

The Albany Whale Chasers

by Tony Dwyer



A "rough" is the nemesis of the whaler, it occurs when the wind is so strong it stirs up the white caps on the wave tops and when this happens it becomes difficult to see the blows from the whales, so the whale chaser stays in port and the seamen are paid at a minimum rate ... we didn't like it, we couldn't live on roughy pay.

It was 1967, I was living in Albany, a small town on the south coast of Western Australia, picturesque but exposed to the cold winds from the southern ocean, a farming community of some 16,000 people, if you didn't farm you could try for employment at the Wool Stores, the Woolen Mill or if you where in the season you could possibly find work at the Cannery, the Meat Works or on the Whale Chasers that belonged to the Chayne Beach Whaling Company which operated a small Whaling Station out at Frenchmans Bay.

It was just ten years since I'd jumped ship at Brisbane, I'd worked at various jobs from Sugar Stacker, stacking 50lb bags of sugar in a large storage shed, to Dredging ... I worked on the Dutch dredge The Queen of Holland in the Brisbane River; that was an excellent job but I was young and full of the exuberance of youth, I wanted to see Australia so here I was at Albany.

One day I wandered down to the Town Jetty where the whale Chasers tied up. I was standing on the quay watching the seamen as they prepared the chaser "Gascoyne", for the coming whaling season which was due to start at the beginning of February ... about three weeks away.

There was a big fellow wandering around the deck overseeing the work, he looked up at me and bade me G'day ... a course heavy voice with a strong accent that I later discovered was Finnish. I acknowledged his greeting and we were soon in conversation. It turned out he was the skipper of the Gascoyne and as such was also the gunner ... the man who fired the harpoon into the whale.

His name was Rao Samioki, that being my version of the phonetic spelling of his name, anyway in the course of the conversation I told Rao that I was a seaman and he was delighted as he had also served time as an AB (Able Seaman) on Norwegian and Swedish ships. He asked me if I could splice wire rope and when I said I could he asked me if I would like a job on the Chaser and so started my season on the Whale Chasers.

Needless to say I spent the next couple of days splicing Bull Wires, these were used for Buoying off the Whales we had shot, and covering big chains with bingles of rope yarn in the form of West Country Whipping ... These chains were used to secure the dead Whales to the waist of the ship for the tow back to the Whaling Station. It was all pretty boring and more so because we were only being paid roughy wages.

The first day of Whaling, for this season, soon arrived. I was renting a small house down at Emu Point with my girlfriend, she was a sister at the local hospital, anyway I had to report down to the ship at 2300 Hrs (11PM) that evening to help load stores and harpoons.

My girlfriend, who was soon to become my wife, drove me down to the Jetty where I kissed her farewell and told her I would see her the following night, God willing. We sailed at 0100 Hrs (1AM) and the Mate told us deck hands to get turned in because once we were amongst the Whales there would be no sleep until the return trip.

The first watch (shift) was taken by the acting 2nd Mate, Snowy; he was in his mid twenties, a blond headed Aussie of Dutch origin and a real character. He would con the ship down to Bald head, turn the vessel south and then call the Mate and a couple of the deck hands, one to go up to the barrel (Lookout) and one to take the wheel ... I got the first wheel and an experienced Chaser deck hand (a local Albany lad of Italian origin) went up the ratlines to the lookout nest known as the barrel ...

The ship was conned from a small open bridge, exposed to the weather ... It was from here that the helmsman steered the ship, it was also from where the required speeds were telegraphed down to the Engineer, John McNess ...a quiet, soft spoken man and an excellent engineer. The engine room greaser was an Irish man named Paddy Hart who was later to sail as skipper and distinguish himself in a daring rescue but that's another story.

At the side of this bridge was a catwalk that led down to the foc'sle head, the gun deck, this was where you would find the skipper when we were amongst the whales.

Soon the dawn had given way to daylight and the look-out was scanning the horizon looking for the white mist of a blow, given off by a whale. I was steering a southerly course and yarning with the Mate as we both scanned around looking for blows. Suddenly, I heard it for the first time as the man in the Barrel yelled, "Blows to starboard, about three miles"... As I swung the wheel to starboard the ship came to

life, every man was awake and if not on the bridge they were scanning the horizon from the deck.

The Mate rang the telegraph to full steam ahead. The Gascoyne seemed to be in her element, she surged ahead, her bow cutting through the water; the man in the Barrel was calling out the distance to the pod as we closed on the whales.

Rao, the skipper was soon down on the gun deck, swinging the gun, getting use to the feel of it once again, listening as the look-out man, who by now had identified a big bull whale and was singing out the closing distance as we raced on toward the pod.

Above the noise of the wind and waves Rao shouted instructions to the Mate, who was standing by the engine room telegraph, "Half ahead", "Slow ahead"... we were creeping up on the pod ... suddenly the skipper sang out, "Dead slow ahead"; the man up in the barrel was screaming the position of the bull whale and where it was going to surface, "Coming up, coming up, two lengths to starboard, one and a half lengths to starboard".

The skipper was ready, bracing himself against the swell as he swung the harpoon gun, Boom! ... the deafening sound of the gun, another dull boom as the detonator ignited the powder in the cast iron harpoon grenade, ripping its shrapnel through the innards of the mighty whale that was soon blowing blood through its blowhole ... I had witnessed my first kill and even though I felt sorry for the whale, I was soon looking around for another one ... each kill was money in my pocket and I needed money to survive ... the sea was my life.

I saw out the season on the Gascoyne, crewing it up to Fremantle for dry dock, and made the first trip of the next season on the Chaynes IV but I had been offered a job working on a tugboat up north, so I just quit the ... by this time I was really sorry for the whales ... the Chasers had been fitted with Sonar and the whale never had a chance.

Rao Samioki, my skipper on the Gascoyne, had ignited my interest in navigation and I got to relieve Snowy as 2nd. Mate.

Later I went on and studied for my Masters ticket which I acquired in '79.

A couple of years later I was Ch/Officer on a Rig Tender, we were picking up a new crew when who should I see coming aboard but my old skipper Rao, "What are you doing here" I asked "I'm one of the new AB's" he replied ... we both laughed and I thanked him for encouraging me to sit for my Masters ticket.

Rao is no longer with us but I am proud to say I sailed with him on the Gascoyne.

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The time I spent on the whale chaser Gascoyne was a real eye opener for me, the only thing I knew about that great mammal was what I had learned from the movie, "Moby Dick" and the portrayal there was off a big, intelligent white whale that Captain Ahab was determined to kill, however the Whale turned the tables and in its death throws it took Ahab to his watery grave.

Working on the "Gascoyne" opened my eyes to what real whales were all about.

At the time I joined the Chayne Beach Whaling Company they had just changed over from killing Humpback Whales, actually they had killed too many Humpbacks and

were told by the government to desist ... give the species time to recover from the slaughter, they were now concentrating on the more abundant Sperm Whales.

Chayne Beach had three chasers, "Chayne2", "Chayne3 and the "Gascoyne. The Chayne 2 was under the command of Axel Christiansen, a very competent Swedish skipper; Chayne 3 had an Aussie captain Ches Stubbs and the Gascoyne was under the command of a captain Alby Christianson.

Ches was a modern day Captain Ahab who lived for the hunt and was a true whaling personality. In the early 60's he was out on the Chayne3 hot on the chase, apparently he had killed a couple of whales and was intent on remaining with the pod and getting a couple more. In the rush to reset the gun and harpoon the fore runner, which is the line attached to the harpoon, was not stowed properly and was left lying alongside the gun. Ches was in a state of anticipation, excited by the chase and ready to shoot the next whale ... he failed to notice that he was standing in a bight (a loop) of the forerunner and when he fired the gun the harpoon shot away, the forerunner ripping the lower half of his left leg off.

First aid was applied and the company float plane was called for, the three chasers steamed at full speed, two on one side and one on the other ... they created a lee and flattened out the seas so that the sea plane could land.

In those days the ships didn't have the fancy Zodiacs that they have today; instead a one man rubber dinghy was inflated into which the still very vocal Ches was placed ... he was still giving out orders for his own rescue.

Paddy Hart, whom I mentioned in the first yarn, was the cook on this trip; he kicked off his boots, jumped into the water and dogpaddled the dinghy over to the float plane.

Captain Ches Stubbs was back on the gun deck, wearing a new tin leg, and shooting Whales just nine weeks after the accident. They didn't come any tougher than the late Captain Ches Stubbs.

As I mentioned in the first yarn Paddy Hart wore many hats before he finally became a skipper, as such he was involved in the daring rescue of a young fisherman ... That Paddy was born to be a hero I have no doubt ... dogpaddling the rubber dinghy across to the float plane was a very brave act in itself. Ches was lying in the dinghy screaming orders; the stump of his injured leg was hanging over the side of the dinghy dropping blood into the water...the southern ocean is renowned for the great White Sharks but that didn't deter Paddy ... he had a life to save.

Anyway I've digressed ... I want to tell you about the wonderful intelligent whales.

About half way through the season I had settled in on the Gascoyne and making progress as a whaler man, I was now relieving the bosun for one week and the 2nd Mate (uncertificated) for another week, it was then back to being an ordinary deck-hand for two weeks. Life was good and I was making good bonus, however more and more I was feeling sorry for the Whales; they were beautiful intelligent creatures.

When we were amongst the Whales it was wholesale slaughter. The harpoon was a deadly weapon, standing about, five feet, made of iron it had four stout flukes which were lashed to the shank of the harpoon with rope yarns ... on the end was a cast iron grenade filled with 4lb of ballastine gun powder and fitted with a three second detonator, When the harpoon entered the whale the grenade would explode sending the shrapnel tearing through the whale and at the same time releasing the flukes ...

even if it was still alive the whale was hooked and there was no way it could get away.

Sometime the shot would ricochet off the back of the whale and shoot into the air like a rocket ... When this happened the detonator had been activated and we all had to hit the deck hoping that the shrapnel from the exploding grenade would miss us ... In my time no one was hit but I believe it did happen once in later years.

There were a couple of instances during my whaling days that eventually prompted me to get out of the industry.

One occasion was when we shot a big bull whale weighing about 55ton (on average Sperm Whales weigh in at about a ton a foot) but we didn't kill it which meant that we had to reload the gun with a killer shot (a harpoon with no flukes). The whale was still attached to the fore runner like a fish on a line and as we were re-loading the gun it swam out onto starboard beam, it then turned and charged us at top speed hitting the ship and causing it to roll heavily to port springing the plates of a fuel tank.

We finished this brave creature off, pumped air into it, buoyed it off then made a dash back into port to repair the damage.

Once alongside the jetty I went onto the quay to give the engineer, John McNess a hand; I asked what I could do and he told me to get the welding gear ... I said, "John if you are going to weld it up give me time to get to the top of Mount Clarence before you start" ... he just laughed and proceeded to hammer wooden wedges down between the sprung plates before breaking them off ... it was a riveted vessel and the wedges worked a treat.

Australian waters are now a whale reserve.

On another occasion we had put a shot into this big cow (female Whale) but once again we didn't kill it ... she was still on the fore runner, swimming ahead of us and blowing blood from her blowhole, as we were reloading with a killer shot two big bulls came out from the pod and swam either side of the cow trying to support her ... We finished her off then shot the two bulls ... It was all too much for me, I vowed not to return for the next season ... I went back to being a real sailor and I'm happy to say the Whales are back only this time they are shot with cameras.