

# My Reminiscences of Old Klong Toei

By Geoff Walker



Flag of the Kingdom of Thailand

**Klong Toei** (sometimes referred to as Klong Toey) is the name of the Port district of Bangkok, located some 34 or so kilometers upstream along the Chao Phraya River. Between the years spanning 1940-80s, it served as the main maritime gateway, strategically situated on The Chao Phraya River, to service Thailand's capital city. The port has draft limitation but was capable of handling average sized deep sea ships, of the era.

During the Vietnam War the Port of Sattahip was constructed by the Americans, together with the adjacent airport of Utopao, mainly as a military facility in support of their operations in Vietnam. They also built a two lane highway connecting these developments with Bangkok. The other main Port in Thailand at that time was that of Songkhla, which was situated on the western side of the Gulf of Thailand and serviced southern areas of the country. In later years, the newer and more modern Container Port of Laem Chabang superseded Bangkok as the principal commercial port for Thailand, although Klong Toei still retains a smaller portion of the shipping traffic to this day.

My first recollection of Klong Toei stretches back to 1961 when I was a deck apprentice with Bank Line but over the ensuing years I have always maintained a close relationship with Bangkok, both professionally and personally, having worked in Thailand for some years, and having a residence there.

My initial visit was before the onset of the Vietnam War, and was therefore devoid of noisy military personnel on leave and therefore remained relatively unspoiled. The worst we had to contend with during the early 1960s was the odd sailor having one over the eight or the occasional bar room scuffle. Even after the commencement of the hostilities in Vietnam, Klong Toei still managed to retain some level of order, because it remained outside the focus and off the Radar of the American forces, as they tended to favor Pattaya since it was closer to their bases, and the red light district of "Pat Pong" in Bangkok. From Sattahip to Bangkok, in those days, would take a good 3 hours by road and if they did go to Bangkok they usually congregated in the bars located in the area of "Pat Pong", which was the main hot spot at that time and still remains so for tourists.

Klong Toei was the main night entertainment area in Bangkok for mariners, and whilst not completely unknown to local residents, it sourced the majority of its commercial activity from crews of visiting foreign ships and to a lesser extent from the European expat community. During the Vietnam conflict, even with the influx of American GIs to Bangkok on R&R it seemed they did not really know of its existence, since very few ever ventured to patronize the numerous night Clubs, Bars, Massage Parlors and

other entertainment venues. So, we sailors established “squatters rights” so to speak. Hence it maintained its hidden secrets, they being mainly directed to the seagoing types who visited the port.

Klong Toei nightlife did not come alive until after 9pm when it erupted, going non-stop until around 5am, by which time most sailors had consumed too much alcohol and wandered back to the ship with empty pockets, to get their head down, or having spent the night in the company of Bar girls or ladies of the night.

We were very fortunate inasmuch as our ship usually berthed very close to the Klong Toei dock gate, a stone’s throw away from either the Mariner’s Club – if you were broke then that was your venue. The alternative being the local night life if you were more financial. Both options were within a very short walking distance of each other.

At the heart of the night entertainment area was the notorious **Mosquito Bar** and the next door **Venus Room**. Both were notorious and the “headquarters of insanity” when it came to exotic and erotic night life.

The Mosquito Bar was just across the road from Klong Toei dock gate, situated on the corner. It was so ideally located and was the first thing to catch the eye having walked out the gate from the wharf area, into the street. Downstairs there was an open bar with tables and chairs outside under the building’s canopy and awning. The actual Mosquito Bar was upstairs on the second floor. At the entrance you had to wait to be seated at one of the tables but first it was necessary to adjust your night vision as inside was in virtual darkness.

Soon one of the Bar girls would escort you inside and take you to a vacant table – you needed to follow closely for fear of bumping into other tables. Then the available girls would jostle for your attention. Their next modus operandi was to get you to buy them drinks. Even after a period inside, it remained so dark it was difficult to really see much. The atmosphere was thick with cigarette smoke and fumes. The air-conditioning and ventilation, being minimal and of no use whatsoever.

The darkness was twofold in purpose, firstly to mask the identity of many local patrons and secondly so the freelance females were not so visible helping to conceal the wrinkles of those more elderly amongst them. The girls ranged from very young, about 18-20 years of age, right through to the near geriatric. The ladies seemed to be shipped in as most originated from outside Bangkok. The upstairs bar, was void of any internal decoration from what one could determine, anyway, if there was it could not be easily seen.

The bar was nearly always, filled to capacity, as well as noisy. There were the most daring of striptease artists, some bordering on sickening, amongst the cast of regulars was “Midget Rooter” and “Skinny Minnie”, to name but a couple (no idea how these names derived). In short it was a meat market, with a polluted atmosphere laced with the smell of cheap perfume and the females asking, “you like me”, “you take me home”? Business boomed and was always popular, despite the occasional brawl – generally over a female, or alcohol related.

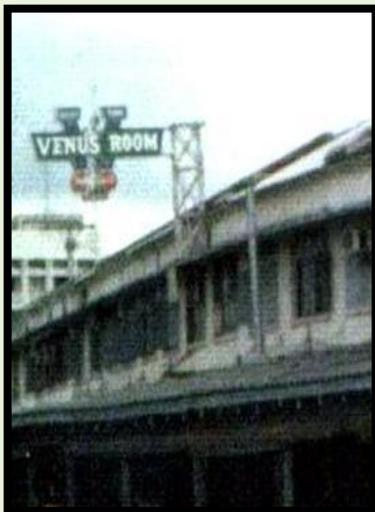
On one of my calls at Bangkok our ship’s electrician got into a “Mekong Whiskey” drinking session and subsequently got himself into a fight over one of the females. Mekong Whiskey was brewed locally and was dynamite if consumed in quantity. He was missing for 4 days before the Thai Police managed to find him, spread-eagled over some close by disused railway lines (see map below), still very drunk and bleeding from the ear after having been clubbed with a baseball bat. He ended up in hospital with alcoholic poisoning and perforated ear drum. He missed the ship and rejoined at our next port which was Hong Kong. Hence the Mosquito Bar truly earned its international reputation for notoriety.

It remained as such until the 1970s when the proprietors decided to upgrade and renovate the premises with new internal decoration. This included wall papering, pink lighting, cubicles, and proper seating to replace the previous cheap and flimsy folding ones. It still remained absolutely full, every night despite the renovations which caused it to lose much of its legendary atmosphere. And I believe there were a new intake of girls and striptease artists. This all ended abruptly, during the early 1980s when finally, the local Port Authority bulldozed the premises to make way for new construction to take place (so they claimed).



The Mosquito Bar as it was in its heyday, between 1960 – 1980. Hand outs and cards distributed usually by the Bar staff.

Below, the infamous sign, hanging innocently on the wall of the twostory building, not revealing any of its inner secrets.



The nearby “**Venus Room**”.The sign hanging ajar, which was no surprise as the building was ramshackle and in a state of disrepair, having long past seen better days.

With somewhat less notoriety, but still packed most nights, the next door, **Venus Room**, was in the same ramshackle building as the Mosquito Bar and was also on the second floor. It appeared bigger than the Mosquito Bar (MB) and seemed to be favored more by local Falangs, (male expat residents). It still got its fair share of sailors, but it was never quite as popular as the MB. It had its girls who I recall, used to take it in turns to sit at an outside table, trying to entice you inside, rather like modern day Thai Bars, but without their conspicuous flashing fairy lights and decorations designed to catch one’s eye. During that time most Bars or nightclubs employed Spivs or shady looking types to act as pimps to get you inside their disreputable dens of iniquity.



It was still as rowdy with its share of brawls but not quite in the same league as the MB. I believe the girls were more local and freelance than those that frequented the MB since they all seemed to know each other and were friendlier amongst themselves. That is how it appeared to me anyway. Today, all that remains of the site where these notorious Bars were located; is a few small buildings and trees. There is no evidence whatsoever of its previous history since the site is substantially derelict. The Mission to Seafarers was still going, at the time of my last visit, just down the small “Soi” (lane) as shown in the image to left.

Both these establishments form a substantial part of the history of Klong Toei, despite the fact, that there were numerous other bars close by of much less infamy. The good seafood eateries were close to hand and always popular, but the motto was “eat first and play later”.

For those with more sober entertainment in mind there was always the **Mission to Seaman** which was located only a few strides away down a small Soi (small lane) adjacent to the Mosquito Bar, across a wooden footbridge spanning a swampy area that occasionally was ablaze with water lily flowers, despite the smell. The “**Mission**” featured a swimming pool and the other usual facilities offered by similar establishments world-wide, including the rather featureless bar, but cost of beer was cheap. It was open during the day and closed about 10pm. One unusual attribute was it did have its share of freelance ladies during the day, who were always willing to keep you company and to chat, whilst they scrounged a drink or some snack food. There were those who still attempted to peddle their extra curricula services somewhat discreetly, as it must be said that the ladies at the mission were slightly less pushy as they were under the watchful eye of the management. Unless you were short of funds the only reason to go to the Mission was for a swim, post your mail, or to support the expat Chaplain who always visited the ships when in Bangkok port.

The Mission to Seaman was later renovated and is now known as the Mission to Seafarers. Although, it remains, in the heart of the once infamous Red Light district, of Klong Toei.

Nowadays there are still, one or two, night venues that come to life after 10pm but nothing of the caliber of the Mosquito or Venus Room bars. Today, they are mainly surrounded by Massage Parlors and Karaoke Bars, and restaurants, mostly catering for Thai patrons. The area is constantly changing. Seldom are tourists seen in the area nowadays since Bangkok City, which provides its own huge array of nightlife is within quick and easy reach, by using the Mass Transit Railway from Klong Toei, a convenient



conveyance for visiting sailors, seeking an exciting and adventurous night of entertainment in Bangkok’s “Dark Side”, known as “Pat Pong”. As mentioned, only memories remain of these infamous bars. What a sad end to an exciting era for the foreign sailor. Alas, a port call at Bangkok is no longer the same and only nostalgia remains. Map of Klong Toei, the Dark Side, after Midnight.

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