

Excerpts from *The Up Country Man*, by K C Ryeland.  
A personal account of the first one hundred days inside secessionist Biafra

**Chapter IV: A Testing Time**

....The following day, as Fred and I walked through the main gate, we were greeted by Sergeant Musa who gave us the usual smart salute and told us, in his very formal way, that the GSM wished to see us right away. He then did a very strange thing. He turned to me and said that he was sorry that Nigeria was going through a bad patch now, but that he was sure it would all be sorted out very soon. My reply reflected his feelings on the subject, but stressed that he could in no way be held responsible for all the palaver in Nigeria.

“But I am to blame in a way, sir,” retorted Sergeant Musa. “Had I stayed in the army and tried to knock some sense into these young officers, then perhaps the problems would not have existed. When we had British officers, there was none of this tribalism. It is destroying our country, sir. The only hope we have is for Her Majesty to intervene and stop Ojukwu in his bid for secession.”

I could think of no appropriate reply except to nod slowly, make my excuses and walk away in the direction of the GSM’s office. As we walked, Fred grabbed my arm and said urgently, “Why was old Musa talking to you like that. Apologising for all the palaver and all that stuff about the Queen?”

“I don’t know, Fred. Perhaps he knows something we don’t.”

Edward met us at the door to his office and invited us in.

“How are you both this morning? Fit? Well? Good, the coffee is on its way. Nothing like coffee to chase the cobwebs away in the mornings is there?”

We both knew that Edward was feeling tense. He always talked too much when he had something difficult or unpleasant to say. We sat down and wondered what was coming next.

When his secretary had served the coffee and departed, Fred immediately got up and stood in front of Edward’s desk. All I could do was take a deep breath and pray for him to keep quiet. He did not keep quiet of course; instead he began to rant at Edward.

“Now listen to me, Edward. I am not going to the east for you, the general manager or anybody. So you had better cancel me out of any plans you may have in that direction.”

Fred began pouring out all the old arguments, but it was clear from the expression on Edward’s face that he was livid at such an outburst. At an appropriate moment Edward stood up and shouted, “Sit down, Fred, for God’s sake. Nobody has asked you to go anywhere have they? Instead of bawling and shouting at me why don’t you wait your turn and let me do the talking around here?”

My mouth remained closed. However, it did cross my mind that Fred had been a little premature in his outburst. He should have waited for Edward to say his piece before jumping in at the deep end.

Edward eyed us both angrily for a moment and then he began to speak.

"I was going to spend some time explaining the reasons for the decision I have reached, but there's no point now. So here it is, no frills. Fred, you're staying put, which will please you no end I am sure. Ken, you're going to Enugu to relieve Charlie McKay."

Even though the decision had been half expected, it did not prevent me from being taken aback somewhat. As the information began to sink in, my hands started to sweat and I decided to protest.

"Bloody hell, Edward. What about all this talk of rebellion and white men on chopping lists and Biafra and everything?"

Edward managed a smile and then said, "Oh, come off it, Ken. You don't really think they know you from Adam, do you? How can you be on anyone's death list? You've only been in the country for five minutes, and anyway all that nonsense was last year after the second coup."

Since there was no answer forthcoming from me, he continued talking.

"Charlie McKay has been there for ages and he has his family with him. So there's nothing to worry a young chap like you."

A sudden thought entered my head and I voiced it immediately.

"Just a minute, Edward. The whole point is, this McKay bloke is coming out and I am going in. Just as all the bloody trouble is about to start."

Edward tut-tutted and said, "You've been listening to all those old buggers at the club again. I do not think it will come to a fight, and even if it does, it will be over in five minutes. They don't have the nerve for it, the Ibo, especially against the northerners, and you can bet your bush boots that these Yorubas will keep right out of any fighting if it comes to it."

I thought about what had been said for a moment and concluded that Edward was probably right. Everyone who had expressed an opinion to me was convinced that the Yorubas would back away from anything that hinted at physical violence. The biggest problem, according to the pundits, was the Hausas. They would fight the Ibos given half a chance, and they were good at it too. They had a long tradition of soldiering with the British when Nigeria was a colony. I thought about Sergeant Musa and concluded that he would certainly give the Ibos a bashing, despite his age. The sound of Edward's voice calling my name interfered with my train of thought.

"Ken. Ken, are you with us? You should be ready to leave on Sunday. You had better see the carpenter right away and ask him to make you a load box; he knows the form. The box will be quit valuable. He makes them from best mahogany you know. Of course, it is as cheap here as pine is at home. Do not forget to dash him. Ten shillings will do."

My further protestations at having to leave so soon were met with a steely gaze and an explanation that McKay was now well overdue for leave and had been making quite a fuss about his replacement. Resigned to my fate, I said, "Presumably someone will give me a lift to the airport on Sunday, and whom do I see about the air ticket, Edward?"

He eyed me carefully over his glasses and said slowly, "Only general managers and up-country personnel travel by air. There's a brand new, UK built series IIA 88-inch wheelbase Land-Rover station wagon due for delivery to Enugu, and I have delayed its departure for you."

"Whaaaat? I am up-country personnel; you have just confirmed it, Edward. Why can't I go by air?"

“You are headquarters personnel at the moment,” said Edward calmly. “You won’t be up-country personnel until you actually get to Enugu. Do not worry; you will have one of our own drivers to take you there. You won’t have to rely on a casual driver.”

Highly irritated at being caught in a “Catch 22” situation, I tried not to let show through.

“How bloody far is this Enugu place from here then, Edward?”

Edward tried not to notice my belligerence and replied very calmly, “Oh, about 350 miles. It depends on how much of a detour you have to make because of bad roads.”

“Bloody hell, Edward, 350 miles in a bloody 88-inch station wagon. I won’t be able to sit down for a week, particularly if the roads are bad.”

“You are lucky my lad,” he retorted. “The rains have only just started. Another week or so and the roads will be completely washed away in certain areas.”

My irritation ensured a continuous stream of questions and belligerent discussion until I could think of nothing further to say about my transfer to Enugu. Fred had remained silent throughout my exchange with Edward. No doubt he was feeling somewhat guilty over the whole business....

## **Chapter XII: Cowardly Action**

....The Abakaliki Road had a tarmac surface for most of its length from Enugu to Abakaliki and beyond. However, this did not signify that it was in any way remotely similar to a conventional tarmac road. The surface, a single, thick layer of tar overlaid with gravel, would have been applied directly to the graded laterite surface many years ago and simply patched every now and again. However, it would only be repaired if the Ministry of Works were able to coax enough money out of the Ministry of Finance. Inevitably, the years had taken their toll and the road now consisted of a series of potholes joined by short stretches of tar. In certain areas, particularly on bends and gradients where the road was susceptible to erosion by rainwater, bare patches and corrugated sections abounded. Some of the potholes and bumps were big enough to jolt a vehicle so hard that any occupants were in danger of being propelled off their seats with the same acceleration as a Saturn V rocket going into orbit. On this road forty miles an hour was fast, very fast indeed.

On one or two occasions during the journey out from Enugu, Joe had misjudged the depth of a pothole or the frequency of a series of corrugations and had sent me flying off my seat. However, it soon became second nature for me to jam myself against the backrest whenever we hit a bad patch. Considering the appalling state of the road, Joe had managed very well. He was a good driver and kept us moving at a reasonable speed in spite of everything.

Throughout the return journey, my body was wedged in the “rough road” sitting position. My feet pushed hard against the metal dash and my back forced into the corner of the seat back. It was comfortable enough to permit me to doze off from time to time between the bumps. No doubt, the two bottles of Star beer had contributed significantly to my overall feeling of tiredness, because the next thing I remembered was Joe telling me that we were approaching the Enugu roadblock.

This roadblock was similar to the many other roadblocks that had materialised in recent times. It was situated some three or four miles from the outskirts of town on a

straight stretch of road with good visibility in each direction. At the actual checking point, the road was reduced to a single lane by strategically placed oil barrels and tree branches. Close by, under the shade of a clump of thorn trees, were some large army tents around which a dozen or more soldiers lounged on their groundsheets.

It was noteworthy that since the army had taken over roadblock duties from the police they tended to employ twice the number of people, and most of them appeared to spend their day eating, drinking or sleeping.

As a rule, there would be a minimum of six soldiers on duty at any given time: two to check the vehicles from each direction and two to observe and cover the four checkers. Much depended on the volume of traffic, and since the Abakaliki Road was very quiet on that day, they had deployed the minimum number of guards. Naturally, the soldiers on duty were armed, but there was no pattern to the type or calibre of the weapons they carried. I noted that at this roadblock, two of the soldiers were armed with modern automatic rifles, whilst the others sported Lee-Enfield rifles and Webley side arms dating from the Second World War.

It was clear to any casual observer that the average Biafran soldier was not as well disciplined as his contemporary in the police. Since the army had assumed responsibility for the roadblocks, there had been several reported incidents of innocent motorists being shot dead because of irrational and drunken behaviour on the part of young, inexperienced soldiers. It was with this thought in my mind that we approached the roadblock.

I was now wide awake and sitting up in my seat looking ahead to where the soldiers were gathered. I was trying to gauge their mood and determine what state they were in, remembering that they had been drinking palm-wine when we passed through the checkpoint earlier in the day. It was difficult to tell what sort of reception we would get because they all looked sober. However, their looks were no guarantee that they were.

Four of the six soldiers on road duty were sitting on the oil drums chatting, whilst the other two were reclining close by on the dusty ground.

As Joe began to slow our vehicle to a crawl, my eyes scanned the road in each direction. I was looking for other vehicles that may be in the vicinity, but the scene before me confirmed that we were alone. A feeling of apprehension enveloped me and I began to worry. It was far safer to be among a large crowd of vehicles at the road checks for two very good reasons. First, the soldiers were less likely to bother a white man if there were plenty of Africans from whom they could extract dash. Secondly, they tended to get bored very quickly and wave vehicles through if there were perhaps more than three or four waiting for the dubious pleasure of their attentions.

At the beginning of the emergency when the police were responsible for the roadblocks, they tended to concentrate on checking the vehicle's documents and the identity papers of the people on board. They would only demand dash if they found fault. To be fair to the police, this was a less prevalent occurrence than was generally held true by popular belief. The army however, tended to concentrate on searching the vehicle, albeit in a most arbitrary way, after which they would apply all their powers of persuasion to extract the maximum amount of dash with aggravated menace.

Throughout my time in Biafra, I cannot recall being asked for any form of identity at roadblocks manned by the military. Clearly, they never doubted that the name, occupation and destination I gave them were anything but true. However, a more likely

explanation was the inadequate training given to the majority of the Biafran soldiers who were conscripted immediately before the initial mobilisation. They had probably not been told that there was a government decree requiring all expatriates to carry their passports at all times. However, not that knowing about it would not have made much difference, very few of the young conscript soldiers could actually read.

Our vehicle rolled to a gentle halt close to the roadblock and almost immediately two of the four soldiers who had been sitting on the oil barrels got up and stumbled toward us. I swore under my breath. "Bloody hell, they're both pissed as newts."

Joe looked across at me and said, "Whatin, sa?"

"Don't worry, Joe," I replied. "Just be careful with these two, they're drunk. We don't want any palaver."

When the soldiers reached the front of our vehicle, they split up: one to my side and one to Joe's side. With an ever-increasing feeling of trepidation, I watched as the individual on my side of the Land-Rover lurched unsteadily towards me.

He was little more than a teenager really, and he had that gaunt, hungry look that often haunts the post-pubescent young of our species, regardless of race or colour.

Although he was a very slim youth, his uniform was quite clearly several sizes too small, which must have presented a somewhat comical sight to any casual observer. I made an effort not to smile openly at him. However, when I looked at his face any thought of smiling was dismissed when I noted that it was flushed and shining with sweat, thus indicating a surfeit of alcohol. It was easy to spot the blood-gorged tissue around his cheeks and neck, despite his dark complexion. His pupils were large and brown, but the whites of his eyes were extremely bloodshot: a maze of minute, fiery red veins. They looked as though they were bleeding freely.

The red face and neck, the bloodshot eyes, the unsteady walk and the glazed expression confirmed that he was as drunk as a lord. My diagnosis was further reinforced when he tried to ask me where we had come from. The youth was so drunk that he was unable to string two words together successfully.

A vague awareness of raised voices on the other side of the vehicle alerted me to the possibility of a problem. However, I took little notice, concentrating instead on keeping my soldier sweet and trying to understand what he was saying to me.

After the third attempt, he was able to make me understand what he wanted. However, as I began to relate the story of the Coal Corporation truck and how we were returning from mile forty-two, the soldier on the other side of the vehicle wrenched open the cab door, grabbed Joe by the scruff of the neck, and began to pull him out of the vehicle. Being unprepared for this violent action, I did not recover my senses until Joe was sprawling on the ground at the feet of his attacker.

I shouted and tried to open my door, but the young soldier on my side was pushing against it imprisoning me inside the cab. Shouting again, I put my shoulder to the door. The youth must have realised that he was in no fit state to bar my exit for very long. Rendered useless by alcohol, he suddenly let go and staggered to one side. When the Land-Rover's door swung open, I almost fell out. I quickly regained my balance and saw that Joe had been dragged to the front of the vehicle and was being systematically kicked by the other soldier. From the wild look and manner of him, it was obvious that this soldier was in the same drunken state as his chum.

It was difficult to believe the brutality that was taking place before my eyes, and in some desperation I scanned the faces of the other troops sitting around, but none of them were paying the slightest attention to Joe's predicament. If this palaver was to stop, it was up to me to stop it, because no one else would.

I made a move towards the kicking soldier, screaming at the top of my voice.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing to my driver, you bastard? Move away from..."

My words were cut off sharply by an arm that closed tightly around my neck from behind. Quickly and instinctively, my right elbow was thrust rearwards into my attacker's ribs. The young soldier in the tight uniform was so severely winded and knocked off balance that he immediately let go of my neck and fell heavily to the ground.

The soldiers who were supposed to protect and cover the searchers had been half asleep at the side of the road, but now they were alert and fully aware of what was happening. In no time at all, they were running towards our little group with their automatic rifles at the ready.

I had already reached Joe and was attempting to pull him up out of the dust, but his attacker, who was still lashing out with his feet, frustrated my efforts. However, he was so drunk that his aim and balance were less than perfect, and it did not take more than a momentary grasp of his boot during mid-kick to have him sprawling on the ground along with his colleague.

When the other soldiers arrived on the scene some few seconds later, Joe, who had now recovered somewhat from his ordeal, stood at my side and we both raised our hands high in the air. Determined to convince the soldiers that we posed no threat at all, I began to speak to them in the calmest voice I could muster.

"Everything is fine, gentlemen," I assured them, "there is no need for any palaver here. It is just a small misunderstanding. Let us all remain very calm. We don't want any shooting palaver, do we?"

My words were drowned out by the abuse being hurled at us by our attackers who were now sitting on the ground feigning injury and looking very sorry for themselves.

The incident had also alerted the other pair of vehicle checkers and most of the off-duty soldiers too, because I could see about a dozen of them walking towards us from their camp under the thorn trees some twenty yards away.

Watching the potentially dangerous situation forming in front of my eyes, I swore to myself and wished we were somewhere else....

## **Chapter XVIII: Deliverance**

....The roadblock into Aba was very badly situated immediately after a sharp bend in the road. The curve was so tight that when all our vehicles had finally halted, those of us who were at the front could not see the cars at the end of the convoy. I had to alight from my vehicle and cross to the right hand side of the road before it was possible to see the DHC's car at the head of the convoy. I was soon joined by many of the people from the vehicles in the immediate vicinity of my Land-Rover, most of whom stood silently watching as the DHC negotiated with some incredibly scruffy-looking volunteers at the barrier.

Without warning, several of the CDVs broke away from the general confusion of the main group and headed in our direction. As they approached, I noted with some dismay that they were armed with shotguns, home-made rifles and hunting guns. As they trudged up the slight incline the armed group began to shout and scream at the people who were still sitting in their cars, ordering them to get out and stand at the side of the road with their hands up.

My words were whispered to myself.

“ Bloody hell, what are these bastards up to now?”

It was not really necessary to ask myself the question. The answer was obvious as far as I was concerned. They were probably going to rob us of our personal possessions, steal the cars and leave us stranded with no possible way of reaching Port Harcourt.

The CDVs moved from car to car and screamed abuse at those who were slow to react to their orders. As they came closer, it became clear that they had been sleeping rough for some considerable time. Their clothes were dishevelled, they were dirty, and their hair was matted and covered in laterite dust. Most disturbing of all was the glazed look and the excessively bloodshot eyes, a sure sign that they were all drunk, or drugged, or both. As the men continued to stagger towards us shouting and bellowing at everyone in sight, they carried their weapons at the port ready for instant use. I decided not to play games with these people. They would certainly be dangerous if provoked.

“Hand up, white man. Hand up. Hand up.” They were screaming at everyone, even those of us who had anticipated their requirements and obliged by raising our hands above our heads. Every twenty yards or so, one of the vigilantes would drop out of the group to guard that particular section of the convoy. By the time they had finished walking the whole line of vehicles, all our people were standing at the side of the road with their hands in the air.

From where I was standing on the bend in the road, it was possible to see at least four armed vigilantes in front of me and about a dozen of them behind. I could also see that the DHC was deep in conversation with a couple of nasty-looking characters at the roadblock, approximately a hundred yards away. The Rhodesian, who had been two cars behind me and had already joined our little group on the bend, addressed me in a whisper.

“What do you think, Ken? Are these bastards going to shoot us, or what?”

The shock of his words made me turn my head quickly and snap, “Don’t be bloody stupid, with the DHC here? They would not bloody dare. Would they?”

David shook his head and gave me one of his funny looks.

“I know these buggers from old, man,” he said. “If they get something into their bloody thick heads they will do it all right, make no mistake. No matter who is around. Man, they will even kill the DHC if they have a mind to.”

How could I have been so stupid? It had not even occurred to me that they would actually shoot us. The gist of my reply to David indicated that there were too many of us for them to handle all at once, and anyway the DHC was with us. They would not dare harm a representative of the British Government. Furthermore, most of us were British and they would not dare to shoot British people.

Further reasons and excuses for not shooting us rushed through my mind. I was desperately trying to convince myself that all would be well. However, my hopes were dashed when David pointed to where the DHC had been negotiating with the CDVs. He too was now standing up against his car with his hands high in the air. Clearly this was

the point at which news commentators would have announced that, “Negotiations had broken down.”

One of the scruffy individuals with whom the DHC had been talking, left the roadblock and was now walking towards our little group with a menacing-looking double-barrelled shot-gun tucked neatly under his arm. He growled orders to our guards as he passed by and from their reaction it was clear that he was the undisputed leader of this gang of thugs. He suddenly began to shout at us in very poor English and pointing to the side of the road where our vehicles were parked.

“All dissy British somebody go for dissy side. All British go, go, go. One-time.”

We British glanced at each other and quickly crossed the road to stand against our vehicles as instructed. Quite naturally, David and all the other non-British stayed put, but this did not please the senior vigilante who must have thought that all white men were British. He began to shout abuse as he waved them all towards us with the business end of his shotgun. Moments later he began pushing David with the stock. David resisted for a moment before turning to speak to him.

“Listen, man, stop pushing. I’m not a Brit, I come from....”

David stopped in mid-sentence, and much to my relief quickly walked across the road to join us.

As he stepped into line beside me I said in a whisper, “Bloody good job you bit your tongue, you twerp. If he thought for one moment that you were from Rhodesia, he would have shot you on the spot....”

## **Chapter XXI: Sea Dogs**

....Clambering down the hatch ladder complete with suitcase and flight bag was not too difficult a task. However, as I slowly descended into the hold my senses began to detect a rapid rise in humidity and temperature. By the time I had reached the steel floor plates at the bottom, some forty or so feet below the deck level, the atmosphere could have been sliced with a knife. Not only was the hold uncomfortably hot, but also quite gloomy, despite the hatch cover being wide open. After a few minutes my eyes became accustomed to the dark and I soon began to search for somewhere suitable to park my bags.

The hold was surprisingly dry and comparatively clean. The steel floor and sides were quite brightly polished and therefore it was not unreasonable to assume that the ship had been used for the carriage of dry cargoes for some considerable time. There was no trace of damp or congealed dirt as might be expected for a general cargo ship. Of course, this was pure speculation on my part. Having never been in the hold of a ship before, all ships’ holds could be as clean and tidy as this one for all I knew.

Having found a bright spot directly beneath the hatch opening, I promptly claimed my two square metres of deck space. Moving about and arranging my things caused me to sweat profusely as the heat and humidity extracted their toll. I shuddered to think how unbearable it would be when, according to my information sheet, the full allocation of 150 adults was packed into the comparatively small hold area. It would not be wise, I thought, to spend too much time in the bowels of the ship if it could possibly be avoided. Undoubtedly, this would be the goal of every evacuee on board and therefore it was not

unreasonable to assume that the open decks would be severely overcrowded for the duration of the journey to Lagos.

David Haslam and one or two of my other friends from Enugu had also been allocated to hold number two. After welcoming them to the “black hole” as our accommodation had been so aptly named, we occupied ourselves trying to make the best of our combined space allocation. Having seen to our welfare, we turned our attention to assisting the elderly and less able people to negotiate the hold ladder. We also helped them to find a suitable space and stow their belongings. It was very pleasing to note that everyone had been very sensible about luggage. There were no great sea chests or masses of household goods being loaded. Each person was bringing on board only one, or possibly two, suitcases.

Whilst waiting at the top of the ladder for more people to show themselves, I struck up conversation with a man who, it was later revealed, originally hailed from the Portsmouth area of the UK. My discussions with this ex-sailor brought home to me the full extent of the personal losses that some people had sustained due to the evacuation.

The man had been working in Port Harcourt for over ten years running a small marine engine repair shop for a Lebanese businessman. The terms of his contract had been such that the employer provided a rented house at the going rate and the employee was expected to provide his own household furniture, soft furnishings and fittings. Because of the recent political instability and the beginning of the police action, the company suffered a downturn in business. As a result, the ex-sailor’s contract of employment was eventually terminated and he had to use some of his accumulated capital to finance his day-to-day existence because he was unable to return to the UK. Now, with the evacuation of most expatriates, the poor man had been forced to leave everything he owned. Notwithstanding the precious little time he had been given to sell up, who in their right mind would buy anything of value with the threat of civil war and invasion hanging over the town? Even if he had been able to liquidate his assets, the authorities would have prevented him from taking his money out of Biafra, as we all discovered to our cost in the customs hall.

The man also told me that he had given his car to his steward for safe keeping and had asked the houseboy to look after his two dogs. He must have loved his animals very much since he appeared to be more upset over having to leave the dogs than over the loss of his money and chattels.

He had smiled ruefully when pointing out that all he had to show for ten years of very hard work were two small suitcases full of clothes, his passport and some loose change in his pocket. It shocked me to the core when he revealed that he had been forced to leave over ten thousand pounds in his bank account with absolutely no idea of how, or when he was going to lay his hands on it again.

The conversation with this man made me realise just how lucky I was in not having too many personal effects or household furniture to leave behind. Thank goodness it was the Company’s policy to provide its managers with fully furnished houses on a rent-free basis. True, it had been necessary to leave my personal allocation of linen, my radio and a second-hand set of golf clubs, but none of these items were of sufficient value to bankrupt me. My account at the bank in Enugu had been abandoned of course, but since it contained only a few pounds it was no great loss. Talking with the ex-sailor really shocked me and I wondered how many others among us were similarly affected.

It must have been about three o'clock in the afternoon when the last of the refugees began to board the Isonzo. Those of us who had already embarked had been requested to stay in our allotted places in the holds until the ship was under way. However, it was impossible to comply with this request because of the searing heat of the afternoon sun. Many people, on discovering how hot and stuffy the holds really were, simply dumped their baggage and promptly returned to the upper decks. Because of this mutinous behaviour, the decks were crammed with people enjoying the cooling effects of a slight breeze that had manifested itself during the early afternoon.

David Haslam and I spent some considerable time leaning on the ship's rail overlooking the quay, talking and smoking as we watched the last of the refugees struggle on board. Each time we thought we had witnessed the final batch of people, yet another group would file out of the customs hall and make for the gangway. There were a surprisingly large number of European women and children among the last of the stragglers and only after close scrutiny of the children did it dawn on me as to why they were so late arriving at the ship. It was reasonable to conclude that the women were married to Biafrans since every child in their care was of mixed race. This raised several thoughts in my mind and had me wondering what sort of nonsense these women had been subjected to because of their choice of marriage partner. It was a sure bet that the authorities would have gone out of their way to ensure that their processing was made as difficult and unpleasant as possible. Indeed, we learned later that the officials had claimed that the women were trying to kidnap the Biafran children. This sort of treatment and the inevitable delay while suitable "arrangements" were agreed would certainly have accounted for them being the last to board the ship.

My discussions with David included a consideration of how much dash had been necessary to allow the children to accompany their mothers, and we concluded that the price would have been very high indeed.

As it was for everyone, the Isonzo was the only way out of Biafra for these unfortunate women and children. Had the authorities not permitted them to board they would have been stranded. Locked inside what was to become a besieged and doomed Ibo enclave until its collapse and surrender some thirty months after our departure.

Before the women and children were permitted to embark we noticed that several African men had been escorted from a nearby shed by armed police and were now milling about amongst the women at the foot of the gangway. It was clear from their actions that they were the unfortunate husbands.

David and I assumed that since the new republic was involved in a bitter struggle for its very existence, the husbands would eventually be required to take up arms in its defence. This was probably the reason for the men being physically restrained from boarding the ship by the heavily armed detachment of police. Because the men were being prevented from accompanying their loved ones, they were forced to say their farewells on the quayside in full view of everyone on board.

Saddened and bitter at a regime that could cause so much pain and misery for its people, I watched the pitiful sight with a growing feeling of helpless anger as the men, women and children enacted the time honoured ritual of saying goodbye to each other.

From my position on the ship's rail high above the quay, I could hear the sobbing and crying as the police began to pull the men away from their families. It was hard to imagine a more heart-breaking scene. Particularly since I knew that the people involved

may never see each other again. Even the most cynical of observers must have been moved at the sight of those unhappy families hugging and kissing each other, possibly for the last time in their lives. Many of us were so shocked and upset at seeing the children being wrenched from their father's last embrace by over-zealous policemen that we began to shout and scream at the officers to let the men on board. Alas, our efforts were wasted. The police continued with their unpleasant duty and began to escort the men back to the shed at rifle point. That final, forced departure of the men-folk must have been sheer torture for the families involved....