

Destination—Barrier Reef

By Richard Martin—a talented Queensland aboriginal writer and artist

It was February '58. I was net fishing at Mackay, North Qld. There were four of us, and about that time fishing was poor and I was thinking of joining the league of deep-sea fishing, namely the outer Barrier Reef. During the last few months fishing boats have been coming in with their catch and as the season was coming to a close about April, all small ships were making their last dash to the reef. I always thought of going to the Reef, not only to catch big fish, but because the Reef itself was to me an attraction.

My chance came one morning after my friends and I were repairing nets and doing other minor jobs that required attention. It was then I saw a friend of mine I had known coming down the waterfront looking for me. Although he was 18 or 19 he was an "old hand" at reef fishing, and had been "outside" on a number of occasions. He and the Skipper of the "X" were about to depart for the Reef at high tide that night. He said the Skipper of "X" wanted to see me, so we made our way to the wharves where a 28 foot launch was tied. Les was the Skipper and was also an old hand at fishing and handling small ships. He was an ex-navy man and knew his ships and fish.

We boarded the boat and found the Skipper doing the final check of fishing gear, emergency fuel, ice-water, oil, food, etc. He came straight to the point and asked me to come "outside" with them as they were a hand short. I told him I would and we discussed the matter and settled everything. He expected to be back in a fortnight.

At full tide that night Les started the engine, letting it idle for a few minutes, tested the rudder per steering wheel, returned to the engine, revved it a few times, then being satisfied with it, he went into the cockpit and told Bill and I to stand by to cast off.

I went to the stern and Bill to the bow. Les called to us to cast off, and gave the all clear. The powerful engine gave a roar, as white foam stirred at the stern, then slowly the boat lurched forward and at long last, we were on the first step to the Great Barrier Reef.

After we sailed out of the Pioneer River and past Flat Top Island, the Skipper said everything would be O.K. and to go and have a sleep. Bill and I went below where there were three berths, and we crawled into our bunks and with the constant rocking of the boat and the engine throbbing in our ears, we were soon fast asleep.

I awoke at 5 a.m. At this time Bill was steering and the skipper was in his bunk asleep. Bill said he was steering since 2 a.m., and asked me if I could steer by compass, and as I could he left instructions with me to wake the skipper as soon as we got aside of Tern Island.

I noticed by the charts that Tern Island was to be the last bit of land we were to see for a fortnight, also it was about 4 hours steady sailing. Most of the islands we were passing were surrounded by coral reefs.

At last when Tern Island was ahead about a half mile I went below and woke the Skipper, and he told me to bring the boat in about a hundred yards off Tern Island, which I did. Then Les and I prepared to make breakfast, which consisted of steak, bacon and eggs. He noticed the boat was drifting and he asked me if I had put on a reef anchor and taken off the ordinary anchor. I told him I hadn't, but he didn't seem to mind. He said, "I meant to tell you to put a reef anchor on, but don't worry, the anchor will catch", and it did.

On the starboard side about a short mile away was a small island called Bushy Island. It is covered in green bushy trees, presumably mangroves, and surrounded by a beautiful yellow beach. It is one of the prettiest little islands I have ever seen on the Reef, next to Pine Island in the Whitsunday Passage.

Tern Island is a great rock about 60 or 70 feet above sea level with sparse vegetation and a few trees. It is well named, as terns, seagulls, and other sea birds inhabit it.

As we wanted to leave then, Bill and I were told to get ready to pull up the anchor, while the skipper started the engine. It was then the trouble started. The boat

