

Boa Constrictor Boards LNG Libra!!

By Jerry Hale, REO



Bontang, East Kalimantan, September 27, 1995 (SP) - When the LNG Libra dropped the hook on the equator in the waters off the LNG port of Bontang on the east coast of Borneo in the early morning hours of Wednesday September 20th no one knew just how exciting these several days at anchor were going to be.

Later in the day on Wednesday the tug Sea Puli came alongside and deposited the usual cadre of customs and immigration officials. In about one hour, when all the formalities had been completed, the tug returned to take the officials off

the vessel. The sea had picked up a little and so the tug, to maintain stability for the boarders, made up to the side of the Libra with more than usual force. As the powerful engines pressed the Sea Puli against the side of the Libra the space inside of one of the large tires which make up the bumpers on the tug boat apparently became a little too cramped for a large boa

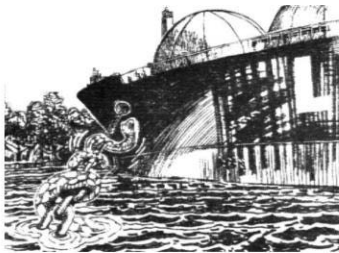
constrictor which had taken up residence inside the tire. As the tug moved away from the ship the snake slithered out of the tire and into the sea. The Bos'n Bert Gillis spotted the snake dangling by its tail from the Sea Puli and then dropping into the water. He tried to signal the tug boat crew but they misinterpreted the gestures and grinned and waved back, unaware that they had just lost a passenger.



For the remainder of Wednesday the snake was seen swimming in the waters around the Libra. Much speculation ensued as to whether it was actually a boa constrictor, as the Bos'n insisted, or some sea snake, which seemed much more likely. In mid-afternoon the snake was no longer seen and was thought to have drowned or perhaps he was clinging to the rudder post.

Around 5 PM, the Sea Puli returned in the role of liberty launch. As she rounded the stern the snake was seen in the water once again. This time the snake was swimming toward the Sea Puli and seemed to be intent upon re-boarding the tug boat! After the tug left, however, the snake was seen swimming around the Libra as before. That night it was seen on several occasions where the ship's lights illuminated the waters.

Thursday the Bos'n and A/B Tom Grose spent every spare moment trying to capture the snake. They devised poles with rope loops on them, several baskets and buckets etc. Nothing worked to lure the snake into their clutches.



At one point the Bos'n observed the snake attempting to climb the anchor chain. It soon failed and fell back into the water. Bert described the serpent as being 8 to 10 feet in length and perhaps four inches in diameter at its thickest point with a large head which was wide and tapered down to a flat nose. He has had some experience with snakes, being a diver and veteran of the Army's 1st Special Forces who made it their business to know snakes. His opinion was that it was indeed a boa constrictor or something very similar and was NOT a sea snake. Late on Thursday the snake was no longer seen swimming

around the ship. Speculation about the snake's fate varied. Some thought it couldn't stand salt water and had drowned. Others thought it would have swam ashore, in spite of the fact that we were anchored 7 to 10 miles from the nearest land. A few insisted that it would have been eaten by barracuda.

Several days went by with no sightings of the snake being reported. The crew of the tug Sea Puli were informed that their boat had brought the boa (Indo: sar'cha) to the Libra. They were adamant that it was not possible, could not have happened etc. No snake had ever been spotted on the tug boat and none were ever seen in the port area. We were advised that it could possibly be a sea snake but could not possibly be over about 1 meter in length or bigger in diameter that 1-1/2 or MAYBE 2".

I had missed the early sightings but put out the word that whenever the snake was again spotted to please let me know IMMEDIATELY so that pictures could be made of what was looking like a VERY unusual incident. Days went by with everyone checking the water for the snake. People would be seen walking all around the ship looking down over the rail every several feet hoping to see the snake again but no one saw anything after Thursday.

On Wednesday September 27th, exactly one week after the first sighting, the phone rang in Radio. An excited voice informed me that the snake was aboard the ship and was presently between cargo tanks 1 and 2! The snake had finally learned to climb the anchor chain!!

I grabbed my video and still cameras, stopped long enough to make a quick call to Captain Legnos and one to EOS before I dashed down the ladder. I called to everyone I saw and urged them to pass the word, this was something not to be missed.

When I arrived on the scene I found the Bos'n armed with a large stick, A/B Tom "Tomahawk Tom" Grose armed with a hatchet, circling the winch and prodding at an unseen snake which had crawled inside it. A/B John Lefavour was perched atop the winch keeping an eye on the snake's reaction to the prodding.

A/Bs Ralph Neal and Norman Armstrong were standing WAY back. Ralph had had a real scare when he started the winch and saw a REALLY BIG snake start to come out of it! It turns out that the snake was hit by the fan when the winch was started. The blade cut him rather

severely and he decided to get out of there. Soon all of the noise and horrified screams changed the snake's mind and he retreated back inside the winch.

As the crowd gathered, various implements were inserted into the winch in an attempt to dislodge the snake but nothing seemed to be working. Bert sent A/B Gene Aruta to the Bosun's locker for some solvent. When a little of the solvent was poured onto the snake he decided he had to make his getaway and dropped down onto the deck under the winch.

As the snake started to make it's getaway Bert placed the big stick on him and stopped his progress then turned the stick over to 'Tomahawk Tom' who held the snake in place while Bert put a deck scrapper on the snake's head and then grabbed the snake right behind the head and picked him up.

Bert paraded the snake around so that everyone could get a good look at it. Of course he had everyone's attention and had no problem with crowding! After the Captain, the Mate, S/A Tom Williams and others had their chance to handle the snake and everyone had a chance to take pictures Bert marched off to the fantail for the end game. Bert had the snake firmly behind the head and the snake had Bert even more firmly by the right arm, clutching so tightly that he was cutting off Bert's circulation. By then though, the snake's options were few and his chances of survival only two, slim and none.



Some discussion was given to what should be done with the snake but the people who captured him were adamant that he should be done in and his skin used for some practical purpose. Actually 'Tomahawk Tom' was enthusiastic about the prospect and can be heard on the video tape exclaiming "Let's cut off his head" over and over! He kept swiping at the snake's head, scaring the Bos'n who seemed much more afraid of being chopped by Tom than of being bitten by the snake!!

Some said the snake should be spared and just returned to the water. That idea was not enthusiastically received, opinion being that he wouldn't stay in the water and if he did would not survive because of the injuries he received in the winch.

Since nobody was very forceful in the snake's defense 'Tomahawk Tom' finally had his way and the snake's head was chopped off (quickly and mercifully I assure you) and his skin was removed.

Eating the meat was considered, the Captain of the Sea Puli insisted that the meat was delicious. That idea did not get a majority vote however, and so the meat was disposed of.

The curing and tanning process is underway and Bert informs us that the skin will make approximately 10 men's wallets, souvenirs of the great snake caper on the LNG Libra.

In the final analysis the snake was exactly 9-1/4 feet (2.82 meters) long. He was 7-1/4 inches (18.42 cm) in circumference at the largest point. Although no official weight was taken he was estimated at 10-1/2 pounds.



And so ends our tale of adventure. I've always maintained that a sailor's life was anything but boring but this has to be the most unusual sea story I've ever encountered.

Hopefully this is the final chapter although the natives assure me that these snakes always travel in pairs and his mate is sure to be near by. We don't really believe that but there seems to be an extraordinary delay in getting the winches serviced and flashlight batteries have become a commodity! Watch where you step on the LNG Libra and use the buddy system if you go on deck at night!

• - • - •





