

Russ Brown, the ‘Tiare’ and the Ramu River Patrol

By Len Malcomson

Each year in PNG, commercially registered vessels complete an annual survey for the Marine Department. All safety equipment is checked; flares, rockets and life rafts are updated, the hull is slipped and inspected and the engine/s pulled down. I once noticed a wooden vessel tied up to the wharf in Madang, similar in appearance to a Tasmanian fishing boat with the wheelhouse aft, long open foredeck with cargo hatch, boom and winch, and all obviously under repair as there were engine parts all over the place. I called out, “Anyone there?” and a scrawny-looking unshaven fellow with greasy hair, covered in black oil and dripping with sweat emerged. It was near midday in the tropics, about 90 degrees Fahrenheit with 95% humidity, and I thought it must be even hotter down in that engine room. “What do you want, mate?” he snapped, so I introduced myself and he replied, “Russ Brown. Come aboard, could do with a cuppa.”

We swapped yarns, with fishing naturally being the main subject. Being inquisitive I asked Russ what he mainly used the 60’ ‘Tiare’ for. I was told that it was a trading vessel, carrying general cargo when available, but mainly trading for copra (dried coconut meat) and for selling tinned meat and fish, sugar, tea and all manner of other goods to the native communities on small isolated islands. Russ also shot crocodiles and purchased additional skins from the native hunters. He then became very interested in the idea of making extra income by catching fish, and discussing this at greater length in my office we designed and built a portable freezer for him that could be lowered into the hold and removed again when not required.

With this newly constructed freezer on board the ‘Tiare’ sailed for Hankow Reef – real virgin fishing country. We set out full of hope, and returned full of strong drink but with the freezer absolutely full! My larger 10-ton capacity freezer at Fisheries was used to store all this fish, which was then sold to the larger stores bagged in bulk as ‘mixed reef fish’. The varieties included Sweetlip Emperor, Cod, Trevally, Mackerel, and Coral Trout, among others.

Russ was a cranky, fiery, impetuous man with a short fuse who often vented his anger on his crew. My job was to educate these ‘boys’ on firstly how to catch these fish, to construct and use the fishing tackle properly, and very importantly how to gut, wash and clean the catch as soon as possible – fish soon spoiled in the tropics otherwise. Several times I had to get him to back off, telling him that if he kept this abuse up he would lose his crew, which would be a waste of my time and effort as well. In any case, what happened when I didn’t go out with them didn’t seem to matter as they always brought plenty of fish back to port. Like fishing anywhere, it mainly depended on the weather.

Russ had a partner, Clare, a beautiful mixed-race girl with long black hair, slim and well-dressed. Her father, Mo Johnson, was an itinerant ex-planter who had married a girl from the Ninigo Islands, and Clare was the result. When Mo was sober and working he could afford to have Clare educated in Australia, but as with most planters he spent most of his time drinking and soon deteriorated as a person. Carmel and I became very friendly with the Browns, and spent several holiday weekends on the ‘Tiare’ cruising the islands.

One feature on the ship was a toilet built on an extended platform over the stern. It was a large and prominent box like a backyard dunny, with no can but with an adequate seat open to the water below. The first time Carmel used it, Russ neglected to tell her about some of its vagaries. In calm waters it was a pleasure to sit out there and meditate, but when we rounded the island and headed into the open sea heavy weather struck. The ship’s bow suddenly buried itself, then as it went up again in a hurry the stern went down, Kapoosh, Kapoosh!. There was a loud shriek from the box, and no further need for the now-soggy paper, but at least Carmel had a sense of humour when she finally emerged dripping wet and laughing her head off.

We were later invited to become the Godparents of their daughter Tamarel, the baptism taking place immediately after Russ and Clare’s own ‘delayed’ wedding by Father Dowd in the Madang Catholic Church in 1965.

Russ told me of an annual run of small eels in the Ramu River during the first three weeks of November each year. Fisheries Research were interested, and I was able to get Russ to take me there as no funds were then needed to finance the survey. We departed from Madang and twenty-four hours later entered the mouth of the Ramu, located to the north-west of Madang. This was a large flowing fresh water river that was navigable for about 80 miles by shallow draft vessels, the salt water being unable to penetrate very far upstream at all. Marangis No.1 Village was situated on the right bank near the entrance, and Brown put all my equipment ashore for me there – the dinghy, nets, patrol box, and a 44 gallon drum of petrol for the 20hp outboard that was already in the village in a locked shed. The ‘Tiare’ had cargo on board for unloading at a distant plantation, and then Russ was to trade through the islands before retrieving me. “See you in 10 days,” he shouted.

Most villages had huts for visiting Patrol Officers and others to use, and my one was perched on 3’ stumps right in the centre, still under construction and having no walls – it felt like being in a peep show. This centrality was due to the fact that the village was ‘divided’ into Seventh Day Adventists and Catholics. ‘Ah well!’ I thought, as I set up my camp table and chair, opened my patrol box and prepared to hang the essential mosquito net over my canvas stretcher - and guess what? The house-boy had packed my baby daughter’s bassinet mosquito net, which would only cover my head and shoulders! Being midday the mosquitoes were not too bad, with the natives using whisks of cassowary feathers to constantly flick them away, but did I mention the sandflies? Wearing a long-sleeved shirt, trousers *and* boots to protect myself, I went to bed with both net and blanket over me. It was hot, but better than ending up with malaria or dengue fever (which I later caught anyway, in Rabaul). Thank God for that bottle of Old Kedge OP Rum!

Russ had left me the outboard motor to use, but unfortunately neither the tank nor the hose were in the locked shed. He explained later that he ‘didn’t trust the natives.’ This all prevented me from doing my intended fishing survey, so I remained stuck in the village all day. The women were catching the small eels of about 2 to 3 inches length (elvers) in scoop-like baskets in only ankle deep water from a continuous stream of them, about 6-12” wide, swimming upstream. Apparently the larger eels go out to sea each year to spawn, and the newly hatched elvers then return to the same area the adults came from – similar to the salmon in Alaska. The baby eels were then spread on racks lined with banana leaves and smoked over a fire, divided into solid blocks about 2” thick, 10” wide, and about 3’ long. In the season of the right trade winds, these blocks were then taken by traditional sailing canoe to distant islands such as Manam and Karkar. Most coastal villages were on a small strip of arable land fringed by mangrove swamps, and the diet of the inhabitants consisted of sago, bananas, crabs and fish, with only a limited supply of other foods. The rich volcanic soil of the islands however was much more suitable for growing tobacco and all manner of root crops, and these were traded for the blocks of smoked eels. The canoes usually stayed for several weeks until the winds were favourable for the return voyage, laden with the desired produce and tobacco.

After three days of Marangis No.1 I wasn’t feeling either happy or well, no-where to walk and whiling my time away writing down the local dialect for the fish names, which was at least interesting. On the first Sunday a Catholic Father came to say Mass. When he saw my predicament I was invited to join him at his Mission Station at Bosman, about 20 miles upriver. We set out in his inboard powered pinnace, travelling for about four hours against the fast flowing river. I was delighted on arrival to find that the lay workers who had just left by Cessna had completed a six-room accommodation block, fly-wired, with real showers and toilets, and even generator power at night. Father was in the process of moving in himself from his ramshackle bush house so in return I assisted him and did a few odd jobs.

As the ‘Tiare’ was due back soon I then caught a local dinghy and returned downstream. It was very pleasant under a canvas awning with the gentle cooling breeze, but I must have picked up a tummy bug and after about 2 hours I couldn’t stand the pains any longer. The dinghy also had young mothers and children on board returning to their village from the Mission so I couldn’t just stick my arse over the gunwale. I whispered to the captain that he must stop at the next village so that I could use the toilet there (mi laik pek-pek, kwiktaim). Eventually we arrived at Boroï village and I hit the bank running. A villager pointed me in the right direction, to a low-set humpy, and dropping the strides I squatted thankfully on a plank over a 3’ wide pit.

Suddenly, without warning, the plank broke. 'Crack!' There I was, stranded, and with legs straddling the hole and arms also outstretched I endeavoured not to fall in. Anchors aweigh, all finished, help, help! Two old men ran in, pulled me upright and out of the pit, and then their convulsions of laughter set in, with crying and wailing like I've never heard. Pulling my strides up I dived into the river and began washing the detritus off before continuing, red-faced, further down river to where Russ was already waiting in the 'Tiare'. I have no doubt that the tale of the big white man who fell into the cesspit is being told there to this day.

Russ apologised for not leaving me the petrol tank, and with a wry smile told me that his head crocodile shooter had once been taken at that same village by a crocodile. Russ searched for days and finally shot a 14' beast which contained the remains of his 'boy'. The croc was skinned and tanned, then displayed on the wall of his house in Madang as a memento, rather than being sold. It made a good conversation piece, and was a warning *not* to swim in those rivers that I had recently jumped into so eagerly.

The last time I saw Clare and Russ was on passage to Rabaul from Madang. My crew and I had to deliver a 28' ferro-concrete boat, the 'Dikarua', departing on November 4th 1977 and arriving at Rabaul on the 13th. It was all daylight travelling as the waters around New Britain were full of uncharted reefs.

On the 8th I anchored at Cape Borgen in West New Britain and couldn't believe my eyes when Clare came out in a dinghy to greet me. "What are you doing here?" she said. They had a trade store ashore, and Russ had just chartered a steel-hulled ex-trawler which he was going to convert to a freezer vessel. Fishing in the area was fantastic, especially for the deep-water species – an untapped resource as due to the distance from Lae in New Guinea few boats came to fish there commercially. Russ reckoned he had the advantage by living on the spot, and was going ahead with his project. I wished him every success.

Carmel and I then went on Leave to Australia, and were dismayed to learn on our return of Russ' death in Lae. After losing the 'Tiare' when it was blown ashore on Manam Island and sank, Russ was fitting out the chartered steel trawler and finishing the freezer insides using an epoxy resin as coating. Fumes were given off by this and he instructed his 'boys' not to smoke. I was told that one disobeyed the order and lit up when Russ wasn't looking. The resulting explosion blew my friend onto the deck and he died of his burns in the Lae Hospital – thus ending the life of one of the most colourful characters I ever met in Papua New Guinea.