THE KPM's 'WAI'-CLASS CATTLE SHIPS OF 1948-49

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In January 1970 I was an undergraduate student in vacation employment with the Department of Telecommunications, working in an office building with what for a shipping enthusiast was an excellent view overlooking Melbourne's busy Victoria Dock. I remember my amazement one morning at sighting a strange vessel in Djakarta Lloyd colours at the short No. 8 cross-berth. To satisfy my curiosity, I wandered down to find it was the ex-KPM's *Waiwerang* and had a good look around the capacious tweendeck. Fascinating. Together with *Waibalong*, *Waikelo* and *Waingapoe*, the quartette combined tried and proven elements of KPM design but in a unique way that was something of a platypus, in marked contrast to the contemporary 'Si'-class single-deckers that were regularly seen in Australian ports on charter to Royal Interocean Lines (RIL). The explanation for these strange hybrids is that they were built for the cattle trade to Java and Sumatra from Bali and what the Dutch called the Small Sunda Islands but known by Indonesians as Nusa Tenggara (Southeast Islands). From East Lombok through Sumbawa, Flores and Sumba to West Timor, the islands have little of the fertility of Java and feature dry grasslands ideal for raising cattle (horses on Sumba), which are also part of local lore and custom. Surplus animals would be shipped live to supply the markets of urban Java, mainly Jakarta, but also Palembang and Singapore. The chosen names reflected those connections, being small towns in southeast Flores (*Waibalong*, *Waiwerang*) and Sumba (*Waikelo*, *Waingapoe*).

The design featured a long continuous tweendeck for carrying livestock (up to 750 head of cattle) or up to 1,400 'deck' passengers, who would bring their own sleeping mats and, in effect, camp on the timbered deck. There was cabin accommodation for twelve first-class passengers along with Dutch officers in the rather large bridge structure well forward between Nos 1 and 2 hatches and elsewhere for 24 second-class. Being livestock carriers with dimensions of 315' x 50', the deadweight was fairly modest, around 2,850 tons or about the same as the somewhat smaller 'Si' class (294' x 43'). Cargo-handling gear was eclectic. Nos 1 and 4 hatches were served by electric goose-neck cranes, a feature introduced by the KPM on the passenger liners *Boissevain*, *Ruys* and *Tegelberg* in 1937/8 but now for the first time fitted to its cargo ships. Nos 2 and 3 hatches were each served by two slewing cranes with a longer reach: in an unusual arrangement, the line to the winch ran via the crosstree and could be topped like an ordinary derrick to a tall goalpost that also carried a high signal mast. Goalposts

were a typical feature of Java-China-Japan Line ships but hitherto the KPM had fitted these only to the 8,000-dwt collier *Ombilin* (1916) and later the 4,650-dwt sisters *Bantam* and Japara of 1930. Those on the 'Wai'-class were a narrow set fitted with big ventilators on top (and also on the mast house) to ensure airflow to the tweendeck. In the anchorages and roadsteads of Bali and Nusa Tenggara that lacked proper wharves, cattle would be loaded from lighters or prahus in slings fitted under their bellies but there was also a long, wide ramp either side amidships for use in ports where cattle could be walked on or off. Pigs, however, were shipped in large baskets.

Midship section of *Waingapoe* in 1970 showing goalpost mast, large ventilators, and cattle ramp (raised) for access to the tweendeck with a row of portholes to give light for cattle or passengers. The big windows below the bridge could be fixed at horizontal for airflow to the first-class lounge and accommodation, being three 2-berth cabins on each side. The forward gooseneck cranes were a characteristic feature of the KPM's later 1930s-1950s vessels, as also the slewing, open-section jib cranes at the mainmast (John Mathieson/NAA).

Engines were reliable 6-cylinder Werkspoors for a speed of 13 knots, a couple of knots more than contemporary 'Ba', 'Ka' and 'Si" classes, thereby allowing cattle to be delivered more promptly and in better condition. Just why the engine was placed three-quarters aft instead of fully aft, as in the neat pre- and post-war 'Ba' class is unknown. It could have been a matter of trim, or of providing passenger space away from the main cattle spaces amidships. One other feature was 380 cubic feet of freezer space. The design had obviously been well thought out and one might speculate that, as with Jardine's *Eastern Queen* (1950), it owed something to the long wartime internment of KPM personnel by the Japanese.

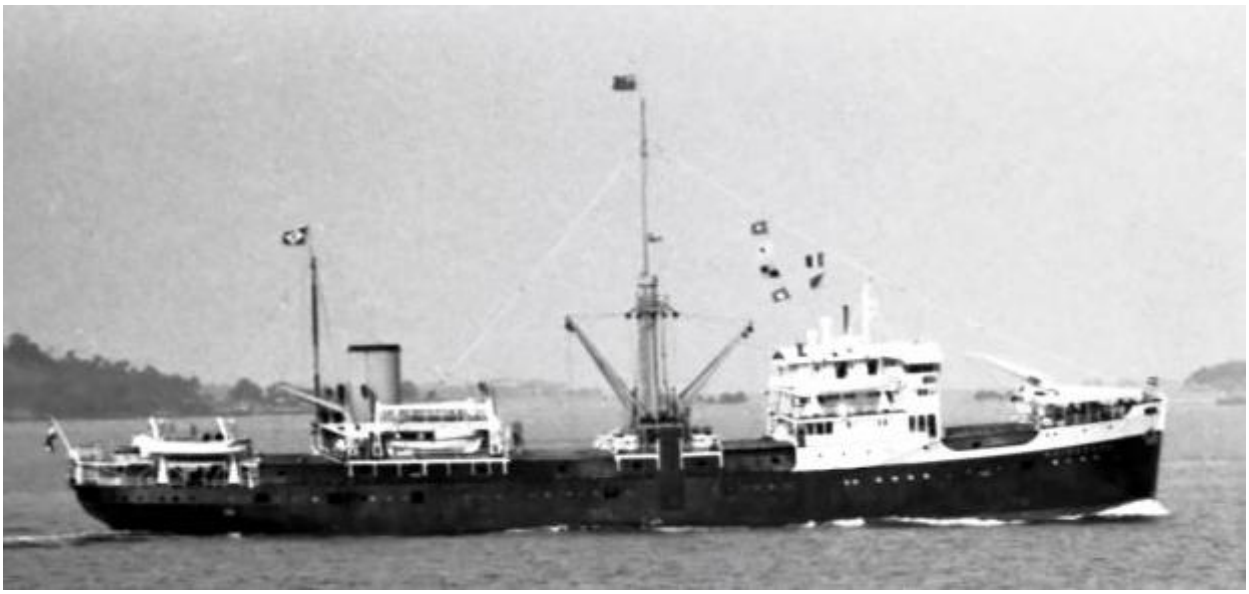
The ships were completed in between December 1948 and June 1949, each by a different Dutch builder, and commissioned into the fleet at Tanjung Priok (Jakarta) on 7/2 (*Waikelo*), 15/4 (*Waibalong*), 5/5 (*Waingapoe*) and 5/8 (*Waiwerang*), thus just a few months before the transfer of sovereignty to the Republic of Indonesia on 27 December 1949 after a bitter four-year struggle by the Dutch to reimpose colonial rule. At first the ships were placed in the cattle trade between Nusa Tenggara, Bali, Java and the oil and rubber centre of Palembang in South Sumatra. An article in 'Malaya Tribune' (31/7/49) noted the new 'cattle ships' and reported that

they would be calling at Singapore once the Straits government lifted the restrictive import quota of 500 head per month. In September *Waingapoe* was indeed brought onto the run, which in March 1950 became a fortnightly service with *Waingapoe* and *Waibalong* extending from East Nusa Tenggara (Timor, Sumba), Sumbawa, Lombok and Bali (Benoa) to Surabaya, Singapore and Belawan (Medan) in North Sumatra. The other two ships continued to serve West Java and Palembang. Arrival of *Waibalong* on 12 January 1951 was reported by the 'Singapore Standard' along with some detail of the mix of cargo: 440 cows, 215 buffalo and 51 goats along with 1,500 tons of general cargo comprising copra, rubber, bran and dried chillies. The livestock loadings varied a good deal. On 13 May 1950 *Waibalong* brought 705 oxen and 406 Bali pigs, then on 25 June with 504 cows and 1,438 pigs. The Singapore trade, however, virtually ceased in 1953, probably because more livestock was being shipped to Jakarta.

As the Newsletter article explained, the ships saw only eight years of interisland service. One of the conditions of the Round Table agreement for Indonesian sovereignty had been that Dutch firms, including the KPM, would be allowed full rights in independent Indonesia. For the next few years it infuriated nationalists that Indonesia's domestic shipping continued to be dominated by KPM ships flying the Dutch flag. That discontent culminated in the strike and seizures by labour unions of the KPM's ships, offices and shore installations that began on 3 December 1957. Three days later the government took control but formal nationalisation was forestalled by Lloyd's of London, who had insured the KPM against this contingency. After three months of negotiations, the Indonesian's agreed to release the ships, which sailed off to Singapore. 'Straits Times' (8/4/58) reported that *Waikelo* had arrived the previous day along with seven other KPM ships but half the fleet was still awaiting release. *Waingapoe* followed later in the month. Being at sea on 3 December, *Waibalong* and *Waiwerang* were not seized and had made their own way Singapore to Singapore in the course of that month.

The problem was now how to employ the large, displaced fleet cluttering Singapore Roads. Older units were sold for scrap or to secondhand buyers. The four 'Wai' class were flexible enough to be worth keeping, either on new KPM lines – that would not intrude upon the expanding territory of the affiliated RIL – or on charter. Already in January 1958 WAIBALONG had been placed in the Bangkok rice and cattle trade. Between September 4 and November *Waiwerang* was employed between Rangoon, Singapore and Bangkok, then taken on charter by the Ta Hing Co. of Hong Kong to open a cattle trade between Darwin and Hong Kong carrying around 700 head each voyage. *Waibalong* and *Waingapoe* were sent to trade around the Persian Gulf. In May 1959 *Waikelo* followed to open up a line between the Gulf and East Africa. After coming off charter in late 1959, *Waiwerang* was placed in a Hong Kong-Bangkok line, carrying rice and cattle on the return leg, and resumed that run after a short Ta Hing charter in mid-1960.

KPM's *Waikelo* arriving at Aden, 26 February 1962, with a large complement of deck passengers. First-class cabins forward, second-class aft (white section). Derricks topped at the mast (Dr. George Wilson).



KPM's *Waiwerang* off Singapore, 13 November 1959, while in Singapore-Bangkok trade. Cattle stalls fitted above the four hatches and cattle ramp raised beside the mast (Dr. George Wilson).

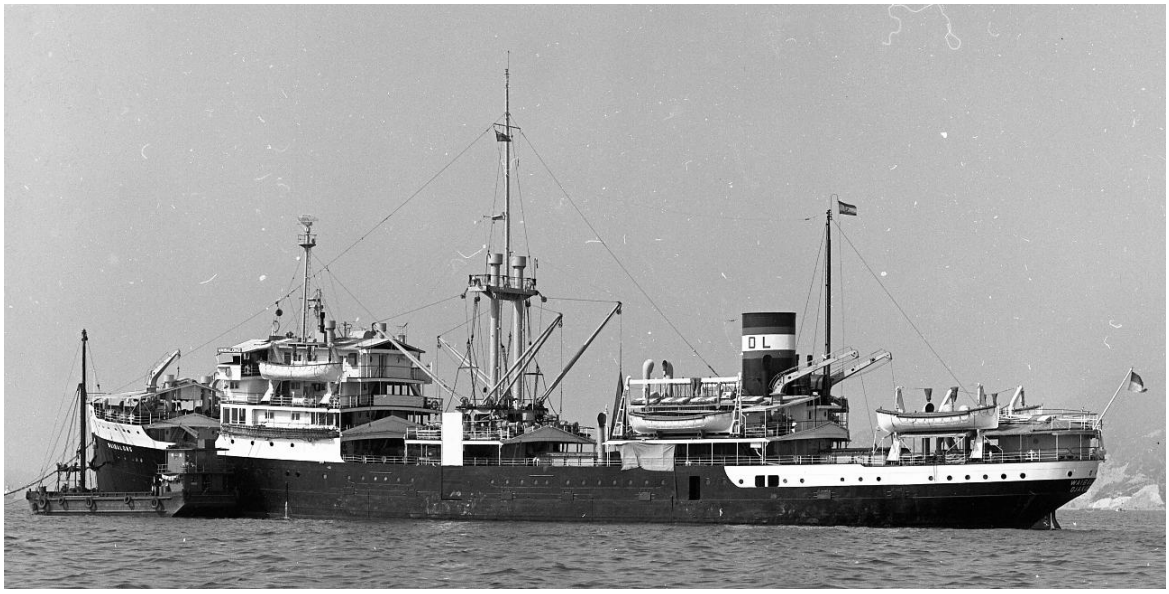
The transfer of sovereignty over Dutch New Guinea to Indonesia on 1 May 1963 further crimped the KPM's territory and in 1964 there was a further sell-down of tonnage, specifically the three 'Ka' class that had maintained that run from Singapore and also the 'Wai' quartette with delivery on 14/2 (*Waiwerang*), 3/3 (*Waikelo*), 8/3 (*Waibalong*) and 17/4 (*Waingapoe*). All four ships were sold to the state-owned deep-sea shipping company P.N. Djakarta Lloyd for

deployment in the cattle trade between Nusa Tenggara and Hong Kong, cattle northbound, general cargo southbound to Java. This trade had already been taken up by the state interisland and short-sea shipping company P.N. PELNI, but rival state interests led to something of a 'turf war'. Strengthening economic relations with the People's Republic of China may also have been a factor.

Waiwerang at Hong Kong in Djakarta Lloyd colours, 28 June 1970. A temporary cattle deck has been erected fore to aft (Bill Schell).

Nevertheless, the little 'Wai' ships and the short Hong Kong cattle line were always an anomaly for Djakarta Lloyd, whose operations as a national carrier were oriented more towards Europe and North America. There was also a well-paying line to Japan and, from 1965, a monthly line to Australia under the general agency of McIlwraith McEacharn, at first relying on the familiar ex-Australian 'B'-class sisterships *Antonio Regidor* ex *Adelaide Breeze* ex *Baroota* (1952) and *Visaya Regidor* ex *Koorawatha* (1948), then *Pilar Regidor* (e xBurns Philp's *Malaita* of 1933) and from 1967 isabel brenda (ex *Watamurra* of 1947), all chartered from John Manners & Co. of Hong Kong, who in 1966, a few months after the military had seized power in Indonesia, took over as general managers of Djakarta Lloyd until accumulated charter debts had been paid off. At the beginning of 1970, as mentioned, *Waiwerang* turned up in Melbourne with *Waikelo* following in February-March and again at the end of the year, also calling at Fremantle, and for the last time in July 1971. *Waingapoe* put in an appearance in June 1971. Though Indonesia was still emerging from political and economic turmoil, the 'Wai' ships were too small (2,800 dwt) and awkwardly configured to be well suited to the Australian trade. Since 1969 the 5,750-dwt, 13-knot all-aft *Gunung Guntur* had sometimes loaded from australia. she was one of a trio, the others being *Gunung Kerintji* and *Gunung Tambora*, all built for Djakarta Lloyd in Japan in 1961 under war reparations for the Indonesia-Japan trade, in which they had become too small and too slow. *Gunung Kerintji* arrived in Sydney in December 1971 and *Gunung Tambora* soon

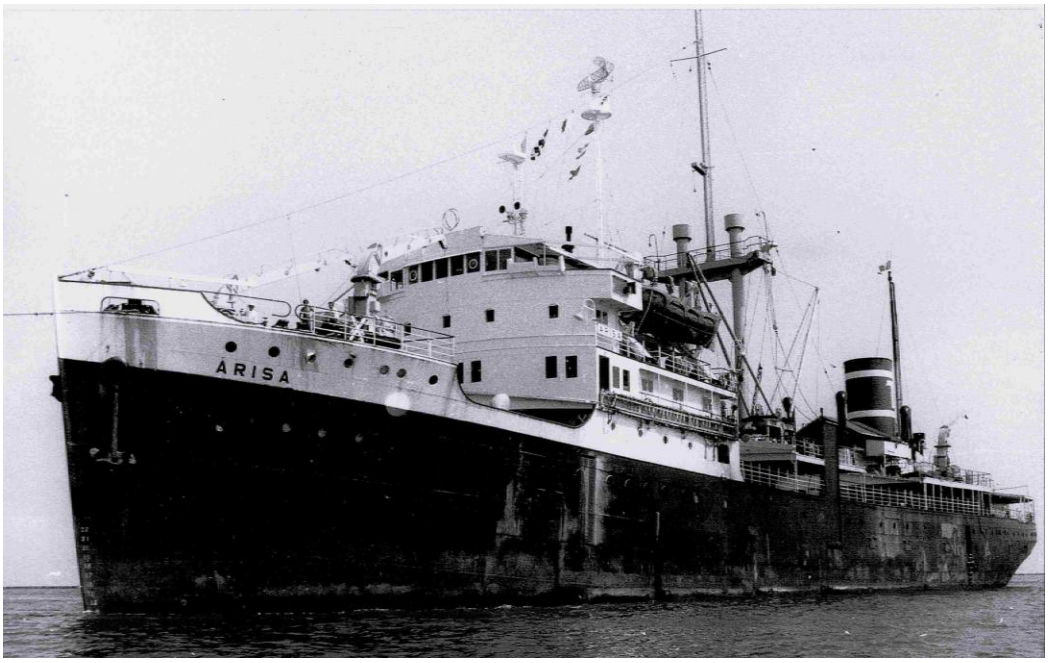
followed. This trio would then cover the trade until the waterfront ‘black ban’ was imposed in 1976 in response to Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor.



Waibalong lying at Hong Kong, 7 December 1969, better showing the tweendeck, mix of cargo gear and boats. The unusual slewing cranes are also clearly seen (Bill Schell).

Waingapoe departing Sydney, 23 June 1970, seen from the Harbour Bridge (J. Mathieson/NAA).

In the second half of 1971 *Waingapoe* and *Waiwerang* were both sold for breaking up in Hong Kong. *Waikelo* and *Waibalong*, however, were sold in the same year to Trias Navigation S.A., a Panamanian affiliate of Asia Africa Shipping (Hong Kong) and Unique Shipping (Singapore), all affiliated with private Indonesian deepsea operator Gesuri Lloyd, and traded out of Indonesia for another two years as *Arisa* and *Arima*. In mid-1972 while working in Indonesia, I visited Tanjung Priok to photograph the laid-up PELNI liner *Ambulombo* ex *Manoora*. While taking a boat out to the anchorage, I was very lucky to coincide with the inbound *Arisa* ex *Waikelo*. Sadly, I did not have colour film and only a little Yashica camara – not my later Pentax – but conditions were good, as the accompanying B+W shows, and I think I did her justice. She and her sister would be broken up the following year.



Arisa ex *Waikelo* being towed into Tanjung Priok, mid-1972. The funnel is a white 'T' [Trias] between two white bands on bright red (H. Dick).

Sources

This background draws mainly on my notes from KPM records in the Dutch National Archives, Mulder, *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij* (1991) and the excellent Dutch website <marhisdata.nl> that also has a good selection of photos. My thanks to Dr. George Wilson, Bill Schell and John Mathieson/NAA for use of their photos and to Iain Steverson, who stevedored some of the ships at Sydney in 1970-71, for clarification of the cargo-handling arrangement.