

CHAPTER NINE

Returning to Perth in late January, I immediately set about organising a business trip to the north west of the State.

An urgent message also awaited me from Channel Seven TV to contact Darcy Farrell. I phoned him. "Alan, we want to make a three week underwater series depicting sharks in their natural habitat. Would you be interested in organising the entire venture with three or four other divers?"

"Sounds interesting and exciting. Yes I'd love to do it. Only thing is I'll be away for the next three weeks, can it wait until then?"

"Certainly Alan. That will give us time to sell the programme. Thanks mate. Have a good trip."

Ten days later, I sat in Dave Nelley's office in Roebourne. "Time marches on and May is drawing closer," I said. "How is the preparatory work going for the "TRYAL"?"

"Very good Alan. I've made up several steel frames for tents and supplied the covers. Folding beds and an icebox are available as well as stores and cooking utensils. I have all my diving gear ready and an eight cubic foot diving compressor. What else are we going to need?"

"For a start we need to charter a boat large enough to transport our equipment. Then while we are at the islands we'll need a small fast boat to work from. As we will be completely isolated, we will have to duplicate all equipment in case something breaks down. I'll see Ian Blair at Onslow, on the way back to Perth and arrange to charter the "Quinda," it's 45ft. long and should do the job. I may as well hire a small boat from him as well, which will save me transporting one from Perth. I already have the extra diving compressor and I can hire a portable refrigerator. I will buy all the necessary provisions and send them on by road transport to Onslow."

"And how many will be in the party?" Dave enquired.

"Just you and I and if I can arrange it, a medico, just in case something goes wrong with us. I'll approach Doc. Harrison when I get back. I'm quite sure he will come."

"Alright," said Dave, "so until I see you in May we will keep in touch by telephone."

Continuing on North, I arrived at Derby five days later, hurriedly completed my business and retired to the hotel room, intending to leave early the next morning. About 9.30 p.m. I heard a knock at the door and opened it to see a stooped old man in tattered clothes standing on the verandah.

"Shallow-well Charlie," I said in instant recognition. "Come in old timer." I reached into the refrigerator for two bottles of beer, knowing that the action would be recognised as one of friendship and welcome. He sat on the edge of my bed and without saying a word, started his drink.

I studied his face. Estimating his age would have been well nigh impossible. I had been told he was over eighty when I had first met him ten

years before. From the wrinkled furrows in his face I estimated he was over a hundred. A few tassels of grey hair hung from under a battered old bushman's hat, while a stubble of whiskers covered his cheeks. Probably it was a long time since he walked with a straight back and his body was now thin and tired.

The only name people knew him by was Charlie, having long since forgotten any other attachment except the nickname of 'Shallow-well'. I had heard that he earned this title from his early days of water divining and well-digging in the district. He was reputed as the only person to find water at less than thirty feet in some of the most arid areas of the State. To know him was to like him as he never tired of expressing how life had been good to him.

"If this is a social call," I said, "then I'm flattered with your company. But from your expression, I think there could be something on your mind. How does it concern me?"

He slowly placed his bottle on the table, wiped the froth from his whiskers with the back of his hand, then took out a worn old pipe.

"They tell me you're still playing with shipwrecks, lad. Seems to me that sometimes things don't go too good for you; ay!"

"I don't know Charlie. Probably I just take the good with the bad.

"H'mmm," he mused. "I did a bit of fossicking meself some time ago. Used to like moseyin' along the beaches. Pick up a few shells; kick over a bit of rubbish. Good life, ay."

I grinned at the way the 'ay' was tacked onto his conversation; depending on the manner of expression it could mean anything at all. I nodded to this question as he continued. "Sometimes found things interestin', but not havin' leamin' I mostly couldn't find out what they were. Used to do a bit of prospectin' too, ay."

He extracted a grubby packet of tobacco from a side pocket of his tattered coat, then proceeded to stuff a mixture into the bowl of his pipe.

I took the opportunity to ask a question. "Did you want to tell me about something you found, Charlie?"

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He ignored the question, as if I hadn't spoken, then struck a match to light up. Several matches later, smoke billowed from the pipe, now firmly clutched between his gums.

"Yeh, prospectin's a good life too," he continued. "Found a pretty rich strike o' galena, back about '30, right on the end of the cape. Never did nothin' with it though, too darn far away ay, a hundred and twenty mile walk with the donkeys through the scrub. Don't reckon anyone's found it again, ay."

He stopped to puff at the pipe; I took the break in the conversation to produce two more small bottles of beer.

"So now you're going to tell me where to find the old galena mine?"

He ignored the question, puffed at the pipe again, then took a swig from the new bottle. "Yep, no-one has found it since, but someone sure was there before me. Great big hole dug in the side o' the hill. All overgrown round there with bush now. Must've been a long time ago, ay."

I interrupted. "If this mine is in an area where only donkeys could travel, it seems hardly likely that any other white men would have been out there to dig away a large quantity of galena without attracting some attention."

He thought for a moment. "It's pretty close to the coast, could have come by sea, ay? Big tide, though, thirty-five feet, I reckon plenty mangroves and mud, lousy with mossies. Saw something buried in the mud one day at low tide, ay."

He reached inside his coat, then with a rustling, produced some dirty old brown paper. Placing it on his knee he unfolded the paper to display a piece of material about nine inches in diameter and three eighths of an inch thick. It was a dirty green-brown colour with the edges broken and chipped.

"Looks like some writin' on this," he continued. "Could be Chinese. Would have been a lot o' them yellow buggers here one time, ay? Have a look," he said, handing me the object.

"It's quite heavy, Charlie. How did you carry this in your coat?"

"Didn't, I stuck it in the top of me strides, ay."

I looked at the face of the plate. Quite bold and discernible figuring was etched into the surface in a letter with which I was not familiar. "It's not Chinese, Charlie. I'm afraid I don't recognise the imprint at all. Would you like me to find out something about it?"

"Well, that's why I brought the bloody thing here. Thought you'd be the best bloke to show it to, ay."

"Thanks for your trust in me Charlie, but, are you going to show me where it came from?"

"Gettin' a bit old to take you there now, mate, but I got a map here, ay "

Once more he reached inside the coat, this time producing some torn and dirty white paper. I couldn't help but wonder at the contents of the rest of that coat. Possibly all his worldly belongings were hidden inside

He spread the paper on the table and I recognised it as part of an admiralty chart. I visualised Charlie tearing away the other pieces he didn't require.

Heavy pencil lines ran over the surface, tracing his journeys from days gone by. He ran a gnarled old finger along one of the lines which ran south from Derby, then northwards to take a long curving line to the north-west and then west to finish on the coast. Offshore was marked the Buccaneer Archipelago, Dampier's old playground.

"That's where she is" he said, resting his finger on the coast.

"And why have you got that mark off the coast?" I inquired.

"Seems to be something buried in the mud. Never could get out to have a look at it, always too much water at high tide and too much mud when the tide went out; could be a ship, ay."

"Could be Charlie," I replied. "Tell me have you ever been in an aeroplane?"

"Yep, just before the war, the old 'Murchison' went to Koolan Island, when they started the iron ore show. Quick way to go, ay."

"Would you like to come for another flight Charlie? I'd like you to show me where the exact spot is, if you wouldn't mind."

"Be glad to. When do you want to go?"

I reached for the telephone and asked for the after-hours number of the local aircraft charter company. "I'll find out, we may be able to go tomorrow."

When they answered, I gave them my requirements with the proviso that I would want the plane over the spot at the time of low tide.

Ten minutes later the telephone rang again with the information that low-tide was 11.15 am. An aeroplane would be available at 10 am. Would I be at the airport at 9.30.

"There we are," I said to Charlie. "All the arrangements are made. Now so you won't have any problems later, you can sleep here tonight, have breakfast in the morning and we'll go out to the airport in my car."

I rang the hotel office to organise an extra bed.

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The following morning the aircraft took off on schedule, turning to the northwest to come into line with the previous instructions. Below us unfolded the rugged grandeur of the mountain ranges with great rocky gorges gashed in the landscape. Mountain streams wound away to the sea with heavy timber lining the banks. Occasionally I could see the movement of kangaroos or emus scurrying through the bush in terror of the noisy engines. Smoke curled upwards from Aboriginal camp-fires.

"We shouldn't take very long" said the pilot. "About another half-hour will bring us into the coast."

I took out my two cameras and loaded them with rolls of new film. I had barely completed the task when I could see the ocean coming into view. Away to the west dozens of islands stood out from the blue sea, shimmering in the tropical sun.

The pilot made a slight course alteration, then turned to ask my instructions. "I would like you to hold it steady at five hundred feet, then drop your speed to the allowable minimum above stalling."

From a fixed height, I knew I could later calculate the size of any object which we photographed. Not accurately of course, but near enough.

"Recognise any of the country?" I asked of Charlie.

"Now that we are lower I can," he replied. "Over there you can see the mine near that valley."

Following his pointing, I noticed a hill which had been burrowed away for hundreds of yards along one side as if a bomb had been exploded there at some time in the past. Vegetation covered the huge scar.

I clicked the cameras from a dozen different positions as the plane circled above.

"She stands out plain today," I heard Charlie comment, thinking he was talking of the mine. "Just about see her ribs."

I turned to see him pointing offshore and followed the indication given. There in the mud was a strange outline. Small pips of mud seemed to project above the surroundings to form a shape more like a banana than a ship. It was only about one sixth as wide as it was long but the contour was quite plain.

"I certainly don't think that would be a ship," I commented, "it would be too narrow to be an ocean going vessel. It's more like the shape of a canoe."

Later with two rolls of film completely used, I directed the pilot to return to Derby.

Driving Charlie home I was non-committal.

The galena mine was certainly interesting. The object offshore, I couldn't be certain about. The best hope was from that tablet of bronze and the inscriptions.

"The best place for this to go, is America," I said to Charlie, when later I delivered the carefully wrapped parcel to the post office. "It will be the quickest way to receive an accurate reply."

"Could be interestin' ay?"

"Sure mate. I'll keep in touch, but in the meantime, I've got work to do. Goodbye."

Back in Perth, I received no rest. The television series was all geared to go. Saturation advertising had been given to the pending programme which would be called "Shark".

Location was to be Jurien Bay, two hundred miles north of Perth for the first ten days and then to Rottnest Island, twelve miles off Fremantle for the next ten days.

Jurien Bay area had gained notoriety from being the site of a fatal shark attack on a skindiver only a few months before. The object of our trip was to film underwater as many species of sharks as we could, then if possible shoot the sharks before they made a meal of us.

Somehow the sharks seemed to know of our venture and did their best to stay away. In twenty one days of filming we had caught only thirty sharks which included nine separate species. The only conclusion we reached after studying their habits was that sharks are completely unpredictable.

I returned home for a well earned rest, but three days later a registered parcel arrived addressed to me from the United States.

Opening it, I removed Charlie's bronze tablet and then hastened to read the accompanying letter. Quote.

"Dear Sir,

"We wish to thank you for the opportunity to identify the enclosed bronze plate, which we found to be extremely interesting.

"It is of Phoenician origin possibly from a period 200 -- 700 B.C.

"At present, we are not able to translate fully, the text of the writing on the plate. This is being investigated by Professor Mason of our archeological section, who will forward his findings at a later date.

"We would appreciate any further information you could send regarding location of your discovery as we consider it of important historical significance." Unquote.

I immediately sent a letter to Charlie to inform him of the news, but wanted badly to make the story known to our own museum.

Entering Dr. Ride's office, I started. "Doctor, it is possible that I have located a Phoenician ship adjacent to the Buccaneer Archipelago. I have already had a bronze tablet identified."

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"Yes," he replied. "If you could pick-up the appropriate form, from my secretary, submitting your discovery to the Board Members, it will receive the necessary attention on a priority basis."

Exasperated, I replied. "I know, I know, let's just forget it."

I walked across the street to the Perth Public Library requesting information on books of Phoenician voyages of exploration. I was told to call back the following day.

Entering the library the next morning I was confronted by a smiling female attendant with a huge pile of books on a desk. "That is all I could find, sir, is there anything else?"

"No thank you," I gasped. "This should do."

Three days later I had reached my conclusions.

The Phoenicians had made voyages of exploration and commerce, up to 1000 B.C. as far away as Cathay (China). On many of these trips, they returned with cargoes of high grade silver. (Galena, is silver lead and zinc.)

One publication, "The Ancient Explorers" made reference to reports by Herodotus, from 500 B.C. whereby Darius had asked his Admiral Scylax to take a fleet of ships on a voyage of exploration in the Indian Ocean.

It is also known and accepted that, in 600 B.C. Necko, had circumnavigated South Africa from Athens, through the pillars of Hercules and back via the Red Sea.

Why then should it be impossible for one of their ships to be on the Australian mainland.

Another book gave details of the structure of a Phoenician Trireme as 165ft. long and only 20ft wide (just like a banana).

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