loss of one of our seven. Dr. Charters was the photographer of our party, and had succeeded in getting some good photos of places and natives with his camera. I was in the habit of going with him on his special trips for taking photos. One morning, he got up early and departed himself to get some particular photos that he wanted, and he was never heard of again. Search parties were set on foot and we beat the jungle, but not a trace of the missing man did we ever find! We learned from the natives that lions were known to be in the vicinity and that he was devoured by a lion, was



the only explanation we could ever get at. It was with sad hearts that we gave up the quest for our lost friend and prepared to carry back our ill-news to the coast and then send it on to the agents in London. This is a common occurrence in the experience of parties like ours, and shows that exploring in Central Africa is not all beer and skittles!

Altogether we spent two months in building our bridge, of which we were very proud, and during that time we lived by our guns, with the addition of plenty of tinned provisions that we had brought with us. Our chief trouble was to keep the coolies in order, as they were lazy and unruly, and had a strong habit of sitting down to rest at the most important part of the work. Our object being accomplished, McKenzie, Neil and I retraced our steps to the coast with a bodyguard of 50 coolies, while the others awaited Sir Gerald Portal and his expedition, who had to pass that way on the road to Uganda.

On our backward march we took a northerly direction so as to avoid the Masiah tribe, as we had no wish to encounter them again in our reduced numbers, and we reached Mombasa without adventure. There we joined the 'Henry Wright', a small mission steamer which was put under my charge, for Zanzibar.

Arriving at Zanzibar we found the whole place en fete, as Stanley and his company had come in that morning from Cape Town and he was landing his coolies there after his great three year long expedition. Long lost fathers and sons were being received back again to the bosoms of their families. Here I made the interesting acquaintance of Mr. Stevens, the celebrated war correspondent of the 'New York World'. He is the author of that fine book 'Four Months Besieged' and his tragic death in Ladysmith is still fresh in the memory.

It was on board a British Gun Boat that I met him and although I only saw him once, he left a very marked impression on my mind. He had a kindly, but stern face, a man of iron will, overbearing in his manner, but impressing one with the inflexibility of his will and his great staying powers. In appearance, his hair was white, his keen grey eye deeply sunken, his mouth prominent, his figure commanding. He questioned me about the railway and said he hoped in two years' time that it would be extended to Uganda. This hope is now fulfilled. So much impressed was I with Stanley that I would gladly have joined an expedition under him, if he had gone out again. This did not come to pass, and I may say that during the remaining three years I spent in East Africa I was never again so far inland, so I can only boast about 300 miles of African exploration. Those three years I chiefly spent on the Zambezi River, a very monotonous run, with only the sight of an occasional hippo or the prospect, if we went to bathe, of being made the breakfast for a crocodile, to give a variety.

In setting down these few bald and incomplete notes of this part of my life, I am handicapped in two ways. First I kept no diary, and took no notes whatever of the events at the time, and as a considerable time has elapsed since then it is with difficulty I can remember anything but the merest outlines. Secondly I am not gifted with a fertile imagination, so I cannot embellish or adorn the narrative. I can only give my impressions of how we felt and what we saw. One merit I can safely claim for what I have written, that is, that it is fairly accurate, but I am sorry that my memory failed me to make it fuller. I must just ask the listeners to be very indulgent and to make allowances for the want of interesting matter and all the other imperfections. I may remark in closing that of those eight young men who left Glasgow that wild, winter night, there is not one left today but myself. Fever, misadventure and drowning have befallen the other seven. I give this as a note of warning to those of you who may be dissatisfied with your peaceful lives at home, and who may think that it is grand to go abroad and see the world. It is very nice no doubt to travel, but going out either to India or Africa, what with the climate, fever and accidents, is almost to take your life in your hand. The Poet says 'Home keeping hearts are happiest; to stay at home is best'. After all is said and done, there is no place like 'Home sweet Home'.

*Robert Lyle delivered this lecture to a church audience in Belfast at the beginning of the 20th century. Sadly, your editor can find no other details of this colourful BI engineer, either of his further career with BI, except that he contracted malaria and returned to live in Northern Ireland, dying there in 1921. Whether his account encouraged recruitment to BI's ranks is doubtful, but certainly we doubt whether his was the usual career path of young seafarers.*



## FROM THE SHIP'S LIBRARY...



It would seem that "... calling BI" readers as are an erudite lot, indeed almost of an intellectual bent, unlike your editor. He at least will own up to have read such trashy novellas as "For Your Eyes Only". Well it did pass the time during a long voyage in the Indian Ocean. How else to explain that not one reader managed to identify the connection between the book cover and your favourite shipping company, a question we posted our last issue. Or perhaps you are all too shy to admit that you did read James Bond books?

The answer to our original question is of course that James Bond was originally booked to travel from the Seychelles to Mombasa on the *Kampala*, as these two facsimile pages indicate. Just as well he didn't, because enough hijinks seem to have happened on that ship without his intervention!

someone to give an independent view. When Makarios was locked up there a few years ago there were quite a few Security scares. Japanese fishing-boats hanging about, one or two refugee crooks from England, strong ties with France. Just go and have a good look.' M glanced out of the window at the driving March sleet. 'Don't get sunstroke.'

Bond's report, which concluded that the only conceivable security hazard in the Seychelles lay in the beauty and ready availability of the Seychelloises, had been finished a week before and then he had nothing to do but wait for the ss *Kampala* to take him to Mombasa. He was thoroughly sick of the heat and the drooping palm trees and the plaintive cry of the terns and the interminable conversations about copra. The prospect of a change delighted him.

Bond was spending his last week in the Barbey house, and after calling there to pick up their bags, they drove out to the end of Long Pier and left the car in the Customs shed. The gleaming white yacht lay half a mile out in the roadstead. They took a pirogue with an outboard motor across the glassy bay and through the opening in the reef. The *Wavekrest* was not beautiful – the breadth of beam and cluttered superstructure stunted her lines – but Bond could see at once that she was a real ship, built to cruise the world and not just the Florida Keys. She seemed deserted, but as they came alongside two smart-looking sailors in white shorts and singlets appeared and stood by the ladder with boat-hooks ready

*The Hildebrand Rarity* / 189

off from Long Pier to meet them. Liz would already be buzzing with the chelles Club and then, through and staffs, into the town.

Liz Krest turned to him. 'I Will you help me through formalities and things?'

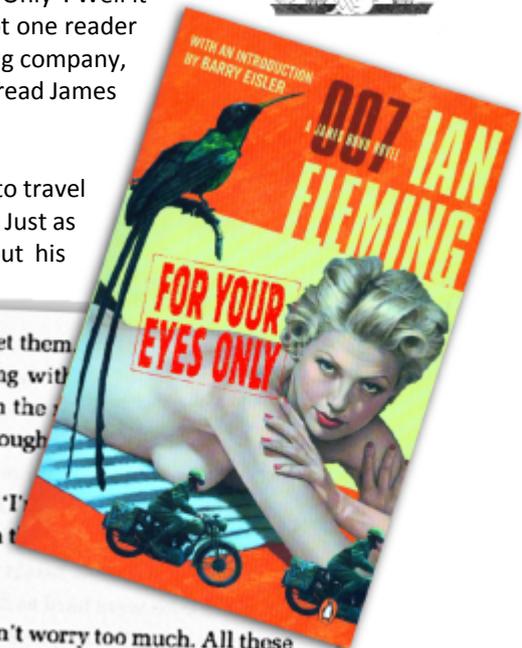
'Of course.'

Fidele Barbey said: 'Don't worry too much. All these people are my friends. And the Chief Justice is my uncle. We shall all have to make a statement. They'll probably have the inquest tomorrow. You'll be able to leave the day after.'

'You really think so?' A dew of sweat had sprung below her eyes. 'The trouble is, I don't really know where to leave for, or what to do next. I suppose,' she hesitated, not looking at Bond. 'I suppose, James, you wouldn't like to come on to Mombasa? I mean, you're going there, anyway, and I'd be able to get you there a day earlier than this ship of yours, this Camp something.'

'*Kampala*.' Bond lit a cigarette to cover his hesitation. Four days in a beautiful yacht with this girl! But the tail of that fish sticking out of the mouth! Had she done it? Or had Fidele, who would know that his uncles and cousins on Mahe would somehow see that he came to no harm? If only one of them would make a slip. Bond said easily: 'That's terribly nice of you, Liz. Of course I'd love to come.'

*The Hildebrand Rarity* / 231



## FROM THE FUTURE...

Your editor shouldn't laugh, but he does confess a small smile crossed his face when he watched the following clip.

<http://cyan.blogspot.com/2009/03/we-are-sinking-german-coast-guard.html>

He only trusts that it was sorted out in the end.

