# Moengo

It's not every day that a 10,000 ton cargo ship gets to knock over a tree but I was on a Hain-Nourse ship that did just that, 100 miles up a jungle river in South America.

In August '66 I had joined the *Trefusis* in the Royal Albert Docks, as 3rd mate, for a "quick SAF-Marine run, back in time for Christmas". However, as the more cynical hands had foretold, after we had discharged at all ports from Capetown to Beira it was back to Durban to load sugar for Japan. And from there we picked up a charter for a general cargo run to the Caribbean. I forget which company it was for, NYK, Mitsui or some such, but they had us going to some of the most out of the way places with seemingly scant regard to profitability or the safety of the ship.

We had loaded, first in Hong Kong and then at six Japanese ports, for Acapulco and La Libertad on the Pacific coast of Central America, then through the Panama Canal to ports in Colombia, Venezuela, Curacao, Aruba, Trinidad and Guyana. Having discharged we were then bound for a place called Moengo, which none of us had ever heard of. Not surprising really, for if you look at a map of Suriname, or better still, Google Earth, Moengo lies well inland, about 50 miles ESE of Paramaribo, as the parrot flies. As the jungle river (the Cottica, I think) meanders, it is more like 125.

We had been advised that there would be many twists and turns and that we would have the assistance of a tug for the more torturous bends.

Trefusis, *pictured here on another river passage, this time in the St.Lawrence Seaway.*

*Gr 10007, Net 5754, LOA 508'*

*Built in 1961, she was swallowed up in the P&O General Cargo Division in the early '70s and became the* Strathteviot. *Sold to the Greeks in 78 as the* Evia *she got caught up in the Iran/Iraq hostilities and was detained at Basrah in 1980, finally being towed away and scrapped in '87.*


Things started well enough, with the river being quite wide, but the steering expertise of the deck crowd was soon put to the test. In those days "Iron Mike", the auto-pilot, was already well established and it was the custom for the Deck apprentices – for that's what they were in the tramping trades; cadets were only to be found on pazzy ships or the more up- market of the liner companies – to man the wheel during pilotages. That was all very well for normal arrivals and departures but for a river passage expected to take over 24 hours it was necessary for the deck crowd to revert to a watch system instead of the normal day-work and to man the wheel. Although most of the sailors were in possession of steering certificates they were pretty rusty at it and it showed. One after the other they were sent off the wheel in disgrace, returning to the main deck to the cheers and jeers of their shipmates while another hapless seaman was sent to the bridge in their place. Soon, of course, all hands had been tested and found wanting and it was again the turn of the first man discarded to return and have another bash at it.

The river soon started to narrow but seemed to have deepish water right up to its sides. As the ship careered from side to side the bank effect would force her back to the middle. This was all very well on the straight stretches but on the many bends it was a different matter. Even with tug assistance the inevitable eventually happened. Straight into the bank, gouging out a lovely V and knocking over that tree. Well, OK then, more a sapling perhaps. We backed off, with a squelch, the tug pulled the bow round and we continued on our way. That was our only major contact with the bank but you can see from the accompanying photographs just how close we were at other times. They were all taken as the ship moved at her normal speed for a river passage, around 10 knots. There was many a time when we could have just reached out and grabbed a piece of passing jungle. On the way, we passed by,

and looked down on, primitive villages right at the waters edge. Most of the population there would have been descended from freed slaves and they were living just as their ancestors must have done in Africa more than one hundred and fifty years before; in mud huts, the women bare breasted and the children naked.

We had commenced the passage at 0600 and when evening approached we just drew up alongside the trees on our starboard hand, put the pick on the bottom and waited for the dawn, with nothing to be heard other than the genny and the sounds of the jungle. Eerie!

Under way again at first light we arrived in Moengo at 0900. And the object of this enterprise?

To load into just one lower hold some bauxite, in bulk. It couldn't have been any more than a thousand tons and, if my memory serves me right, it was loaded into no.3 lower hold, just forward of the bridge, so the vessel would go down bodily without much change of trim. The bauxite, the principal ore of aluminium, was poured into the hold via a mechanical conveyor but there was no local labour available to trim the stuff. So all hands were cajoled and bribed into descending into the hold, led by us deck officers, to trim the hot, coarse, pink powder into the wings. One couldn't endure more than about 10 minutes before scrambling back up to the main deck for a breather. Modern day 'elf and safety would have had a fit!

By dawn we were ready to proceed and the passage back to Paramaribo was without further incident, the sailors having rediscovered their steering skills. It was also a lot quicker down hill and we made Paramaribo before dark. There, divers inspected the bottom for damage but none was apparent. We continued to load at other, equally outlandish ports, (as opposed to in-landish ones) before returning to Japan where, after discharging at Kobe, Nagoya and Kawasaki, we dry-docked at the Hitachi shipyard in Mukai Shima, Hiroshima, for a thorough bottom inspection.

All was well so we loaded another cargo of general for the Caribbean, where I paid off in Trinidad at the end of April and returned home to study and sit for my Mates ticket.

I never did another such river passage and I doubt if many more general cargo ships did. If you study Google Earth you can see that the stuff is now transported down river in barges. Much safer and cheaper but less exciting.

Terry Clark