

We counted the children....

Warren Blake.

I have sailed with many school children, usually in groups of 12-15, ideally with one man and one lady teacher, and usually for five or seven days. We sail to uninhabited island groups in the S. China Sea, or in the Andaman Sea, depending on the prevailing Monsoon, and the students learn a little about each of many skills: navigation, sailing, seamanship, kayaking, snorkeling, rock climbing and abseiling, coral reef and jungle Ecology, some Astronomy, Geology, Maritime History, etc...all good stuff.

These trips are great fun...for the kids, but also for me. If I were to sail alone, or with just my wife, to these oceanic isles set like gems in the azure sea, I would just as soon pour a cold beer to sit with the scenery all around, and open one of the hundreds of books on board that I have never had time to read...you see I have done all those adventurous things before!...but when I take young people there, they all demand, especially the twelve-year olds, "Can we go snorkeling over there?...can we climb up that rock?...can we go exploring in there?"...and I am immediately enthused with the idea of exploring!..."Whoopee! Let's go!" Of course it is simply that I see the natural attractions through new eyes, and just as vividly as the first time I demanded of my own father, the Admiral, "Can we go exploring over there?"

There is a lot of fun to be had on these trips, but a large measure of responsibility to be shouldered too, in terms of safety especially. One of the measures that we endeavour regularly to observe is, naturally enough, to count the students out of the jungle and into the boats, or at other appropriate checkpoints, especially when one party has been off snorkeling, another jungle trekking, and even another abseiling...we do need to bring all our crew home! We elicit the help of the teachers in this, of course.

Such a sensible precaution is an obvious and necessary one, but on one occasion this proved insufficient, as the story of Dr. Barrett will demonstrate.

We were on the last of a seven day trip with an International School group in the Anambas Islands, somewhere East of the Malaysian island of Tioman. We had some hours to spare so sailed to a small, unnamed islet that we had never visited....so small it was merely a pencil dot on the best chart available.



The place proved magical...the classic tropic isle of the imagination, heaps of light grey granite boulders, leaning palms, a curving strand of gleaming, pale pink, squeaky sand, seven shades of turquoise in the shallows, and "the prettiest coral reef in S. East Asia!", according to our onboard lady marine biologist, who knows a thing or two about coral reefs.

The students went exploring, kayaking across the glowing reefs, or snorkeling amongst their flowering heads. Dr. Barrett, teacher of Geography, and I sat on a flotsam log in the shadow of the coco-palms. The Learned Doctor was heard to say, and I have witnesses to prove it: "You know, Captain, I could stay here forever!" I dreamily concurred.

All too soon the time came to begin our voyage back to Malaysia. The students were recalled from their activities, counted into our motor-launches, ferried to the two schooners FOUR FRIENDS and STARDUST, and again counted on board. All present and correct, all well and found. The two ships weighed anchor and set sail for Tioman.

The South wind blew briskly out of a brilliant sky, and all hands were engaged in sail handling, and navigating. After FOUR FRIENDS and her crew had settled into the routine of bashing along on a broad reach in a full-sail breeze, with a few flecks of spray coming over the windward bow, the off-watch students fell to playing cards or writing their journals. One girl, seeking advice, called out for "Dr. Barrett!" There was no answer. The girl came to the wheelhouse, her journal in hand. I suggested she should check in the heads. No Dr. Barrett. I suggested she should check at the masthead, a favourite perch for the learned Doctor. Nobody there. The girl, having searched throughout the ship with no luck, came aft to the wheelhouse with a worried expression.

I was starting to wonder myself...had we left him behind? This small spasm of doubt must have shown in my face, for the girl's face crumbled, her lower lip trembled, and her eyes welled with tears. The other kids in the wheelhouse all looked at me with questions in their eyes. Touching as this display was, I could not resist winding the situation up a little...if we had left Daniel Barrett behind on the islet, and I was indeed starting to recall boarding the ship without him, then he would come to no harm...we would just have to sail back.... "You know," I said, "Dr Barrett did say when we were sitting on the beach...and I have witnesses to prove it...he did say he 'could stay there forever!'"

I was astonished at the reaction to my pleasantry. The girl, the chief worrier, dissolved into a paroxysm of distress, wailing out loud, with her lip vibrating, and tears starting down her cheeks. Other kids looked at me in startled shock.

Now I have on past School trips enjoyed the company of hundreds of twelve-year olds for many reasons, one of them being that they still live partly in a world of the imagination...not for them the world-weary cynicism of your jaded teenager. The best part of this other-worldliness is that they believe my stories! But I could scarcely conceive that these more mature students of Dr. Barrett, these 16 and 17 year-olds, could take my idle jests seriously!

I could not resist the impulse to improve upon the jape. "OK, if you are so worried about him staying on the island...no worries!...we can pick him up a year from now when we sail here with next year's group!" More audible distress.

My last sally was a pathetic one. "But surely you see?...without him on board there is more beer for me!" No sign of consensus...only subdued sobs.

"Alright, then! Alright! We'll go back for him! ALL HANDS! Down sails!"

Nearly two hours later, as 4F was approaching the islet, and while our consort STARDUST was sailing on, hull-down, with just her tops'ls visible on the far horizon, the students, being kids, were gleefully playing cards....but I was not so sublimely confident. While the whole caper had first seemed like a good joke to me, if nobody else, I now felt a trifle perturbed. Daniel Barrett was the enthusiastic organizer of these annual trips, this was his fourth. It would be a great pity for all concerned if he were so upset by being marooned on a tiny desert islet that he might decide to go sailing in civilized, inhabited Queensland next year instead! I conveyed my slight sense of unease to the students. They cheerfully agreed that Dr. Barrett would indeed be annoyed.

"Well, perhaps we can do something to make him feel better? Can you reproduce those genuine emotions again?...that obvious distress?" I asked the girl.

The chief worrier replied, "No problem!" She indicated two others of the girls. "We are all in the Drama Club...we can put on anything!" Well!...so much for spontaneity!

"Great!...but what about the tears?"

The three thespiennes looked at each other. "Eye-drops! We will put eye-drops in just before he comes on board!"

Thus it was that when the Launch came alongside with a stony-faced Dr. Barrett on board, three tearful girls rushed out to embrace our castaway, and a line of thankful boys queued to shake his hand and put a reassuring touch on his arm. Daniel was visibly moved...and quickly cheerful.

As the ship moved away from the scene of his marooning, Daniel and I poured beers in the wheelhouse to toast his rescue. “You know, Captain, just now was one of the finest moments in my life!” he observed. We officially named his islet “Barrett’s Isle”, and announced this to the students, with enthusiastic agreement.

I was glad he had experienced the manifest concern of his loyal students. In telling this story, I feel a trifle guilty that it was necessary for me to...how do I say this?...to choreograph the original genuine distress and shock of the kids, to channel it towards their respected teacher at the right moment...but, as any parent or teacher knows, kids are kids, and one cannot expect them to express spontaneous emotion *at the right moment!* They would cheerfully have continued playing cards!

Another obvious moral of this story is that one does not count only the children...

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