

A Cannibal Voyage....Food for thought.

Warren Blake.

“Strange things happen at Sea, Laddie...for them that goes Seafarin’” ...was the opening line of the first sea-story I can remember reading, at about age 8 or 9, I imagine. I knew very well then that I would go Seafarin’, since I was growing up in an extended family of Seafarers, and so the prospect of Strange Things happening to me out there on the Ocean, to me personally, quite had me tingling with eager anticipation. The mature adult forgets, I suspect, just how much of an impact stories have on the young mind.

Just what Strange Things I must have imagined then as my lot I cannot remember, but I am sure I never dreamed that one day the Spectre of Cannibalism, plain, no-nonsense Cannibalism, would bare its famished fangs amongst a crew of loyal and reasonably responsible seafarers, and in a vessel under my command!

Here is how it came about:

We were cruising amongst the far-flung Isles of the Seychelles Archipelago...in '75 it was. My ketch “Four Friends” sailed from isolated Bird Island, on the North edge of the Great Seychelles Plateau, where we had been visiting good friends who, to this day, run a charming resort under a cobalt sky full of wheeling Sooty terns, Fairy terns and their attendant giant predators, the Frigate birds. We were bound for Boudeuse Cay, the Southern-most outlier of the Amirante Archipelago, some 190 nautical miles away to the South West. There we planned to search for a rumoured ancient wreck of possible Portuguese origin (see “The Wreck of the Santa XXX”.) All the islets of the Amirantes are merely low sand cays, surrounded by invisible coral reefs. On the more permanent cays coco-palms have grown, but even the crowns of these are visible at perhaps only ten nautical miles in good conditions, so each isle presents a very small target for the anxious navigator.

The correct course, I now see, would have been about 230 compass, which would have had us fall in with the coco-palms of the Island of St Joseph in the late afternoon on the second day.

Thence we would have laid a new course for Boudeuse Cay in safety through the second night. At least, that was the Plan.

In attempting to identify the egregious error in navigation that led to the aforesaid Spectre, I can only surmise that I laid down the correct course in pencil on the chart and then proceeded to read 240 off the Compass Rose, rather than 230, when I stepped my parallel rules across the paper.

Only an error of this type and magnitude can explain the sequence of navigational events that embarrassed me greatly and thoroughly alarmed one experienced man of the crew, whose fear spread like a contagion among some of the younger, more impressionable members.

This error of 10 degrees can explain how we fetched up off the northern end of the Amirante Archipelago, rather than the Southern end, some 100 miles futher SSW. I suspect I issued this wrong figure to the first of five watchkeepers, who each passed it on verbatim to the others through the first afternoon and night. I did not stand a watch myself during that period. If I had I feel sure I would have detected the error...but this does not absolve me from responsibility.

The morning of the second day dawned with complete cloud cover...no chance for morning starshots. Never mind, the islands should appear ahead some time well after lunch. The sun peeked through briefly about 0830 LMT, and so I did shoot it with the sextant. One such shot produces not a “fix” but a Position Line across the surface of the Earth somewhereon the observer lies. This, crossed with our rhumb –line on the chart put us already past the expected

islands, an unexpected leap ahead. Had we we been swept by a very strong current past the isles in the dark? In case we had, I altered course to 220 to look for Etoile Cay, a low sandy scrap of land. I waited anxiously for the clouds to clear. I shot another brief glimpse of the Sun at 09 50 LMT. This leap-frogged our DR position many files further SW, down our track, past our destination of Boudeuse.. Something was badly wrong, there could be no such extreme current! A Latitude sight, offered by the Sun at precise noon LMT, would help clarify the situation...but the Sun coyly remained hidden the rest of the day ...several stars sights at dusk would have cleared my mind completely, but no stars at dusk, and no land in sight either. We had been under full sail all day, doing 7 knots, but with dark falling, and with a disconcerting sense of confusion about our position, we reduced sail to just a small jib, and sailed back along our earlier course line. I learned this technique for safety from reading the logs of the venerable Captain Cook, my own Guru. This greatly lessened the chances of sailing into trouble in the dark, as we would be crossing water already proven safe.

Dawn broke on the third day under low clouds...no stars in the dark sky, and no islands in sight after first light. Where were we? Wither should we go? I still felt that we must have sailed past the chain of the Amirantes and so we charged East under full sail for two hours, and then North for another three.

I noticed that some of my crew had been sitting in the shade of the masthead jib. There were three boys, teenagers from various parts of the Western world, plus Leonardo, a grised old Seychelles fisherman, an experienced and competent seaman. I had noted that Leonardo was doing all the talking, with vigorous expostulations, and that the boys were listening intently. Some time before local noon the clouds thinned out considerably, and I readied my sextant, hoping for a noon shot, which uniquely provides an accurate reading of Latitude, a Line of Position running East-West.

Ten minutes before noon two of the boys, Christian and Scott, came aft to me in the cockpit. They seemed quite ill-at-ease, but obviously had something on their minds, "Ehrr.. Captain..? I was more intent on scanning the sky high above for signs of the sun, but finally I asked them what was bothering them.

"Well, Captain," said Scott, hesitating, and looking to Christian, who nodded support. "We think we should sail to Africa!"

"Whatever for?" I asked in astonishment, but right at that moment the sun's rays fell on the deck. I handed the wheel to Scott, and scrambled out on deck with my sextant.

There followed ten minutes of following the orange orb slowly up to its zenith, and then two minutes more to confirm that it was falling. I had precomputed the figures already and so just a glance at the maximum altitude recorded was enough to show me that our observed Latitude lay some ninety miles North of where I believed we actually were. What, on the surface of the Earth, was going on to produce such large errors?

"Captain! Please, can we sail to Africa?" pleaded Christian.

"Why?...you want to go shooting lions or something?" I asked absently, my mind solely fixed on my strange navigation problem, and relishing the prospect of clear skies all afternoon, where progressive sun-shots, and a round of stars at twilight would doubtlessly solve the conundrum. Christian mumbled something incoherent.

The noon latitude I had observed when laid down on the chart put us thirty miles North of the Northern set of sandcays of the Amirantes, the African Banks. In stark contrast the previous

morning's shots had put us SW of the Southern end of the Archipelago, near a hundred miles away, a mutually exclusive set of observations. There was manifestly no error in the noon shot, a very simple calculation in two dimensions, unlike the other ex-meridian calculations. In deference to the most recent, most reliable sun shot I ordered Scott at the wheel to turn 180 degrees to steer South.

I was still below staring at the chart and my calculations when movement in the cockpit attracted my attention. All three teenagers and Leonardo, were staring anxiously down the companionway, obviously seeking my attention.

I listened to them. All earnestly advocated that we should turn for some undefined port on the African Coast....because, as they put it in several different ways, "Because...it seems....that we are lost!"

Leonardo amplified the point: " Nous allons au Sud, rien, nous allons a l'Est, rien, au Nord, rien." ("We go South, nothing, we go East, nothing, we go north, nothing") "We must go a l'Ouest, vers La Grande Muraille!" ("...West, towards the Big Wall!"). He was saying, graphically, that since we could not find the small islands we must steer for a target that could not be missed, the Coast of Africa, nine hundred nautical miles away beyond the West horizon. Now I understood his position. I knew that amongst the inter-island Seychelles schooners and fishing boats that were permitted out of sight of land, their licenced "Cox'ns" were required to know by heart the compass course, and the distance from any island of the far-flung Seychelles to any other, thus enabling them generally to be able to sail to various islands that lie beneath the horizon, to sail out of sight of land. Given that none of these local skippers had been educated in Trigonometry, nor in the Nautical Chart, this was a feasible, if rough and ready method of navigation.

But science and mathematics long ago produced a very satisfactory method of fixing one's position on the globe through the timed observation of the altitude of celestial bodies above the horizon. Given this skill, and the nautical charts, I was therefore able, in theory, to navigate anywhere in the world without having to memorise such local knowledge as the Seychellois were required to. I was perfectly confident of being able to find our destination ...given sufficient clear weather...which must come eventually, certainly before we could reach the African coast. I had also heard of the very pragmatic resort of these intrepid local seafarers that, when they could not find their destination, a tiny isle whose highest point was the coco-palms, and they did not succeed after several days of searching back and forth, then to avoid death due to thirst and starvation on the trackless vastness of the Indian Ocean, they must turn West, towards the setting sun, to eventually raise, if provisions lasted, La Grande Muraille, the Great Wall of Africa, an unmissable target. Having had luck enough to find sustenance in some coastal community there, they would then count themselves blessed if eventually they could find their way home to their families, assisted, hopefully, by sympathetic African authorities. This was what Leonardo was proposing as our only salvation.

I now saw that my personnel problem, the morale of my less well-trained crew, lay in persuading them that modern science, and my knowledge of it, was sufficient ground for confidence that we need not doubt our final deliverance. I saw too that I had not hitherto done a very good job of inspiring confidence, in not explaining our many changes of course. Add the manifest lack of coco-crowned islets on our patch of the Indian Ocean, and their reasons for doubt were plain. My own confidence was not bolstered by my very real lack of knowledge of our *present* whereabouts, nor by the lack of an understanding of why my sunshots gave such disparate

results...although “please believe me, if the sky stays clear until nightfall, I will know exactly where we are, and we will be able to sail direct to Boudeuse Cay!”

I tried to explain how my shots of the sun had given me the various Position Lines to lay down on the chart, but given the admitted disparities, I knew my case must have sounded weak.

Everybody's morale, my own included, was not boosted by a great dark bank of clouds that formed not long after noon, and before any feasible afternoon shot was possible.

So Leonardo's illiterate discomfiture was understandable. I might have expected a little more understanding from my young men of modern education though.

But, damnit!... from my elevated position as Master, from my years of science and mathematics, from my exalted wisdom of 35 years, I knew what I was doing and all I needed was some hours of clear sky, hopefully at sunset, and I would know for sure where we were.

I told my dissident crew that I understood their fears, “but, trust me!...we will soon understand what we must do...and please!...stop worrying, we will find the elusive Boudeuse Cay!”.

My crew turned, grim faced, and dispersed to their quarters. I was a bit startled by their expressions...no cheerful assent...but I felt sure that on sober consideration, they would realize that I was right.

In facing my unhappy crew, I had been buoyed up by a surge of bloated ego, but as soon as I was alone, I recalled my inability to explain the disparate results to date, and this sharp prick of doubt punctured my pride with an audible hiss of escaping gases. I resolved to solve this problem before making any more ill-founded alterations of course.

I went carefully through the three sun shots I had calculated. There was no question: the observed data made sense, the data derived from Almanac and from Computed Tables were correct, my maths contained no errors, the procedures conformed, my chronometer was checked against radio signals. I looked at the three mutually exclusive lines on the chart with renewed consternation and self-doubt. I wondered had something like this ever happened to James Cook?...or had it ever happened to that other navigational exemplar of mine, my Old Man, the man his grandchildren would always call “Admiral” in later years. Whoa, there! Now I remembered a dictum he laid down many years before: “If all your position lines together make no sense, check for errors, and if none, go ahead and lay them down, extend them to see where they all actually intersect...there is a good chance that will be your position!” Here was something I could do immediately.

My two earliest lines had already been transferred ahead to the recent noon shot, to account for our various movements in between. Like that they made no sense, but extending both of them to the NE had them crossing the noon line quite close to each other....they were consistent...we were North of the entire Amirante Archipelago..I knew roughly where we were! (see Map)

I contemplated calling the crew together to explain...but what?...my jumbled mairix of lines: full, heavily pencilled lines, light dotted lines, numerous half-erased ones...would not mean much to my sceptical followers. Instead we would alter course once again, to SW in order to try to pick up the Northern Banks of the Amirantes in what remained of daylight.

Dusk settled without sign of land, and for the third night I ordered the crew up to reduce sail....we would jog slowly Northward, away from the danger of the low-lying Banks...yet another abrupt change of course, another change of mind by an apparently disparate navigator! The men went about their tasks sullenly, with grim expressions. They still feared we were hopelessly lost!...had Leonardo been preaching more sedition while they were below?

Suddenly Leonardo erupted in loud expostulation. “Mon ne veut manger! Mon pere est manger!” he shouted several times, gesturing with his arms in the air. He was obviously greatly upset but I could not understand his concerns. He seemed to be saying, in Creole, the local form of French patois, “I do not want to eat! My father is eating” What did he mean? The odd use of pronouns and participles in Creole was sometimes confusing to someone who had been taught regular French at school.

My earnest enquiry did not clarify the problem. Leonardo merely repeated, even more loudly his strange cry.

Scott interrupted, “Captain, he is saying he does not want to be eaten!...his father was eaten...some...err.. cannibalism of some sort!”

Good Heavens! I saw that Leonardo had a serious worry...even if the cause for concern seemed wildly misplaced.

“Leonardo, we do not want to eat you!...or anybody else!” I offered in an unctuous, consoling tone, as one addressing a fearful child.

“Where is island? We not know....we look, we look, no find...no food, you eat me!” he cried with a pained expression, and in English clearer to me than his native patois..

Ahh! Now I understood that he was convinced we were lost on the wide Indian Ocean, that we would run out of food, and...Good Heavens!..that we would eat him first!

Now by that time the night sky had cleared completely, and a brilliant array of bright stars blazed overhead. The weather situation now looked very stable...I felt that it was very likely the first hint of the dawn horizon would be accompanied by half a dozen, familiar bright stars...and I would then be able to fix our position accurately with six position lines...and therefore be able to predict the time of our first landfall in four days. This plausible hope gave me the confidence to promise Leonardo, and his young followers, some reassurance.

“Leonardo, I promise you we will find land tomorrow...and if we do not, I will consider your request to turn towards the African Coast!” I offered.

Leonardo seemed a little reassured, so I ordered up a round of beers all round, and with all seated and more relaxed, I asked him, “Leonardo, please tell us what happened to your father.”

Leonard’s story came out haltingly, and we had to ask him repeatedly for clarification, but it transfixed his listeners: his father had been a passenger on an ill fated inter-island ferry called the M..... which had gone missing on a relatively short voyage between the second largest island of Praslin and the main island of Mahe, which, in clear weather is visible from Praslin.

I had heard the story of the M..... several times before from scandalized Seychellois seamen. It has always been supposed that the M.....ran out of fuel and simply drifted away into the empty Indian Ocean. In the days after her disappearance a fisherman came forward to say that he had seen what he was certain was the M..... at anchor well off the Northern tip of Mahe on the evening of her voyage. The spot he indicated was far out, in 30 to 40 fathoms of water, deeper than the M...’s anchor rope could reach, but all surmised that the crew had cobbled together every piece of rope and string they could find, and did achieve a tenuous hold on the bottom, and on their own lives, until the weakest link in their lifeline probably parted in the night and they were borne away into the void by the strong currents...never to be seen again.

Well, most of them were never seen again. Seventy seven days after the M..... went missing a passing Panamanian ship picked up two survivors from a drifting derelict near Aden, in the mouth of the Red Sea, These two young men were reported in good physical condition., but “crazed, raving...incapable of coherent speech.”

It was widely believed then, and to this day, that this pair of strong men had survived by eating their fellow passengers as they died, and alleged some, by killing the weaker ones as a supply of food. Everyone concluded that the horrors of their acts had unhinged their minds.

What made the hairs on the backs of our necks bristle was Leonardo's quavering, tearful conclusion: that his revered Father had been eaten, perhaps murdered, by "ils diables jeunes!"... "the young devils!" The sense of horror for his listeners, and especially for Leonardo, was devilishly enhanced by the distinct prospect, in all our minds except my own, that Leonardo, and others among us, might very well follow in his father's footsteps.

To my consternation all of my crew now stared at me with an explicit, unstated question in their eyes....

After such a revelation I sympathised with Leonard's dread, of course, and with that of his youthful followers. I was even secretly a trifle amused, and relished the first hints of this story. I was very much aware that Leonardo, in his thirty years of seafaring, had distilled the wisdom of his peers, and that he was advocating a very rational course of action, given his wide experience of the Sea...and his total lack of experience of celestial navigation. He had not yet seen me find a isolated isle by that method, and just possibly he regarded my shooting of the sun as some form of religious ritual. He was aware that I was not a Roman Catholic (his own faith), nor a christian of any sort, but I had given no hint of what beliefs I espoused in their place.

But my whole life has been a search, a pilgrimage even, for rational explanations of the World... I studied for a degree in Physics...with all the mathematics that entails. I grew up sailing with the "Admiral", who taught all of the navigators who manned the ships of the small Royal New Zealand Navy during the Second World War. I knew, without the slightest hint of doubt now, that I could, eventually, find the elusive palm trees on low-lying sand cays that we sought...and long before our water and food might run out.

Even more fundamentally, I was very conscious that I was the Master on board, One who owes allegiance to no higher Authority...and that there now existed an implicit threat to my position. All of my instincts suggested that I should resort to my usual boastful bombast and violent invective: the threat to "break every damn'd bone in your body and then tow what remains astern for the sharks!" ... should there be the slightest questioning of my authority. There has been one recent occasion where even shedding young crewmen's blood has served its purpose (see "The Gangsta Boys"). But fortunately I was reminded of the fact that I had dillied and dallied in my navigation, suffered terrible doubts about my results, and that I had not explained my actions to my obviously impresionable crew...indeed Leonardo had stepped into the vacuum I had had left open.

So I did not offer to beat the living shit out of anybody. Instead I humbly asked for one more day of searching. I explained, in the simplest terms possible, that I had discovered the error that had led to us sailing first this way, and then that, and that if there should be no land in sight by the dawn of the next day after, then we would indeed turn for La Grande Muraille.

I was lucky. At the first hint of rosy Dawn there were plenty of bright stars in an almost cloudless sky. I had time, during that brief tropical twilight, to shoot five stars. I neglected breakfast in my eagerness to lay down five position lines. They all intersected nicely at a point 25 miles NNE of African Banks, the Northern extremity of the Amirante Archipelago. I

summoned my crew, indicated our present whereabouts, and predicted that we would sight the Banks by 1030 hours. Leonardo, born seaman that he was, immediately climbed the mast to sit on the spreaders, that he might soon sight the tops of the two lonely coco-palms reported to grow there... should they really exist in our part of the world. Christian followed him up. I did suggest to my eager navigators that they could afford to wait an hour or two, but they were insistent.

Being sufficiently confident, I could now afford to spend an ostentatiously relaxed breakfast reading a five-week-old *Economist*. I was gratified when Christian's young eyes caught a tiny dark blob on the mirror-like horizon, and when Leonardo gleefully identified the slender tower of the small, unmanned lighthouse on the Banks. Our outbreak of Cannibalism had been averted.

But I have often wondered what drama would have ensued if that day had dawned under heavy cloud, and the next as well. Would I have bowed to the wishes of my uneducated crew?...of course not! Would they then have hatched a plot to mutiny, depose their Captain, and sail for Africa under Leonardo's command? Would I, lashed to the mast, have been first on the menu?...or would Leonardo have fulfilled his filial destiny and been consumed like his father?

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PS: For the sake of the analytically-minded, or for aspiring navigators, the essence of my navigation argument is presented geographically below.