

CHEETA II - Colin Nicol - My story

*Originally written for and only partly used in, Keith Skues' "Pop Went the Pirates".
Scanned and very slightly edited 21 February 2007, but kept in context.*

The day I first went aboard the Cheeta II, was the first occasion I formally met Mrs. Britt Wadner - the ship's owner, boss of Radio Syd (Sud, South), and the "first lady of pirate radio" and the "pirate radio queen of Sweden". We met on the wharf at Harwich - she, Ronan O'Rahilly and I, along with a gaggle of journalists and photographers. The ship had just arrived from the Baltic and was to be commissioned as temporary replacement for Caroline South, which had gone aground and been taken to Holland for repair, not long before. Mrs. Wadner is a striking woman, full of charm and with a commanding personality. She obviously controls her staff and crew through the



affection and respect she commands. Certainly, in her own country of Sweden she is known as the "Viking Lady" - and is a national celebrity, as much for the number of times she has gone to prison for operating a pirate radio ship, as for the fact that it is hers entirely, and she is well known as a radio personality on the ship. There were times shortly after, when she and her son Kalle fascinated me for hours with the stories of their adventures as one of the world's first commercial radio buccaneers, and of the enormous success they enjoyed in

Scandinavia.

[Britt Wadner, Colin Nichol, Ronan O'Rahilly and Holger Jensen on the Cheeta II.](#)
(Colin Nichol collection)

After introductions were made at Harwich, on a rather cool and damp morning, we boarded the tender waiting for us, and made for the open sea. As is often the case in these seas, a heavy mist was up, and visibility was very bad we chugged for what seemed like many hours, vainly searching for the ship which was to be the new temporary home of Radio Caroline South. I began to doubt if Cheeta II had arrived at all, and the captain of our tug admitted he was lost, and didn't know where she was, when the mist curtains parted an instant over our bows - and there she was, ringing her ship's bell to guide us alongside. My first impressions were that she looked a homely kind of ship. My landlubber's eyes saw what appeared to be a fairly typical, old ferry, which indeed she was, set fairly high out of the water, but with no visible sign of any radio masts or equipment. We pulled alongside, to the accompaniment of greetings shouted in Swedish, Dutch and English. A rope ladder was thrown down, and I helped Mrs. Wadner up to be the first aboard. Ronan followed, with me trailing third, and the cameras whirring. My first impression was that the atmosphere aboard the ship was very relaxed, the people who ran her personal friends and not

employees, and nobody seemed at all troubled by a slight air of charming disarray aboard. All the faces, though strange to me, were smiling, and I was quickly introduced to those on deck. It was several days before I discovered who the captain was, and then there seemed to be two, both of them weathered old salts. I met Mrs. Wadner's son Kalle, who was usually in charge, and who had sailed with the ship from her former location in the Baltic Sea. He said they had a smooth and quite fast journey, and were at present in a temporary mooring until their arrangements had been made to take up the Mi Amigo's usual mooring place.



[Tony Blackburn and Colin Nichol \(Hans Knot collection\)](#)

Kalle was about my own age, and we got on very well together, and were good company for each other during the time I was aboard. Despite missing his young wife who worked for their firm in Sweden, he was excited to be in England (or almost) and like the rest of the crew, anxious for shore-leave, and a look at London. Most of them had been aboard for a long stretch, and a replacement crew was expected before many days were out. They did arrive, but rather later than hoped. The purpose of our expedition to the ship that day was to look her over, decide how suitable she might be for our needs, and to discover what was needed to get the radio side operative as soon as possible.

The first thing that crossed my mind was that we'd need a mast to start with - all that was visible was two ten-foot high lattice masts, set well apart on the superstructure of the middle of the ship. "That won't do, I thought". But it developed that these were just the first stages of two prefabricated antennas, which could be made much higher. These masts had been taken down, prior to the ship leaving her old station in the Baltic. (Cheetah had moved because of the icing up of the sea and increasing



opposition from their government). Mrs Wadner led the tour of inspection of her ship, and she seemed very proud of it. Even now, long after, I can feel the friendliness and the homely warmth that seemed to characterise the old vessel. I had the feeling that many people, over many years, had enjoyed being aboard her, and I knew that I was going to feel more relaxed and at home on the Cheeta II than I had felt on board ship, ever before. Perhaps what appealed to me most was the comparative spaciousness of her, compared with my old home on

Caroline South, Mi Amigo. There seemed to be endless stairways and passages and

scores of doors to penetrate, and explore beyond.

Colin Nichol, Britt Wadner and Ronan O'Rahilly (collection Colin Nichol)

We went first to the lounge and while I was still grinning with pleasure at finding so much polished wood trimming and panelling aboard, and marvellous glass swing doors into the main recreation room, Ronan was calling to me in excitement and saying, "Isn't she marvellous - what a great room!" It was, to me, a room that looked as if it would be just the haven a harassed ship-bound disc-jockey would like to relax in. Long and quite wide, and tapering in a little toward the aft end of the ship. Quite big enough to seat about forty, along the couches lining the walls, behind rows of small tables. For the second time, I told myself this was going to be fun. Just look at those little red-shaded lamps on the walls! And those big portholes!

We trailed forward, on the first level below the deck, passing a small kitchen that looked more like what one has at home, than a ship's galley, and past lots of doors bearing the unpronounceable names (or perhaps designations) of the crew and radio staff.

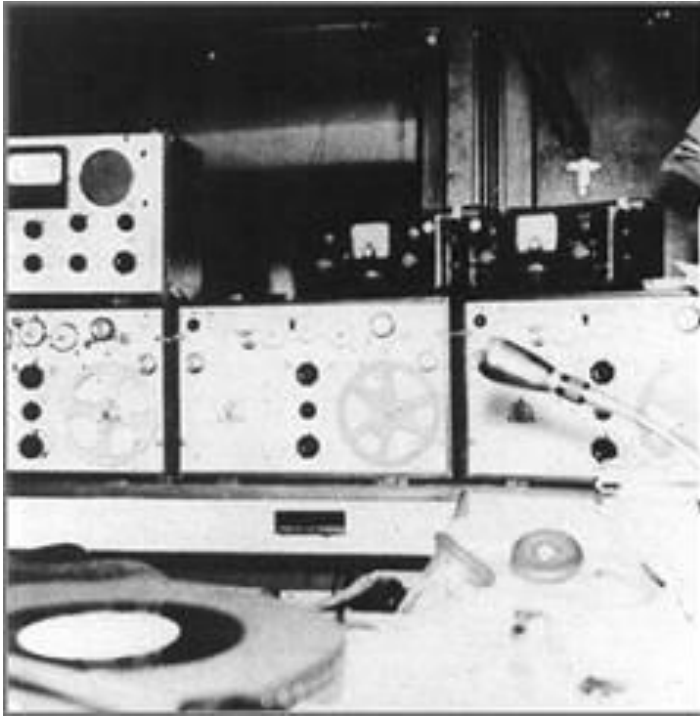
Amidships, alongside the galley, was the glassed-in hold, and it was here we subsequently decided to site the medium-wave transmitter that would be used for our broadcasts. Further forward, we descended again, and in the hold discovered an almost complete television studio, littered with equipment. Radio Syd was to have been the first with pirate television as well as on of the first with the radio. In fact, they probably were the first with TV, since they did run a successful test broadcast before bad weather forced this visit to England. Their ingenuity had solved the problem of the movement of the ship affecting broadcast, by designing a special aerial arrangement that allowed them to broadcast TV, no matter which way the ship faced. Later, our transmitter stood in the middle of this studio, at the bottom of the hold.



Tendering Cheeta II (archive Hans Knot)

We had to bring one of our own transmitters from the Mi Amigo for this ship, as Radio Syd was designed to only broadcast on VHF (FM), and this would not be suitable for the Radio Caroline arrangement. In Britain, not too many people can receive VHF

radio and the nearby land (topography) would also have made it difficult to get the signal out to a large area. After the television studio, a visit back on deck to the cabins and fittings on that level, and up to the bridge. Here I was delighted to find the ship's bell, and gave it a few rings for Caroline's sake. It was going to be some time, however, before listeners heard that bell again, from that ship. There was a lot to be done. Finally, the studio. We went aft again and found the studio in two glass-walled rooms above the deck level, and over the saloon. On top of the again, were store rooms for records and equipment for the radio. It was all going to be a big adventure, I kept telling myself, and this was going to be fun. The studio was inadequate, to say the least. Anyway, it was so, as we first saw it.



Ronan asked me if we could make it work, and I crossed my fingers and said, "Yes". But a lot would have to be done, I told myself. Everything had been dismantled, there was not even a turntable in sight. However, I was very impressed when, a few minutes after asking for some equipment to be brought in so that photos could be taken, the smiling Swedish radio staff had the whole room littered with tape recorders, amplifiers, turntables, wires in all directions, and Swedish records. That looked good in the photos, but none of it was connected. I decided that we could adapt what equipment there was, and add some of our own from the Mi

Amigo, and that in about a week we should be able to have the studio operating to our requirements, but - it would be a different style of operation. The Swedes were used to having the announcer only doing the talking and an operator in the other room would play the records and run the tapes. Adapting this equipment caused some problems, but it was made to work, after, a fashion. In the end, I was rather glad I never used the equipment on the air, as I heard it was very difficult.

[Cheeta II studio \(Hans Knot archive\)](#)

I find myself differentiating between the crew of the ship and the radio staff, but in fact, on the Cheeta II, there was never really any such defining line with the original Swedish operation. For the most part, the DJ who had just done his programme was quite likely to then go down and help cook dinner or might swing over the side and paint the ship. Everyone "mucked -in" with Radio Syd, so I was told, and they were really a big happy family. That was to change when the English staff came aboard, but then our type of radio was quite different. Talking of painting, the hull of the ship was white. It seems that not long before, they had all been very busy repainting the peeling sides of the Cheeta II, while she lay at anchor in the Baltic. But they painted it

a bright red, thinking this to be the most noticeable and safe colour to paint a stationery ship. They were warned by the Swedish coastguard that this was illegal. So paintbrushes hurriedly came out again and any paint that was handy was splashed over the red, in one frantic day of brush-wielding. The result was that the paint was almost the constituency of whitewash, but was the best they could do in an emergency.

Britt during Syd days (Hans Knot archive)

Our tour of the ship was almost over. We sampled the delicious Swedish coffee the crew made for us, ate a huge pile of sandwiches and boarded the tender for the return to Harwich, taking Kalle Wadner with us. That night was spent at the Gables hotel at Dovercourt and I returned to the ship the next day with Kalle, to prepare what could be done to get the studios right. I was allocated a tiny, comfortable cabin - with a porthole. To me, this was a luxury, as we shared as many as three or four to the cabin on the Mi Amigo and there were no portholes, as the cabins were below water level on that ship. That ten days or more on the Cheetah II, just me and the Swedish crew, was one of the most pleasant times I can recall. There wasn't much to do, not much to do it with, and lots to talk about. Food was fine and well cooked. We always seemed to be eating, as four meals or hearty snacks were served up every day, in Swedish fashion. I was



really on a pleasure trip and hoped it wouldn't end too soon. I certainly felt grateful Ronan had chosen me for this job and hoped I could carry it off satisfactorily. I checked and helped install equipment in the studio, tried my best to make do with what was aboard, and attempted to make racks and shelves for the efficient running of the studio. But there was very little to work with and supplies from shore

were slow. For a time there was a lull and I began to wonder if the plan was going ahead, or if I might wake up one day to find myself looking - not at Frinton, Essex - but Malmö, Sweden, on the horizon. However, things slowly started to move. The transmitters arrived and were speedily installed by the Swedish engineer; consulting engineers had been and gone several times, and the radio masts were extended.

Power supply was a big problem. Electricity was in such short supply aboard that the electric stove had to be turned on slowly, otherwise the power supply to the whole ship, and to the transmitters, which were being tested, took a sudden drop.

[Radio Syd wrote to a listener to Caroline \(Hans Knot archive\)](#)

The Cheetah II was not a very stout ship, though a seaworthy one. This seemed to be my opinion when, one day, while sitting in the cosy little dining area, the tender came alongside. A swell was running, as was usually the case, and the tender came heavily against the side of the ship, right where I was sitting below-decks.

The wall of the room bowed in noticeably, as the tender struck the hull outside and I leapt up and headed for the deck, checking safety equipment on the way. Yet, in all seriousness, I always felt her to be a safe ship, and enjoyed a good sound sleep every night I was aboard her. We were hardly ready for the invasion when it happened. After all, the ship was still nowhere ready to broadcast, when one day the tender came alongside loaded to the gunwales with the other Caroline DJs, all shouting and waving, and shattering the peaceful interlude we had been enjoying for more than a week past. More cabins were allotted, sheets and blankets found, and I decided to go



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ahead with the plan I had at the time just before *Mi Amigo* went aground. After going ashore on leave shortly after this time, I resigned from Radio Caroline in the hope of working ashore, and believed, wrongly as it turned out, that I'd seen the last of the saga of pirate radio. It was quite some time after that again, that the Cheetah II first made her presence felt on the airwaves and became an only partly successful, on-again, off-again replacement for the *MV Mi Amigo*.

I'll always remember those very happy evenings spent on the Cheetah II. with my new-found Swedish friends. Those late suppers with smorgasbord, sandwiches, coffee, and listening to other radio broadcasts from all over the world on the big radio in the lounge. She's a ghost ship now, deserted and useless in Felixstowe Harbour. But Cheetah II left a warm place in my heart and I now understand a sailor's feeling for his ship.

(Later, Cheetah II resumed her voyage to the Gambia, West Africa, her originally intended destination. She broadcast there for some years and is now a tourist

attraction – as a wreck. The Wadners operated a hotel there and the radio station became land-based. Britt Wadner is gone, so is Kalle, sadly by his own hand.)

