

Neil Dunstan's 1973 Voyage Across The Top End

Introducing a remarkable yarn of a great voyage F&B contributor Neil Dunstan made in the early 1970s when a job change forced him to move his 6.4m de Havilland Trojan west from Gove around to Darwin - a distance of nearly 600 miles through some of the most remote and inhospitable coastline in Australia. Even today, with all our 'toys' - GPS, chart plotters, quality sounders, 4-stroke engines (etc) it would be a tough call. Thirty years ago, it was an exceptional piece of seamanship - and courage.

Story & pic by Neil Dunstan, Illustrations by Greggo

Around 1969/70 I was offered a position as an Instrument Technician with Nabalco Ltd, at their alumina refinery on Gove the mining outpost on the top, eastern side of Arnhem Land, off the Gulf of Carpentaria. I packed up my family and car, and off we went for the big adventure.

The employment conditions were very good and all we needed to take with us was crockery, cutlery and bedding as they supplied us with a brand new rent free house, fully furnished including whitegoods with free electricity. They even went to the trouble of filling the fridge and freezer with food and drinks, which was a pleasant surprise. At this time there was no TV, no radio (except Radio Australia or Indonesian radio) so we had to make our own fun. Luckily, this area was probably one of the best places for a keen fisherman or boatie to be in Australia.

After a while I was put in charge of the department in which I worked and although it was a hectic time as the plant was only just being commissioned we still found time to cast a line. One of the chaps who worked in my dept. was John Bell who became my very best mate and fishing partner. As most of our work involved electronics and computers the majority of the staff were young blokes in their late twenties to early thirties, whilst John, who was a mechanical instrument fitter, was around forty five and known to all as "Father".

Now Father's unofficial duty was



Procurement Officer and because of the isolation of the plant site from the rest of Australia, it was sometimes difficult to get hold of some items. When we wanted a couple of extra chairs or a coffee machine for the crib room, or some hard to obtain piece of equipment, we would pass the message to John - and in a few days time, the item would appear, with any markings or engravings indicating the original location of said items skilfully removed. A handy bloke was Father.

Father had a sixteen foot Quintrex and we used it for lots of trips to wild and woolly places. He also had a de Havilland 'John' boat around 3.5 metres long, driven by a 9.5 hp Evinrude in which we had lots of fun fishing the creeks.

Friday nights were always good fun on Gove. Father would leave the jon boat on the beach beside the Wallaby

Beach pub, and regularly on Friday nights on the way home from work we would stop at Wallaby Beach, launch the boat and chase pelagics around the rocks just 50 metres off the beach.

It was a normal thing for all the pub patrons to be out on the veranda shouting encouragement to us as we battled a dirty big Spanish mackerel or a five foot long barracuda or sometimes a 40 pound G.T.

After the fight was over and the cheering had died down, we would come ashore, and if we had a decent Spanish we would take it into the bar and donate it to some worthy drinker - wherein they were usually so grateful that they would shout us a couple of rounds of drinks.

When I had been in Gove about three years the plant had begun to settle down and a lot of the startup problems had been overcome. At this

stage most of the management staff and engineers who were from the major shareholders, Aluswiss, were starting to head back to Switzerland and all the positions they had held were being allocated to Australian staff members.

It was about this time that the politics of a heavy industrial plant became serious and somewhat frightening, and I was caught in the middle of it all. With very little experience of this level of infighting, I very quickly became a casualty and was planning on getting out asap.

Just prior to this time, I had decided to get myself a decent boat as my boat back in Queensland was too small for this area and not worth freighting up to Gove. After a lot of research I decided on a de Havilland Trojan which was a 6.4m aluminium half cab, powered by an Evinrude V-4 of 115 hp.

When I had lived in Gladstone Qld previously, I had become friendly with the local Evinrude agent by the name of Col Brown (he later went on to become the long standing mayor of Gove), and rang him to see if he could organise this outfit and get it sent to Gove.

One of the things I wanted was for

the motor to be run in the test tank for as many hours as possible, and then given a 10 hour service before sending it to me. All this was duly arranged and the outfit arrived just as I was getting ready to leave Gove, quickly.

I decided to fit the motor, give it a test run and take it out at least once before leaving, so within a couple of weeks she was ready for the test run. Father had helped me to fit her up, or should I say he arrived on the scene and took over the whole show.

With his much appreciated help we took her down to the yacht club ramp and put her in the water. We were wildly excited with the test as she went beautifully, with the only problem being I couldn't get Father to give me a drive.

We subsequently took her for a run up to the Brombies, caught a swag of fish and were mightily impressed with the boat.

It was now time to start getting everything ready for a shift out of Gove as I had applied for a job with Cliffs Robe River Iron at Wickham in the nor-west of W.A., and had been accepted.

Lots of arrangements were required to organise the shift, one being getting

the boat on the barge to Darwin. This turned out to be quite a shock as unlike shipping a car which is a nominal charge, the boat was going to be charged by volume and as it was so big the cost was very high.

Father then came up with the idea that we should send the car and trailer with my wife to Darwin and we would take the Trojan across on her own bottom.

I thought it was a great idea but I'm afraid that neither of the wives were too enthusiastic. However, we managed to convince them by playing the cost savings card.

This then required much frantic preparation, as we only had a couple of weeks to get everything ready, so it was decided that Father and I would stick to the most important things ie get the boat ready, whilst my wife could do all the easy things like shifting everything else.

The main problem was getting enough fuel storage for the trip as we only had the 23 litre tub that came with the boat.

Father turned up from work with a couple of stainless steel tanks made to fit under the outboard well either side of the battery complete with a bunch of

