



ChimDingo Publishing - Life Story

“Leaving Thursday Island by Crewing on a WWII Landing Barge”

Author's Note: This is an extract from draft book and life story from my time on Thursday Island, Torres Strait, Queensland. The actual book will have names and more detail on events and may be ordered differently; some background is mentioned to give context or continuity. It might also be written in a different style as opposed to a narrative.

Time to Leave

Sometimes the time to move on just comes. Often it is precipitated by events, unhappiness with your situation, a yearning for something better, the good times have changed, you've matured a little, you are simply tired or bored and want a change, you're not getting on with your boss or it'll be detrimental to your mental or physical health to stay any longer.

After nearly 5 years on Thursday Island I'd say I was in the last category with a bit of the others thrown in as well for good measure. I was starting to go “troppo”¹ as they say in the far north. I hadn't quite completed my apprenticeship officially, had about 6 months to go, but just couldn't bring myself to stay any longer due to some personal events and a disagreement with my apprenticeship boss².

So I made the decision to leave in late 1984 and thought about the best and cheapest way for a poor apprentice to travel the 2,000 odd kilometres home to Brisbane with his heavy tools. I was pretty poor by this stage as I'd used up a lot of my funds on buying some new tools, a few football trips and had even had to sell some of my assets like my over and under shotgun³. Through a few contacts I managed to negotiate that I would crew as cook to Cairns on a World War II vintage cargo landing barge. I had never crewed on a ship before, let alone as cook. Then I'd get the train from Cairns to Brisbane. So I organised a clean empty 44 gallon drum to pack all of my gear and tools into, packed one bag of clothes (didn't have a lot; airy shorts & t-shirts were the order of the day up there due to the heat and ball rot⁴) and basically chucked or gave away everything else.

I was pretty excited about this in the end. It was a bit of an adventure for a 25 year old to crew on a boat from the tip of Cape York to Cairns, a distance of about 800 km, and then get the train another 1200 km.

At the time I was conducting my apprenticeship at South Sea Enterprises. It was an engineering workshop, slipway and diesel fuel depot used by the military during World War II when the Japanese occupied Papua New Guinea. This was a company owned by an old guy who owned a small private bank on Wall Street in New York. Was never quite sure what the connection was here, maybe he was there in the war, maybe he knew someone or it was just a tax write-off investment.

I made a fairly low-key exit, just had a few quiet beers at the Torres Hotel with a few friends and waited for the morning. Conveniently the barge had to fuel up at our wharf. The M.V. Torres Venture, mainly grey, glided into the wharf, the rectangular square loading ramp prow angled upwards and the Captain waved from the wheelhouse at the rear. The deck was fully loaded up. Loading of my drum was easy; we just brought it down with the tractor, hooked a rope around it and lowered it down as the tide wasn't overly high.

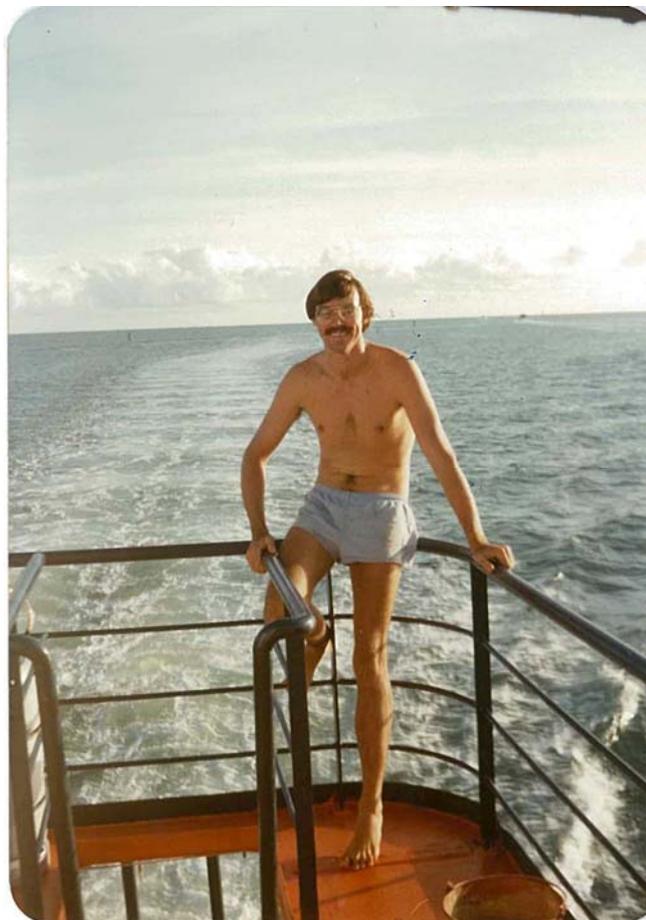
¹ A colloquialism for spending too much time in the tropics and frying your brain basically by becoming feral.

² My boss was pretty good, he gave me the opportunity when I needed it and though sometimes a little fussy to deal with he was a funny guy and it was just one of those things but that's another funny story (probably not from his point of view).

³ I learned to shoot clay targets at the Thursday Island Gun Club and that's where I met my eventual apprenticeship boss when I was still in the bank.

⁴ A colloquialism for fungal infections caused by the heat and humidity in the groin area mainly, a hazard of the tropics.

I said my goodbyes to my fellow employee, who was an older local islander and also a great friend, musician, fishing and drinking buddy. [Seaman Dan who won an ARIA in his seventies.] I also ate the famous fruit from the "Wongai" tree a few weeks before which means:- "On Thursday Island (TI) there is a legend which states that whoever eats the fruit of the Wongai tree on TI is destined to return". So I wondered about that. I was actually relieved to be leaving to be honest though it had been fun a lot of the time ⁵.



After refuelling we slipped quietly out of port between Thursday Island and Horn Island and headed south-west for the 25km trip to the Mainland.

On arrival we took Albany Passage past the historic settlement of Somerset made famous by the Jardine family, on further south into the Coral Sea past the entrance to the Jardine River and onto the inside of the Great Barrier Reef (all a marine national park now) to Cape Melville near the famous secluded fishing resort of Lizard Island, past Cooktown where Captain Cook repaired the Endeavour before sailing northwards to claim Australia and finally past Cape Tribulation to Cairns.

My cooking wasn't a great success the first night as I messed up the mashed potatoes & pumpkin (too watery) and I wasn't that good at cooking rice. One of the crew was a footballer I had played against so they had a good laugh. The captain an affable experienced old islander seaman managed to catch a couple of very large Spanish mackerel on the troll lines the next day so we had some good tucker for the rest of the trip.

There is a lot of time to kill while cruising along so you read, play cards, do any odd jobs or sit out and get a tan. It's not that comfortable sleeping on a boat. It wasn't that rough luckily and I didn't get seasick so that was good. It was about a two night, three day trip down there. Not much else of note happened, its mostly enjoying the solitude of the ocean.

On arrival in Cairns in the afternoon we were met by friends and family of the crew and goods were exchanged. I had a few beers with some of the ones I knew while we waited for the boat to be unloaded and my drum to be transferred to the train freight depot. The captain arranged this for me for free which I was appreciative of. I slept that night at my friend's house as the train was leaving next morning.

The famous train from Cairns to Brisbane or vice versa is the Sunlander which has sleeper, seated and dining carriages as it takes 2 days. I didn't have a sleeper so had to sleep in the seated one which wasn't great. I like trains as you can at least walk around and get a beer plus see the scenery. It's quite a nice trip if you're not in a rush. The highlight in those days was one of the stops where they made a 20 minute layover where everyone raced over to the historic pub (The Railway of course) across the road from the station to get a few beers in and the driver blew the whistle and then you all ran back over to the station.

I arrived at Roma Street Station in Brisbane uncertain of my future; 25 years old, sacked from the bank for getting arrested for streaking and the subsequent politically motivated trial ⁶, having my apprenticeship unfinished, no formal education past junior level and significantly derailed so to speak at the end of the line. My life was a mess basically at this point in time.

⁵ TI in those days was a multi-cultural frontier type fishing (prawns, crayfish mainly) and cultured pearl farm outpost and islander community with a few government departments and private commercial enterprises, four pubs, only one national radio station, no TV & video hadn't been invented and everyone having a very casual lifestyle.

⁶ This resulted in a civil (not criminal) conviction and a lot of notoriety; TI and National Bank legends.