

Confinement and a journey to Suez and the East.

We are in January 1951 and I have just completed my studies in a French Air Force Technical School, followed by six months spent at the El Aouina air forces base near Tunis.

We are now, a small group of airmen, staying at Marseilles while waiting to board a ship which will take us to the Far East. The mood is still the one which emerged at the end of WW2 with the happiness of having won peace at least, living in a world confident to build a bright future. I still remember the movie we saw in the afternoon : "Captives in Borneo", it is a war story but such stories are now things of the past. Tomorrow we are going to leave on board an Ocean Liner for the Far East, a journey of which most of us are dreaming.

Suddenly in the evening we learn that although we are leaving tomorrow it will be just after midnight and we have to get ready at the soonest. Some political demonstrations being organized in France are the cause behind that change of schedule. So, we are moving in the dark, boarding a relatively small foreign ship. To my surprise I can see as we enter it that there are on each floor three layers of berths and no portholes. That is not exactly what we had been expecting but, well, it may bring in a touch of adventure.

Still in the dark the ship leaves quietly the dock and starts moving to high sea. I hear the engines accelerating and I can feel a bit of rolling... and I fall asleep.

Next morning my first concern is to discover what the ship really is. Her name is "Skogum" on a wet lease from Norway. The ship has been built as a cargo equipped with a few cabins to accommodate half-a-dozen passengers, but has recently been modified to be used as a troop carrier for 600 men. The crew is Norwegian and at lunch time I perceive that there is a kind of prohibition on board: as we are handed one glass of wine with our meal tray, we have to drink it on the spot to make sure we don't pass any wine to the crew.

We enter the port of Mers-El -Kebir near Oran, Algeria, at dusk and during the night the vessel is fed full with new troops. In the middle of the night we furtively leave to Port Said without a chance to have any glance at Mers-El-Kebir or Oran.

Two days later in the evening, at the south of the Cyclades we are sailing in a storm. The doors to the deck have been locked as the waves are sweeping it. Inside more than 80pc of the people are seasick and I would not mention the smell in the crowded rooms. Fortunately, I feel well and manage to have a good sleep.

Under a bright sun we are mooring at Port Said. A brief call of 24 hours and no question of disembarking. However, a flotilla of small boats is surrounding our ship. They are selling all kinds of strange products unknown to us the sons of WW2. By "strange", I mean goods such as whisky, Coca-cola, cigarettes like Navy Cut, Craven A, Lucky Strike and so on. Of all these goods we have heard the name but never seen them available in France.

Then we enter the Suez Canal. It is very narrow and there is a pilot on board every ship. The convoy move slowly to limit the mass of sand falling back to the canal. Suction-dredges are

at work permanently. Sand is all around. It is terribly hot. The length of the Suez Canal is 100 miles and at approximately mid-distance is the small town of Ismailia. British soldiers guarding the canal and probably weary of such environment are jokingly showing us that the way home is the other way around. I am not sure for how long we have been sailing in the Canal, probably not far from a full day.

We are entering the Red Sea at Port Tewfik, Suez. Our next Port of call is 1400 miles farther south-east. Despite of its name the sea water is blue at least for the moment. With a width reaching 220 miles the land is not always in sight, however at a moment when we were much closer to the coast two legionnaire soldiers jumped and started swimming towards the beaches, what do they expect to find on such shore one may wonder?

We exit the Red Sea through the Bab el Mandeb strait and enter the Gulf of Aden. The Skogum is heading for Djibouti which is a French territory and we expect some hours of freedom in the city. Deception again, we stay on board and here the few hawkers navigating around the ship are nothing to compare with the flotilla we met at Port Said.

At sea again, this time heading for Ceylon. At this point we do not expect anything anymore. We enter Colombo harbor where the Skogum will be moored. It is relatively early when; O surprise, we are informed that we can disembark, what we do immediately. May be that feeling is due to two weeks of confinement but Colombo appears to us as the most enjoyable city. The atmosphere is the one that we can imagine at each port of call during those long journeys on board ships sailing to and from far away destinations. I have close relatives who had been living for years in the East and when traveling to Europe they were sending us a postcard from each port of call. When meeting them they were telling me about the rickshaws, the monsoon, the hotels with open air terraces for drinking or dining in the warm evenings. Suddenly I can recognize the Taprobane hotel which I have seen a few times on postcards... But that will not be the case for us as we are leaving in the evening for our next call: Singapore.

The first day of that new leg has been going well, in fact a bit monotonous as the sea was calm with nothing to see on the water and nothing to do or learn on board, but now suddenly there are engine problems and the Skogum starts drifting in the Indian Ocean. The Norwegian crew is doing some repairs and we can only wish they will succeed soon since with the limited power available the inside ventilation is minimal and the heat and smell are terrible... During the day we have established some rotative shift: 2 hours on the deck and 4 hours inside the vessel.

Some repairs have been completed and the Skogum is again able to navigate but at quite a noticeable reduced speed. We are going along the island of Sumatra and entering the Straights, as they are commonly named. After a few days Singapore is in sight. The prospect of disembarking and walking freely in the town is enough to revive our enthusiasm. We are waiting impatiently the end of the manoeuvre and the ship to be moored. One or two hours have passed and we are told that the ship having been located in a special area for repairs we remain confined on board. All we can see is at night the lights over the city!

En route to Saigon. It takes only a few days by sea from Singapore to Vietnam which we reach near Cape St James. We are waiting for the high tide to enter the Donai river which gives access to Saigon River and the Port of Saigon. It should be about half a day sailing through mangrove, forest and rice fields. That will be our first sight of the Vietnamese countryside from the deck of the Skogum...

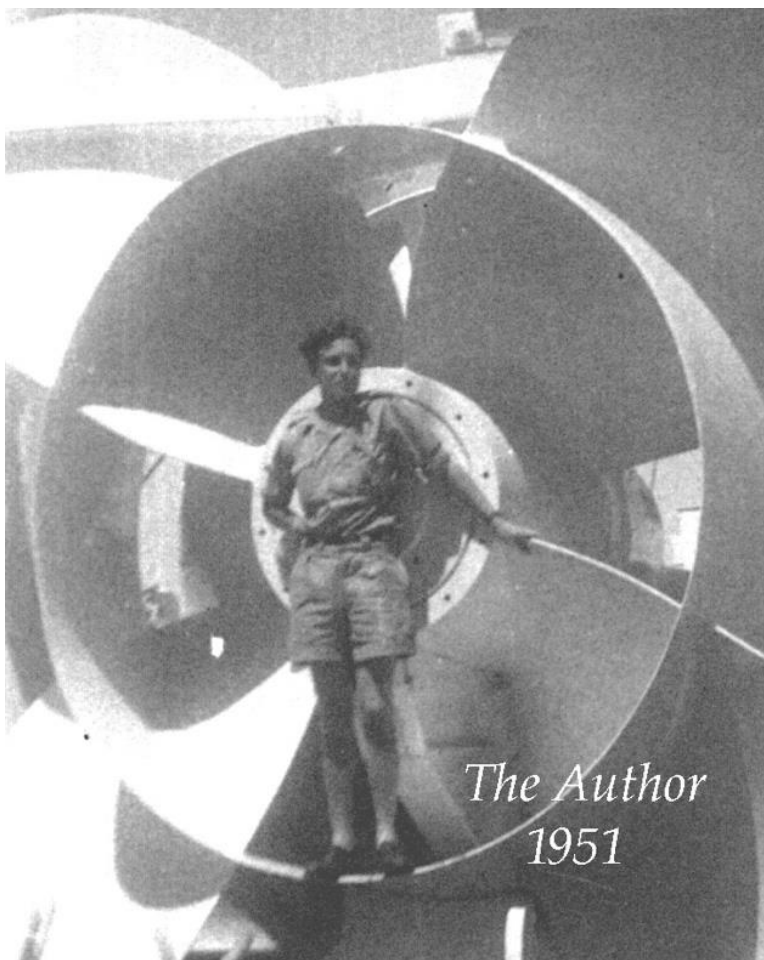
Don't dream Boys! Lately some ships have been attacked while sailing on the Donai river. Now a commando is taking place on the deck with automatic rifles. To all ordinary passengers: "Back in the hull!"

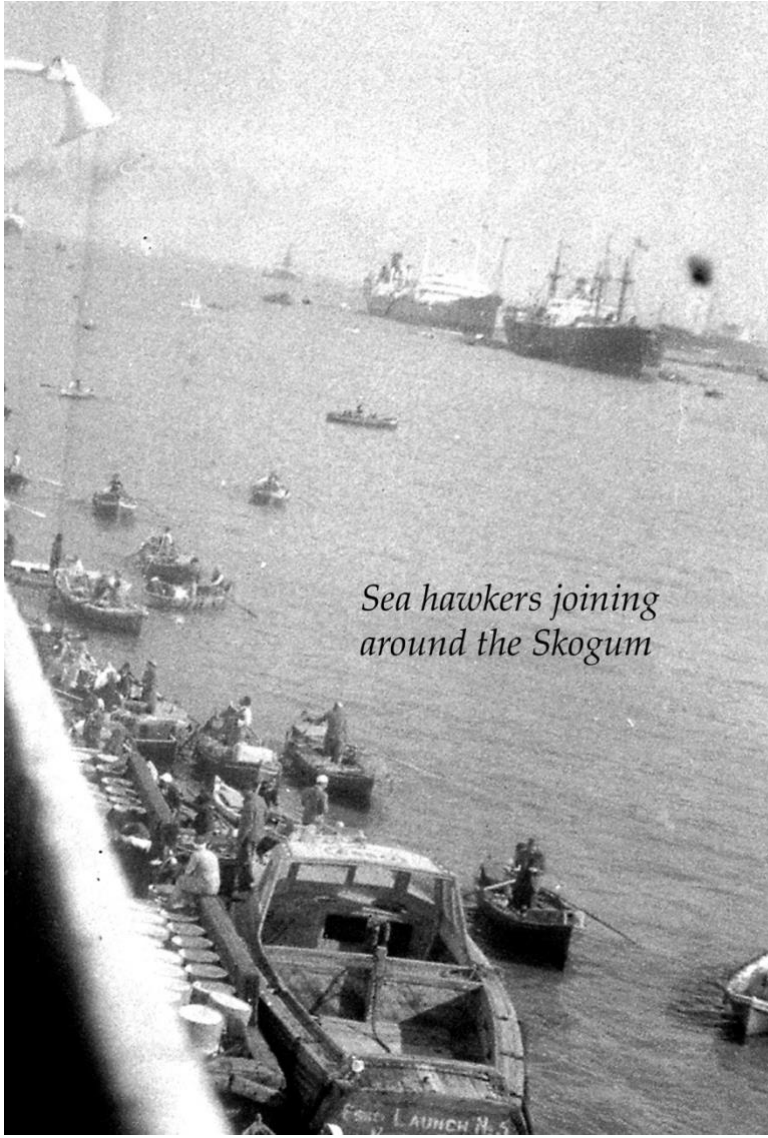
Finally, here we are, moored in Saigon harbor after 25 days of confinement at sea.

It takes about one hour to disembark and reach the air base after crossing the city on board military trucks. For us we all feel good. I am not sure whether it is the end of confinement and the return to freedom or a more solid visual and mental discovery while observing what is for us a New World, probably a mixing of both, but I already like the place and I would not mind living for years in that part of the world.

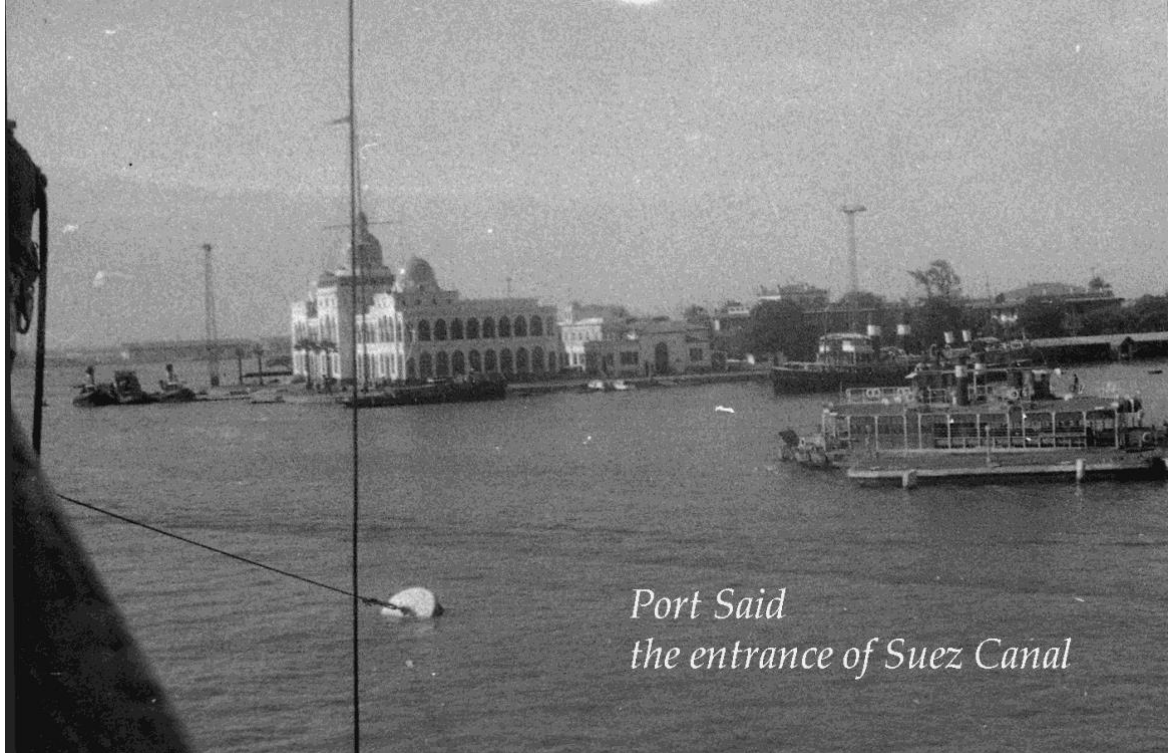
For those who wish to be sailing down a river with more colors and in a more pleasant way that link will take you to [The Nile](#)".

Bernard Leroy





*Sea hawks joining
around the Skogum*



*Port Said
the entrance of Suez Canal*