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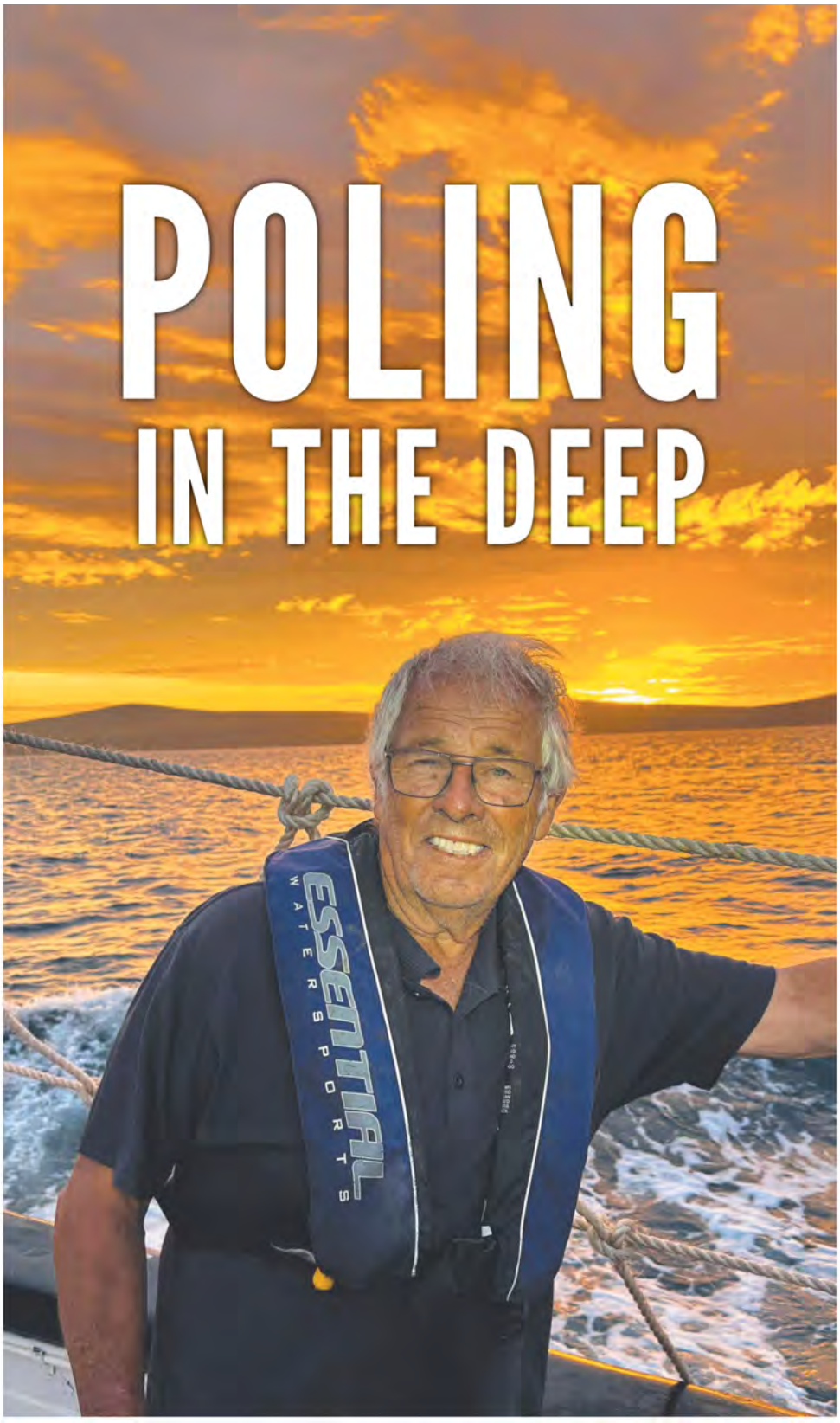
DEEP IN THE SOUTHERN OCEAN, ROSS HALDANE AND A WEATHERED 84-FOOT TIMBER BOAT ARE KEEPING A DYING ART – AND A REMARKABLE LEGACY – ALIVE



POLING IN THE DEEP

Story **PAUL ASHENDEN**

Seventy years after a humble timber boat helped build the fortune of Port Lincoln, the MFV Tacoma is heading back to the edge of the continental shelf – and a devoted band of custodians is determined to make sure her story is never lost

FISH ON!!

That's the cry from the polers in the racks as the silver flashes of tuna glisten in the water while short-tailed shearwaters and black-browed albatross hover inches above the surface.

One of the school has latched on to the lure and the polers lock their feet and knees into the rack, heave back on their bamboo poles and hoist a thriving torpedo of tuna into the air.

As the men strain their arms, backs and legs, 15kg of fish flies over their shoulders and lands with a thud into the boat.

The hook comes free and the tuna convulses frantically, slapping the deck with its nose and tail as the polers swing their line back to the water, ready for their next customer.

Within seconds, the process is repeated. And again. And again.

For the next 45 minutes the back deck of the boat is a whirl of action as the tuna, in a feeding frenzy fuelled by pilchards chummed into the wake, fly in from polers clipped to racks latched on to the aft port and starboard corners of the vessel.

We're about 160km south of Port Lincoln, 25km off the edge of the continental shelf, floating on water three kilometres deep at one of the most remote locations on the planet.

We had been steaming for the better part of 24 hours to get here ... but we had also been steaming back in time. Back seven decades to an era when tuna polers became the ironmen of the ocean, building the bedrock of the fishing industry upon which Port Lincoln amassed its fortune.

We're on board the historic 84-foot wooden clipper the MFV Tacoma on a voyage that celebrates the 70th anniversary of when the crew on this very boat poled more than 600 fish in a day to prove the viability of the tuna industry in Port Lincoln.

Skipper Ross Haldane, 78, has a lifetime of history aboard this boat. He was on deck as a four-year-old when his father and uncles

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> TACOMA IS THE ORIGINAL TUNA BOAT AND SHE'S STILL HERE AND STILL TUNA FISHING ... IT'S A VESSEL THAT REALLY NEEDS PRESERVING

MFV Tacoma skipper Ross Haldane, opposite page; happy anglers after a successful outing, above; the historic 84ft wooden clipper, left; tuna being poled on the Tacoma, below left; and fishermen hauling in fish on the Tacoma about 30km off Coffin Bay, in March, 1956. Pictures: Paul Ashenden, John Loxton, Dion Le Brun, Bob Horwood, supplied

brought her across from Port Fairy in 1952, chasing their dream of becoming professional fishermen after building the boat in the backyard of their home in the Victorian coastal town.

He's been the mainstay and driving force of the Tacoma Preservation Society, established 14 years ago to keep the history of the boat, and what it represents for the tuna industry in Port Lincoln, alive.

Because the Tacoma, as Haldane points out as we chat in the boat's humble galley, is so much more than a fishing vessel. She represents the stories of the thousands of men and women who have supported their families working in the multimillion-dollar tuna industry here on the Eyre Peninsula over the past 70 years.

"Without people, this is just a hunk of wood," he says. "There's not many of these sorts of boats left anymore, it's like any industrial old steam train or plane ... they all seem to fade or die. But amazingly, Tacoma has survived.

"She's the original tuna boat, and she's still here, and she's still tuna fishing. Its historical significance to Australia is well documented, and it's a vessel that really needs preserving."

Haldane was too young to remember much of that original trip over from Port Fairy and the story of the boat's inception goes back to the late 1940s – before he was born.

By 1944, the Haldane brothers Bill, Alan and Hughie had built, with the help of their father Hugh, two 40-foot boats to net gummy sharks off their home in the western Victorian town of Port Fairy.

But they decided they needed something bigger to head further south and west into deeper waters to catch salmon and tuna on a commercial scale, so hatched plans

for something more than double that size. They reached out to the Western Boatbuilding Company in Tacoma, Washington State, wanting to buy plans for a boat similar to those used to catch tuna off the west coast of America.

The idea was to build Australia's first purpose-built purse seining boat – a type of fishing that uses a net to circle around a school of fish before a drawstring on the bottom is tightened, making it impossible for the fish to escape.

The Haldanes sent off a cheque to the Western Boatbuilding Company, but that cheque was never cashed. Western Boatbuilding Company owner Harvey Petrich didn't want to sell the plans but rather gave the Australian family the plans for free.

In October, 1944, Bill, Alan and Hughie Haldane got a call from the stationmaster at Port Fairy that their timber had landed. The arrival of six huge logs from the Otway Ranges (the heaviest weighed eight tonnes and they had a total weight of 25 tonnes) marked the start of a seven-year process of building the boat named after the American town that was home to the Western Boatbuilding Company.

The boat was built in the brothers' spare time between working as professional fishermen and looking after their young families. The original plan was to pay for the build with the profits of their fishing but they ran out of money.

After years of unsuccessful negotiations with commercial banks and the Victorian and federal >

governments, South Australian premier Tom Playford lent the Haldanes 20,000 pounds – on the proviso they would operate the Tacoma from Port Lincoln and help develop the state's fishing industry.

Before the boat could be launched, the Haldanes spent two months digging a 17m slipway to the Moyne River and on November 5, 1951 the Tacoma slipped into the water. A few weeks later, on January 6, 1952, she steamed out of Port Fairy, arriving in Port Lincoln on January 18.

There were 16 people on board for that maiden voyage: The Haldane brothers, their spouses and children, cook Tom McDonald and a couple of young deckhands – identical twins Jack and Keith Bellamy. The Bellamy boys, who turned 18 on the trip across, had helped build the boat. But more on them later.

"I was only four-and-a-half, but I can remember leaving Port Fairy," Ross Haldane, son of Bill, says in the galley as we roll with the waves more than 74 years later.

"I can still remember one night, it must have been as we were coming up past the Coorong or something, and things were a little bit bumpy.

"I can remember watching my dad and uncles walking around the boat as though they were walking on concrete. I couldn't believe that humans could walk on a surface that was all going up and down and splashing ... I think that's called sea legs.

"I can't remember arriving in Port Lincoln, I can only remember walking from the jetty up to our new home in the trust homes in Dickens St."

But their long-awaited new life failed to yield the results they had hoped for. After a couple of lean years, they realised purse seining for tuna was unviable. But in 1956, Norwegian-American fishing experts Cris and Sverre Jangaard arrived in Port Lincoln and taught the locals, including the Haldanes, live-bait pole fishing.

The Haldanes converted the Tacoma into a pole fishing vessel and the rest, as they say, is history. Premier Playford was on board and even jumped into the racks to help haul in a 50kg fish during a Tacoma expedition in March that hauled in 25 tonnes of tuna and cemented

poling as the fishing method that would help establish Port Lincoln as the tuna fishing capital of Australia.

For the next five decades, the physical heroics of the polers saw them earn an almost legendary status as they helped Port Lincoln become one of the richest towns in South Australia on the back of the tuna industry.

Peter Bain, 70, is a retired big ships captain from Queensland on his third trip as a customer poling for tuna on the Tacoma. The mystique of tuna polling first caught his eye when he was an eight-year-old travelling around Australia with his parents and they visited Port Lincoln for the first time during the town's annual Tunarama festival in 1964.

"I just fell in love with the place," he recalls as we chat in the bunk room that eight of us are sharing.

"I wanted to be a tuna poler because they were the toughest guys in town and they just caught tuna by pole and they were fit, strong, rufty-tufty sailors and that's what I wanted to be."

> "I WANTED TO BE A TUNA POLER BECAUSE THEY WERE THE TOUGHEST GUYS IN TOWN ... THEY WERE FIT, STRONG, RUFTY-TUFTY SAILORS

He had to wait quite a few decades, but he eventually poled his first tuna here a couple of years ago and is back for his third trip as a paying passenger on-board the Tacoma.

Helping people like Bain achieve a lifelong dream of poling tuna provides the Tacoma Preservation Society with a critical source of income – money vital for the ongoing maintenance of the historic boat.

Passengers pay $2500 to spend six days searching for and poling tuna. On this trip, we catch about 50 of the fish, weighing between 10kg and 20kg each. The sale of these fish once we get back to port will also add to the society's kitty.

Catching them is hard physical labour for the paying passengers, but there's a wealth of experience among the volunteers on board to show and explain how it's done.

Dion Le Brun, 64, is now a semi-retired farmer from Tumby Bay who spent nearly 20 years tuna fishing after becoming hooked by the adrenaline of poling.

He started as a deck hand, became a poler, engineer and captain. His departure from the industry, in about 2000, coincided with the end of commercial poling as the tuna barons of Port Lincoln turned to purse seining and tuna farms as less labour-intensive, more economical methods of producing tuna.

Le Brun is one of the newer preservation society volunteers and relishes the chance to help others experience the excitement of hoisting a bluefin tuna from the ocean.

"It's really interesting," he says. "Everyone can be apprehensive, nervous, seasick, and you can spend days searching for fish and think nothing's going to happen.

"Everyone's dejected and then a switch gets flicked, there's fish on and everyone forgets their seasickness and that's it, there's fish coming on board in a hurry. It's an exciting

way to catch the fish, it's good to watch people enjoy what we do."

Le Brun is the deck boss on this trip, and barks instructions in an almost military manner as we catch, stun, bleed and ice the precious tuna.

We're all wearing our supplied helmets, harnesses, safety and wet weather gear but as the rain and waves roll in, are saturated by the time the fish go off the bite.

The adrenaline of the action has cured the seasickness which resulted in the contents of my stomach being an unplanned addition to the Tacoma's chumming efforts just a few hours earlier.

By now, I'm well enough to join all on board for a celebratory shot of grappa once the fish are caught before we create a production line of gilling, gutting, scrubbing, bagging, tagging and icing the catch.

It's nearly dark by the time we finish and the dozen or so on board cram around the galley table and share stories about what we have just experienced over a meal cooked on the coke-fuelled Aga oven by volunteer Janine Gin.

She's a surgical nurse, 47, from Adelaide who fell in love with the Tacoma and the people who run it after visiting Port Lincoln for the city's Tuna Classic fishing competition in 2021 and now plans her holidays around the boat's expeditions.

"I saw the bunks, and the portholes, and the little curtains and I was like 'this is awesome'," she says.

"I'd heard about tuna poling but never really understood what it was, and then Ross said they do men's and women's trips.

"I was like 'Yes, I've got to get my fishing crew on to one of these.'" She did a trip as a passenger, Haldane convinced her to sign on as a cook as part of the volunteer crew and she's now on her fifth tuna poling voyage.

Like all volunteers on board, Gin speaks passionately about the importance of the Tacoma to Port Lincoln, and the camaraderie among the preservation society members.

More than one refers to the boat as a floating men's shed, a place where mostly retired volunteers meet weekly, share a coffee around the galley table and tinker on the never-ending list of jobs needed to keep the boat seaworthy.

Among those volunteers is Jack Bellamy, the now 91-year-old who steamed across from Port Fairy with the Haldanes and his twin Keith back in 1952.

Bellamy spent more than 70 years fishing on the Tacoma, first when she was a tuna boat and then when the Haldanes converted her to a prawn catching vessel in 1968 when the tuna started running dry.

He was 25 and dual poling off the back of the boat with Keith in 1959 when tragedy struck. A huge tuna grabbed their lure and pulled Keith overboard. He drowned and his body was never recovered.

Keith Bellamy is one of more than 50 fishermen who lost their lives at sea whose names are etched into the stones surrounding the Fishermen's Memorial in Port Lincoln.

Jack Bellamy officially poled his last tuna at the grand old age of 88.

My seasickness abates and the ocean is calmer as we steam through the night and return to Port Lincoln to offload our precious cargo.

This haul, which will add precious thousands of dollars to the society coffers, comes amid one of the poorest tuna seasons many can remember – which is why we were forced to travel so far south on this trip.

The original plan for this commemorative trip had been to head back to Rocky Island (about 43km from Coffin Bay) to replicate the historic journey 70 years ago when the Tacoma first unlocked the potential of poling by catching 600 fish in a day back in 1956.

But the lack of tuna action around Rocky Island forced Haldane and his crew to look further out to sea and take the Tacoma out to the continental shelf for the first time since 1968.

Ironically, the ship's log books show that the crew had no luck the last time she went to the shelf, prompting then skipper Bill Haldane to return home and fit up the Tacoma for prawn trawling. This year, though, the commercial fleet out on the shelf has helped ensure we don't return empty-handed.

Boasting spotter planes and hi-tech sonar and echo sounders, the commercial fleet is far better equipped than the Tacoma to find and net the tuna schools.

The modern fishermen enjoy the spectacle of watching the Tacoma turn back the clock to the days of poling, and are always happy to let Haldane and the crew know where the fish are biting.

Hence skipper Ross Haldane headed back to the shelf for this historic voyage and the crew of the commercial purse seiner Maria Luisa, who had already filled their nets, kept chumming for hours to keep the tuna off the shelf interested until we arrived.

The gesture is an example of the respect within the tuna industry for its roots, and towards a boat that played such a critical role in those embryonic days of the early to mid-1950s.

"I'm often asked why am I messing around with this old wooden boat and with a paintbrush and sanding etc," Ross Haldane says.

"I think these sorts of artefacts need to be preserved. You have to have people that are passionate about the preservation of them. And also you have to think long term – what's going to happen to this boat in 50 years or 100 years' time?

"The way of assuring we've still got these artefacts is to do a really good job of looking after it now because if we don't look after it today, then tomorrow somebody will come along and say, 'Oh, she's a bit rusty and she's bit grotty and it's too hard – let's send it to the knackery.'

"And that's what happened to almost all the boats that Tacoma fished with in the '50s ... all now gone. So our role, and we've got an amazing group of volunteers, is to look after this vessel. We're custodians of it.

"We're no different to people that preserve old buildings and trains and planes and furniture and even family heirlooms.

"If we don't value these things, pretty soon they're all going to be just on YouTube or on the internet and that's it.

"But to really sit on these boats and feel them and smell them and touch them, I think that's better than any AI stuff that might be around these days." ■

Opposite page: Crewmen Jack and Keith Bellamy on winch with Hugh and Bill Haldane unloading eight tonne of salmon from the Tacoma, Port Adelaide, in November 1953; volunteer Dion Le Brun on the Tacoma; the boat's galley. Top; tuna being loaded on to the port at Port Lincoln; and retired captain Peter Bain, below. Pictures: Paul Ashenden, Andy Woolaston, Bill Krischock

The writer was a guest of Tacoma Preservation Society. Go to tacoma.org.au for information about upcoming tuna poling trips