

MR. FEED PUMP IS DEAD, *VIVA SENOR BOMBA*

BY

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The velvet Caribbean night is almost past. The phosphorescence, alive with flying fish, pales with the first touch of dawn. H.M.S. *Blake's* friendly frigate-bird is once again to be seen, soaring above.

In the forward engine room, the morning watchkeepers go about their business. No hint of impending disaster clouds their unlined brows.

FM HMS BLAKE
011244ZJUL
NAVOPDEF/BLAKE
OPDF/ME 27-78/INOP/NO
AMPN/FWD ENGINE ROOM STBD MAIN FEED PUMP SHAFT
SHEARED
RMKS/1. SHIPS STAFF WILL UNDERTAKE ON RECEIPT OF
STORES

2. FEO 0304.2 CAT 3

FM HMS BLAKE
011241ZJUL
STOREDEM
A. 03RDD 4JUL78
D. WEIRS TFP 20 PUMP COMPLETE QTY 1. LH SUCTION BRANCH
H. CONSIGN MEO HMS BLAKE CARTEGENA COLOMBIA

'Ah', the discerning reader will exclaim at this point. For today is a Saturday, and Cartagena, Colombia is 5600 miles from London. A cloud the size of a man's hand can be detected on the horizon. A cloud which soon solidifies . . .

FM MODUKNAVY
011933ZJUL
YOUR STOREDEM. ITEM NOT ISSUABLE . . . ADVISE PIL NOS OF
COMPONENTS

FM HMSBLAKE
012152ZJUL
YOUR 011933ZJUL NOT UNDERSTOOD. PUMP IS AMD ITEM
STOCKED AT BEITH

. . . and miraculously disappears.

FM MODUKNAVY
021538ZJUL
ITEM DEPARTS BRITISH CALEDONIAN FOR BOGOTA 04JUL . . .

Bravo, a thousand times BZ you brave boys of DGST, you valiant duty officers in Eaglecliffe and Beith, you great little movers strung across U.K. For it is Sunday and you have fixed it.

Monday, and the mood in the Engineer's Office is jocund. The Senior is positively beaming. Tomorrow we hit Cartagena, and a spanking new feed pump, bright in G. & T. Weir's familiar green livery, will await us at Bogota, a mere stone's throw away. Officers may be of good heart; singing (within certain limits) is permitted in the machinery spaces.

Tuesday, and the early promise of the day withers as the heat begins to build. As admirals, guards, and bands come and go, a mild concern begins to become apparent.

Bogota, jewel of Colombia, is, it is true, only 350 miles from Cartagena, as the condor flies. But certain salient matters concerning that flight emerge:

- (a) the altitude of Bogota is 8000 ft. Even our trusty Sea Kings, not being condors, are overcome with aspiration problems at such a height;
- (b) the pump is said to be too heavy or too large or both to fit into the routine flights between Bogota and Cartagena;
- (c) the pump is thought to have been spirited away to a customs pound some 16 miles from Bogota Airport. More things enter that pound, the locals aver darkly, than ever leave it;
- (d) the road from Bogota to Cartagena is 800 miles long, frequently in-commoded by landslides, and takes three days by truck;
- (e) communication is precarious. The Herculean efforts of the ship's staff to maintain the physical connection of telephone lines across a chaotic dock area are matched only by the Herculean efforts of the civilian operators to leave the exchange unmanned;
- (f) *Mañana* is not a day; it is a philosophy of life.

By now, the Defence Attaché, a lieutenant-colonel in the Intelligence Corps, has been introduced to Feed Pumps as a Concept and to their lack as an Embarrassment. With that admirable panache of which only the army is capable, he steps ashore jauntily 'to fix things'. A great weight is lifted from our shoulders.

But man proposes and God disposes. From his command-post in the Hotel Caribé, the gallant colonel makes a number of phone calls, through an instrument occasionally and precariously connected to Bogota. Despite the agreeable nature of his surroundings—the tinkling of ice in rum-laced cocktails, the graceful passage of the lightly-clad flowers of Colombian maidenhood—the news he receives is seldom comprehensible; when it is comprehensible it is seldom good. The caretaker at the Embassy reports that, regrettably, all potentially useful officials are already in Cartagena to assist *El Task Group Britanico*. The freighting agency selected to help in such matters no longer exists; the alternative agent is unfortunately indisposed. Perhaps next week . . . ?

Gritting his teeth and reflecting on various victorious army campaigns, the colonel plays his trump card—a call via *El Microwave* to the head of the Colombian Air Force:

'Ah, General, with respect to your most excellent Hercules in which I travelled last week, I was wondering whether . . .'

'My Colonel, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to serve the British Navy in this small way. However, there may be certain difficulties. Perhaps next week . . .?'

Over the next 24 hours, the possibilities flood and ebb. The mood in the Engineers' Office oscillates between unreasoning optimism and total despondency. Light and shade alternate as if driving down a tree-lined road.

The subject assumes a pervasive air and, at cocktail parties, café society can be heard muttering 'feed pump . . . feed pump' in a dozen groups. What most of them think a feed pump is, heaven knows!

By Thursday morning, all avenues have been explored, all stones turned. The Commander (E), unused to sensations of impotence, paces like a caged tiger. 'Senior,' he rasps, a vein beating in his temple, 'assemble a cutting-out party'.

Sub-Lieutenant Parkinson, Mechanician Rodd, and Sub-Lieutenant Nelson Troncoso, Colombian Navy, receive their briefing soon afterwards. Parkinson

and Rodd are the curators of the poor dead feed pump, the watchers on the Longships (as it were) for the first glimpse of its gleaming successor. Troncoso is an energetic and capable liaison officer with no fixed views about the mandatory nature of *mañana*. As thoughts of Fawcett, Livingstone and Shackleton whirr in his brain, the Commander (E) gruffly instructs his fragile team of hit-men. 'You are to fly to Bogota this evening. Tickets have been arranged. Once there, locate the pump, spring it from customs with Embassy help. Get it on an aeroplane. If necessary, dismantle it into smaller components. If all else fails, fly it to Panama. Do not return empty-handed. We sail on Saturday'.

An exchange of firm handshakes and the team, visibly moved, go over the top. By 2100, they arrive in Bogota. The airport is closed (O death, where is thy sting?) but the agent has arranged a flight for tomorrow (O grave, where is thy victory?). In the circumstances, a run ashore to downtown Bogota is indicated.

Friday dawns, pregnant with meaning. It's the big one. At 0800, ominously, the agent, crucial to the plan, is missing. At 0830, he has been scooped up and is involved in one and a half hour's earnest supplication with the Head Customs Officer to release the pump.

At 1100, the flight is cancelled . . . try *mañana*.

At 1200, a chartered DC6 is arranged for 1300 at the modest fee of £850.

At 1300, the flight is cancelled, no crew . . . try *mañana*.

At 1500, a crew has been located and, miraculously, the pump and hit-team are airborne for Cartegena. The Andes appear particularly lovely in the glow of success.

At 1630, before landing, the pilot identifies *Blake* and salutes her with a victory roll—not often experienced in a DC6. His bravery is further magnified when it transpires that he thought the crated pump was a bomb—the Spanish for pump is *bomba*.

At 1700, a further hour of discussion with the Cartegena customs intervenes, assisted by the British Consul, the R.N. liaison officer, and two Colombian naval officers. Inexplicably, a second crate, containing a tractor engine, has attached itself to the circus, creating further confusion.

At 1800, the Colombian naval transport is reported U/S . . . try *mañana*. The team hires a lorry for the final trip to the ship.

By 1930, all is safely gathered in, to the thunderous applause of the duty watch and a large assortment of Colombians on the dockside.

As Mechanician Rodd puts it with the agreeable understatement so typical of the British, 'It was an interesting experience.' And so it was.

Actions to avoid recurrence:

(a) *Mañana* means *mañana*.

(b) Don't freight through Bogota . . .