

Transportation of the Rhinos from Sumatra

by T. B. Begg

The first caught animal, Torgamba, had settled down and become acclimatised in his enclosure in the forest and in January was transferred to the base camp. This entailed moving him in his crate about three miles through what in places was thick jungle. The assistance of a US oil company, Caltex, was sought, and with a bulldozer to clear and level a track, the first stage of Torgamba's journey to the UK was uneventfully carried out. From now on, his diet was slowly changed to suitable items readily available at Port Lympne in preparation for his departure at the beginning of April. The various methods of transport were investigated and finalised, and a firm itinerary was arranged. It entailed a six hour truck drive over, at times, very poor roads to the port of Dumai on the east of Sumatra. Thence by ship to Singapore — some 31 hours — and on to the airport for a Singapore Airlines flight to Manchester (17 hours), and finally by heated truck to Port Lympne (9 hours). The only firm timing was the departure of the scheduled flight SQ38 at 22.40 on April 4th. To clear formalities prior to boarding, Torgamba was required to present himself plus documents by 18.40.

However meticulously everything is planned, fate can always have a hand at some stage or another — and this time it very nearly did. The truck was due to arrive on April 1st — of all days — the rhino to be shut in his crate that evening and first thing the following morning to be loaded on to the truck by means of its own built-in crane. The truck arrived with driver and mate as scheduled, but for the first time ever Torgamba could not be persuaded into his crate. He had been habituated into leaving the mud wallow in his yard and walking into his crate adjoining it for his food and, on completion, a sleep. On this particular evening he appeared to sense something unusual was going on. Our friendly oil company, who had supplied the truck, had also sent a camera crew for publicity reasons and maybe these strangers had disturbed him.

After some two hours, by which time it was dark and the mosquitoes particularly active, Torgamba eventually decided to walk right into the crate and the slide behind him was lowered.

He finished his meal and fell asleep unaware of what was in store for him over the next few days. With the mission accomplished successfully, it can only be marvelled at, that with two exceptions, he ate and slept his way through everything.

The following morning, April 2nd, presented the bad news that the driver was acutely ill, vomiting, unable to stand and clearly unable to drive. Fortunately, his mate could handle the truck and crane, but how well remained to be seen. Fate struck when he got the lorry bogged down to its axles, but he proved to be an expert in getting it out and subsequently Torgamba was loaded, his crate strapped down securely and the journey began. Unknown to us Caltex, the oil company, had provided a bulldozer, grader and roller to repair the first ten miles of road. An oil tanker then sprayed crude oil on the surface which bound the soil together and provided a good surface. The convoy set off with two camera crews in front, followed by the truck, with a four-wheel drive maintenance vehicle bringing up the rear in case anything went wrong mechanically en route. The journey went without incident to Dumai, although torrential rain on the oil roads made them very slippery. For quite some distance the road was lined with Indonesian flags, not, we learned later, to wish the "badak" (Indonesian for rhino) a safe journey, but to welcome a visiting government official.

Word had obviously gone ahead to the port of the departure of the rhino, and a very large, noisy yet interested crowd had gathered, along with cameramen with flash equipment and journalists. As previously, Torgamba ate and slept and treated with nonchalance many unusual noises and incidents. He was offloaded by a mobile crane from the truck on to the quayside and subsequently with his food on to the deck of the Kim Soon Li, a 270 ton coaster registered in Singapore. The prospect of a 30 hour journey in this tiny vessel was daunting for passengers and the precious cargo should the Straits of Malacca be rough. Fortunately that wasn't to be, and apart from the monotony of a 26 year old ship chugging along at 6 knots, the journey was uneventful. The pilot came

aboard outside Singapore harbour and led us into our berth. Dawn was just breaking, yet the place was swarming with activity. Everyone seemed to know of the arrival of the rhino, yet Torgamba remained oblivious to everything. The first really worrying incident occurred as the crate was being offloaded from the Kim Soon Li on to the truck which would transport it to the airport. The crane operator, aware of his precious load, worked so slowly in lifting the crate that it began to swing. This prompted Torgamba to move and soon the crate appeared to be rocking violently out of control. Screaming at the driver galvanised him into action and he very quickly had the load on terra firma with the panic over. As previously, the huge crowd wanted to look, touch and photograph the rhino, who kept munching unaware of the activity around him. Customs and immigration facilities over, the truck left for the airport's cargo department where Torgamba was required to wait several hours before the next leg of his journey. Enormous publicity was awaiting him before he was eventually loaded on the 747 Combi flight to Manchester. His real moment of concern was while waiting beside the aircraft to be loaded. The high-pitched note of jet engines ticking over caused him a lot of anxiety and it was necessary to alter the loading schedule to get him on board and in a reasonably quiet area.

The trip itself, though long, was broken by a stop in Dubai and another in Athens. We carried veterinary supplies capable of dealing with in-flight emergencies, and I made periodic visits from the passenger cabin to ensure that all was well. The weather on arrival in Manchester was freezing with snow on the ground. However, prompt unloading and transfer to a heated truck ensured no undue drop in temperature.

The final leg of the journey went without incident and on the evening of April 5th, he was settled into his new house. The preparation in Indonesia in slowly adjusting his diet to conform with suitable available supplies in the UK has paid off. Torgamba has settled in well, but will not be on display to the public for some months.

Subur, the adult female rhino, was caught in a pit trap on June 22nd. On release from the trap that evening, our suspicions that she had a snare encircling her right foreleg were confirmed and it was decided to remove it the following day. Long-term daily treatment was

envisaged, which could more effectively be carried out at the base camp, so plans were made to move her there as soon as possible. (Normally a newly caught animal is kept in its enclosure in the forest for several weeks to habituate it to human presence, confinement etc. before transporting it to the permanent holding yards at the base camp). From June 24th until August 25th she remained there under treatment and observation, while plans were being made to transport her home.

We were unable to charter the ship we used for Torgamba and it was arranged that the Sumatra-Singapore leg be operated with a Dakota DC3. Larger aircraft are available but, apart from the cost, the airports are not always able to accommodate and load them. The double freight doors on the DC3 dictated the height of the crate and this was not acceptable for the complete journey. So the compromise was reached whereby we made a reinforced sliding roof which could be raised once loaded.

As with Torgamba, a Singapore Airlines Combi 747 completed the journey to the U.K. via Dubai and Brussels.

A large crowd of onlookers were present at Pekanbaru Airport for Subur's loading and departure. Everyone seemed to be an expert when it came to loading, with plenty of advice as to how to fit the large crate into a small plane. In spite of them, the almost impossible was accomplished with an inch or so to spare all round! We took off with what seemed to be very noisy engines, which didn't upset Subur at all and landed at the former RAF airbase in Singapore 1¼ hours later, having achieved a height of 5,000 feet. The real accomplishment came in unloading the crate without damage to the plane and its cargo. Formalities were completed and the truck journey to the international airport went without incident. There then ensued a wait of several hours, during which time Subur was fed and watered; and she remained much calmer than expected throughout. The journey via Dubai and Brussels was straightforward, and it was just getting dark when we unloaded Subur at Port Lympne on the night of August 26th. She had behaved well throughout the trip, lying down for a lot of the time. No greetings were exchanged between Torgamba and his new neighbour who was out of sight but not out of calling range.

This was the first pair of Sumatran rhinos to arrive in the west for a very long time.