

## *The Romantic Tropic Shore*

A surveyor's lot is not always a happy one. Especially when he is newly married and living in a frontier society, as Josephine and I were in New Guinea in 1966. The nature of the job meant weeks of separation as I did my white man's burden bit in the jungle, while Josephine languished in Wewak, the district capital on the north coast.

However, Josephine is not noted for her patience, so I wasn't wholly surprised when, after a month's separation while I was working in the Aitape District, I received a telegram: *Arriving Aitape Saturday 2 pm. Love, Josephine.*

This news aroused mixed feelings, as it came to me at the little patrol post of Sissano on the 10 am radio schedule, that very Saturday morning.

Now Sissano is only 35 km from Aitape. They are both on the coast: but, unfortunately, there was no road between them.

No problem! I leapt on my trusty Honda 90 trail-bike, sped down the sandy track and crossed the mouth of the Sissano lagoon by way of the ferry-canoe. The lagoon is divided from the ocean by a sand dune about 13 km long, wide enough to have well-established vegetation and several villages on it. Inland of the lagoon is all swamp, so the only way to Aitape, except by boat, was along the beach.

Being low tide, I roared along the hard-packed sand at top speed to the next ferry, which crossed a creek, and then by what was laughably called a road to Aitape, arriving just in time to greet Josephine as she alighted from the afternoon single-engined Cessna: piloted by the Bishop of Aitape, no less.

Once past the joy of reunion, her smile slipped slightly at the absence of the expected Landrover limo. I explained the transport difficulties. What did it matter? We were together again. That was the most important thing.

We tied her suitcase vertically on the very rear of the luggage rack, and with her squeezed in between it and me, set off slowly for the first ferry.

This was a dugout canoe of the economy class, without even an outrigger. We wedged the Honda's wheels into the hollowed-out log, little more than a slot, where it leaned precariously over the side. Josephine and I leaned over the other side to balance it while the ferry-mistress, an ancient crone who smoked a pipe, stood nonchalantly in the stern with her toes curled over the flattened edge as she poled us over the creek.

We had to run beside the bike, gunning the engine, to get it over the soft dune sand to the beach. Dusk was falling by the time we reached the sea, and with it came the tide, obliterating the hard-packed highway I had sped along earlier. We slithered and slid through the soft sand, kicking along with our feet to keep the bike moving. By about 8:30 we were exhausted, and decided to stop and wait for the tide to go out.

I turned off the engine and headlight. The quiet and absolute darkness of the moonless night closed in. Even the stars were invisible behind a heavy overcast. The only sound was the soft sea slop on the strand, the only light the faint phosphorescence of the foam fringing the beach. We were alone, in the middle of nowhere, on the romantic tropic shore ... and we hadn't seen each other for *over a month*.

We decided to have a swim first. Funny how you never think of crocodiles or sharks at a time like that. We stripped off and plunged in. The water was cool and bracing after

our sweaty progress. As we stood in the shallows to walk back to the beach, we each had the strangest feeling we were *no longer alone*.

We hastily dressed. I turned on the bike's headlight, and it was reflected from a constellation of white, grinning teeth and eyeballs! We had unwittingly stopped in front of Arop village, and many of the villagers had crept silently down to see who was trespassing on their beach in the middle of the night.

"Oyes, gutnite, two-fella!" they chorused politely, when the light hit them.

"Oyes, gutnite all-togetha!" I replied, and added, "Uh, me-fella like go now."

"Orright, you can e go," they agreed.

We leapt aboard and roared off in a shower of sand, wheel spinning, legs kicking to assist our progress. It seemed the tide was never going to go out. With all the reefs and islands, it was not unusual to have one, two, or three tides in the 24 hours. This seemed to be one of the singular tide nights.

Around midnight, we reached the lagoon mouth. Naturally, the ferry was on the other side. We flashed the headlight and blew the feeble horn. After about half an hour the canoe appeared out of the darkness, and we climbed thankfully aboard.

This was a more substantial craft than the last, a double-outrigger with a sail. We set off slowly in the ghost of a breeze ... which died altogether in the middle of the channel.

The ancient mariner who ran this service made it a point of honour never to use a paddle. After all, what was the sail for? He settled in the stern to sleep until the breeze came back. Josephine and I found a couple of sticks in the bilge, normally used to prop out the sail. With these as inefficient paddles, we finally made it to the opposite shore.

At last, at about 2 a.m., we pulled up at the house where I was boarding with the local patrol officer. He was waiting up for us, with bottles of port and whiskey ... and several well-thumbed notebooks. His eyes lit up at the sight of Josephine. After the briefest of introductions, he opened the first of many pages.

He had chosen this moment to reveal himself as a frustrated bush poet! It was hard being a poet in the wilderness, with no ready audience. And here, he must have thought, was the perfect audience: a new person, and a white woman, no less, a rare species on the New Guinea outstations.

What he didn't know was that even after a hot shower and a good night's sleep, Josephine is not the greatest poetry fan around. But she has excellent manners. She smiled, made polite comments and swallowed her yawns, and blinked an awful lot as her eyes glazed over. It was nearly 4 a.m. before he released us to stagger off to bed.

Postscript: We always had happy memories of that time, but since July 18, 1998, those memories have been overlaid by sadness. By then, the bright-eyed kids who had laughed at the crazy whiteys they'd surprised on their beach would have grown up and had kids of their own.

Sitting before the TV news that night, we didn't immediately realise what we were seeing: video from a helicopter of bodies floating among debris. But then the shock of

recognition set in. On the previous night an undersea earthquake, offshore from Sissano, triggered a tsunami which swept right over the dunes and into the Sissano lagoon. Later estimates were that three waves, over seven metres high, struck the shore while the people were sleeping. Arop village was obliterated, and most of the 2,000 inhabitants of the dunes died.