

OPERATION DEEP SEA SOUNDING

By
MIDSHIPMAN G. A. BERRY

“On her last voyage as a training vessel ‘Calchas’ steered a new course across the Gulf of Thailand. Midshipman G. A. Berry who was serving as Bosun’s mate has sent us this account of the crew’s experiences as they charted a continuous line of soundings along the new track.”

The midshipmen were informed by the Master (some members think “warned” would be a better word) quite early in the voyage that a new route would be followed in the Gulf of Thailand when bound from Bangkok to Hong Kong.

Early visions of the “Calchas” ‘blazing a trail of glory’ were quickly dashed when it was learned that other vessels had been using the route for years, but even so, the consolation of being the first “Bluey” to do so was enough to kindle the spirit of exploration even amongst the least romantic types in the alleyway.

Sounding practices from both the poop and promenade deck machines were arranged in the Red Sea and after leaving Singapore, during which the enthusiastic efforts of the midshipmen were watched warily by the Mates and suspiciously by the Bosun! Thankfully these practices were without serious mishaps and were appreciated inwardly by most of us once we had realized how rusty one can get if one has not used the sounding machine regularly for a trip or two.

We left the wharf at Bangkok early in the afternoon of 26th April and reached the Bar at 1638 hours. After dinner in the evening Midshipmen Taverner and Berry presented themselves on the bridge for a final briefing, from the Second Mate and the Master, on the use of the new American type sounding tubes. During the briefing the Master remarked that we might discover a shallow bank (1 to 5 fathoms) and have it named the “Calchas Shoal”. A certain midshipman was heard to remark that he hoped we would not do the job too thoroughly and mark the bank permanently with the “Calchas”.

We so arranged matters that all the time we were on double watches there were four men aft, four men on the promenade deck and three men on the normal sea watch. Each group moved round during the operation so that an even amount of time was spent, on the poop, amidships, and on the watch. The prom-deck men took soundings on the hour and half-hour, while the men aft sounded on the quarters. In this way we were able to record the depth and the nature of the bottom every fifteen minutes during the thirty-one hours of soundings.

At 1930 the vessel reduced speed to 80 revs. ship’s position being 12° 40' N, 100° 32' E. At 2000 the men on the promenade deck took the first cast and obtained a good cut at 15 fathoms and a fine impression of black sand and shell on the arming. Fate had it however that the motor should fail us at

this early stage and so the wire had to be wound back on board by hand and to the strains of an improvised and colourful shanty. The electricians soon came to the rescue and no further trouble was experienced.



The Promenade Gang – Oiling the Works!
(Mike Gusterson, Ralph Brough, Don Worsnop and George Collings)



The Poop Gang – Stripped for Action!
(Derek Smith, Dai Davies and George Berry)

So the watches continued through the warm and pleasant night and very soon each gang developed into a quick efficient group taking only about four minutes between the time of casting, reeling back on board and setting up again for the next cast. In all honesty though we must admit that one

midshipman found it necessary to run out two hundred fathoms of wire to gain a fifteen fathom sounding. After “turning the handles” for two hundred fathoms we are glad to say he never found it necessary to do so again!

At 1345 hours on the 27th the Second and Third Mates gained visual bearings and a radar distance off, of Pulo Wai which was about fourteen miles on our port beam. At this time our casts were showing thirty-seven fathoms with a bottom of grey mud. The echo sounder read slightly less and it is interesting to note that during the whole operation the bridge instrument nearly always recorded slightly less than the actual soundings taken. Perhaps Captain Lecky’s faith in the leadline is not so old-fashioned as some of us younger seafarers would like to imagine!

The officers on watch kept an accurate log on the bridge of the soundings taken and an extract reads as follows:

Date. (April 1956)	G.M.T.	Lat. N.	Long. E.	Echo Sound fath.	Cast Lead.	Nature of Bottom.	Remarks.
26	1300	12° 36.25'	100° 35'	15	15.5	bl. s. sh.	Bearings
	1315	12° 33.75'	100° 36.5'	17.5	18	-----	Lost arming
	1330	12° 31.5'	100° 38.25'	15.5	16	-----	Lost arming
	1345	12° 28.75'	100° 40.75'	15.5	16.6	bl. sh.	Bearings
	1400	12° 26.5'	100° 42'	14	15	spk. s. sh.	One North-bound ship
	1415	12° 24'	100° 43.5'	17.5	19	s.	Bearings
	1430	12° 21.5'	100° 45'	16	15.5	spk. s.	Bearings

In all, one hundred and twenty-three casts were taken by the two sounding machines. No wires were broken and no sinkers lost during this time so we feel that we have blended into a reasonably skilful team at sounding here on the “Calchas”. However on twenty-nine occasions we failed to pick up the nature of the bottom but this is no real disgrace as on the second day we increased speed and, in the last eight hours, were sounding at speeds approaching fifteen knots.

When we broke sounding watches and resumed normal life on board once again we all had interesting and amusing incidents to remember and we have valuable hours of experience astern of us. We all hope that our efforts will prove in some way helpful to our fellow ships in the Company then they follow the new route we have travelled.

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Editorial Note:

Ian Thomson has kindly provided the photographs, which did not appear in the original article.