

LIVING ON BITTERN

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On 27 October 2015, 200 miles southwest of Madagascar, Alfred and I had to make the terrible decision to abandon *Ironhorse*, our wonderful home for the previous 22 years (see *Flying Fish* 2017/1). Thanks to the magnificent efforts of Captain Bondar and his crew we made it safely onto the massive deck of MV *Bittern* which, at 200m long, 30m beam and 20m above the ocean, felt like *terra firma*!

The first mate on this Ukrainian-crewed bulk carrier led us through a labyrinth of pristine corridors to an amazingly luxurious suite of rooms with large windows overlooking the ship and ocean – the absent Owners' Cabin – where we were offered a most welcome, and perfectly brewed, cup of tea! Happily for us, the officers and several of the 20 crew spoke good English. They were bound for Singapore – almost 4000 miles back east and 16 days away – back to where we'd stopped a couple of months earlier as we sailed down the Malacca Straits.

Alfred then met the delightful Captain Yuriy Bondar, who retained our passports – as for all crew – prior to contacting the ship's owners for advice. Because Alfred had moved them from bags to his pocket, our passports, credit cards and cash were the only things which survived intact. Sadly, all four of our 'waterproof' bags had leaked and, in spite of frantic flushing with fresh water, our cameras, all Alfred's expensive lenses, computers, hard-drive copies, iPhones and iPads were write-offs. Even our brand new 'Iridium Go'!

With Captain Bondar and some of his 20 crew on the bridge





Commanding views from our (the owner's!) cabin



By then both official and unofficial wheels were in motion. To enable Captain Bondar to change his scheduled course we had been required to trigger our EPIRB to initiate an emergency. This sent our information to many rescue centres around the world, including Falmouth Coastguard in the UK whose responsibility it was to alert our contact person immediately. Thus our very good friends Bill and Cherrill, who have coped with most of our affairs throughout our 22 years of cruising, were woken with the news at 0700. Sensibly they waited until they knew we were safe before they contacted our families (and insurance company – third party only!) after which poor Captain Bondar was inundated with e-mails of appreciation which he allowed

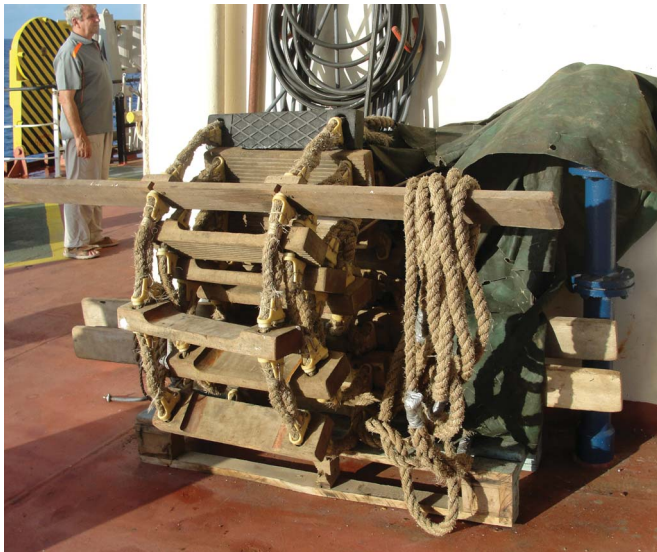
Taking exercise on deck

us to acknowledge. Aware that our cruising cohort would be concerned for us, he offered us the use of the ship's HF radio that evening so that Alfred could check in to the net, on which he had that morning expressed our concerns about being able to continue.

Friends from our local sailing club in Exmouth who had a son well-connected in Singapore (although now working in Hong Kong) had also been busy, and next day we had an e-mail from Keith offering help on arrival. The day after that he informed us that the generous committee of his (Changi) Yacht Club had arranged free chalet accommodation for us, that a laptop and a loan-phone would be at our disposal, and that someone would pick us up when the ship docked.



Aboard MV *Bittern* it was clear next day that Captain Bondar had been considering how, without any English reading-matter on board, we could be usefully occupied for the next 15 days. Realising I enjoyed writing, he produced notebooks and also lent his laptop so that I could record our experiences. Whilst we continued absorbing the daily routine he gave generously of his time towards our comfort, making us aware of the facilities on board – which included a gym. He also invited us to visit the bridge whenever we wanted – what a treat and an experience! It was amazing just how quickly the hours passed and it was a good respite for Alfred when he found sleep difficult. The bridge was a spacious and businesslike area 25m above the ocean with a commanding view, its large, square windows cleaned with fresh water sprays and windscreen wipers! The array of instrumentation was mind-boggling, every piece duplicated.



***‘Our’ rescue ladder
stowed on deck***

By now we were much refreshed and our minds dwelled on the reality of our future. Although relieved – and how! – that our lives had been spared, losing our home and almost everything we had hit hard. I’d also lost every diary and over 140 accounts I had written, recording our experiences over the years. And Alfred still ponders possible solutions to those

rigging and steering issues. Our settled routine continued, with me finally producing an acceptable account of our rescue which Captain Bondar allowed us to print out, asking us to leave a copy on the bridge for others to read.

We were to leave MV *Bittern* in Singapore, where she was scheduled to re-victual, but it was not a matter of simply being delivered safely ashore to make our way home. For all the relevant Singapore authorities – Maritime Port Authority, Immigration, Police Coastguard, NEA Port Health Authority and British High Commission – as well as *Bittern*’s agents we were ‘survivors’ and, as such, were to be the subject of considerable extra administration – about which Captain Bondar up-dated us daily.



***Stowed sern-lines and
‘free-fall’ liferaft***

In spite of reporting that he was happy we were in perfect health, we were required to prove it to Immigration with written verification that our vaccinations were up to date (documentation still on *Ironhorse*!) as well as recording our temperatures daily. In fact, Alfred was in considerable pain, having broken a rib during our rescue, but since nothing could be done anyway he opted not to mention it for fear it would add to the complications. In the UK our friend Bill asked our GP to release the required medical information, which certainly smoothed our entry into Singapore.

On 2 November, the agent phoned Alfred and confirmed that we had an official limit of six days in Singapore, and required details of our flight back to the UK. Again with Bill's help, by day's end we were booked to fly out on the 18th.

Rosemarie dwarfed by anchor chain and winches



When he had time, Captain Bondar gave us guided tours of various parts of the ship, taking us out onto the different decks and explaining everything to us. He started at the muster deck, with the 'free-fall' lifeboat and communications aerials on the stern. The sandbags visible in the photo are anti-piracy and always in place, together with stacks of steel window shutters ready for use if required. (*Bittern* had carried several armed guards for much of her previous passage from the Red Sea down the East African coast to Brazil). Large rolls of galvanised razor wire, also for anti-pirate use, were kept in the bosun's store, together with two very realistic mannequins in orange overalls which are lashed on deck with 'weapons' when in or near pirate areas to increase the apparent number of armed guards!

The muster deck also held a neat garbage area, with colour-coded containers for stowage of various types of waste for collection at the next port. Everyone seemed very diligent about this. Also on the stern deck was the hospital, but unless very seriously ill or injured a patient normally remained in his own cabin.

With the deck 20m above sea level being showered with heavy spray, it was hard work battling 25 knots of wind and outside work had to be rescheduled – although one morning we changed course 45° to port for half-an-hour so that important forehatch checks could be made. (Days later, in our first tropical downpour, the Captain calmly ordered a brief change of course for its duration, in order to get the full benefit of a wash-down!) These sea conditions also delayed our tour of the fo’c’s’le but eventually, having turned northeast towards the Malacca Straits, conditions improved, allowing not only for our tour but for deck-maintenance to resume.

The captain explained the water-ballasting system and how, when ‘in ballast’, the hatches must be ventilated before anyone entered for checking and maintenance. This was essential, because any rust sealed inside would have absorbed all the oxygen. Also along the main deck he told us how they must regularly monitor the cargo holds, which were then at capacity carrying 52,150 tons of corn from Brazil to Vietnam. The deck fittings at the bow were overwhelming, with winches as tall as we were, ropes the girth of, and anchor chain links the length of, my arm!

The engine room, on three levels, was simply ‘WOW!’ and very noisy, requiring ear protectors. It, too, was spotlessly clean and the engine alone was at least as big as *Ironhorse*! The statistics were mind-boggling, with an output of 8,700KW (11,666·9hp). We were moving at 10 knots, and at this ‘economy speed’ she used 26 tons of fuel per day – or 35 if running all out! Also in this area were the three main, magnificent diesel generators, and the steering room, with spares for everything. What an amazing area, responsible not only for propulsion but for all onboard power, air-conditioning, and fresh water production – interestingly not via reverse osmosis but via evaporation

In the engine room with the chief engineer





The reverse side of the engine with walk-in inspection hatches

and vacuum, efficient enough to provide the crew with their requirement of 15-20 tons per day! Later we saw the office shared by the first mate and the chief engineer, with its array of monitors mostly relating to the cargo sealed in the holds – checking its security, temperature, air state and stability.

One evening the genial chef showed us his voluminous galley, complete with refrigeration and storage areas where meat, fish, vegetables and dry goods were all kept separately. His budget was US \$5000 per month for a crew of 20 men, and if in a port with good prices and good quality he stocked up as much as space allowed – the current meat supply had been loaded in Durban en route to Brazil. It was obvious the captain also cared for his crew, organising two birthday celebrations as well as a ‘Crossing the Line’ ceremony for the newest young officer, breaks in the ship’s routine much enjoyed by all.

After a night of lightning, Sunday 8 November dawned calm and pleasant (but much hotter outside by now). The clock continued to advance another hour every three days as we moved east. In mid-morning an alarm sounded, and we found ourselves participating in a fire drill followed later by an abandon ship drill – a monthly requirement.

Now officially clear of the piracy area, at dawn on 9 November Alfred woke me with “Land Ahoy!” as *Bittern* entered the Northern Malacca Straits. We had come full circle, having left there with *Ironhorse* in March! Back in familiar territory, but in one of the busiest shipping bottlenecks in the world, and until *Bittern* was anchored in Singapore it was total concentration and ‘all hands on deck’ for safe navigation. VHF activity increased hugely as we closed Malaysia’s biggest port, Klang, which serves its capital, where the radar showed 37 ships within a six mile radius.



The chief engineer and a colleague explain engine room monitors

Captain Bondar had hardly appeared the previous day, confining himself to his cabin to apply himself to all the administration required for arrival, and confirming arrangements for replacement parts, repairs, stores, and exchange of crew. Soon he would be in contact with Singapore Port, to arrange for the pilot who would guide *Bittern* to anchor.

Before docking we were touched to receive from captain a personalised Russian calendar he had prepared for us using photographs of us with *Bittern*'s crew – a delightful memento of our time on board. It had been an exceptional and unforgettable experience which very few people would ever have. We could not have asked for a more comfortable situation in which to consider our circumstances and ponder our future. There was also no doubt that it was a positive distraction from the reason we were there.

By early afternoon *Bittern* was finally at anchor – frustratingly close to Changi Yacht Club where we were to spend the next few days. Whilst the crew immediately turned to loading awaiting supplies, we were introduced to the company's agent who had been in constant touch with everyone involved, even those standing by to meet us. He had certainly covered all eventualities on our behalf.

Bittern's lengthy administration began in earnest with ours commencing many hours later, involving finger-printing, questioning, and all our papers checked. Only then could clearance with the British High Commission be completed, after which we could leave *Bittern*. This took another two hours. Finally we were led down the ladder to board the agent's launch. What a great pang of sadness we felt as Captain Bondar and his crew waved goodbye. They had become almost family to us, yet realistically we would be unlikely to ever meet them again.

How we counted our blessings as we were whisked away from the sturdy, memorable MV *Bittern*.

