

# Negotiating the Reefs around the Paradise Islands

By Geoff Walker

It must be said that my time in New Guinea and the Paradise Islands must rank amongst my most romantic of nostalgia. I was very fortunate to live and work in New Guinea, Bougainville, Lihir, and Simberi, including such exotic places as Palau as well as the less exciting like Nauru and Ocean Islands. Over my years spent at sea and working in the region I can say with hand on my heart that they were some of the most enjoyable and the adage that PNG only attracts Missionaries, Moneymakers or Misfits is entirely untrue.

My first introduction to the “Paradise Islands” was in 1973. I had been offered a post as Master on one of the Pacific Island Navigation Company vessels trading around the Pacific Islands but during the process of seeking alternative new challenges away from a seagoing life, I came across an advert in an Australian newspaper, for a Cargo Superintendent based in Bougainville; to be precise, the Port of Anewa Bay, which is a stone’s throw away from the Islands old colonial City of Kieta. With tongue in cheek and full of self confidence, I sent off a quick letter to the advertiser, thinking I would hear no more. To my great surprise, I received a prompt response, in which I was requested to attend an interview. My permanent home and place of abode was Hong Kong but it just so happened I was visiting Australia at the time so attending an interview in Melbourne was an easy task.

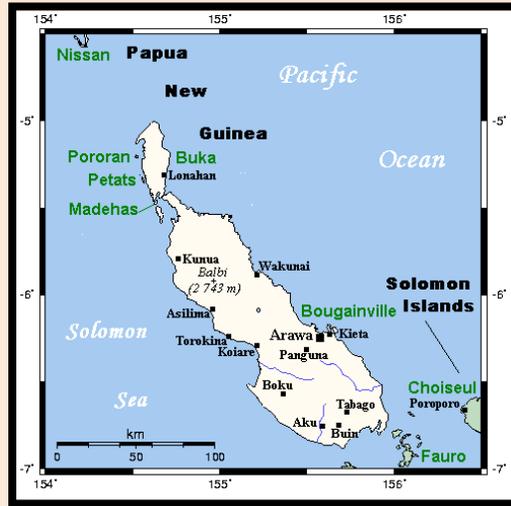
I arrived at the plush offices of Bougainville Copper Ltd, (BCL) which was a subsidiary of the Australian Mining conglomerate Rio Tinto; the interview lasted well over an hour during which I was shown a short film clip outlining the lifestyle of expatriates working for the company on the Island. At the conclusion of the interview I thought that I may have a 50% chance of success. Anyway, to simplify matters, after about one week I received a letter informing me that my application had been successful and asking for details of when I could depart for the Island. The Visa process was a little laborious but within two weeks I was firmly seated on an Air New Guinea flight to Port Moresby and then connecting to Aropa Airport, Bougainville.

I found Bougainville Island to be breathtakingly scenic, with spectacular rain forests, volcanic landscapes, mountains of all shapes and sizes and magnificent flowers and beaches. The drive along the coast from Aropa Airport to my house in Arawa was spectacular, passing lush manicured street plantations and gardens as well as Palm lined roads along the route. Arawa was the satellite town, mainly constructed by BCL. It was the Headquarters for the North Solomons Province and had taken over from Kieta which was the old Government cum Colonial Town where the senior Government officials resided, such as Police, Immigration, Magistrates and District Officer (Kiap-known formally as district officers and patrol officers, who were travelling representatives of the British and Australian governments with wide-ranging authority, in pre-independence Papua New Guinea). Right up until independence in 1975 many of the senior Government positions were held by expatriates mainly from Australia or New Zealand.

In contrast to Kieta, Arawa was a modern well planned, suburban city, featuring a Hospital, School, Library, several large Supermarkets and all the other usual conveniences required by a transient

community of mainly expats. My accommodation was a recently constructed “Queenslander” type residence on stilts, nestled in amongst numerous similar houses within the township. All the residents were expatriates so it was a fairly tight knit community prone to lots of BBQs and partying.

At that time Bougainville was a relatively orderly place but as it became closer to Independence Day there were a number of worrying incidents. Unrest was mainly stoked by local ringleaders, who were all jockeying for their piece of the potential political or financial pie.



Above is a schematic map of Bougainville Island and surrounding areas. Arawa is centrally located on the Island's northern coast and is the township mainly constructed by Bougainville Copper Ltd.



This was a typical standard house provided for expats by BCL at Arawa during 1970-80s. My house was of similar design but somewhat larger than the one depicted in the image above. These homes were laid out in uniform roads, in all there were about 500 such houses of varying size in Arawa. Generally, the rule was, the larger the house, the more senior the occupant, within BCL hierarchy. Competitions became the norm between the residents to see who could achieve the most beautiful manicured garden. The island was prone to regular earthquakes, known locally as Gurias – when these occurred the

houses shook alarmingly, aided by the fact that they were on “Legs”. I never heard of structural damage being sustained to the houses. The worst was everything falling off the shelves in the Supermarkets.

Not long after my arrival, I was interviewed by the Port Manager and Harbor Master and given the opportunity to take on the role of Assistant Harbor Master/Port Pilot since I had previous command experience when I was at sea. The Port of Anewa Bay was a private Port, also having been totally constructed by BCL, so it stood to reason they assumed full responsibility for the Port operation. So, after a period of training I was officially appointed and issued with a license to conduct vessels of unlimited tonnage in and out of the Port. During periods when no ships were in Port, the stevedore labor was gainfully employed cleaning and beautifying the Port area. Hence, Loloho Port was always immaculately clean and adorned with attractive flower beds and tranquil rest areas. It was very picturesque and environmental conducive to the pristine surroundings.



The image shows a fine caption of a “Handy Size” Bulk Carrier typical of the era, loading Bulk Copper Concentrates at Anewa Bay. The facility was capable of handling vessels up to 45,000 dwt with a minimum of 13m of water available alongside the main wharf. The Cantilever was in a fixed position so vessels warped along the jetty in order to load different hatches. An average sized Bulker of about 25,000 dwt generally took about one day to be loaded. The load out rate of the Cantilever being 1000 tons/hr. Obviously for the larger vessels it was correspondingly longer.

Other regular callers were American “LASH” ships, which remained at one of the anchorages to offload their laden Barges, then, reload the empties. The LASH Barges usually contained steel Ball Bearings from America, which were used in the Mine crushing plant. Piloting these ships was interesting mainly because the Americans did not use much of our more traditional nautical jargon; “turns” instead of “revolutions” or “left or right full rudder” rather than “hard aport or starboard”, etc. etc. The image below shows a typical American “LASH” ship, quite large but ungainly in appearance. There was one very sad occasion I remember, we received a radio message from one of the “LASH” ships shortly following its departure, asking if we had located a crew member as they were missing one man. Regrettably, we



we were called upon the following day to recover a body from the water, just off Banaru Reef. This was a very gruesome affair, indeed.

We had a fair number of regular General Cargo vessels calling, mainly China Navigation “Chief” ships, or chartered vessels such as the German

ships “Wesser Carrier” and “Pacific”, both of which, were on long term charter to BCL operating between Australia and Bougainville. They replenished the food and provisions as well as machinery and project cargoes required by the Mine. My phone used to run hot with people enquiring as to the arrival dates of these ships. The idea was so that the callers could be first in line at the Supermarket to purchase the fresh produce and groceries as it arrived on the shelves. I remember Potatoes, Onions and Citrus fruits were always in short supply.

The Port had a main wharf (on which a large loading cantilever was situated) with dolphins allowing the ships to warp along the wharf to simplify and aid their loading into respective cargo holds. At the Port complex there was a large concentrator plant and Power Station, in the south west sector of the cove was a Tank Farm which was connected to a SBM for the discharge of Tankers, In addition there was a small coastal ship jetty which was frequented by small LCT type coastal vessels, used extensively throughout the Island for servicing the Copra and Cocoa plantations that fringed Bougainville’s coastline.

The Port Administrative Offices were located just outside the Port’s gate – it was affectionately named the “Pink Palace”. This name came about because the building was constructed of some form of fiber cement sheeting which turned from a greyish white to pink when it rained. The name was very appropriate.

There were a couple of anchorages at Anewa Bay, all be it they were in relatively deep water, mainly used by Bulk Carriers awaiting a berth. Anewa Bay operated between 6am to 10pm daily. The Port commenced operations in 1970 with the first export cargo in 1972. We regularly received 3 or 4 ships calling every week, so with undertaking the Pilotage and Draft Surveys I was kept fully occupied. The Port only had 2 Pilots so we shared the workload.

The Pilot Boarding ground was 1 mile N.E of Kurukiki Island (outside the reefs). The pilot would guide the vessels inward between Takanupei Island and Karikiberia Shoal, passing clear of Bora Shoal then directly towards Dokome Point and the adjacent Wharf, SBM or anchorage, whichever the case may call for. Pilotage was compulsory for all ships calling Anewa Bay and a Pilot was available anytime during the Port’s working hours of between 6am and 10pm daily. Outbound ships were taken right up to the Pilot Boarding Ground, well clear of the reefs. The Port provided one small underpowered Harbor Tug of about 500 BHP, aptly named “Loloho”, after the beautifully serene and very popular beach of the same name in the bay adjacent to the Port.

The Tug was adequate for assisting in the berthing operations but lacked the “Grunt” for offshore towing. It also doubled as our Pilot Boat.



Pilot Tracks ↔

The movement of Tanker vessels was restricted to daylight hours only. The Pilotage was not difficult but one needed to exercise extreme caution in the event of the sudden heavy rain showers which quickly rendered Radar useless and reduced visibility to zero. Fortunately, these rain storms, although relatively frequent at certain times of year, did not last long.

One of my secondary functions was to oversee the maintenance of the lights, beacons and other marine assets within the Port limits. Considerably more concentration was required when securing Tankers at the SBM, especially since the approach was closer to one of the fringe reefs, but with due diligence it was entirely a safe operation.

Above is a chart of Anewa Bay and approaches, showing the Pilot Boarding ground, Kurukiki and Takanupei Islands, Karikiberia and Bora Shoals, Arovo Island, Marowa Point (and passage), Dokome Point and Anewa Bay. Pilotage took approximately 45 minutes all going well, but embarking or disembarking the Pilot from vessels could delay proceedings due to high swells outside the Reefs.

We would regularly pick up General Cargo ships from Kieta Port and bring them to Anewa Bay. For this we used the narrow but deep passage between Marowa Point on the main island, and Arovo Island, which was a small but exotic resort island, very popular with BCL staff as a weekend get-away (or hide-away for some). Taking a ship through the narrow passage was always an exciting event for holiday makers at the Resort.



The remote and secluded Arovo Island, showing the Resort clearly visible and sole feature on the island apart from the landing jetty and magnificent beach. A wrecked fishing boat on the south beach was the only other distinctive attribute. I have no idea as to authenticity, but locals claim the wreck is the home of a giant sea snake. Mind you, I myself have seen very large sea snakes when piloting ships in the Anewa Bay area.

Bougainville had a wonderful selection of silver sanded beaches from which to select but most popular amongst the expats was the one at “Loloho” located in the next bay to the Port. It was completely unspoiled and pristine in every way. There was a small residential camp there where single expats working either at the Port or supporting facilities, resided. This was known as Camp 6 and consisted of



small purpose built dwellings, known as “Dongas”. This was an altogether delightful place with the small houses scattered amongst the Palm trees very close to the beach. It also sported a small outdoor Bar and drive-in style cinema. There were a number of these “Dongas” designated as weekend rentals which were very popular with BCL staff. A typical “Donga” used by single expat staff at Camp 6 or as weekend rentals for married BCL personnel. They were very compact but comfortable self-contained units complete with all

facilities.



The magnificent, Lolohe Beach. It was serene, peaceful, and safe at which to swim. There was a reef about 200m offshore that dropped away steeply into the abyss. This acted as a barrier against some of the Pacific Ocean's more unwelcome guests of the deep.



Another view of the wonderful Lolohe Beach, just a little further along the coastline from Camp 6. Lolohe Beach was also relatively void of sand flies, mainly due to the anti-malarial and insect fumigation that took place in the Camp 6 living compound.

There was no Television available in Bougainville so for visual entertainment one was limited to either the outdoor Lolohe drive-in or hired movies. I think, from memory the movies were available from a shop in Arawa. Drinking, BBQs or partying were the alternatives. Fishing was also a popular pastime. So, the Lolohe beach was a main attraction.

There was a fair share of marital casualties as relationships became strained or broke down, especially where no children were involved. I think this was mainly due to the boredom experienced by some expatriate wives and the very sensible self imposed restriction they placed upon themselves with a view to their own personal safety. I really enjoyed my time on Bougainville and revelled in my work. However, as independence approached there was an increasing amount of unrest between the local factions and it was only a matter of time before expats were drawn into taking one side or the other. Hence, from the mid-70s onwards there was a progressive exodus of families from the Island, mainly wives and kids initially. Inevitably the husbands followed. I too was caught up in this dilemma and left prematurely prior to my contract expiring. Matters deteriorated rapidly until eventually in 1989, when mining operations were officially halted on 15 May, due to militant activity and the Mine has remained closed ever since.

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