

In a lifetime on or under the sea I have suffered through numerous embarrassing fiascoes, farces, and furores.

Many of my ingenious underwater inventions, in particular, were derided by my fellow-divers, a notorious bunch of no-nonsense stalwarts little given to whimsy or flights of the imagination. The Great Blake Rake, for example, was summarily jettisoned in 100 fathoms after the most cursory of tests of its ability to rake away the annoying debris that accumulate on underwater wreck sites, and was derisively referred to thereafter as the Great Blake Fake. Similarly, the Blake Uptight-Mooring System was cruelly relabelled the Uptight-Blake Mooring, even after its successful deployment...admittedly it worked on one occasion only, and I must confess that the Designer did become a trifle exasperated by unwarranted snide remarks. But it was the Great Shark Cage Fiasco that not only nearly did me in, but is also that which weighs most heavy in my long memory of youthful underwater follies.

I was living in the Seychelles in '69, in command then of a vessel no bigger than a 17 foot Boston Whaler with outboard motor. In those days, before the construction of the international airport, the only way to visit those idyllic isles was on board the British India steamship SS Kampala. Since she arrived from Bombay only once every six weeks a visitor had to be prepared to stay that long, or twice that long, and this led, naturally enough, to those visitors being more interesting characters than your average modern tourist. One such visitor was Craig, a young Californian surfer and adventurer. Besides his back-pack, he carried a Bolex 16mm movie camera with an underwater housing, plus a burning ambition to capture some footage of sharks underwater, a commodity much more rare in those times than now in these days of the Discovery and Nat Geo channels.

I was instantly drawn to such an exciting project, and volunteered my small boat and hookah compressor as my contribution to the expedition.

Even in those days the shark population around the main islands of the Seychelles had been ravaged by the obscene appetites of far-away Chinese for sharkfins. We were assured by all the experts that there were no longer large congregations of sharks of any species anywhere on the Great Seychelles Plateau, whereon all the major island centres of population sit.

Fortunately I had friends amongst an extraordinary collection of human characters, the "Island Owners" of the Seychelles. They all described themselves as "Grands Blancs", "Big Whites" if understood literally, but with less racial connotations in Creole, a French patois universally used by all in the Seychelles.

The extremely diverse ethnic makeup of those islands derived from a multitude of sperm banks: original, actually aboriginal French settlers, their black African slaves, whaling crew on a spree ashore, a few furtive English colonialists after their victory in the Napoleonic Wars, Indian, Chinese and Arab traders, and large numbers of Africans "liberated" by Royal Navy frigates on patrol in the 1860's against Arab slavers ferrying their human cargoes from Zanzibar to Arabia. The British ships soon became crowded with rescued people of diverse tribes, who spoke no known lingo, who knew not whence they came, mostly far inland in the unmapped, "Dark Continent", and thus the befuddled Navy crews could devise no other solution than to land these refugees ashore in the sparsely populated English colony of Seychelles, where their faces are recorded to this day in the Museum in sepia photos along with their thumb-prints and the "Christian" names assigned by their liberators.

This diversity of origin, along with much spirited misegeneration, gave rise to a wide spectrum of colours and forms, from diminutive, black, African Pygmies at one end to blue-eyed, blond-haired specimens at the other, with every conceivable, and often handsome, variation in between.

A certain social egalitarianism led to some rich people of dark complexion and to some very poor, uneducated fair skins at the other extreme. As time passed, the phrase "Grand Blanc" came to mean "Plantation Owner", or "Boss", while that same rich man, perhaps born with a copper skin, would refer to a worker on his plantation as "Mon Noir"... "My Black" literally, although that poor labourer might sometimes be lily-white skinned with fair hair.

My good friend Robert Delorie, Grand Blanc indeed, bon-vivant and raconteur, part-time Minister without Portfolio in the part-time Government of those relaxed islands, was fascinated with our youthful project.

He was part owner of a distant, oceanic atoll far to the South, and proposed an expedition there with the noble aim of filming sharks. “Il y beaucoup des requins, riens de Chinois!” “There are plenty of sharks there!...no Chinese!...many big sharks!...especially Tigers! Tiger sharks up to 20 feet long!” he enthused. This was great news!...up to a point. Craig and I looked at each other with an unspoken question: were we really that eager to swim amongst “plenty of 20 foot Tiger sharks”? Outwardly we maintained an air of enthusiasm for the wild scheme being hatched by Robert and several other Grands Blancs at lunch at the Goggle and Flipper Bar on the beach at Beau Vallon.

We would sail to Isle Providence, 470 miles to the Southwest, three quarters of the way to Madagascar. Robert would arrange passage for us, our boat and our gear in the “Isle de Farquhar”, Queen of the inter-island Schooner fleet...in fact Robert would accompany us to participate on such a fine project...“We’ll come too!” enthused our lunch companions.

Our committee of experts planned our every move. We would use my fast boat to troll for “Dorades, Tunas, Wahoos....many good fish!” These excellent fish would be sacrificed to provide much blood and fragments of bloody flesh which would be dispersed in the currents of the Canal du Sud, a channel off the South end of Providence where sharks cruised in numbers. “Requins grands!...Big sharks!” our advisers assured us quaking novices. This bait would draw the crazed sharks together in a blood frenzy around our boat, and all we had to do was to jump in with them and take our movies...no sooner said...!

Afterwards Craig and I conferred about...well, about the dangers of swimming unprotected amongst many large, excited man-eaters. A cage! We devised the idea of an anti-shark cage...something from which we could film in security while our subjects would whirl dramatically, and harmlessly, around us. To our knowledge at the time this was our own original, and brilliant, idea! We had six days before the “Isle de Farquhar” sailed on her regular voyage to collect copra from the southern atolls, surely time enough for its construction.

Our design was simple enough. Three-quarter-inch water pipes constituted the edges of each side, joined at the corners by 90 degree elbows and a spot of welding. The walls were formed by a lattice of quarter-inch reinforcing rod woven together alternately and welded to the pipes at the end of each rod. The tension built into the rods by the alternate weaving produced a very rigid structure, so the joins needed no welding...surely no Tiger shark could push its way through such a web? Part of one side included a swinging door which would allow our entry.

Our cage was obviously heavy enough to sink, so it could be hung beneath my Whaler at a suitable depth where the compressor could supply sufficient air to two perfectly relaxed divers...at most 20 feet down. But how to recover the cage, perhaps with its beleaguered occupants still trapped inside?...since we had no crane, only the efforts of a topside crew of our middle-aged Grands Blancs.

We hatched the idea of a flotation collar, a ring of buoyant substance around the cage that would enable it to float on its own...and, an improvement!...it would be placed in such a way as to allow an air space in the top wherein two terrified cinematographers might huddle to breathe should the compressor fail, without having to bail out in search of air amongst a maelstrom of hungry sharks.

Suitable materials for the collar proved difficult...our advisers found lengths of giant bamboo, 6 inches in diameter. We did some calculations of buoyancy and weight and determined that four lengths of bamboo lashed around the cage would result in it floating with a 12 inch air space inside the bars...perfect!

We further refined our fantastic invention: stout wooden diagonals in the bottom of the cage provided a base to secure a central anchor line to a heavy weight on the seabed.. To descend initially the two divers would pull the cage downwards against the buoyancy of the flotation collar, to be secured when we had reached a suitable depth. Should our air supply fail, we would simply release the anchor line, the cage would float upwards to the surface, where we divers, secure in our iron shark-proof enclosure, would breathe leisurely in the air space while our boat would manoeuvre alongside, whereupon we would open the door and scramble into safety among our gallant crew of Island Owners, carrying with us the camera and its precious contents. In final triumph the boat would tow the floating cage into shallow water on the island where eager crews of island workers would rescue it, ready for another grand adventure.

So we were now assured of many big sharks, a safe place wherefrom to film them, and therefore some spectacular footage of sharks...virtually in the can already! In a hilarious drunken evening in the Goggle and Flipper in the company of our loyal sponsors we composed our speeches of acceptance for the Oscar Awards ceremony, and even conceived of a gracious nod in the direction of the then Dean of Underwater

Film, Hans Hass, newly deposed by our brilliance, in the form of a heartfelt statement that we upstarts owed our inspiration to that Grand Old Man.

In the sober light of the next day we realized we should at least test our contraption in the blue waters of Beau Vallon Bay, in front of the Goggle and Flipper and our admiring supporters. It floated with about 8 inches of air space, enough for a man inside to breathe if one tilted one's head sideways. We fired up the hookah compressor and dragged the cage downwards in the water. It proved to be heavy work, and by the time we had reached about 10 feet down we were so puffed that the supply of air from the hookah seemed grossly insufficient. We figured that should suffice...surely the sharks would be mostly near the surface? Once we had regained our breath our refuge seemed very secure and safe in the blue waters of the Bay. When we released our anchor line the cage floated majestically, ever so slowly up to the surface. The damned thing worked!

The five day voyage Southwest in a 100 foot, three masted, creaking old Seychelles Schooner was a memorable, if leisurely one.

With the SE Trades blowing true we sailed on a tight reach, heeling all the way, with the three headsails and the bowsprit endlessly describing by day a ponderous circle against the light blue sky and the deep ultramarine Tradewind swells. My reputation as an ocean sailor was sufficient for the Skipper, an ebony giant, to leave me alone on deck during long night watches. With the suit of seven sails trimmed just so, I could lash the wheel and roam the length of the deck in the moonlight, out to the end of the bowsprit, and even up the ratlines of the foremast to sit astride the foresail gaffyard. From here I could scan the whole moonbright horizon, and relish the long periods when my command nodded briefly off course on the face of each advancing swell, and wandered back again as she lunged down the receding back of the wave, rolling me heavily in my perch. On a few occasions an ill-disciplined train of irregular, rogue waves combined to knock her off course upwind so that the luff of the flying jib below my feet collapsed in rhythmic billows, and then I had just enough time to scramble down and back to the wheel to pull her off before she might stall completely, in irons, with all sail flogging and enough noise to wake Davy Jones and bring the Skipper anxiously on deck. Craig joined me aloft in daylight but would not in the dark.

Our Captain navigated it seemed solely by instinct. Although there was a tattered old chart of impossibly small scale in the deckhouse he never once glanced at it...he just knew which way to go. He used the deep-sea lead in the classic fashion, with a smear of tallow in the bottom to pick up traces of the seabed that he would weigh in his huge black hand, and sniff, and then point wordlessly the way ahead. This worked, it seemed, while we were in soundings, on the Great Seychelles Plateau, but once off into the blue abyssal depths he constantly studied the swells, and the numerous seabirds, judging by their species and the direction they flew whereaway lay the various islands. He would squint at his small world around him, and point grandly, with a laconic "La bas, c'est Saint Joseph!", or Poivre, Marie Louise, Alphonse, the string of far flung Seychelles isles way below the West horizon. Only rarely did these revelations demand a change in course, so I surmised that perhaps the venerable old ship knew the way ahead herself...she had been engaged in this trade, twice a year to the Southern Isles to carry provender there and collect copra, for the last forty years.

In the feckless, inevitably regrettable way of youth, I marvelled at such skills, sensing something much, much older at work than mere Twentieth Century knowledge, and vowed that: "One day!...I would really study how our Captain does it!"...instead of jumping right in and finding out there and then. So many wonderful facets of life have I seen in my time, that I thought would be around long enough to seriously record, but when I next looked, they had vanished...the trading sailing ships of the Indonesian Archipelago are at the top of my list of missed chances.

I had noted that there were, in the deckhouse along with the sole chart, a battered old Plath sextant, Nories' Tables, and, miraculously, a Nautical Almanac for 1969! I asked about these, apparently the Harbourmaster back in Victoria decreed that such modern aids must be carried on board vessels venturing off the Great Plateau. A very brief enquiry showed that none of the crew had the slightest wish, nor idea, how to navigate by shooting the sun and the stars.

On the fourth afternoon I began to wonder how our skipper would be able to find Isle du Nord, the only sizeable scrap of land at Providence atoll, when the tops of the cocopalms were the highest points, just visible in perfect visibility at about ten miles, and the land area only 100 hectares. I diffidently asked the

Captain if I might shoot some stars that evening. He laughed uproariously, to my consternation, but graciously took the sextant out of its box and thrust it in my hands.

Shooting half a dozen stars was easy, my familiar Southern constellations arched into the sky ahead, and amongst them Alpha Centaurus and Canopus burned bright in the cloudless evening sky, and above rode Sirius, Rigel, Capella and the brilliant planet Jupiter. But the calculations dragged on, since the lack of the usual Tables of Computed Altitudes and Azimuths meant I had to go back to first principles and equations involving haversines and cosecants....only these were accessible from Nories' Tables. I persisted, mercifully in solitude in the saloon, because having set out to show everybody that I knew something I had to produce some results.

Finally, near midnight, I laid down six Lines of Position on the chart which crossed in a fairly small cocked hat, showing our position at dusk to have been a good thirty miles West of our rhumbline. We would certainly have to alter course Eastward to find Providence.

The Captain was on deck at dawn, now heavily clouded over. I showed him my plot with as much diffidence as I could muster. Again he laughed, and simply said "Toujours comme ca!...c'est le courante!"...that this was usual, due to the prevailing current that normally set to the North West. I noted that after breakfast he ordered the crew to closehaul all sails, and our course was changed to 185 on the compass, just right to lay the island from my computed position. I supposed he always did something like this from long experience, but had to wonder why he had not allowed for the current earlier. Certainly if we had carried on on our former course we would have missed low-lying Providence. We might have eventually sighted tiny St. Pierre, some twenty miles to the SW, and thus been able to work back to Providence, so I supposed that the Captain relied on this outlying signpost should the current have proven stronger than usual. At least I had not made a fool of myself with fancy calculations that proved nothing.

The nautical stuff of voyaging in an old sailing ship was grand enough. Even more inspiring was the company on board. My companion passengers, Robert and two other fellow owners of Providence, Grands Blancs all, spent much of their time sleeping, but they always gathered in the afternoon on dilapidated deck-chairs in the lee of the deckhouse, where the aging Creole steward would serve tea and English tinned biscuits garnished with the odd cockroach off a battered old silver tray. The Grands Blancs would light up pipes and cigars and tell stories for my and Craig's benefit, and to upstage each other: tales of the pioneering days of their youth when they set out to colonise wild uninhabited oceanic isles like Providence, tales of the isolation, privations and dangers of such life, and the elusive promise of riches if only they could get their harvests of copra, dried shark, exotic shells and live turtles to market before the onset of the strong winds of September and October would keep the schooners safe at anchor in Port Victoria.

They told tales too of monster Tiger sharks, one which lunged half out of the shallows to snatch a dog off the beach, and rumours of Arab Pirates in fast Yemeni Dhows that might appear suddenly on the West horizon to snatch slaves and women and gold from their defenceless little island communities.

They told of a German raider that anchored off one day during the War, while the islanders fled into the depths of the plantation, only for her to up anchor and sail away before dark. Was this an account of "Kormoran", a disguised, armed freighter of the Second World War?, or a distant echo of "Konigsberg", a proper warship of the First? Our friends were not sure, the story had come down from their fathers, perhaps their grandfathers. "Kormoran" was sunk by, and herself managed to sink the Australian cruiser HMAS Sydney off the West Australian Coast, and "Konigsberg" was bottled up and sunk by Royal Navy ships in the Rufiji Delta of modern Tanzania, then German West Africa.

There were, as everywhere in Seychelles, tales of schooners and fishing boats wandering lost in the trackless sea that would finally give up and sail West towards "Le Grande Muraille", the Big Wall, the Coast of Africa, one thousand miles away, where at least they might find water and food, and even the faint chance of a passage home eventually.

There were more....but these are the stuff of another story! (see "A Cannibal Voyage...Food for thought.").

We anchored off the West Coast of Providence just before a two day storm that blew up out of the SE. Even loading the precious copra was postponed, but island activities continued. I volunteered to be a Noir for two days of cutting down old cocopalms with an axe, in order to thin out the close ranks of trees. I managed eleven trees in that period while my fellow Noirs, mostly black indeed, hardened, muscular fellows, must have disposed of at least forty each. I retired from this work to nurse blisters and aching muscles while

sitting on the huge verandah listening to more island stories and drinking mildly alcoholic foaming palm toddy laced with dead wasps while rain thundered on the rusting tin roof.

On the fourth morning of our stay on the island the schooner sailed off to Farquhar Atoll to the South loaded with the island's harvest. This meant that a big motorised pirogue that had been ferrying copra out to the ship was now available for our shark-filming project. The cage, the hookah, and an old tractor engine block were loaded into the big pirogue, along with Craig and two of our sponsors. I followed in my Whaler with Robert. We motored 20 miles South in calm water along the curving atoll reef while Robert trolled expertly for dozens of edible-looking fish that would attract our sharks.

I had hoped that our project would take place in calm water, but the pirogue continued around the South end of the reef and out into deeper, much rougher water. Well, I thought, these guys know where the sharks are. Robert was still intent on catching yet more shark bait. By the time we caught up with the anchored pirogue, our cage and its anchor had already been flung over the side, and I could see Craig putting on his wetsuit, fins and mask. Hold on a minute!...I thought, shouldn't we be doing some planning here?

The Grand Blancs eagerly worked to transfer all the bleeding fish into the pirogue, and then immediately started cutting them up and throwing bits over the side. Obviously this was part of the plan, but whose plan? Did we need so many bloody fish? How deep was the water? Wow!...look at that current!...so strong! My fins and mask were handed brusquely to me. Craig started the compressor, hefted his camera in its bulky housing, and started to slip over the side. Craig was a very focussed individual. "Wait a moment!", I cried amidst the racket of pirogue engine, hookah motor and loudly chattering crew. "Beaucoup de poissons...beaucoup reqins...riens de Chinois!" was their only intelligible rejoinder

I attempted to instruct the pirogue crew about how to refuel the hookah, but they, bloodstained like our sponsors, seemed much more intent on slashing at still live fish. There was bright red blood everywhere. I contemplated suggesting that maybe Craig could do the filming by himself, while I might supervise the chaotic surface crew...but...nobody was listening, my self-respect suggested otherwise...and there would not be a story to tell if I were not in the thick of it, so...I jumped in and quickly joined Craig in the cage. A quick look around showed no sharks visible yet.

We laboured at pulling the cage down on its anchor line without visible success until we were puffing hard at our mouthpieces, already short of air. Then Craig noticed that our topside crew had fastened the cage to the side of the boat. He attempted unsuccessfully to untie the tight knots, and then mimed a request for my knife. Unfortunately I had not carried one...neither of us had. Then we saw black hands with a knife cutting through our restraining rope. It parted and quite rapidly the cage surged away from the boat and sharply downwards in the water as our eardrums strained under the increasing pressure. It was sinking!

I was getting ready to bail out of our submarine death-trap when our descent slowed and stopped, with the cage at a sharp angle to the vertical, and the anchor line taut. In the strong current it had come to a sort of angular equilibrium. I decided against abandoning ship, although I still felt puffed and the air which was available at our depth seemed barely enough for survival.

I looked around...I could see neither the surface nor the seabed, nor even the keel of the pirogue. Without a depth gauge it was difficult to tell how deep we were. In my discomfort I told myself that my breathing would return slowly to normal if I could relax.

Craig was fiddling with his camera, in his focussed way. I saw that I had nothing else to do but relax, and looked around again with more interest...no sharks to be seen, just plankton rushing at us and through the bars. This state of affairs continued for quite a while until I did indeed feel more relaxed, that there was sufficient air, that we were safe in our cage...but still no sharks. Craig filmed me relaxed in one corner and then panned around through 360 degrees, looking for sharks. Still nothing.

After another long wait I really did begin to think there was less air to breathe. I looked at Craig with a question, he was again fiddling with his gear. Another minute and I was convinced the air supply was dwindling. I motioned to Craig that we should bail out but he merely shrugged his shoulders..."Why?" he seemed to be saying.

I attempted to open the door...it was jammed shut!

Release the anchor line!...and hope that our contraption still had enough buoyancy to float us up towards the fresh air. The fishermen in the pirogue had tied our anchor line so securely my fingers could not undo the knots under strain now in the current, and we had no knife! I cursed my lack of drive in not insisting on

taking command of proceedings on the surface and supervising an orderly deployment of our death-trap with all necessary safety gear. We were slowly drowning like rats in a cage!

Now it seemed that Craig agreed about the lack of air...he first put down his camera and tried to open the door...no go! He had a go at the knots, with equal lack of success.

Now a degree of planning paid off. Craig fumbled in his pockets and produced a small screwdriver, and managed to prise open the knots. The anchor line shot out through the "bottom" of the cage, quickly followed by our airpipes being violently jerked out of our mouths. Now we had no air at all!

The cage rotated to an upright position, thanks to our bamboos. We two half drowned humans clawed at the roof peering upwards towards the light and the distant air. I recalled, in vivid, technicolour detail, some real ship's rats, caught onboard in a cage trap, who when submerged in the sea to drown them are often found dead with their teeth gripped in rigor mortis on the restraining bars.

In excruciating slow motion, it did seem that the sky above was lightening, and eventually, ponderously, our place of confinement actually broke the surface, to show a brief square of blue sky above...but where was the air? The sky was immediately drowned out by a surge of foaming water, to be replaced again by a momentary vision of blue sky. The waves were washing over us, leaving barely a second between surges when any air might enter the tiny space at the top of the cage wherein we had believed we might breathe. Desperately we clung, just like those drowning rats, to the upper bars, our mouths thrust almost outside, waiting for a chance to gasp some air. We did get some, but oh, so briefly, and with such long waits between, that I despaired of sustaining acceptable life in this fashion. Thrusting aside my nightmarish visions of drowning rodents, I cast around for inspiration...the golden rule of any diver, indeed of any adventurer..."OK!..this is a bad situation!..you will die if you panic, figure out rationally what you must do to survive, and go!..methodically do the necessary!" The jammed door! I had not been able to open it, but perhaps two of us might! I elbowed Craig, and pointed at the door, but he seemed intent only on getting the next breath, understandably perhaps.

Well, I thought, I will try myself! I grabbed the door in both hands, fixed my feet on a bar of the floor, and pushed with all my might. The door floated open effortlessly and in a couple of kicks I was on the surface and gulping lungfuls of our Mother's beautiful blue atmosphere.

After half a dozen gulps I knew I was just about started on the road to recovery, and found sufficient self-control to wonder about my friend. I slid on top of the cage to where his white knuckles were welded to the bars. I tried prodding him through the bars, I tried shouting in his water-logged face, nothing worked to make him let go and swim out of the door. He seemed not to be moving or breathing..oh, no!...that vision of that drowned rat with his teeth similiary welded to the bars!

My weight on top was merely depressing the cage, making his struggle for air ever more difficult supposing he were alive and conscious. Reluctantly, I realized I must go inside again and try to drag him out. Oh God!...what if he grabbed at me in panic?...we might both drown fighting inside while safety lay just outside! No choice! I took four more great breaths, dived down, regrettably on the wrong side away from the door, but I could see through the bars a swimming figure...he must be trying to escape after all! I surfaced to see Craigs's very pale face on the other side of the cage. He dragged himself part way onto the top of it, breathing heavily, but thankfully very much alive. To my astonishment he turned to drag a large black object up too...he had escaped with his camera! It occurred to me then that he must have been very much more in control than I had realized. Craig was a very focussed individual!

We were alive and breathing!...but what now? It soon became obvious that our erstwhile place of imprisonment, now our sole means of support in a very deep ocean, was not buoyant enough to float two men and a camera. We wedged the latter on the cage top, and hung on to opposite bamboos outside, with just our heads out of water part of the time in the big swells which continued remorselessly to roll right over us.



From this low vantage, we could see very little, except those damned wave fronts marching at us. Obviously we were drifting with the strong current....to the Southwest, as best as I could recall. Southwest!...next stop Madagascar, 200 miles! We had bailed out of our rat-trap, only to face being lost forever in the open ocean. Even if the boats were now searching for us, we would present a very low image in this lumpy sea.

Satellite image of Isle des Cerfs (Isle of Slaves) at the South end of Providence Atoll. Our drama took place in the lighter blue area off the SE tip, and we drifted in our cage off the bottom of the picture...towards Madagascar Photo Google Earth.

I made one last effort...I lunged as high as I could on the top of the cage, staring intently up wind...and was able to see the distant tops of the palm trees on Cerf Island, and to glimpse briefly our two boats, far away, but still tied side by

side, and facing away from us, directly into the current, still at anchor, probably with our crew of Islanders and Grand Blancs still in a bloody frenzy of chopping up fish. I fell back into the sea, dislodging the camera, which Craig managed to catch.

What could we do? At last I remembered one planned safety feature. We had lashed a long light bamboo with a large orange flag on one side of our cage. It was still there, and, because it had been lashed there by a sailor, the knots came undone readily. We held it up as high as we could. The flag was heavy with water, and initially it was difficult to keep it upright, but it soon drained and dried out, and flew flapping magnificently, surely visible for a mile or two, except to observers directly upwind,...exactly where our boats lay.

We hung on grimly for a long time, getting colder, and only occasionally summoning the energy to wave the flag back and forth, presenting a bigger image upwind.

I believe I was almost half asleep, in a dangerous and debilitating lethargy, when Craig started shouting, "An engine! I hear an engine!" Our rescuers had arrived!

We drank a little whisky, "to warm us up", and a lot of water, and huddled under a tarpaulin all the way back. Our support crew apologised for the long delay in realizing we had gone missing.."We thought you were down there filming all the sharks!...and that you would come up only after running out of film." The camera contained only four minutes of film, but after all, we had not told our friends this.

It turned out that many sharks, some big ones, had begun to arrive "after twenty minutes, or so." That would probably have been after we had cast off our anchor line. So we had drifted down current presumably through the crowds of sharks converging up-current towards the source of the bloodscents. Just as well then that the odours had proven so attractive...otherwise they may have shown interest in our legs hanging down like ripe bananas while we hung on the outside of the cage. Craig and I shuddered at the thought of being chased back inside our prison, there to struggle for breath while greater, or at least more dramatic danger prowled around outside.

We discussed why the door of our prison had jammed shut....we surmised that it had done so only under the twisting strains of current, buoyancy and anchor line, and had come free once those forces had been reduced to the opposite ones of gravity and buoyancy alone.

I looked inside the petrol tank of the hookah compressor...empty! This started an immediate round of remonstrations amongst our supporters, in their Creole tongue. I had to suppose that they were either blaming each other or expressing regret that they had not noticed that it had run out of fuel and stopped...presumably because of the frenzy of blood-letting that they were gripped by, and because of their inbred fishing instincts...three medium, man-sized White-tipped sharks also lay bleeding in the bilges. The empty tank explained why our air supply started to decrease slowly because the volume tank on the compressor would contain quite a few more minutes' worth of dwindling air pressure.

As for our unintended prison, our torture chamber, our “new technology” that was going to propel us towards the Oscar Awards: our Great Shark Cage probably drifted around in the currents for days, or weeks, before the bamboos rotted, or came unlashd, and then it would have sunk down into many hundreds of fathoms of deep blue Indian Ocean water. I am glad we were not still clinging to it when that happened. I would like to imagine, although it is very unlikely, that this crazy contraption might just have washed up on a Madagascan beach, there to be a source of wonderment, perhaps even superstitious awe, for some isolated fishing community.

The lessons are plain: that a “new technology” should be fully tested under non-threatening conditions first, that such a vital aspect as “surface support” should be well-organized and properly directed, and not blithely left in the hands of a group of enthusiastic amateurs, however experienced they might be in their primary task, that of attracting “lots of big sharks”...and that a real danger such as “lots of big sharks” means extra care must be taken in training and in the provision of safety gear and procedures.

As plain as these lessons may have been, there would continue to be further fiascoes in our marine endeavours, most of them merely hilarious, and none quite so threatening as that of the Great Shark Cage Fiasco.

90%