



Sully's Yarns

By John Sullivan

The Day They Sank The "Groper"

I awoke with a hell of a start as the banging on the hull sounded like we were colliding with another boat. I staggered half asleep and semi nude onto the back deck to find a guy in a hard hat standing up in a dinghy hanging onto my gunnel rail. I was about to ask him what the blazes was going on when he volunteered an explanation.

"We're going to sink the old dredge 'The Groper' right where you are anchored mate" he screamed. "I gotta ask you to move away to a safe distance immediately so we can let off the charges". I rubbed my eyes and looked around and was confronted by this enormous old ship floating no more than 50 metres from my boat. It was lashed to a tug which was manoeuvring it into position.

A closer look revealed her to be a relic from the days of "Bucket dredges". They used a massive conveyer of steel buckets (*see wreck below left*) that run on a moving gantry that could be lowered into the

water through a large opening in the bottom of the dredge. Then by moving along under her own power they were able to dredge a channel as she moved forward. The buckets brought the spoil up to the top of the gantry where upon they tipped their load into chutes that directed the spoil to the side of the ship where a barge collected it.

We was anchored overnight at Tangalooma wrecks which for the benefit of our readers who don't live in Queensland, is a tangle of old dredges, barges and freighters of yesteryear that have been strategically sunk in a line off Moreton Island in Moreton Bay to form a harbour to visiting vessels that may need shelter during inclement weather. Every now and then the authorities drag an old ship out off mothballs and bring it out to Tangalooma where upon they dynamite the bum out of it and sink it gently in the shallows to form yet another addition in to the line of ships already there.

We moved to a safety line of buoys some 300 metres away and anchored up to watch the spectacle.

I cooked breakfast whilst they

struggled to get it in line and position it exactly where it would spend the rest of its' days.

The 'wrecks' as they are called have been the Mecca for travelling boaties and divers for 30 years. They offer fabulous snorkelling and exploring and the fishing around them over the years has always been exciting. During many storms, particularly westerly winds they have proven to be a welcome haven for those that tuck behind them.

By about 8.30 they sounded the siren to announce, "fire in the hole" and several men scrambled off the old dredge onto the tug and we waited with baited breath for the explosions. Minutes later there were three muffled bangs in quick succession and then some smoke spiralled up from the deck. Slowly but noticeably she started to sink. The water is about 5 metres deep where they sink them so that when they rest on the bottom the main part of the superstructure is still out of the water. Within 10 minutes it was all over and the motor dredge "Groper" was now officially a part of the "Wrecks". All the skuttling crew left so we immediately pulled anchor and



Tourism Qld Photograph

headed for the ship to explore her for souvenirs.

I had my two kids with me so when we scrambled onboard we all went in different directions. The first thing I noticed was she still had all her big brass portholes intact. Now these portholes are a trophy on any man's wall. Polished up they really are a talking point. As I started to figure how I was going to get a few of these before the hoards heard about the new wreck, I was disappointed to notice I would require a large spanner to undo the inch and a quarter brass bolts securing them in place. We decided to do a quick tour before heading home for some tools to better do the jobs at hand.

We headed for the front of the boat and discovered the blacksmith's shop where he would have repaired the tool steel edges on the buckets. The big original leather bellows was still intact right above the forge where he would have been heating up the rivets to white hot to hammer them into the buckets. The boat was a virtual museum, a time capsule of our early days. The authorities had not removed anything from this 60 year old bucket dredge.

It was a living testament to how they dredged our harbours and bays since the turn of the century. I was amazed how slack and uninterested the relevant authorities were to have just towed her out and scuttled her without at least a clean up of personal papers and other items that were all through the cabins.

As I proceeded to the main cabins aft where the crew would have lived, I came across personal papers, old cheques not cashed, letters from family members etc and most extraordinary of all I opened a draw and there were the original captain's logs and ships diary.

It showed the dredging history of this old girl from having dredged out Weipa's Harbour to Gladstone's Harbour and all the others in between. It was full of personal comments from the skipper like "we did 500 yards today but the wind came up so we hove to for the day" and other things like "Neville broke his arm today so I am sending him to Cairns tomorrow with the mail".

I could have spent all day just exploring and discovering the history this old bucket dredge had but I

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needed to get some tools so we headed back to Redcliffe, grabbed the tool box and returned some two hours later only to discover that ALL the portholes had been collected...all 16 of them! We were too late. The boat had over 50 people swarming all over it carrying souvenirs and pieces of junk from every section. That was 1982.

Over the ensuing years whenever we visited Tangalooma wrecks we always went aboard the Groper to check her out. It didn't take long for the souvenir hunters and scavengers to slowly reduce her to a skeleton of her original mass. Some non-thinking idiot had even used an oxy cutter to take a dozen BBQ plates out of the steel decks leaving massive holes for some unsuspecting visitors to fall down. On one such trip back my son had gone exploring deep down into the bowels of the ship and after an hour or so I started to get concerned that he hadn't returned.

We set out to find him and after climbing down some ropes (some bright spark had since cut off and taken the steel ladder) I heard some muffled screaming coming from a forward cabin. I was now walking in waist deep water towards what used to be the crew's quarters. The tide was coming in and within an hour or so these gangways and cabins would be underwater. The yelling got louder as I reached the end cabin. I opened the door and my son came flying into my arms almost in a state

of panic. He had ventured into the cabin about an hour before and closed the door. When he went to leave, the handle inside was not connected so he was unable to open the door. The tide started to fill the room and was up to his shoulders when I reached him.

There was a tiny porthole that let some light in but he was unable to let anyone hear his screams for help. He never ever went aboard the Groper again after that.

Today she is a rusty skeleton of her former self and has since sunk about another 8 feet into the sand.

About 10 years ago a group of treasure hunters realised she had a solid brass prop that must have weighed several tons. They came out with cranes and barges and worked on her for a week finally getting the prop off. They would have made a lot of money selling it for scrap. The hole they had to dig to get the prop off caused her stern to later sink another 10 feet into the sand. The bucket tower is still intact and rises up some 80 feet and is a haven for birdlife of all types.

Moving house recently, I came across the Ship's Log and Skipper's Diary long forgotten in the bottom of an old tea chest we were taking to the 'tip - so now we're going to donate them to Brisbane's Maritime Museum, as I would like to think they are an interesting part of our maritime history.

F&B

Editor's Note: John is 63 years old and has been boating for 50 years. Apart from the many thousands of private hours he has accumulated, he also holds a professional skipper's ticket and has driven fishing and charter boats on and off for 30 years. His love affair with the sea and his undying affection for fishing and boating make his life experiences seem to many an enviable accumulation of adventures.

When John and Annie finished their popular reports on the trip around to the Kimberley (F&B #146), we decided this was a skipper we couldn't just sign off - so we've commissioned John to produce a monthly yarn about his life's experiences on the water - and he's got some ripper yarns to tell!