

## GUNS ON BOATS

Malcolm regarded me, a shipwrecked and broke sailor with some disdain, but nevertheless found me sufficiently interesting to invite to his barbecue at Loloho. All did not go well.

An uninvited degenerate, half-dressed alcoholic, Steve, tussled with Malcolm before being ejected from the gathering. It was not long before Steve reappeared at the head of a bunch of Tolais. They were brandishing machetes as they slipped from tree to tree as if trained for this kind of attack. The threat was not to be taken lightly. The Tolai Mataungan society, had only the year before lured the Government Commissioner at Rabaul into the bush to discuss a power station site and stabbed him to death.



**My tri Unbound at Loloho on Bougainville the site of the drama.**

Other guests quietly slipped off among the palms leaving us three to defend ourselves. We picked up the only weapons available, the longest and strongest fire tipped branches from the fire. Strangely I felt adrenalin and excitement rather than fear, at least I had a weapon, was young and strong, and was prepared to fight. We stood ground with our backs to the water and watched the Tolais advance, Steve constantly urging them on, "Come on Tolais." He shouted.

We stood watching intently as they slipped closer. They moved quickly by twos and stood waiting behind a tree as if we had projectile weapons. A second lot would advance to the position vacated by the first two. Then after a couple of minutes of the advance they paused. As we waited expectantly their resolve seemed to waver. They were after all, on the foreign Island of Bougainville, not their native island of New Britain. What support or sympathy could they expect from the blue black Bougainvillians who referred to them contemptuously as redskins? As we waited, the rearmost began to slink away and the resolve of the boldest decayed, and they also slunk off. Steve made no objection probably frightened himself of the possible outcome of any violent confrontation.



**A Bougainvillian lass.**

The incident took the shine off proceedings and we shuffled off to our respective quarters. I retired to my tree tethered tri Unbound, and Malcolm retired to his cabin. I was drifting off to sleep when I heard somebody calling me. Up on deck I found Malcolm standing on the shore, "John they have surrounded me donga and I don't feel safe. Can I stay on your boat?"

"Sure mate, you can sleep in the front cabin, you'll be OK there."

Excited by all this I bedded Malcolm down and prepared a defense.



**Martini Cadet Rifle.**

My treasured little single shot Martini Cadet rifle came out of its hiding place. I slipped one of the 0.310 caliber bullets into the chamber, left the lever arm open for safety, and propped it up against the rear saloon bulkhead. I could now sleep lightly enough in the saloon knowing that any movement of the boat would wake me. Then it would be out of bed, pick up and cock the rifle and if directly threatened, probably by a razor sharp machete, shoot the intruder. Then according to advice, reload and fire a shot through the roof of the boat. This according to Seargent Lynch was the alleged warning shot. That rifle gave me a good night's sleep. Fortunately, no intruders were game

and little harm was done. After this episode, Malcolm, a customs agent, made all my customs problems disappear.

However, it has caused me to reflect on the wisdom of carrying and using firearms. I carried that rifle on board during my world circumnavigation. In many instances I did not declare it to customs. In hindsight except for the above instance I would say that it was an encumbrance. The only time I did declare it, in Jamaica, it took me half a day to clear it out of customs. The bureaucracy was so time consuming, the constable supervising apologized, "I am sorry sir, our people go crazy with guns."

That was true. The last item I read in the newspaper was about a fellow waiting with a gun for the bus. When his victim showed up he said in front of commuters, "Bin waiting for you a long time man." and shot him dead.



#### **AK47**

My friend Alastair Campbell might disagree on the issue of carrying guns. Sailing down the coast of Somalia in his schooner Wilderness, his crew spied a motorised rubber ducky approach with a soldier holding a rifle. Alastair held an AK 47 above his head and the approaching vessel turned away.

These tales cause me to reflect on gun culture. In spite of the alleged threat from guns, in the year I spent in the US I only once felt threatened, unjustifiably I might add. However, I can recall some rather amusing incidents. I used, in my spare time, wander around a town in Daytona beach and occasionally visit a friendly chap in a Pawnshop. There on the wall were displayed all sorts of firearms including pistols of all shape and size;

"What do I need to own one of those?"

"A Florida driving license."

I had a license but what would I do with one? Shoot sharks or something else stupid and what about declaring through customs? No thanks.

Then one day while I was talking to him a fat woman came rolling through the door:

"I wanna buy me a gun, I'm gunna blow ma man away."

"Yes ma'am here we have a 45 colt revolver, good stopping power but I recommend the 38 magnum just as good but more accurate."

In one of the marinas I ran into a rather charismatic skipper of a trimaran belonging to Richard Bach, the author of Jonathan Livingstone seagull. I argued with him for better gun control given the amount of gun accidents and crime in the US. Later he invited us to come to the Pizza parlour with

him. As we drove down the road in his gigantic car he reached under the seat and pulled out a large handgun waved it around and exclaimed, "I like to drive defensively."

Later, one of his friends handed me a large and heavy revolver and told me, "Here hold this, doesn't it make you feel powerful?"

I held this heavy revolver that had the power to instantly kill any person I chose. In spite of myself, it did make me feel powerful. Is there any power greater than the ability to take some poor person's life? Interestingly no rifle had ever given me that feeling, I suppose because a pistol is specifically designed for killing people at close quarters.

The questions that need to be asked are:

1. What is the effect of uncontrolled gun ownership that includes machine guns?
2. Does this unfettered right to own assault weapons protect people?
3. What does this tell us about the wisdom of carrying guns on boats?

One story that stands out is related to the American sniper Chris Kyle. Chris had killed 160 "combatants" in Iraq and written a book of his experience that was made into a film. He was trying to help a former marine Eddy Ray Routh who was suffering from PTSD and psychotic episodes. Chris had done this before by taking veterans to a rifle range for what could be described as a bonding session. However, in this instance the bonding did not work too well. The death of Chris and his friend is described:

*Arriving at the range, the party carried several rifles, five handguns and boxes of ammunition and protective earplugs to an open platform. Kyle and Littlefield were carrying loaded .45 caliber pistols on web holster belts. They began using the range. Routh later said that it bothered him that Chad Littlefield was not shooting — it somehow made him a threat. At some point Routh armed himself with a 9mm pistol.*

*Kyle and Littlefield never had a chance to defend themselves. Routh told one of the psychologists who testified that he shot Littlefield first, then Kyle. Littlefield was struck seven times in the back, shoulder, head and hand, with slugs from the 9mm handgun. Kyle was hit six times in the head, shoulder, chest and right arm, by bullets from the Springfield .45. They apparently fell with their sidearms still holstered and with the safeties on.*

This incident is one of many similar that involve automatic or semi-automatic firearms. We may assume that Americans want the freedom to own firearms for self-protection and to "prevent the government from taking them over." The latter objective can never be achieved no matter how powerful the armament. But let us suppose a compromise is agreed whereby the populous is allowed, or even required to own a single shot rifle, preferably with a low velocity bullet. In the event of a home invasion the occupant is in a position to adequately threaten any invader without having the capacity to go on a mass killing rampage. For instance, he would have only been able to kill one of the two friends in the above Kyle killing before the second would have returned fire. Faced with this it is unlikely Routh would even killed one considering the likely consequences for him.

If we define a mass murder as a gun killing of 4 or more people we find that in Australia and the US we have the following statistics. The third column shows the mass murder rate in Australia as if it had the same population as the USA.

### Mass Murders

| Decade    | Australia | US | Australia (population adjusted) |
|-----------|-----------|----|---------------------------------|
| 1976-1986 | 2         | 13 | 30                              |
| 1987-1996 | 7         | 32 | 100                             |
| 1997-2006 | 0         | 42 | 0                               |
| 2007-2015 | 0         | 28 | 0                               |

The table shows that for two decades Australia had triple the mass murder rate per capita of America. The mass murder rate in Australia dropped to zero after the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania in 1996. The 32 people massacred in this incident induced the government to introduce strict gun control laws\* that reduced mass murders to Zero for the following two decades.

It can be seen that weapons in homes and on boats are more likely to harm the owners and their friends. Assuming that the weapons are designed to repel pirates, it might be wiser to obviate this problem by avoiding areas that harbour pirates and bandits. There are several books describing the problem and areas to avoid (e.g. Dangerous Waters by John S Burnett). Up to date information can be obtained in cruising circles and from marine authorities. Some yachtsmen like to cruise in large groups where pirates are suspected and have their own agreed methods of protection. I never had any problems in my seven years of cruising the world (1969-1975) but times are changing and it will be wise for the cruiser to inform himself of any inherent dangers. Whether arms aboard a boat will help is a moot point, but speaking for myself I would avoid them.

\* In 1996 after a particularly horrific massacre at Port Arthur in Tasmania where 32 people were killed the government introduced new gun laws: Semi-automatic rifles and pump action/self-loading shotguns were banned from civilians and a genuine reason was required for all other firearms. Both a firearms license and a buyer's permit are necessary to legally purchase a firearm. Furthermore, an acceptable reason must be stated on the permit for buying the weapon, and a minimum 28 day "cooling off" period must be enforced before the issuing of the license. Also as a condition of having a gun licence, the owner must have his guns securely locked away at all times.