

# Sverre Berg, Thoresen & Co. and the long-lived m.v. *Kurimarau*

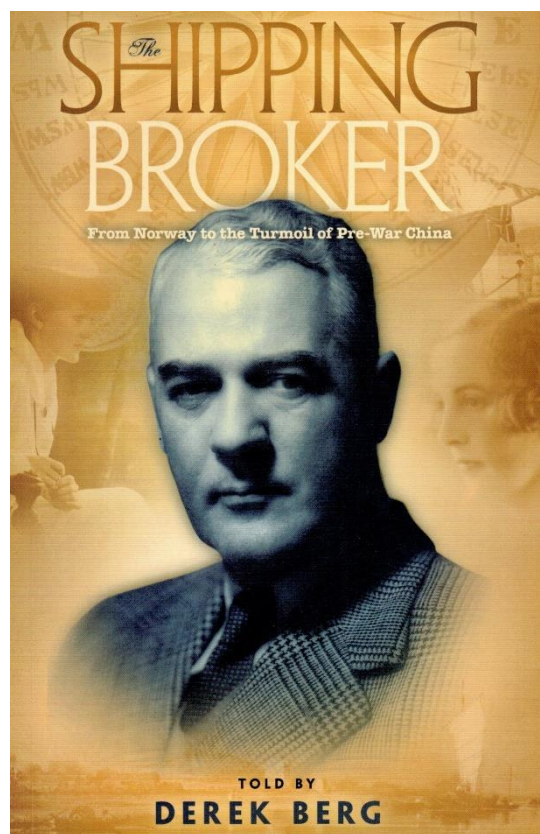
by Howard Dick

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Norwegians have always been venturesome and resourceful. The world is their oyster. Sverre Berg (1913-1979) was a good example. He grew up in Norway, learned the ropes of the shipping industry in UK and France, then spent the next thirty years in and around Hong Kong. After wartime internment in Hong Kong, he was repatriated with his Australian wife to Sydney, where he began the second half of his active life. In 2008 his son Derek Berg completed his wartime memoir up to December 1941 (*see above*). Interesting though the book is for the anecdotes and family background, it is not informative about Berg's business life and his shipowning, which bears some elucidation. The catalyst was the recent discovery, through Bill Schell, that the Sverre Berg who in 1968 sold his South Pacific shipping business to Dilmun and previously had owned the little interisland trader *Kurimarau* had also, from 1926, been joint owner in the passenger steamer *Svale*, formerly BI's turbine steamer *Lama* (1905). What follows is an exercise in joining a very incomplete series of dots.

According to his memoir, supplemented by Ancestry, Sverre Oddmund Berg was born in Trondheim on 9 June 1892. In February 1913 at age 21, he took ship via Bergen for Newcastle, thence by rail to Leith, where after a short stint of work he was recommended what he described as a medium-sized shipping firm in Glasgow. There, in effect, he did his apprenticeship before in May 1915 he transferred to a shipbroker in Nantes. In the midst of the Great War he received an offer to join the Norwegian agency Thoresen & Co. in Hong Kong, so retraced his route via UK to reunite with his parents and sister in Trondheim before in April 1916 taking the train from Oslo via Helsinki and St Petersburg to Moscow, where he joined the Tran-Siberian for Vladivostok, thence via Nagasaki to Shanghai and on to Hong Kong.

Thoresen was a small China Coast company founded in Shanghai in the early 1900s by Olaf Thoresen as a small local agency, chartering and broking firm. Born in 1870, Thoresen himself is first mentioned in Shanghai in late 1895 as a shipping clerk in the office of Messrs Harley, Buschmann & Menzel. Thereafter he appears frequently in the 'North China Herald' in reports of shooting competitions, rowing and later also yacht races. Then in June 1902 Thoresen & Co. appears for the first time as agents for the almost new 1500-grt steamer *Labor* (1901), which arrived on the 23<sup>rd</sup> from Moji with coal and returned two days later in ballast. It was a good staple trade and the Norwegian-flag steamers *Saphir* (1378/1901), *Hermes* (1358/1896) and *Protector* (ex *Enchantress*, 2636/1890) soon followed. The 1904 Hong List includes an entry for Thoresen & Co. as 'Merchants, Shipping Agents and Engineers' (no address). It looks to have been a sole proprietorship with eight employees Cato N.B. Aall, O. Janson, J. Hargreaves, H. Herlofson, R. Kahn, E.J. Sales, A. Serpa and Woo Chang-sung, thus a mix of Norwegians and British with a Portuguese Eurasian clerk and a Chinese business manager/compradore. In 1908 Thoresen nominally became a shipowner on behalf of Ku Ti Sang when the 1250-grt steamer *Sing Lee* (1871), the 1782-grt *Sing Yue* (1972) and the 747-ton *Tuck Yue* (1886). Ku Ti Sang, also transliterated as Ku Din-tsiang, Ko Dih-sang and Ko De-sang, had evidently succeeded Woo Chang-sung as compradore of Thoresen & Co. Their arrangement lasted until 1911, when the first two ships were sold to breakers and *Tuck Yue* was transferred to the newly formed China Commercial S.N. Co. of Shanghai under Ku's direct control.

Thoresen & Company's Hong Kong branch had been opened by 1908 as Aagaard, Thoresen & Co. with Bjarne Aagaard being the co-principal and manager with a staff of three other foreigners. By 1912, Aagaard had withdrawn and A.S. Sorensen had taken over as Manager of what was now Thoresen & Co. (known in Chinese as Sun Hong or Shun Hong). Sverre Berg was recruited by a time when the business was expanding rapidly through the new scope arising from the seizure or internment of German shipping and the increasing scarcity of British shipping. By 1917 the Hong Kong branch was already much bigger than Shanghai with agencies for the (Danish) East Asiatic Co., Steamship Co. "Orient" Ltd, the Russian East Asiatic S.S. Co. Ltd, The Norwegian Africa & Australia Line (Wilh. Wilhemsen & Fearnley Eger) and two Norwegian shipowner associations, also three Norwegian insurance companies and the Sarawak Government Collieries. It was also the registered office for the Sisiman S.S. Co. Ltd and Figueras S.S. Co Ltd.

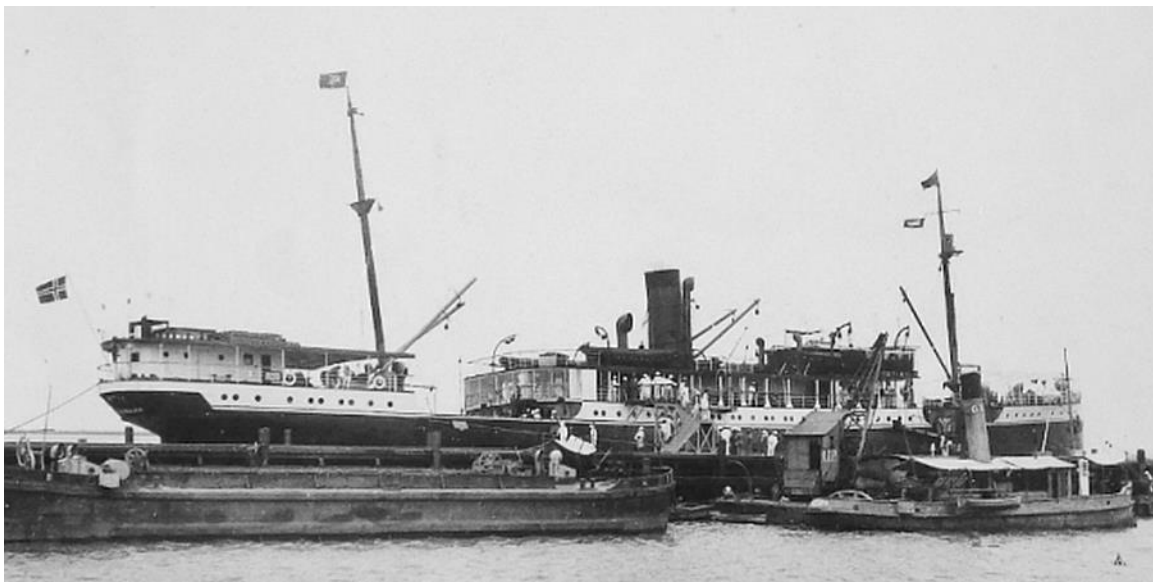
Berg brought energy and skills to the Hong Kong branch and rose quickly, being appointed General Manager in 1920. After Olaf Thoresen had lost badly in 1921 by the collapse of the commodity trader Det Oversøiske Compagnie, in which he was a substantial partner, after speculation in the falling sugar market. Probably in consequence, on 24 November 1922 the Hong Kong affiliate was registered in Hong Kong as the private limited liability company Thoresen & Co. Ltd. From time to time from 1920 onwards Berg had also been taking on the role of Acting Consul for Norway until in October 1923 he officially succeeded his former boss Sorenson as Consul. In fact, on 6 January 1923 when Berg and his newly married wife Constance (Connie) embarked in London for China on NYK's *Suwa Maru*, he had already identified his profession as Consul.

By 1920 Thoresen & Co. had become agents in Hong Kong for Bruusgaard Kiosteruds Skibs A/S whose South China-Bangkok line along with that of China Navigation Co. had taken the place of the local fleet of Norddeutscher Lloyd Bremen. As set out in Stephen Kentwell's listing, two modern China coasters had been ordered from Hongkong & Whampoa Dock for delivery as *Helikon* (1917) and *Hermelin* (1918), both delivered under requisition (to September 1919), while eight smaller cargo steamers were ordered from the New Engineering & Shipbuilding Works in Shanghai for delivery between 1917 and 1921. In 1926 Thoresen & Co; proceeded to open a branch in Bangkok to represent Bruusgaard Kiosterud and also manage the new 127-grt Hong Kong-built tug/tender *Changnam*.

Berg obviously had some opportunities to accumulate capital of his own. In mid-1926, he became part-owner of the small ex-BI passenger liner *Lama*, which was completing refit at Hongkong & Whampoa Dock after conversion from turbine steamer to motor vessel. The ship was registered at Trondheim to Skibs A/S Nidaros under the management of Hanson & Berg. The other half of Hanson & Berg may have been D.J. Hanson, who from early 1920 had been Admiral Line agent in Hong Kong, but this is mere conjecture because it's a common enough name. On completion in September 1926 as *Svale* (Swallow), she was placed in what was then known as the 'coolie' trade between Amoy, Swatow, Hong Kong, Hoihow and the Straits on

charter to various Chinese passage brokers. On 17 March 1928 the 'Singapore Free Press' reported her as having arrived with 1,565 deck passengers, again on 14 April from Swatow with 1,204 and on 12 December with 1,149, some en route to Penang, but on other voyages the number was well under the thousand. There was usually also a few hundred tons of general cargo.

On 17 February 1928 Berg registered Berg & Co. Ltd in Hong Kong (#793) and nine months later resigned from Thoresen & Co. Shortly afterwards, *Svale* was transferred to Skibs A/S Nidareid under his sole management and in September 1929 was placed on charter to inaugurate a new line between Macao and Portuguese Timor, proceeding via Singapore, Batavia, Surabaya and Macassar. The Singapore agent was the Portuguese-linked firm of Barretto Shipping & Trading Co., which by December 1929 was advertising the ship northbound for Hong Kong 'with excellent first-class accommodation', though she arrived from Timor Deli (Dili) on the 27<sup>th</sup> with 24 bullocks and 196 goats. According to KPM reports, *Svale* finished the charter at Hong Kong in late February 1930, being replaced in the Macao-Timor line first by the French-flag freighter *Gouverneur General Paul Doumer* (1919) and then in March 1931 by Wallem's China coaster *Norviken* (1925). Meanwhile, *Svale* was placed on charter between Hong Kong and Rangoon, In April 1931 she was sold back to Williamson & Co. and reverted to the South China-Straits trade with relieving stints in the Douglas S.S. Co. line to Swatow, Amoy and Foochow until wrecked three years later when departing from Foochow in fog. Curiously Berg's memoir makes no mention of *Svale*, so perhaps the venture was a disappointment. He does lovingly mention his nine-ton yawl *Irene*. LCI reports another vessel has having been owned and broken up but this ship is yet to be unidentified.



Norwegian-flag SVALE at Macao c.1930 under Portuguese Gov't charter (Internet).

In terms of personal life, in March 1922 Berg married Adelaide girl Connie Hendry and in the mid-1920s moved into the large house 'Bergslein' overlooking the harbour from on Stubbs

Road, two thirds of the way up the Peak. They had a son, Derek, born in November 1926 but tragically, in October 1929, Connie died in Hong Kong of cerebral malaria. In 1932 Berg remarried to Tui O'Kane (b. 1904), an Australian nurse from Sydney and had a daughter together. Unfortunately the Depression made business very tight and before long they were forced to sell Bergslein and the yacht, pay off the servants, rent a flat, and Tui to go back to work as a nurse. Gradually their situation improved.

After the German occupation of Norway in April 1940, Berg joined the Royal Hong Kong Volunteers as a 6-inch gunner at Fort Stanley, where he was wounded on the last day of fighting against the Japanese invasion. After the colony's surrender on Christmas Day 1941, he was interned at Shamshuipo, as separately his wife.

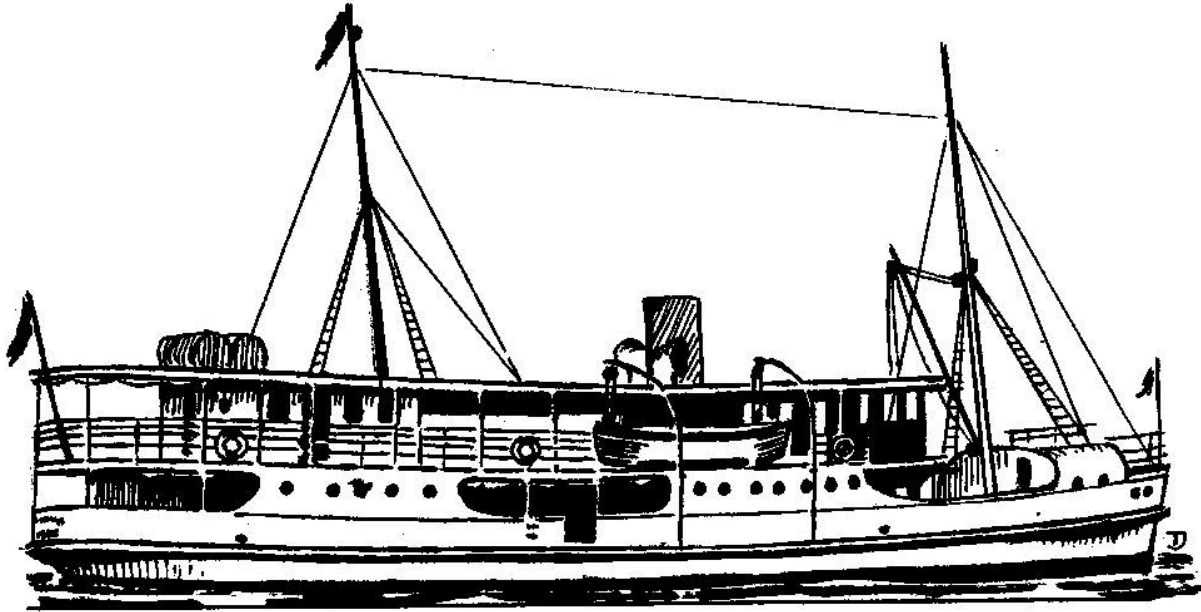
### **Postwar Years**

After some months of recuperation but still very thin, in early 1946 Sverre and Tui were repatriated from Hong Kong by Royal Navy aircraft carrier to Sydney, where their son awaited them. In the half page epilogue Derek Berg notes only that subsequently 'with partners [he] built up a small but successful shipping business in Australia. They bought and managed a number of small steamers, which carried cargoes to North Queensland ports, Papua New Guinea, and other Pacific Islands'. The business and the partners are not named but it must have been S. Berg & Co. Ltd of 75-77 Pitt Street in downtown Sydney. On Trove the only mention that can be found of Berg is in relation to yachting, a recreation that he had enjoyed in Hong Kong between the wars. In Sydney he joined the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia, bought the 40-foot Huon pine ketch *Horizon* and from December 1948 competed successfully in Sydney-Hobart races, later also in the inaugural Sydney-Noumea race. In fact, by 1952 he was Commodore of the Club. Around this time, he became a naturalized British citizen and in 1954 both he and Tui are listed on the electoral roll as living at The Basin, a tiny settlement opposite Palm Beach on Pittwater, a yachtsman's paradise.

On 6 September 1954 Berg registered a new Berg & Co. Ltd (#4039) in Hong Kong, though the original company of the same name was not dissolved until February 1956. Set up by two local solicitors, the new entity was a simple \$10,000 company with the 1,000 shares fully paid up. After the two solicitor's shares had been transferred, the holding was divided between Sverre (Merchant) 900 and Tu (Housewife) 100, both listed as British citizens living at 'Tai Mo Shan', The Basin, NSW.

Registration of the new company paved the way for Berg to buy his first postwar ship, the 297-grt motorship *Kurimarau*, which had been built at Hong Kong in 1930 for Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd as a passenger-cargo vessel for operation in the Solomon Islands (see Part II below). After the War, she was sold to the Western Pacific High Commission. As far as can be determined, *Kurimarau* was sold to Berg & Co. in April 1955, several months before the transfer of registry from Suva to Hong Kong on 12 September 1955. Her movements under Berg's ownership are seldom reported. In February 1956 (location unknown) she completed Special

Survey for 100A1 Lloyd's Register class. On 21 November 1956 she was listed outward from 4 Walsh Bay, Sydney for Suva under the agency of F.H. Stephens. The following photo taken around this time shows that the shade deck aft of the funnel has been removed and the light mainmast replaced by a working mainmast with two derricks to serve the now unencumbered No. 2 hatch. She now looks to be trading solely as a cargo vessel. The funnel appears to be pale yellow with a black top.



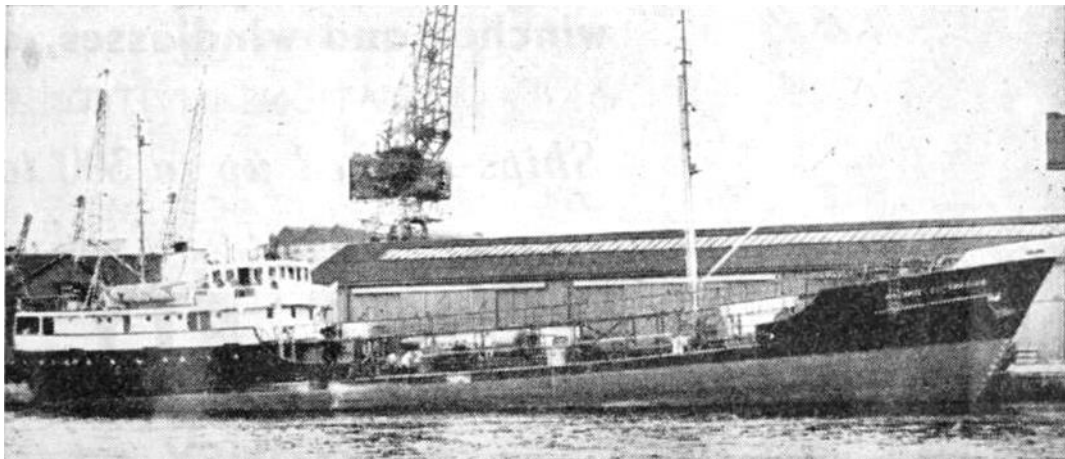
Sketch of KURIMARAU in the 1930s with passenger accommodation ('The Log', Feb. 1991).



KURIMARAU inbound off Circular Quay, Sydney in Berg ownership, mid-to-late 1950s, now without after awning and with working mainmast (coll. Ian Edwards).

According to A.D. Couper's study of South Pacific shipping, in the late 1950s she was on charter to The Rotuma Cooperatives for service between Suva and that outlying Fijian island. Couper records that hitherto under the shipping and trade monopoly of the 'Fiji merchant companies' (Burns Philp, Morris Hedstrom and W.R. Carpenter), freight rates for the 400 miles from Suva to Rotuma had been \$17.60/ton plus \$3.50 lighterage, almost the same as Suva to UK! The emergence of the cooperative in 1957 and the charter of *Kurimarau* and then the Tongan Copra Board's 559-dwt Dutch-built *Aoni* (1958) reduced the rate to \$5.70 plus \$2.20 by 1964.

With charter money coming in from *Kurimarau*, in 1960 Berg and partners took the step of buying the 732-dwt, Dutch-built and smart-looking product tanker *Harold* (1952), which was registered at Vila to Pacific Carriers Ltd as *Pacific Enterprise*. The carriage of fuel to the many islands of the South Pacific had become an increasing logistics problem with the increase in motor vehicles, motorized craft, aircraft and diesel generators for power. Drums were clumsy to handle and stow and the empties took up space on the return voyage at the expense of copra. Apparently *Kurimarau* had latterly been used in this trade out of Suva but a small product tanker would be a much more efficient and cheaper way to deliver fuel, 'Pacific Islands Monthly' of September 1960 reported that Vacuum Oil Co. would charter the ship and were busy building bulk terminals at Lae, Wewak and Kavieng with other terminals to be built at Tarawa, Vila and Santo. First Master of *Pacific Enterprise* through to 1969 was South African-born F.W. More, a former Ellerman's cadet, later junior officer with Union S.S. Co. and Chief Officer with Northern S.S. Co.



Dutch-built tanker PACIFIC ENTERPRISE soon after delivery (PIM, Sept. 1960).



PACIFIC ENTERPRISE in Dilmun colours departing Lyttelton oil wharf (coll. A Duncan-W. Schell)

In 1966 Berg & Co. bought a second tanker of similar size, the 804-dwt German-built *Jugum* (1959), which was registered in Port Moresby to the same entity as *Pacific Carrier*. London-born Ian Hoskisson became Superintendent. This small but well-run fleet attracted the interest of Gray, Mackenzie & Co. of London (Inchcape Group), whose Dilmun Navigation Co. Ltd had since 1959 been chartering small tankers and other vessels in the Persian Gulf and, though the affiliated Macdonald, Hamilton & Co. saw opportunity to expand into the South Pacific. Having reached the good age of 75, Berg was a willing seller and in 1968 the deal was concluded for the two tankers and the associated business. In retirement, Berg lived on in Sydney, where he died on 11 March 1979, survived by his wife Tui, who died there in June 1995.

## Fleet List

**SVALE** (1926-31) 2198/05-3 (275.8' (283 incl. rudder) x 44.1'; E (1926): 2x6cy/298nhp)  
 Built by Wm. Denny & Bros. (#731), Dumbarton with three steam turbine engines (450rhp) by Parsons Marine, Newcastle for British India S.N. Co. Ltd, London for Calcutta-Rangoon line but until 1907 running Bombay-Karachi, then Colombo-Tuticorin [Laxon]. 4/11 t/f to weekly Singapore-Port Swettenham (for KL)-Penang mail line. 7/15-1/18 requisitioned as Armed Boarding Steamer (Persian Gulf and Red Sea), then Calcutta-Chittagong line. 8/23 sold for £6,500 to S.T. Williamson, Hong Kong and 6/24 reg. at Hong Kong. 10/25 t/f to Shun Hong S.S. Co. 1926 fitted by Hong Kong & Whampoa Dock with diesel engine (built 1917 by McIntosh & Seymour Corp., New York) from former U.S. submarine. 7/26 while still in refit sold to Skibs. A/S Nidaros (Hansen & Berg mgrs.), Trondheim r. SVALE and employed on charter in South China-HK-Hoihow-Straits passenger trade. Late 1928 t/f to Skibs. A/S Nidareid (Sverre Berg mgr) and



9/29 on charter in Macao-Timor line. 4/31 sold to Wing Ning S.S. Co. (Williamson & Co Ltd, mgrs), Hong Kong and reverted to S. China-Straits trade, also relief for Douglas S.S. Co. 2/34 switched from HK-Swatow to HK-Foochow line to replace damaged *Haining*. 11/3/34 at 2010 hrs wrecked on Breakwater Rock near White Dogs Is. in Min River (25.58N 119.51E) outbound in fog from Foochow to Hong Kong, all passengers and crew rescued by Chinese Maritime Custom's *Ping Hsing* (1880), ship quickly stripped by pirates before breaking up, CTL with no prospect of salvage.

**KURIMARAU** (1955-63) 297/30-11 (125.7 x 25.2', M6cy/330bhp/9k Deutz)

Built by Hong Kong & Whampoa Dock Co. Ltd, Hong Kong (#681) for Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd, Tulagi. Early 1947 sold to Western Pacific High Commission, Suva. 4/55 sold to S. Berg & Co. Ltd, Hong Kong, 9/55 reg. at Hong Kong. 3/63 sold to Kee Lee Shipping Co. Ltd, Singapore. 1966 sold to Pek Bon Swee & Goh Kah Kheng, Singapore. 1966 RLR but t/f to Panama flag and continued trading out of Singapore/Penang. 5/90 at Penang as Thai-flag SIRIVANNICH (reg. Trang). By 1995 laid up at Krabi, SW Thailand and presumed subsequently broken up.

**PACIFIC ENTERPRISE** (1960-68) 518 (720)/52-10 (tkr, 193.4 x 29.2', M6cy/10k Werkspoor)

Built by N.V. Bijker's Aannemingsbedrijf "Ijsselwerf", Gorinchem (#126) for N.V. Algemeen Vrachtkantoor, Rotterdam as HAROLD. 1960 sold to Pacific Carriers Ltd (S. Berg & Co., Ltd), Vila r. PACIFIC ENTERPRISE. 1968 sold to Dilmun Navigation Co. Ltd (Gray, Mackenzie & Co. Ltd), London. 1972 sold to Nagata (Pte) Ltd, Singapore r. PETROEMPAT [=Petro 4]. 1977 sold to Siantan Shipping Pte Ltd, Singapore. 1986 broken up (rep. 1990) [Schell].

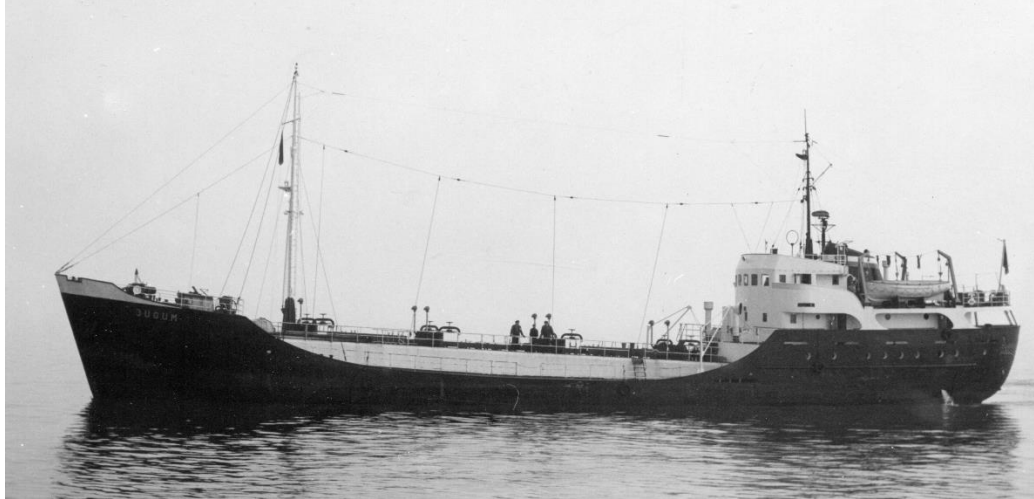


PACIFIC CARRIER ex HAROLD in Malacca Strait in 1970s as PETROEMPAT (P. Foxley/W. Schell).

**PACIFIC CARRIER** (1966-68) 621 (791)/59-6 (tkr, 192.10 x 28.6', M8cy/10½k by Masch. Kiel A.G.)

Built by D. W. Kremer Sohn, Elmshorn (#1068) for P/R (Atlantic-Rhederi F. & W. Joch), Hamburg as JUGUM. 1966 sold to Pacific Carriers Ltd (S. Berg & Co. Ltd), Port Moresby r.

PACIFIC CARRIER. 1968 sold to Dilmun Navigation Co. Ltd (Gray, Mackenzie & Co. Ltd), London. 1973 sold to Independent Shipping Co. (Pte) Ltd [Mdm Dolly Seah), Singapore. 1974 sold to Cia Nav. La Luna S.A. (Hang Seng Trading Co.), Panama. After mid-1975 owners no longer listed in LCI, 1986 RLR [Schell].



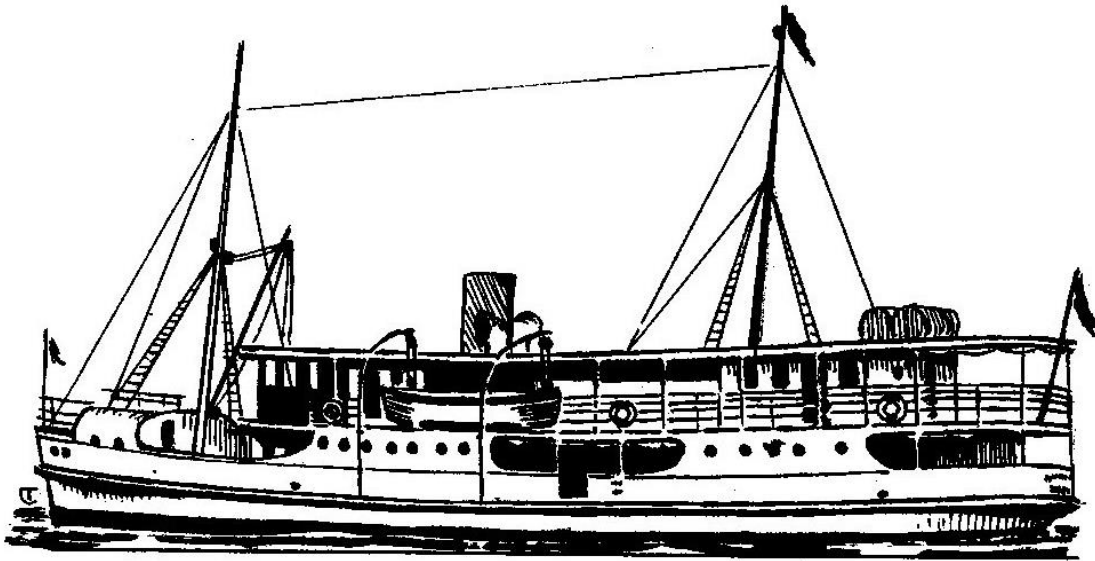
German-built PACIFIC CARRIER as JUGUM at Newport, Wales (D. Lynch/W. Schell).

## Part II: The Long-lived KURIMARAU

*Kurimarau* was completed by the Hongkong & Whampoa Dock in November 1930 for Lever's Pacific Plantations Ltd (LPPL), since 1902 a subsidiary of the Liverpool-based soap-making parent company Lever Brothers. LPPL was formed to establish coconut plantations in the South Pacific islands, especially the Solomon Islands, which would be a convenient source of copra for the new Sunlight soap and glycerine factory in Sydney's industrial harbour suburb of Balmain (see Wikipedia). To ship the copra without complete dependence upon Burns, Philp & Co., in 1903 LPP acquired the Union Company's 1141-grt island steamer *Upolu* (1891), which in January 1911 was replaced by the much larger 2005-grt *Kulambangra* (1910). For communications and accumulation within the islands, Lever's built the 170-ton *Kobiloko* at Sydney in 1910, then in 1912 added the 140-ton Hunter River coaster *Hawk* (1903) and the 165-ton, Singapore-built *Koonookarra* (1899), all wooden-hulled steamers. *Hawk* was converted to a lighter around 1917, *Kulambangra* sold in 1919 and *Kobiloko* laid up in Sydney in July 1925 and sold in October 1928 to M. Hagen of Noumea. The stoutly built *Koonookarra* (see 'The Log', 2018, pp. 91-92) was retained until *Kurimarau* came into service, then cast ashore on Malaita as being of no further use. Comparison of the two vessels suggests that the reliable *Koonookarra* was at least the starting point for design of the larger *Kurimarau* with the addition of an awning deck from aft of the bridge.



KOONOOKARRA at Hobart in Holyman colours (Coll. Rex Cox).



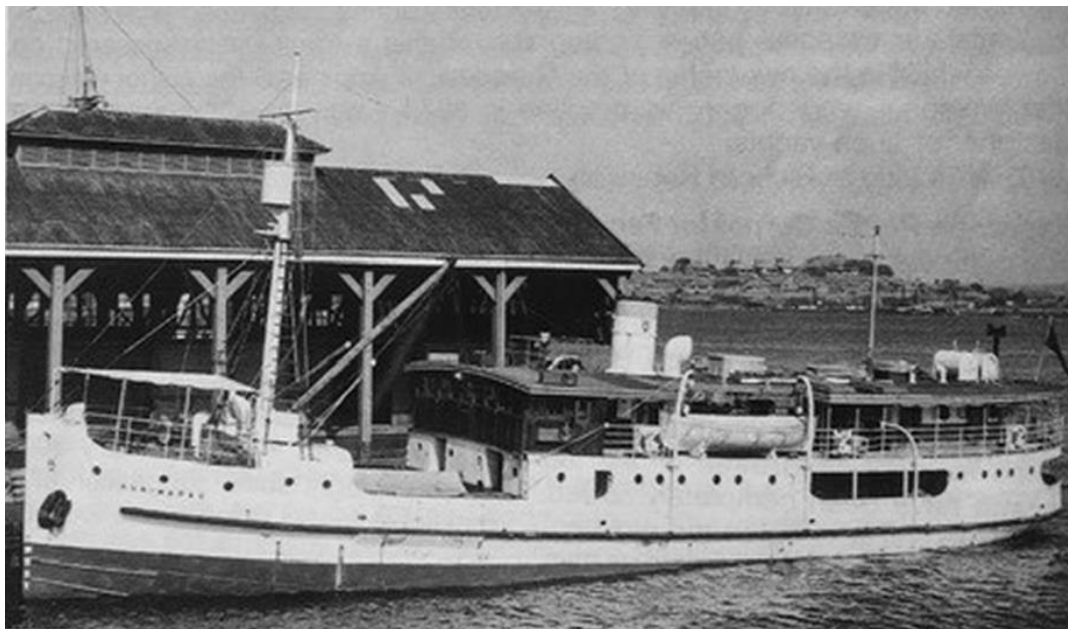
Sketch of prewar KURIMARAU, flipped for comparison ('The Log', Feb. 1991).

A smart, multipurpose vessel with a teak main deck, *Kurimarau* had accommodation for an 18-man islander crew in the forecabin, officers and engineers amidships, and four single-berth 'staterooms' on an aft shade deck. Cargo deadweight was about 250 tons with a capacious

forward cargo hold served by a single derrick and electric windlasses, also a smaller trunked hold aft without gear. The engine was a single-acting, 4-stroke, airless-injection, 6-cylinder, 330-hp Deutz diesel giving a speed of 9 knots. The diesel would have taken up less space than a steam engine, boiler and bunker and avoided the need for a complement of firemen.

Perhaps *Kurimarau's* most notable feature, though hardly apparent from her broadside profile, was that she was very beamy. Her length of 125.7 feet was only five times her 25.2-foot beam, which would have allowed for a shallower draft, less cramped cabin accommodation and a more squared forward hold. Whether it impaired her sea-keeping qualities is not known but Colin Ellwood noted in 'The Log' (Nov. 1990, p.147) that she did not steer well and later during wartime service was not at all popular in convoy.

According to the 'Singapore Free Press' (10 Dec. 1930), *Kurimarau* was launched on October 11 – named after an island off the coast of Guadalcanal – and registered at Tulagi, then capital of the British Solomon Islands. By early December, she was en route to Tulagi via Manila. She was reported by the 'Singapore Free Press' (10 Dec. 1930) as intended for service between Sydney and the Solomon Islands but only turned up in Sydney for annual docking. Lever's purpose was probably more for local interisland service and connection with Fiji, taking out supplies, bringing back copra and empty fuel drums and bottles, carrying staff and recruiting labour as required. On her first voyage to Sydney on 30 October 1932 under Capt. J.W. Reardon for docking and overhaul, she arrived with a cargo of 230 tons of copra (PIM III/4, 23 Nov. 1932) – she returned again in November 1934 (23/10 ex Tulagi) and also in 1938. A drawing of her prewar appearance that appeared in 'The Log' (Feb. 1991, p. 147) showed her all white except for a yellow funnel.



KURIMARAU at Sydney c.1952 in High Commission service but still in original configuration with first-class passenger accommodation aft (Ian Edwards in WSS Marine News, July 2002).

In January 1942, after Pearl Harbour, *Kurimarau* was part of the evacuation to Australia of the last European staff from Tulagi. Clive Moore relates that on 22 January *Kurimarau* was strafed there but without significant damage or injury, then proceeded to Rabaul as part of that evacuation. She became a footnote (Gill, v. 1, p. 596n) to Australia's wartime naval history, which notes that in early March 1942 she became one of seven small vessels allocated to a shuttle service between Cairns and Darwin along with Burns Philp's displaced island craft *Mamutu* (300/38), *Matafele* (335/38) and *Muliama* (689/37), AUSN's Queensland coaster *Babinda* (659/36), Burke's coaster *Alagna ex Malake* (736/28) and the sugar lighter *Katoora* (327/27). The following month, *Kurimarau* was requisitioned by the British Ministry of War Transport. The late Peter Nielsen records that she arrived at Townsville from Sydney on 16 April en route via Thursday Island for Darwin with *Katoora* and the minesweeper escort HMAS *Lithgow*. After a second voyage in the latter half of May, she arrived back in Cairns on 4 June and the following day was taken over by the Commonwealth of Australia's Shipping Control Board, though remaining on the Darwin run.

After refit in Brisbane from mid-July 1942, perhaps when the forecastle, bridge deck and bridge were plated up for better protection, *Kurimarau* returned to Cairns at the end of August before on 24 September being transferred to the Small Ships Section of the U.S. Army Forces in Australia (USAFIA) as S-105 to supply the front line in Papua New Guinea, still with her Malaitan crew. On 4 November she sailed from Cairns for Milne Bay, only to have to put back the same day, then sailed again on the 10<sup>th</sup>, presumably after repairs.

From November onwards *Kurimarau* under Capt. Bert Cummings was in the front line supplying Allied forces in the assault on Buna on the northeast coast of New Guinea. She earned a second mention in Vol. 2 of the Official History for an incident on 6 December 1942 when towing a barge with two 25-pounder guns from Porlock Harbour to Hariko, the rendezvous for the supply of Buna. Off Porlock, as Shaw's 'The Rag Tag Fleet' relates, she was attacked by three Japanese dive bombers, fatally wounding Porlock's Harbour Master, Commander Sinclair. Bill Lunney's history of the small ships ('Forgotten Fleet') gives more detail. Sinclair, who had been below eating a meal, had rushed onto the bridge just in time to be hit by a bomb blast. Also killed – but not mentioned in the Official History – were an Islander crew member while four gunners (two American, two Australian) were wounded – the ship had been fitted with two 0.5-inch machine guns. Fortunately, the precious gun barge remained intact.

The damaged *Kurimarau* limped back to Milne Bay, then south to Cairns (3 February 1943), Townsville and, in mid-February, on to Brisbane for repairs. On docking it was found that the propeller blades had been splayed backwards, necessitating a new unit to be fitted. In mid-April she returned to Townsville, thence Cairns and on 11 May from the Ince Point rendezvous off Wednesday Island to Milne Bay and New Guinea. In August 1943, now with 16-year-old Bill Lunney among the crew, *Kurimarau* was still on the advancing New Guinea front line, carrying food supplies to Tambu Bay near Lae and returning with battlefield 'salvage', anything that might come in handy.



KURIMARAU at Townsville in early wartime dress (AWM image 303506).

The rest of *Kurimarau's* war service is unknown. At some point she was released by the U.S. Army and at war's end returned to the Solomon Islands. Through the good fortune of a one-page document in the wartime British Board of Trade series (BT 389/18/27), we can locate her as sailing from Guadalcanal on 13 October 1945 for Esperito Santo, thence via Port Vila to Suva (mid-December). Around February 1946 she made a voyage to the Gilbert & Ellice islands, suffered some propellor damage on 4 March, and was back in Suva by mid-April. On 4 April there is a notation 'to be released from requisition on completion of off-survey and recruiting at ?', the question mark being entered in pencil but the recruiting voyage no doubt being for Lever's. The last report is at Suva on 14 May, where she would have completed survey prior to being returned to Owners.

In the event, Lever's soon decided to sell the vessel. Around the first quarter of 1947 she passed to the Western Pacific High Commission that administered the Solomon, Gilbert & Ellice Islands and had urgent need for interisland communications. She made a couple of brief appearances at Sydney. 'Pacific Islands Monthly' (1 Feb. 1953) reported that on 13 January *Kurimarau* had arrived in Honiara from Suva with the 'second wave' in then transfer of the Western Pacific High Commission from Suva to Honiara. Besides a small number of passengers, the ship carried 22 tons of records, 33 tons of furniture, 10 tons of sugar and 150 tons of general cargo, including 26,000 super feet of timber, building materials, two motor cars, a tractor, two surf boats and twelve goats. This is the only known manifest but apart from the records and office furniture was probably a fairly typical mix of inward cargo. The Third Engineer fell overboard in the course of the voyage and could not be recovered – the ship would have had little freeboard and the crow's nest was not at all high.

Later that year PIM reported that on 25 October 1953 *Kurimarau* had arrived at Ballina Slipway & Engineering Company in need of overhaul and was said likely to remain there until sold (PIM

24/6, 1 Jan. 1954). This report was confirmed by Lismore's 'Northern Star' (29 October 1953), which added that she had arrived at Ballina from the Solomons via Coffs Harbour with six passengers and that, after the Master and 22-man crew had been paid off, was lying at the slipway for sale 'to any person desirous of buying it'. According to Ian Edwards, she reappeared in Sydney the following year on charter to the Colony Wholesale Society, a state-sponsored trade cooperative based at Tarawa in the Gilbert & Ellice islands (now Kiribati and Tuvalu) but the dating is uncertain.

[*Kurimarau's* service with Sverre Berg is sketched above and not repeated here]

On 15 July 1961 *Kurimarau* was reported in the Outer Roads of Singapore, after which she is often noted by the 'Straits Times' as lying in the Inner Roads, though without any information on origin or destination and without any advertisement or news report. According to her Hong Kong register, she was sold by Bill of Sale dated 12 March 1963 to Kee Lee Shipping Co. Ltd of 47B Boat Quay, Singapore. It may therefore be presumed that she was sold under demise charter in the second quarter of 1961. Kee Lee was a small local operator in the rubber trade with the Riau Islands and mainland Sumatra. Its other vessels were the 229-grt Taikoo-built *Pulau Kidjang* (1936) and the 522-grt 'Shelt'-type *Pulau Tekong* (ex *Salong* '62 ex *Empire Seagrass* '46, built 1945 by Goole). The former had been acquired by Kee Lee in January 1959 under mortgage from the adjacent firm of Leong Huat & Co. (47 Boat Quay) that had bought the ship in the previous month from her original owners, the Soon Bee S.S. Co. of Singapore. *Pulau Tekong* was added in August 1962. For whatever reason, perhaps to do with the difficulties of trading through the Indonesian blockade during the Confrontation campaign against Malaysia, Kee Lee folded in 1965/66. *Pulau Tekong* was sold in November to Madam Dolly Seah and *Pulau Kidjang's* register was closed on 31 March 1967 for want of any current information. *Kurimarau*, whose mellifluous Malay-sounding name was never changed, was reported sold in 1966 to Pek Bon Swee and Goh Kah Kheng of Singapore and then, at age 36, she dropped from Lloyd's Register.

By no means was that the end of *Kurimarau*. Evidently in 1965 or 1966 she was reregistered to some nominal entity under the Panamanian flag. In July 1970 Bill Schell photographed her in Singapore lying close inshore in the Inner Roads with the buildings of the colonial business district in the background.



KURIMARAU close inshore from Inner Roads, Singapore, 21 July 1970, now a plain cargo vessel, midship portholes all plated up (Bill Schell).

I myself saw her at Singapore in December 1971 and on successive occasions into the 1990s. A growing number of ship photographers were similarly delighted to find this old craft still working, even if her owners and trade were a mystery.



KURIMARAU down to her marks at Singapore, 16 March 1974. Still a single derrick forward, topmast struck on the main. Funnel lettering 'HCH', red top (Bruce Nicol/NAA).



From sightings in Malacca Strait and Penang, she seems to have been in service between Singapore, Penang and the small ports along the southwest peninsula of Thailand. By January 1980 when I photographed her at Singapore she was under the Thai flag as *Sirivanich*. In May 1990 while visiting Penang for a Naval Review, Chris Gee and Ian Edwards sighted a little old cargo ship anchored off the fishing village area to the south of the main port. Being curious, Ian made his way to the village by land and there, despite the heavy overcast conditions, was to photograph the vessel, which turned out to be *Sirivanich* ex *Kurimarau*, loaded on top of the forward hatch as high as the bridge windows and much the same aft, hardly a safe stow. Masts were freshly painted but the hull was badly pitted and certainly would not have passed Lloyd's inspection. Under a faded Thai flag, the port of registry showed as Trang, the first main town beyond the Thai Malaysia border from Langkawi and Penang. As far as the name is concerned, 'Siri/Sri' is an honorific and 'Vanich/Panich/P(h)anit (as pronounced)' is a common surname for Thai families of Chinese descent and evidently denotes 'commerce' or 'prosperity' (like the Chinese character 'fu/fook'). A last sighting of her was by Andreas Schneider, who in 1995 found her laid up at Krabi, across the bay from Phuket, and sought to know her identity ('WSS Marine News', Feb. and July 2002). By then she was 65 years old. From her poor condition it is likely that she would have been broken up not long after.





SIRIVANICH at Penang, May 1990. Masts and gear painted but hull badly pitted (Ian Edwards).

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