

# The Pearlers Cook

In my previous story, "50 Years," I mentioned how I had met some people who had sailed a pearling lugger from Thursday Island to Broome in the hope of trialling Australian divers to venture into diving for pearl shell. Up until then, the industry was dominated by Japanese and Malay hard hat divers, and the Australian government wanted change. This is my story: I had kept socially in contact with Dale Chapman and the rest of the crew at parties and BBQs, as we were all from Melbourne. As the year came to pass, I was invited on the last trip aboard the lugger John Louis down to the pearling grounds in late September. It was an experience I will never forget. I was always a boat person; my father built boats his whole life, and we were always out fishing or racing. Even my great grandfather was a hard hat diver, doing commercial work like the footings for the St. Kilda bridge in Melbourne.

As the year ended and we all went our separate ways, I ended up in Queensland working for the mines. But not before Dale had told me that in 1972 they would be trialling two luggers and would be needing more divers and crew. I jumped at the chance and in May '72, signed on as crew on the lugger Cornelius, named after Cornelius Male, the youngest son of Sam Male, whose bronze statue today stands in Chinatown, Broome. Sadly, young Cornelius drowned at Cottesloe beach in Perth, and a headstone can be found on the hill overlooking Town Beach.

The lugger was in a very sad state, and I feared some nights that if we didn't get up to pump the bilge, we would surely sink. Most of the water came in via the stern tube, where the drive shaft exits the hull to the propeller, but also through the planking. A typical day would start around 5 am when the cook got up to put the billy on and waited for the steam to make a cup of tea. The first job was to get the motor started. Not easy; the old cantankerous Lister had a mind of its own. It took four people just to start it - three to hand crank and Omar, our engineer, to work the compression switches when the cylinder came up to compress. If it didn't start, which was often, we would take a breath, finish our smoke, and have another cup of tea before giving it another go.

The next job was to get the anchor up. Again, nothing easy, and the old hand crank windlass took four people. Then, we'd set the divers up, lower the booms, and drop the down weights for the divers to work off - all this before the sun was up. Our Malay cook, Ba Ba, quit after an interaction with the head diver, and I became the cook. The only rice I had ever eaten was Mum's rice pudding, and chilies were the thing of nightmares. But I quickly adapted, learning how to salt fish and dry it in the rigging, marinate mackerel fillets in soy and brown sugar (again, to dry in the rigging), pickle pearl guts, and dry the meat. Most food was kept this way, as our refrigeration was not reliable. The Japanese had a way of salting small mackerel by removing the gills and intestines through the mouth and filling the cavity with salt. The fish was then wrapped in hessian to allow air to circulate but keep the flies out. It was then tied to the highest point of the main mast and left for six months. The ceremonious unwrapping of the fish was enough to make the strongest person pass

out. A match head-sized piece, mixed in a bowl of rice, was all you needed. I think that is where the word "UMAMI" should come from - the fifth taste that nobody can describe. What you cooked was always dependent on the weather. One morning, because it was so rough, I decided on scrambled eggs. So, after cracking a dozen or so eggs into a large pot, the wind suddenly dropped and the seas became calm. I changed my mind and decided to have fried eggs. After spooning all the yolks into egg rings, I found I had a lot of egg white left over. So, I decided to fry that up as well. During breakfast, our Japanese diver called me, "Hey Gordo, these eggs have no yolks." So, I had to go into this long spiel about not all eggs having yolks, and there you have the perfect example on your plate. We still keep in contact after more than fifty years. I must ask him if he has ever encountered any more yokeless eggs.

On another occasion, I had three chickens roasting in the oven, and as the weather turned nasty, the oven door would fly open and hot fat would flare up the gas flame. Eventually, a huge breaker slammed into the side of the lugger. The oven door flew open, and three chickens came out like they were shot out of a cannon, smashing against the bunk on the other side of the galley, disintegrating into a hundred pieces. As I stood there, hanging on to the main mast, I looked down and thought, "Well, at least they're cooked," and then tried to assemble them into something presentable for dinner.

We got our meat from a dodgy butcher who got his meat shooting somebody's cattle on their station. One night, I had made rissoles, and during dinner, one of our divers who had just had a throat operation started gagging and coughing, and up came a Bini eye, better known around Broome as a three-corner jack. With the straightest face I could muster, I explained that it must have gotten in there when I was patting them flat with my thong.

The lugger always had a resident rat - not your normal rat, but a mangrove rat about the size of a rabbit and black. I had purchased a large Queensland blue pumpkin, and it sat precariously on top of the fridge while I decided what to do with it - roast pumpkin or maybe a nice pumpkin soup. Except when I picked it up, it was as light as a feather, and in the back was a perfect round hole, hollow. Every night, the rat had had his meal of pumpkin. It was time for him to go, and as it was, I caught him, still alive, and threw him over the side, telling him, "Land is about five kilometers away, start swimming."

Another resident of the lugger were cockroaches - those huge ones with wings that can fly. One night, I had cooked up a nice stew, and two of the boys were sitting by the hatch, commenting on how wonderful the stew was when one exclaimed, "Wow, it's even got bay leaves!" I thought to myself, "No, I didn't put bay leaves in." Then I hear, "No, no, it's just a cockroach wing." Ha! My cooking prowess had even given me the nickname "Cordon Bleu" - a bit of a play on words.

The Cornelius was sold the following year, and I went on to work three different luggers, plus a large modern-day pearling vessel that kept me pearling up into the late 2000s. It's been a long sea voyage, and along the way, I have lost a lot of close friends - from drowning, carbon monoxide poisoning, shark attacks, or simply falling overboard and

never being seen again. And in the words of a famous poet, "it's all over now." I have settled down far away from those pearling days, and the friends I knew and the mates I made have all gone their separate ways. And now, we will understand why pearls are known as the tears of God.