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Call the Hands

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RAN Encounters with Papua New Guinea's Big Rivers

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The passing of Commodore Sam Bateman RAN, (Rtd) in October 2020 reminded many people of his Command of the PNG based patrol boat, HMAS Aitape and its significant 1969 passage up Sepik River. As Aitape was not the first or only RAN vessel to navigate PNG's big rivers this paper provides a summary of big river encounters by other RAN ships.

The Sepik River

The Sepik River flows 1,100 km through Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Today it remains largely undeveloped and pristine. Exploration of the region by Europeans commenced soon after establishment of German protectorate (Kaiser-Wilhelmsland) in 1884. Formerly the Kaiserin Augusta, the Sepik is one of the largest rivers on the island of New Guinea. It rises in the central highlands of PNG and flows north-westward (crossing just over the border into the Indonesian portion of the island) and then, turning east, follows the great Central Depression, receiving numerous tributaries draining from mountains to the north and the Central Range to the south before entering the Bismarck Sea through its delta. It drains an area of some 77,700 square km. For most of its lower course the river meanders through a wilderness of palm swamp and lagoons with large floating islands of vegetation drifting in the channel. The amount of sediment carried down this channel is so great that the waters of the ocean are discoloured for 32 km beyond the mouth, which is more than 1.6 km wide. The river is navigable for more 480 km by vessels drawing 4 metres of water or less, and by canoe for some 900 km.



Fly River

The Fly River is one of the largest rivers of the island of New Guinea, flowing almost wholly through Papua New Guinea. For a short stretch of its middle course, it forms the border between Papua New Guinea and Indonesian. Rising in the Victor Emanuel Range in the central highlands, the Fly—fed by its principal tributaries, flows south and southeast for more than 1,100 km to the Gulf of Papua and the Coral Sea. It drains an area of some 69,900 square km. The river was named by F.P. Blackwood, captain of the ship HMS Fly, who explored the estuary in 1842. The lower reaches of the river are navigable for 850 km in all seasons for boats drawing less than 2.4 metres of water. There are few settlements of any size along the river, but a port at the town of Kiunga, some 490 miles (790 km) inland, ships copper and gold mined in the Star Mountains. Environmental degradation along the upper course of the river system caused by the mining activity has been a source of political tension in the area.

River Passages by RAN Vessels

The March 2016 edition of the Naval Historical Review carried a story by Leyland Wilkinson entitled '[River Cruises and the Big River](#)' described two wartime passages by RAN vessels up the big rivers of PNG.

He wrote, 'Probably the most memorable however, was the 193 miles (310 km) passage up the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea in December 1914 during WWI by HMA Ships Parramatta, Warrego and Nusa, while HMAS Yarra guarded the river entrance. They were directed inland to search for any German military presence, passing along unknown waters that were home to crocodiles, disease carrying insects, and indigenous natives with cannibalistic tendencies, apart from any possible enemy action. Again, at the end of WW II, after the Japanese surrender in October 1945, the patrol boat ML 1347 under the command of LEUT Marsden Hordern, RANVR transited more than 130 miles (210 km) up the Sepik to Kanduonum in search of Japanese forces and Australian POWs.'

'Possibly the longest river transit was undertaken by the LCH HMAS Tarakan, commissioned in June 1973 under the command of LEUT Chris Ritchie, RAN, a future Chief of Navy. In September of that year she visited PNG and undertook a 490 mile (790 km) passage up the Fly River to the river port of Kiunga where PNG Defence Force vehicles were embarked and transported to Port Moresby.'

Two letters were latter received by the Society in response to Leyland Wilkinson's article.

Vice Admiral Chris Ritchie wrote 'I was pleasantly surprised to see mention of HMAS Tarakan's transit up the Fly River as possibly the longest river transit undertaken by a ship of the RAN.

It certainly was a memorable task; five and a half days in the river to reach Kiunga, a fast river assisted a three-day return trip, a few unplanned beachings and a bow door literally hanging on by a thread as a consequence of a heavy south easterly swell as we left the river and entered the Gulf of Papua.

My purpose in writing, however, is to correct the record a little and share the honour with HMAS Wewak. *Wewak*, under the command of LEUT George Scown, RAN had taken the engineering team to Kiunga a few months before our passage. The river levels had then become too low to extract the equipment and personnel once their work was completed so

they had an enforced wait in Kiunga until it was deemed possible for another LCH to make the trip. *Tarakan* got the job and was in the Fly River from 4 to 13 September 1974.



HMAS Wewak departing the port of Lae in Papua New Guinea in 2007 during Operation PNG ASSIST for villages affected by floods after Cyclone Guba. RAN image/

Tarakan had been on her way back to Brisbane after performing a similar extraction of equipment for the army from Belawan in Northern Sumatra to Darwin. LCH's certainly got around in those days. We shall miss them!

Commodore Sam Bateman wrote the following letter which provided more detail about the 1969 passage of HMA Ships Aitape and Ladava up the Sepik River.

'The article by Leyland Wilkinson doesn't really capture the full extent of activity by RAN vessels in the rivers of Papua New Guinea in the 1960s and early 1970s.

On the Sepik, Attack Class patrol boats of the PNG Division of the RAN made several visits during this period to the river port of Angoram about fifty river miles upstream. Then in February 1969, HMA Ships Aitape and Ladava ascended the river as far as the Government station of Ambunti about 230 river miles from the mouth of the Sepik. This was about thirty miles further upstream from the point reached by HMA Ships Parramatta and Warrego in 1914.

An account of the passage by Aitape and Ladava is available on the film 'Navigating the Sepik'. I was in command of *Aitape* at the time and the late Peter Blenkinsop the *Ladava*.

Voyages by patrol boats into the Sepik stopped in the 1970s due to concerns about the risks of propeller damage from floating logs. These risks were higher if the patrol boats steamed on both engines while in the river. While the *Aitape* and *Ladava* encountered numerous floating islands of debris and logs during their passage up river to Ambunti, they steamed mostly on one engine and avoided any underwater damage. The theory was that having two

shafts under power doubled the risks of a serious log strike – perhaps even more with the risks of one driving shaft throwing a log into the other driving shaft.

On the Fly, LCDR Jerry Lattin took the patrol boats *Aitape* and *Ladava* up the river to Kiunga in 1970. Jerry commanded *Aitape* and the late Dave Angus the *Ladava*. There is an account of this passage in Ian Johnston's Historic RAN Voyage up the Fly River, Australian External Territories, Vol. 11, No.3, July-September 1971, pp. 19-22.

One of Jerry's multifarious jobs after leaving the RAN was to command small bulk carriers on the Fly River and elsewhere between Bangkok and Townsville. The main role of these vessels was to carry copper-concentrate downstream from the Ok Tedi mine to the mouth of the Fly where the concentrate was transhipped into larger bulk carriers for export overseas. Jerry wrote about his experiences with navigating the Fly in an article in The Journal of the Australian Naval Institute (Shiphandling Corner – Brown Water Mariners – Cargo Ships on the Fly River, The Journal of the Australian Naval Institute, Vol. 28, No. 3, Spring 2002, pp. 33-38).

There were other voyages up the river to Kiunga in the 1970s by RAN LCHs, as well as the one mentioned by HMAS Tarakan in Leyland's article. I travelled down river myself from Kiunga in *Wewak* under the command of LEUT George Scown in 1973, if I remember correctly. Before going up the Fly, *Wewak* also entered the Bamu River, an adjacent river to the Fly flowing into the Gulf of Papua. The Bamu has a strong bore in it and we experienced it in rather dramatic circumstances one night. *Wewak* was beached on the river bank when the bore came up the river. Effectively, it's like an instant high tide and the ship was swept bodily sideways off the bank. Fortunately, George had the situation under control with main engines running and special sea dutymen closed up in anticipation of the bore's arrival, and no damage was done.

The work of RAN vessels in opening up the Fly to river transport associated with the Ok Tedi mine is acknowledged in the seminal article The Fly River: A Continuing Hydrographic Challenge by P. Done, published in the International Hydrographic Review, Monaco, Vol. LXII (2), July 1985.'

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