

# Nostalgic Icons of the Dutch East Indies

By Geoff Walker

## Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM)



Painting Tony Westmore from author's collection

The RIL Passenger Liner “Tjitjalenska” depicted at anchor in Hong Kong ca. Mid-1960's.

Commencing from 1947, the Dutch company “**Koninklijke Java-China-Paketvaart Lijnen**” (KJCP) under the English name **Royal Interocean Lines**, was operating extensive services intra-Asia, and to and from Australia, and East Africa.

The last of KPM, including the smaller companies Hollandse Vrachtvaart Maatschappij (HVM) and Nederlandse Tank- en Paketvaart Maatschappij (NTPM), was merged into KJCP (Royal Interocean Lines) in 1967. KPM, in its own entity, operated between 1888 and 1967. The line's routes, beyond the home islands, included services to the ports of Singapore and Hong Kong, Shanghai, Manila, Saigon; the Australian ports of Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide; African ports such as Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth, Mossel Bay, Cape Town, Zanzibar, Mombasa, and the Indian Ocean ports of Réunion and Mauritius and Mahé.

Throughout the 1950-early 1960's when navigating the, Malacca Straits, Java Seas, China Seas, and many other places within Asia, one was always able to see one of those graceful little KPM ladies, going about their business of carrying passengers and freight between the various Asian locations. These little ships were, without doubt, true Icons of their era. The Netherlands had tried to reconquer their former

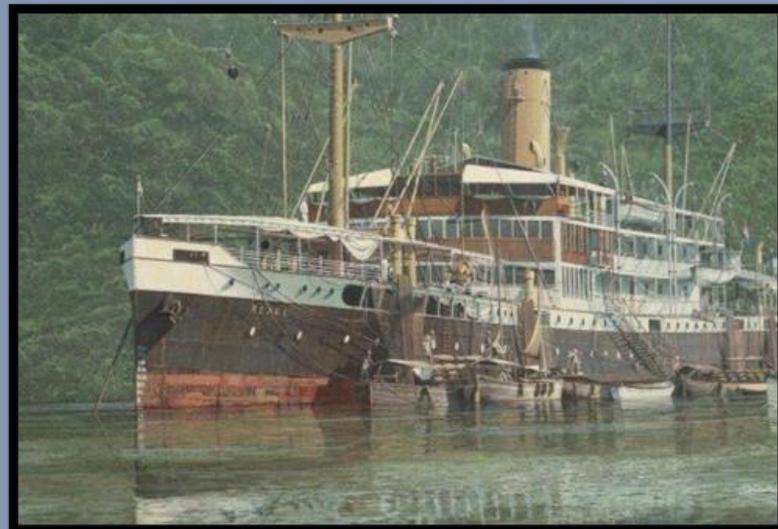
colony, of the Dutch East Indies, which they had been forced to abandon to the Japanese in 1942. But Indonesian nationalists claimed independence for the entire Indonesian archipelago, forcing the Dutch to relocate their main operating base to Singapore.

Considerable changes soon became evident to shipping due to the declaration of independence by Indonesia after WWII. KPM found that dominance in their traditional region of operations and trade had diminished, resulting from the Indonesian uprising, change of government, policies, and newly found Indonesian nationalism. There were some remaining KPM ships left operating after Indonesia's independence, but they were seized and expelled by 1957. In 1967 KPM merged with RIL, the unrest within Indonesia having precipitated this merger.

KPM had traditionally maintained the connections between the islands of Indonesia and supported the unification of the Dutch colony economy as the Netherlands expanded dominance across the Indonesian archipelago. The company brought inter-island trade and commerce through the capital, Batavia (now Jakarta), rather than to British Singapore. With independence and establishment of Indonesia as a nation the company, after competing with the national Pelayaran Nasional Indonesia (National Indonesian Shipping Line) and being taken over by trade union laborers on 3 December 1957, was faced with nationalization and moved its headquarters and international shipping assets to Singapore in 1958, from where it operated until 1967.



A pre - WW2 poster advertising cargo passenger steamers usually used to trade between the various Indonesian archipelago ports and, Penang, and Singapore during their heyday.



This image of KPM's Steamship "Reael" anchored upstream at some Indonesian archipelago location, amidst the choking heat, mosquitoes, and crocodiles, which tells the complete story. No air-conditioning, only a fan with louvered cabin doors and large windows to assist with the ventilation.



The KPM vessel “**Karsik**” departing from Hong Kong in the direction of Lai Yi Mun. Going by the Hong Kong Island skyline the photo looks to have been taken during early to mid - 1950s.

During the latter part of the Indonesia colonial era, KPM experienced a bumpy ride due to revolutionary insurrection and a threat of nationalization by the Indonesian government. In 1967 KPM formally merged with (KJCPL) part of the large (RIL) shipping conglomerate, which was very prominent throughout Asia with their extended world-wide services to Australia, Africa, and South America. In 1975 RIL itself, was integrated along with several other major Dutch lines, to become **Nedlloyd Lines**, part of the **Royal Nedlloyd Group**.

During their heyday, KPM operated an extensive fleet, so seldom a day passed, without sighting one of these small KPM steamers, all beautifully maintained by their long serving crews. Hearsay has it, once an Asian crew joined a KPM ship they usually remained with it for their entire seagoing days. I personally recall seeing many of their quaint little ships trading in Asian waters during their waning years, in the early 1960's, and later of course in their RIL livery.

For many years after the demise of KPM as a trading entity, their presence continued inasmuch, as many of their ships were sold to other regional operators and reflagged and of course renamed. One example being the “**Hero**” ex **Van Riemsdijk** (see below in gallery).

However, it was inevitable some were sold for demolition.

The origins of these little ships could always be easily identifiable by their distinctive design features. The cessation of KPM was a sad loss and signaled the end of inter-island trade around the Indonesian archipelago, with ship services being phased out. Nowadays, modern container feeder vessels, have replaced them. Sadly, the handsome little steamers are no more than a distant memory and only live on in vague nostalgic retrospection.

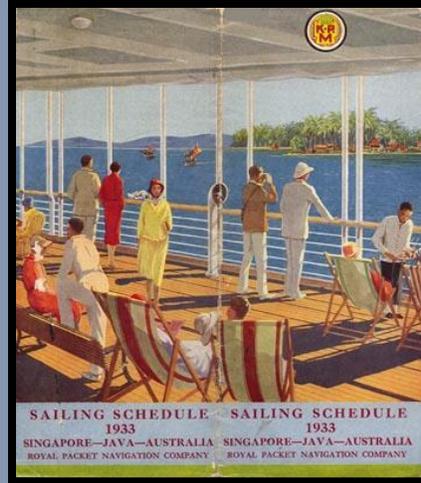
Below is a gallery of randomly selected images of KPM's graceful little ladies.



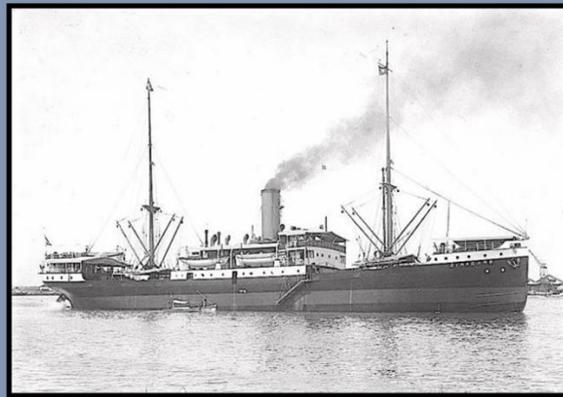
The KPM inter-island trader, "**Siaoe**" in RIL (Royal Interocean Line) colors after KPM's merger with that group.



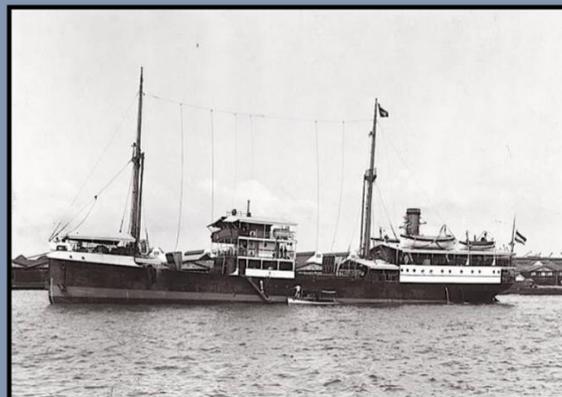
KPM's "**Barumun**". A typical example, of an inter-island trader, captured busy working cargo from both jetty and lighters, most likely in Batavia, now known as Jakarta.



A KPM advertising Poster of the 1930's promoting their services between Asia and Australia



Above, an old KPM Steamer, "**Sinabang**". A Frequent visitor to ports in Java and Sumatra



Another KPM old timer "**Moesi**" from a bygone era, somewhere in Indonesia, proudly displaying the Dutch Ensign



Easily recognizable as KPM, with classic lines and buff and black funnel. Their ships were always immaculately maintained which was reflected in their presentation. Photographed, is their ship “**Van Der Lun**” laying serenely at anchor in a peaceful haven, working from lighters.



Instantly identifiable as an ex KPM inter-island trader, working cargo alongside the wharf, at Belawan after the demise of KPM.



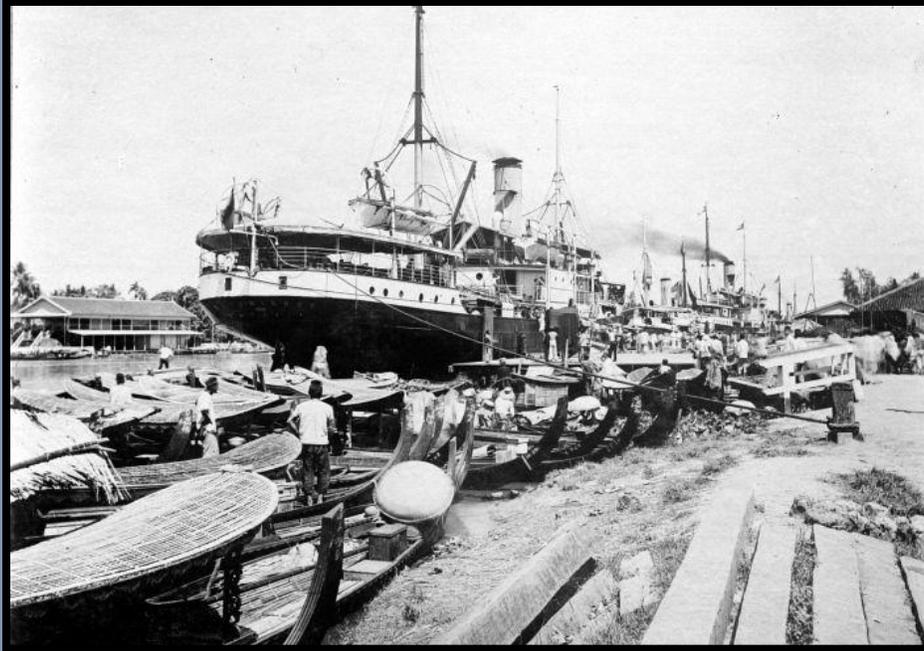
Having seen better days, but still going strong under new ownership, another ex KPM merchantman seen at Singapore small ship's anchorage, waiting on cargo, circa early 1960's.



An ex KPM vessel **Van Riemsdijk**, renamed "**Hero**", placed under a new register and management. Image taken at Hong Kong, whilst secured mid-stream to a Typhoon Buoy seen working cargo to barges. Its Dutch origins are immediately obvious to a knowing eye.



The good ship "**Van Riemsdijk**" seen in her former glory under KPM livery in 1940's, before being sold and renamed "**Hero**". Note, prior to the days of Radar, as the Radar Mast had not been installed at that time.



A wonderful image of a KPM vessel at an Indonesian Port circa, 1920's



The KPM vessel **"Maetsuycker"** (along with sister ship **"Tasman"**) was converted to hospital ships during WW11.

End

Credits: Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM), archives. Koninklijke Java-China-Paketaart Lijnen (KJCL), archives.

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