



# A GLIMPSE OF MY FAVOURITE COMMAND

BY GEOFF WALKER (AUSTRALIA)

I have frequently been asked, what was my favorite command. Well to be honest there were several, but the one that immediately springs to mind, is the two years I spent on a container vessel, named **Kris Madura**, operating in the Far East.

Since my residential origins were in Asia, I had been recalled from semi-seagoing retirement for a two-year contract as the owners required an experienced Master, to which I had agreed, provided the vessel remained trading within Asia. I did not wish to go further afield because my wife, being Asian, was reluctant that I return to sea. Anyway, this was a workable compromise. She could sail with me from time to time, and I would never really be more than four hours flying time away from home.

fitted on board. This was because of the quick succession of ports, associated high workload of radio traffic and administrative duties, much of which was handled by the R/O on behalf of the Captain. A round trip took anything between 3-4 weeks, depending whether or not we were required to go further afield or include additional ports, all of which was based on cargo inducement.

She had been retrofitted as a fully cellular platform with a TEU capacity of 480 units. Containers could be stacked 4 high on deck, depending on their weights. The **Kris Madura** was an ideal ship for working the Far East feeder trades, especially due to her 5 hatches, and 2 x 36 tons SWL container cranes which made her fully self-sustaining at secondary ports. In fact, ship's cranes were used at most of the secondary ports of call in the Far East feeder service, in which we were engaged.

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This ship was considered quite a large container feeder for that period, during which many regional ports were still engaged in developing fully fledged container terminals. At this time many, so called, container

terminals were limited to open wharfs with good sealed lay down areas, on which loaded and empty containers were stacked. Much of the consolidation and deconsolidation was done in adjoining warehouses, other than at major "hub" ports, such as Port Klang, Singapore, Pasir Gudang. There were very few weighbridges whereby accurate container weights, could be ascertained, so at many of the secondary ports TEU's were categorized as "heavy", "medium" and "light", purely calculated or as a best guess, on weights of cargo loaded within. As a rule of thumb, heavy meant 12-18 tones, medium 6-12 tones, and light under 6 tones. It was not a very satisfactory system, but the best available at the time.

The liner service, included Port Klang, Singapore, Pasir Gudang, Maura, Labuan, Kota Kinabalu



**KRIS MADURA** AT PASIR GUDANG (MALAYSIA), SITUATED IN THE JOHORE STRAIT, WITH SINGAPORE ON THE OTHER SIDE.

I had been seconded as Master of this relatively modern container ship, operating a regular regional container feeder service; Japanese built, meant the ship was somewhat spartan in terms of crew comfort and amenities (no bar, and limited public rooms), but she never let me down and performed very well during my tenure on board. The vessel was operated by Singapore interests, and she was like a yacht, gross tonnage: 6100, DEADWEIGHT: 8530, LOA: 114m, BHP: 6000, fitted with a powerful bow thruster, 16.5 knots, but when I was on her we maintained an economic service speed of about 14 knots. We carried a crew of 18 plus a Radio Officer, even though we had an early version of GMDSS



THE OPERATING AREA OF **KRIS MADURA**.



(KK), Sandakan and Tawau (with occasional calls at ports further afield subject to cargo inducement). It was idyllic, as far as I was concerned. However, it was hard work at times with long hours because port time was limited to just hours in some ports. The Master was up and about constantly and experienced long periods on the bridge, especially when transiting the Singapore Straits and similar areas which called for precise navigation in regions of dense traffic. Raw GPS was not sufficiently accurate for use transiting the traffic lanes of the Singapore Straits, unless differentials were available for the ship's GPS system. This was mainly due to the extremely narrow separation lanes in certain sections of the VTSS, and precise reporting requirements. No two transits of the Straits were ever the same, so serious vigilance was required.

Nevertheless, I soon discovered we spent little time in port except at Tawau, Sandakan, Kota Kinabalu and occasionally Labuan which of course stemmed mainly from wharf congestion and lacking port infrastructure during that era. Other ports were generally limited to one day (or often less).

We generally timed our arrival for daylight and first pilot in ports where pilots were compulsory for foreign flag ships. Of course, many ships tried to do the same thing, so the anchorages of the pilot boarding grounds were frequently subject to widespread congestion. To overcome the congestion at the Port Klang outer anchorage (always congested early morning), following four consecutive trips, I underwent examination for pilot exemption.

The exam for a pilot exemption at Port Klang was conducted by the port manager and was relatively thorough, mostly focusing on tides, buoyage, water depths, and port regulations. Once obtained it meant I was permitted to proceed upstream without a pilot and enter the inner anchorage, which

was only a short boat ride to the main wharf. This arrangement turned out to be good because rather than wait overnight outside the port limits we could go in, and the crew would enjoy the benefit of a bit extra shore leave or rest. However, no matter what the circumstances, a pilot remained compulsory from inner anchorage to wharf, even though the distance



AN IMAGE OF THE IDENTICAL SISTER SHIP TO **KRIS MADURA**, UNDER NEW FLAG AND OWNERSHIP. GONE IS HER SMART SILVER-GREY HULL AND BUFF PAINTED CRANES. PICTURED SAILING FROM KOTA KINABALU, SOMETIME IN EARLY 2000'S.

between anchorage and container terminal was very short. When sailing, there was no benefit to the ship, so I engaged a pilot from wharf side, for the full distance to outer pilot ground. This kept the local pilots contented because they were not losing all their bread

permission would be granted to Masters' to depart from the working anchorages without the services of a pilot.

Of all our ports of call, the best organized was Singapore, Pasir Gudang and to a slightly lesser extent, Port Klang (which used to be named Port Swettenham). These three were making the fastest transition to complete



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containerization, hence they evolved as the main regional hubs for container traffic, transshipment usually to Europe, Americas, or major Asian Seaports, via one or a combination of these ports. It stood to reason therefore that these destinations

and seldom differed by more than 15-20 minutes.

The Malaysian Port of Pasir Gudang (PG) in the Johor Straits was also undergoing a more measured degree of expansion during these times. Seldom did we spend more than 12 hours alongside. PG was not one of my favorite ports because it necessitated crossing very dense conflicting traffic, in the Singapore Straits, which could be quite chaotic and even hazardous because there were always rogue ships which failed to properly obey international rules of navigation. The Traffic Separation Scheme (VTSS) for east and westbound traffic in the Singapore Straits (first established in 1981) became progressively more regulated, resulting in today's VTSS (Vessel Traffic Separation Scheme), where there are now designated crossing zones. Once established, these zones did much to enhance vessel control and safety of navigation and has since been extended into the Malacca Straits. This contributed considerably to the earlier disorganized rabble of traffic and eliminated the "cowboy" element that unfortunately persisted at times.

"Rogue" ships could be a problem, which came about due to the significant growth in global shipping, rapid expansion in numbers of vessels under fledgling Flags of Convenience and the serious shortage of experienced and qualified marine officers. This was enhanced by the low standards of training and certification accepted by some maritime administrations, rookie newly established ship-owners (who generally engaged the cheapest of the cheap crews), not to mention corruption and reported availability of "dubious certificates" being issued. The progressive implementation of the STCW code did much to eliminate these practices.

It was long hours and hard work on board – not so much in terms of manual labor but rather in the constant need for officers and crew to maintain sea watches. With port time being so limited, one never



ANOTHER IMAGE OF THE SAME SISTER OF **KRIS MADURA** TAKEN ARRIVING SINGAPORE, AROUND EARLY 2000'S.

and butter to an outside foreigner, only a tad. It was also customary to undertake my own pilotage at Labuan, Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan and Tawau. Pilots were available but unnecessary in my opinion.

When the Port of Singapore was busy or suffering pilot shortages, as was frequently the case,

became our principal ports of call. At Singapore Port, we used Brani Container Terminal, which became so well organized the inward pilot would often tell us what time the outward pilot had been booked for our departure, before we had even fully arrived. This timing was always accurate



## FEATURE A GLIMPSE OF MY FAVOURITE COMMAND



THE AUTHOR, TAKEN AT NOON, ON THE BRIDGE OF THE **KRIS MADURA**.

obtained a break from the daily routine, day in, day out. If anyone went down sick it placed a definite burden on others and everyone became affected having to share the extra workload. Rapid port transits also caused engineering staff concern with routine shipboard maintenance. Time for this essential work became of the essence, in so many different ways for the engineering team.

It could also be stressful on the Master in attempting to maintain the advertised shipping schedule. If the ship missed a specific berth allocation time at a port for whatever reason, the ramifications could cause costly delays. Obviously, many delays were entirely beyond the control of the ships, for example, adverse weather, fog, and the like. Nevertheless, delays frequently amalgamated and compounded creating and giving rise to ongoing hold-ups through the entire schedule cycle. One of the biggest features of containerization was the speeding up and rapid handling of the cargo transit process –naturally, any delays encountered ran counter to the scheme of things.

The feeder service soon became second nature to me, and I accepted that to a degree we were becoming somewhat robotic in various ways. It was like running on tram tracks. Over many consecutive trips we became quite familiar with the ports of call, their quirks, and benefits, alike. Our crew achieved "squatter's rights" in many of the various pubs they frequented, our arrival being anticipated to the day from the shipping List in local newspapers or, through shipping agents.

Kota Kinabalu and Labuan were the only two ports where we could always expect at least one night in port (sometimes longer). This was entirely due to lacking port infrastructure at the time and the need (in many cases) to deconsolidate and then consolidate the same containers ready for back loading aboard. The congestion was not helped due to the severe lack of container vehicles to cart the containers down the finger wharfs being utilized at the time.

When bound for Sandakan or Tawau, I would calculate my arrival for first light at the entrance to the narrow navigable passage, which separated the

### **KRIS MADURA** AT PORT KLANG.



CHARTING OUR POSITION ON THE **KRIS MADURA**.

South China and Sulu Seas, just at the northern most tip of Sabah. This was a restricted navigable channel that could only be safely transited during daylight hours in good visibility. The water depth was good, but the transit was demanding, and required accurate coastal navigation, because many of the important beacons and leading markers were hard to detect by radar (and in some cases, were missing). It took about six hours to transit this passage, and it was a tropical delight, weaving between the various tropical islands, atolls, and reefs.

Tawau and Sandakan were notorious pirate-prone areas, and it was always wise to limit time spent at the respective anchorages, to an absolute minimum. Between 1960 - 2000s, the entire region of what had previously been British North Borneo Island, including Kuching (Sarawak), Jesselton (Kota Kinabalu), Miri, Bintulu, Tawau, Sandakan, down as far as the Indonesian Port of Samarinda, was a haven for pirates. This was especially so on the east coast where Filipino Pirates, based in Jolo Island (Tawi Tawi Group) which was very close to hand, joined ranks and roved about plundering the coastal waters more or less at will, and unhindered. One always needed to be on guard when navigating in these waters. The Indonesian Natuna Islands, (part of the Tudjuh Archipelago) in the South China Sea, was another perilous area.

During the migratory season, the east coast of North Borneo (Sabah), close to the Sibutu Passage and reef in the Celebes Sea is a great place for whale watching. This is also a world class scuba diving venue but fraught with danger, with participants running a high risk of being kidnapped and held for ransom, by pirates, always cruising around the Tawi Tawi group of islands seeking easy prey.

I remained as Master on the **Kris Madura**, operating the same liner service for another two years. Life was becoming somewhat boring to say the least, only disrupted on one occasion when we were hit by a huge freak wave in the South China Sea. The wave damaged about five containers on the starboard side which were stowed on deck. Fortunately, they remained secure, and we were able to reach our next port and have them discharged safely. No damage was sustained to the ship, but the containers were all deformed. Still, I considered us as being fortunate since this was the only incident during my tenure on board. Constantly working in waters with high density traffic, pressure to maintain schedule, and with very restricted port time, etc, it was not uncommon for statistics to be higher in terms of mishaps, near misses or incidents.

The conclusion of my contract, coincided with the vessel transferring to other Asian interests, and change of flag and although I was invited to stay on, I declined having enjoyed my time spent on board, and was happy to leave, and try returning to retirement once again. However, it did not pan out as planned, and I soon became actively involved yet again, in the "Maritime Pie". ●