

Salvation at Samarai

by Neil Robinson (R364755)

The island of Samarai lies at the extreme Sou' East tip of New Guinea. It is small enough to walk around the shore line totally in under an hour, just loping. Palm fringed, it was and maybe still is, a little Island Paradise. Conch shells abounded in the warm shallow waters & on the beach, many undamaged. That was in 1957 when nobody was much interested in collecting them. Nowadays of course, they are worth good money.

MV 'Bulolo', of 6261 GRT with a full cargo of general items, building materials, foodstuffs etc., plus huge consignments of booze and upwards of 100 passengers would depart Sydney, then Brisbane for Port Moresby, Samarai, Lae, Madang, Manus Island & Rabaul. Our return loading from all these ports was always bagged copra. Each of 5 holds - chock a block with copra. Thousands of tons of it and of course, 40 million cockroaches to boot .

The ports mentioned, when it came to British ships, were likely to be visited only by Bank boats or the odd Ropner job. Indeed, in my 12 months in the ship the only Brit ship I saw up there was in Rabaul, New Britain. She had been there years, high & dry, a good mile or more from the nearest water. Your standard 5 hatch tramp she was at anchor when volcanic activity raised the outer harbour sea bed and she went to sea no more. That was in 1937. The volcano responsible erupted again just a few years back.



Built in 1938, 'Bulolo' did some 8 voyages to the islands before WWII began and she was taken over by the RN and became HMS 'Bulolo'. She was RN for 9 years before being handed back to Burns Philp. Completing 161 further voyages she was to last 30 years before being scrapped in China. Early in the war, being twin screw, she chased German Commerce Raiders, then was converted to a Communications ship and was at the Nth Africa, Sicily, Anzio and Normandy invasions.*

Despite being a line ship, almost always 'to capacity' with passengers and continually in the Tropics, she was not air conditioned and was thus a "hot ship", for weeks on end. Mandatory was the salt tablet. However we had spacious cabins, my mate Rick, the Printer and I shared a cabin which would have accommodated 8 unfortunates on a P&O or Orient Line job. And it had 2 ports which we could leave open continually. We were well above the water line fortunately.

We had the advantage of a very reliable washing machine/drier also. Very necessary when you 're T shirt changing 5 times a day. Being Storekeeper I would get through more changes, some of those storerooms were like bake houses! Others quite cool. These storerooms were 'Bossman' visited from time to time for stock checks we'd do as required by the Company. But the Chief NEVER EVER ventured into the Linen storeroom. The adjacent spacious Used Linen store was used for all manner of therapy activity .

My mates getting part of the ACTION too. Inter-State friends, singly, always of the opposite gender, would be given passage from Brisbane to Sydney, ensconced there. And very snug it

was too. Warm it was... but cheap! Their requirements - whatever... no problem! All was at hand. Our cabins big enough for "gay & hearties," we'd invite ladies from the passenger list to them. And later... that's when the linen locker came into its own! Tons of room for Dancing. From the store I 'd get big empty milk churns which we'd fill with bottled beer and ice. Seagoing in the tropics could be very hard on a man! But like the man said ... "Someone had to do it."

Samarai's main claim to fame was that it was the reception point for salvaged World War 2 items recovered from the jungles on the New Guinea mainland. Teams of Kanakas dragged out of the dense vegetation all manner of items suitable for smelting down. Tanks, guns, tracked and wheeled vehicles, even the iron stakes which had held up barbed wire. Almost all of the battle damaged tanks, AA guns and howitzers I noticed were of Japanese origin. Some items were totally undamaged. Aircraft were of not much importance and were left in situ apparently. All recovered items were shipped by barge from Milne Bay to Samarai which had a T jetty/wharf capable of coping with 2 standard sized freighters at a pinch.

When sufficient material was accumulated, off the wharf, a Japanese ship would call and uplift it for delivery to Japan. This recovery went on all through New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland and the Solomons. Scores of thousands of tons of recovered items returned to the Land Of the Rising Sun. Hundreds of sunken and run aground ships were salvaged, cut up and back to Nippon they went. Jap salvage & merchant ships' crews were never allowed shore leave. Japanese were not safe ashore. The locals remembered the occupation. We saw much of the salvage work in progress. Rabaul Harbour, like that of Tobruk in Nth Africa was ringed with run ashore vessels with dozens more sunk - masts and funnels poking out of the water. The Nipponese would be there a long time with their oxy-acetylene cutters. Jungle vegetation had invaded many of those vessels ashore. Vines wove their way in and out of port holes, up king posts, masts - everywhere! Left alone Mother Nature is invincible!

We were shown a spot out of Rabaul in New Britain where the Japanese Army in retreat had run a whole armoured column into a ravine from off the road. Hundreds of tanks, guns and trucks filled the ravine to road level. A solitary, solid rubber tyred howitzer stood on the road at the spot. In good condition after 13 or so years of sitting there I was surprised at the amount of brass on it.

A small group of expat Australians handled the organisation and admin. etc., on Samarai. For entertainment and social life they & their wives relied on the small but adequate RSL Club, the Short Wave Service of Radio Australia and at the Guest Huse a musical 'bill of fare' provided, on periodic occasion, by the "Coral Sea Comedic Choristers" ...aka the MV 'Bulolo' Skiffle Group. See pic in "Days of Past".

If we were ever asked to play at the RSL I can't remember. The proprietors of the Guest House were always aboard quick smart after the gangway went down to organise us for playing for them that night. Once they 'd established that "the muso 's" were still together as a group, (not sacked or in Sydney or Brisbane gaols!) they 'd plaster bills all over the passenger accommodation announcing " A Fun Night of Music & Merriment" at their hostelry. Everyone was invited...crew & locals as well. As the group founder and leader they 'd organise with me, re everything. Despite the island's small size they had a Land-Rover with which they picked us up and delivered us back to the wharf, barely a 3 minute drive, each way!

Arrival at Samarai from Port Moresby was almost always at 0700. We'd work Sea Routine except for Dinner which was advanced so that we could be all through with the 'Bloods' and shaved, showered, etc., and ready for pick up at 19:30 on the dot, on the wharf. During the day the "Passo's" would swan ashore to do, whatever! A very hot spot, with almost no attractions they 'd be back aboard before you could say my brother Jack's name!

The off duty lads would spend time amusing themselves feeding the very BIG sharks from the forr'ard well deck, with gash from the galley, butchers shop and bakery. When I say some sharks were of the order of 14 feet plus I'm not bulling! No over the side painting was ever done at Samarai or anywhere else up there. That's for sure! Smaller White Tip sharks at about 10 feet would dart about like torpedoes. Sharks! Something to remember!

Picked up and delivered to the Guest House we'd have a drink, on the house and kick the music off at .00. Now in order to provide music for entertainment and dancing for 3 hours with breaks you 'd better know a fair few tunes, and the words! That we were able to provide good tempo stuff for waltzers, then jivers was some feat! We were a skiffle group! One of the lads played a mean harmonica which gave my voice a spell from time to time. The inimitable bass player

Ron Rapley could make the damned tea chest talk. He'd play bars and bars of solo stuff! "Big Noise From Winnetka" was his party special and would bring the house down. "Sweet Georgia Brown" he and I would combine on, me vocalising - he and I getting a great personal BUZZ from that one. Such was the musical bill of fare, with dozens of pop tunes thrown in. I carried lists of song titles, 75 & more per list in my shirt pocket and guitar case. With up to 150 people in the main room the bar did a roaring trade. We were well supplied with "whistle wetters" the whole time, all on the house. The temperature in the place soared with all the activity. Samarai is located about 10 degrees below the Equator - the 'air conditioning' was provided by 2 ceiling fans. Folk danced soaked with sweat and didn't care. We played and sang, likewise saturated, but with "attitude"!!

Everybody had a great time, especially the expat brigade who took real advantage of the chance to let their hair down. Inevitably someone would pass the hat around for the muso's and folk were very generous I must say.

By 11 pm the dancing was through and quite a number of folk had departed. 2 of the group also left and returned to the ship. Ron, Rick Bushell, who played maracas, (he's not in the pic) and myself stayed grogging on with the proprietors till after midnight. By that time we were "nicely" to say the least. 'Tom Thumb' and Fosters had us quite "Edwin Quist", for sure! We would never have more than one night stays at Samarai, one going North and one returning to Moresby, then South to Brisbane and Sydney. So these 'soirees' were as I say, infrequent and folk up there made a point of enjoying themselves... to the full!

Re liaisons... there was much mingling betwixt and between passengers, crew and 'Islanders'. It was amazing just what people could achieve in a 'short time' on such a small island. Folk would slope off down to the 100 yards away beach for a cool sea breeze or "whatever". Even band members would slide away with opposite gender members with whom 'chemistry' was taking place. We had a roster system for this and a signal to me would be enough.

The lads were lucky, they could replace one another re output. I was the only guitar player. No big deal, I wasn't deprived! We had one golden rule. No-one, however much tempted, went for a swim, solo or with a lady. In the dark stone-fish with their poisonous spines couldn't be seen and there was no shortage of sharks off-shore. Delivered back to the wharf we said our farewells and prepared to go aboard.

At this stage one of the lads spotted a boat on a slipway. Close by was an enormous stack of those iron stakes for barbed wire I mentioned earlier. There must have been a million of 'em. Investigating the boat we found it had oars on the bottom boards and it was suggested we row this 14ft clinker job out and cause some consternation to folk aboard by cruising up and down the length of the ship playing and singing. For a laugh that is. So...this we did - with Ron and his T chest in the stern sheets, me up forr'ard with the guitar and Rick rowing.

It was a balmy night and we were more than a bit barny too, as it turned out, for involving ourselves in this caper. Heads popped out of ports, inquisitive as to where all this melodic stuff was coming from. They couldn't see the boat or us as Rick was rowing just beyond the perimeter of light thrown from the ship.

With no wind or tidal current he had no trouble propelling the boat. There was no moon, just a myriad stars twinkling overhead. The water...was total blackness. God alone knew what lurked beneath us. Up and down we went, singing lustily - Ron's T chest 'doom - doom - dooming' away, providing beat. He was standing of course, as well braced as he could be.

Rick asked me to sing a favourite of his. A song about a Sydney lady who was tattooed with - amongst other things a fox which, it appeared, was going to ground - disappearing into her anal orifice, its brush tail "up her back" .

Rick would go into hysterics over this song, always! I began... "I paid a quid to see, the fair tattooed lady..." This to the tune of "My Home in Tennessee". Ron was twanging away and laughing and Rick, about to be convulsed dug one oar in deep, the other skimming and the boat did a swift 'hard a port' turn and Ron, unbalanced, did an arc'ing dive to starboard. Clean over the gunwhale - trailing his T chest!

"Jesus Christ!" said Rick - standing up immediately. I put the guitar down smartish and stood up myself. No risk of turning the boat over - she was too beamy. Rick and I looked at each other and then at the inky black water. There was no sign of Ron - just blackness. "Effin Hell" said Rick "where is he ?" Then, there was a bump under the boat and then another and seconds later Ron's head appeared over the transom. There was more than a little urgency in his voice. "Get me in - effin quick!" Before he even got to the 'effin' bit - Rick had jumped a good yard, grabbed Ron's hands and with a superhuman effort yanked him clean over the transom - all in one go!

It was astounding to see. Ron shot out of the water as if from a gun. Rick was a shorter man than Ron whose weight was further increased by all the water he was carrying. The pair of them fell on top of each other on the bottom boards, Rick's head just missing the centre thwart by an inch or two. Amazing good fortune! While Rick yanked Ron inboard I grabbed the oars to stop them sliding away out of the crutches.

We just sat there for a few moments, silently thanking our lucky stars. None saying anything, hardly believing our luck. Each of us now... TOTALLY sober! That Ron hadn't been

chopped in half by a “Noah’s Ark” was bloody remarkable! It was a bare 100ft away from the spot where the lads had been hurling stuff over for the sharks not 12 hours before. With the T chest recovered we set off back to the shore.

I rowed back to the landing - Ron dripping and making very little vocal sound. When he did speak his voice was an octave higher than normal. He was in shock, poor bastard. All Rick could say was “Jesus Christ mate - EFFIN ‘ell!” They were sitting side by side on the stern thwart. Ron had lost one of his pricey French rope soled casual shoes. (He was later to complain about that)

I said to Rick “That was astonishing mate, where the hell did you find the strength to DO THAT?!” He didn’t know. It was simply one of those moments of total crisis when unknown & unimagined strength comes to a man...“from who knows where!”

We stowed the boat where we had found it, as we found it! Except that a large amount of water was in the stern sheets area. The plug we couldn’t move so we left it and scarpered to get the violently shivering Ron back aboard. DRIP - DRIP- DRIP! Ron left his mark all the way to the accommodation. We bunged Ron straight under a shower, clobber and all. “Watch him mate while I go get the Quack” I said. Happily, the medico was still up and about. I could hear his radio playing. Tap, tap, tap on his door and I quickly told him about Ron. Our mate was then tucked up in his bunk, given a sedative and was “out like an OSRAM” - very, very quickly!

I know we all lost sleep in succeeding days. The possibility of what could have been a real tragedy - the cause! But Rick’s amazing show of phenomenal strength I still marvel at! It was truly – Ron’s SALVATION!

Addendum

A young native boy was taken by a shark just a few days later not half a mile away. A number of sharks were killed as a result, one of which had remnants of his khaki shorts and the particular ‘S’ belt buckle which identified the lad, in its gut. The shark was 16 feet long. The story was run in the Port Moresby paper according to one of the OZ expats on Samarai - Peter Black - a mate o’ mine. I’d sailed with him years before and later on the ‘IRON’ boats.

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My compatriots in this saga viz; one Ron Rapley, Motor Dealer since - and Richard ‘Rick’ Bushell both of whom resided in the fair city of Sydney in those far off times I would be “chuffed beyond description” to hear from or hear about. I hope they are still on this PLANET!!

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Bulolo’s story and wartime picture is on http://mns.ewebs.com/Burns_Philp/mv_bulolo.htm (I just type MV Bulolo in the address bar)