

BY AN OLD HYDROGRAPHER

As it Was

In 1955 exploitable areas of ironwood were discovered near the North West River, in the south of former Netherlands New Guinea. Transport by coastal vessel became a problem when the ship encountered difficulties in avoiding mud-banks in the river entrance. The Governor of New Guinea requested the area to be charted.

At the end of November 1955 HNIMS Luymes, under the command of Lt Cdr Jan de Wit, was directed to Flamingo Bay in the Asmat Region, an estuary where the North West, Lorentz and Oetoemboewe Rivers come together. The mission was to carry out a sketchy survey to be finished before Christmas.

Stone age were not only the living conditions of the head-hunters who are part of this story. The methods used when surveying in those years were, at least seen with nowadays eyes, also stone-age.

The scene: rainforest, endless mangrove vegetation and mud flats. When Luymes dropped her anchor the surrounding area seemed deserted.

Soon, however, the first canoes rounded the corner of the Oetoemboewe River. Eight to ten men rowed their vessel in a standing position at high speed and it was followed by a motor-launch with the local administrative officer. They all came alongside and the officials, white and black, climbed the gangway. The commanding officer, a lean and modest figure, and the officer of the watch, a giant of a man, stood on deck to welcome them. The Village Eldest headed straight for the duty officer to offer his bows and arrows as a token of friendship, despite a common effort to direct him to the commanding officer. No one other than such a big man could be the boss of this vessel. Part of the ship's crew, mainly north coast Papuas, were not so happy with this exceptional survey and had locked themselves in their quarters. A few hours later some were found taking pictures of their stone-age countrymen.

After the ceremonies there was no time to lose, as the job had to be finished within two weeks. The original plan was to measure a base along the coastline, set up a couple of beacons on land and lay out a line of floating beacons on the west side of the area to be surveyed. However, they just managed to establish a reasonably stable position on both ends of the projected base; steps in between were not possible. There being no Tellurometer or other sophisticated device to measure the distance in one, the only possible way was to use the ships masthead: the extended telescope mast. The illustration shows the trick. Shortly after the first floating beacons had been lowered secured to two heavy cement weights and cat-anchor, they slid comfortably over the muddy bottom towards open sea at a speed of at least one knot.

The commanding officer was an inventive man who did not easily accept losing. More shore beacons were erected and as there was no "opposite side" to form triangles, the ship moved from one anchorage to another along the coastline, thus forming temporary triangles which enabled them to establish the position of the beacons. Long series were simultaneously measured, mainly by sextant, for which the ship handled a big black flag as a signal. Again, no modern means such as portable radio.

Sitting underneath a beacon ready for the signal from the ship, one of the officers found himself surrounded by a number of canoes containing curious Asmat Papuas. With him were a Dutch sailor and one of the Papua crew. The latter was scared stiff and started handing out his tobacco, urging his white colleague to do the same. Satisfied, the Asmat people soon left, just in time, as the black flag went up. Another problem with the Papua sailors were the tidal observations, for which purpose a tide-pole had been fastened to the only jetty in the vicinity. The intention was to observe a long series for harmonic analysis but the Papuas simply refused duty during the night, leaving this job to their white colleagues. After the ship had left the area the local police finished the observations.

There came an end to the suffering of the native crew members when sounding began, covering the bay with long tracks made by ship and three launches abreast. After having completed the shallower parts by motor launches only, followed by soundings up river, the job was finished on 13th December.

The next day the Village Headman gave an impressive farewell by escorting the ship down river with war canoes, each manned by ten to twelve men. Before Christmas the Hydrographer received an excellent fair sheet, for which he sent his appreciation to the commanding officer, a gesture seldom made in those days.

Jan Kreffer retired in 1983 as Netherlands Hydrographer