THE FOUNDING
OF MANINGRIDA
By
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Northern Territory Library Service
Occasional Papers
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INTRODUCTION

This informal lecture was delivered by Jack Doolan at the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory in December 1986 as one of a series of 'lunchtime entertainments'.

Jack Doolan ended a notable career in Aboriginal Affairs when he was elected to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly in 1977 as Member for Victoria River, a seat he held until 1983. His association with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (or the Native Affairs Branch, as it was then known) commenced in 1948 when he joined as a Cadet Patrol Officer. He served mainly in the Top End; Snake Bay, Port Keats, Daly River, Victoria River and Darwin, to name a few centres and acquired a thorough knowledge of, and affinity for, the Aborigines, and they for him.

Jack is an Associate Member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and has contributed papers to journals such as Oceania.
OCCASIONAL PAPERS


2. The History of the Catholic Church in the Northern Territory, by Bishop John Patrick O'Loughlin. (1986)


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I recall that in the late 1960s, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs organised some sort of 'Back to Maningrida' function for people who had been involved in the early days with the founding of the place. When my name was suggested, a very senior officer of DAA went on record as saying that it would be most inappropriate if I was invited as I had nothing whatsoever to do with the founding of Maningrida.

In actual fact, this senior officer did have some justification in making this statement. What I was very much involved in was the original founding of Maningrida as a trading station, as junior officer (Cadet Patrol Officer) to Syd Kyle-Little, who was a Patrol Officer in the Native Affairs Branch at this time. This was in 1949 and has been documented by Syd Kyle-Little in his excellent book *Whispering Wind*.

Our little effort with Maningrida, the trading station, was later abandoned because of a change in administration and the arrival of an unsympathetic director. As a result of this decision, Syd resigned and after tripping around the world for some time, finished up as a full Colonel in Malaya.

I also resigned and, after a while, enlisted in the Australian Army and finished up in Korea, rising to the dizzy heights of Corporal, so I think Syd must have been a slightly better soldier than I was.

Following the abandonment of Maningrida as a trading station, nothing was done despite all our time and effort to establish the place, until 1957, when it formally became a Welfare Settlement with Dave Drysdale as Superintendent. The period of Dave and Ingrid Drysdale’s sojourn has been chronicled by Ingrid Drysdale in her book *The End of Dreaming*, written in collaboration with Mary Durack.

The original idea of setting up a trading station at Maningrida was the brainchild of Syd Kyle-Little and resulted from the considerable problem of Aboriginal people drifting into Darwin and other towns following the 1939-45 War. Government departments, and in particular, the Native Affairs Branch, were at their wits’ end trying to cope with the problem of totally unsophisticated Arnhem Land people suddenly descending in fairly large numbers on Darwin, where the existing facilities for housing and feeding them were totally inadequate. At this time, in addition to Bagot Settlement, there was another establishment known as the Berrimah Compound, which was built on the land now occupied by Forestry at Berrimah.

However, despite the combined efforts of Bagot and Berrimah, they were completely incapable of coping with this mass influx of Aborigines resulting from the exodus from Arnhem Land.

After many meetings and suggestions as to how this problem might be overcome, Syd came up with the idea of establishing some sort of place in Arnhem Land which was not covered by the influence of the existing Missions. At the time Croker Island, which catered almost solely for part-Aborigines who had been plucked from the four corners of the compass and dumped on the island, was administered by the Methodist Overseas Mission. Incidentally, this collecting of kids and dumping them also happened at Garden Point on Melville Island and Groote Eylandt.

Further east, Goulburn Island was run by the MOM and established mainly for the full-blood Aborigines who speak the Maung language.
Milingimbi and Elcho Islands were other Methodist Missions established on the Arnhem Land coast, and the last coastal Mission was at Yirrkala, on the Gove Peninsula where Nhulunbuy was later established.

The Director of the Native Affairs Branch at this time was Frank Moy. He had been a Patrol Officer in New Guinea and during the War had been a Major in ANGAU. He was a very approachable director and usually open to suggestions if he thought they had some merit, which was probably why he was prepared to listen to Syd Kyle-Little. Although he was quite taken with the idea, the ever-present ‘bogey’ of lack of funds reared its ugly head; NAB at this time was a quite poverty-stricken little Branch.

Syd, always the supreme optimist, suggested that, if he could obtain the use of an old boat lying rotting at Snake Bay, he and myself might try to get her reasonably seaworthy and make use of the Amity as she was called, to sail to the Liverpool River, which was fairly centrally situated on the Arnhem Land coast between Goulburn Island and Milingimbi Missions. In order to obtain money to set up a trading store on the Liverpool, Syd suggested that the pair of us shoot crocodiles, arrange for the skins to be sold in Darwin and that the proceeds be used to purchase trade goods for our store. In this way, some of the Arnhem Landers at least would be able to obtain many of the items which were now enticing them into the ‘fleshpots’, if poor old Darwin of those times could be termed a ‘fleshpot’.

To Syd’s amazement, and the obvious chagrin of not a few ‘dyed in the wool’ public servants, Frank Moy agreed to give the idea a try and threw in a thousand rounds of .303 ammunition just for luck. No doubt if the problems caused by the drift of Aborigines from Arnhem Land had not been so immediate and fairly desperate, Moy would probably have sent Kyle-Little to a psychiatrist.

Syd and his long-time Patrol Boy, Jockey Bundabunda, flew to Snake Bay and brought back the Amity, which was indeed a sorry sight. She had once been a proud little vessel, 27 foot overall and carvel built, with a spoon bow and counter stern. She had been built in Brisbane by Norman Wright and was said to have been used by the Army during the War to land supplies on the Timor coast. Now, however, she had lost any semblance of former glory she may have once possessed, and for the next month or so, the pair of us worked on her from dawn to often the middle of the night, including weekends.

The object of all this effort was not to restore Amity to her original pristine splendour, but simply to try to make the damned thing float without running the bilge pump for 24 hours each day if we didn’t want her to sink under us at sea. All this repair work, which included stepping a mast and fitting stays, was done at Doctor’s Gully and the late Carl Atkinson often dropped over to offer us much appreciated advice and sometimes assistance.

Before I go on with the saga of getting ourselves and the Amity to the Liverpool River, I think I should say a little about my companion.

Sydney Hamilton Kyle-Little is a very imposing name and the gentleman who bore this name was a very imposing figure. He was about 6’2” tall and weighed about 16 stone. Territory born, Syd’s father, Jack Little, was one of the early policemen up here and Syd had been born at an outback police station.

His mother was also born in the Northern Territory, being one of the famous pioneering Goodman family. His uncle, Cecil Goodman, was well-known and respected around the Adelaide and Daly Rivers and other parts of the Territory. An aunt, Mrs Margaret Widdup, who still lives in Darwin, married Wilfred Widdup, long-time Superintendent of Fannie Bay Gaol.

1 — 8 m  
2 — 185 cm  
3 — 102 kg
As might be expected from someone with this background, he was a better than average bushman. As a rifle shot, although I have spent some years in two different arms of the service and a long time in the bush, I have never seen his equal, particularly as a snap-shot. In this form of shooting he was superb.

If I could find any subject in which I might criticise Syd, apart from always being supremely and sometimes annoyingly optimistic no matter how hopeless things were, it was that he was a firm believer in the adage that 'the end justified the means'. I know that he was never in a seminar but if he had been inclined that way, I am sure he would have been a Jesuit, and he was not long in demonstrating this to me.

Being reasonably certain that Amity, although not exactly shipshape and AI at Lloyds, would at least float for a time, we shifted her from Doctor's Gully to the Darwin Wharf to load stores. This exercise being accomplished, the great day finally arrived and we left Darwin on 2 June, 1949, bound for Escape Cliffs on Cape Hotham near the mouth of the Adelaide River. Amity was loaded to the Plimsoll and despite impassioned pleas and entreaties from both of us, we had no alternative but to leave Darwin without a dinghy — Administration could not afford such a luxury.

At Cape Hotham we were to rendezvous with the patrol vessel MV Kurru. Frank Moy had arranged for the Kurru to escort us to the Liverpool and repatriate a number of Gunawirra people, whose country lay in Arnhem Land in the vicinity of the mouth of this great river.

The Kurru had been a former Navy HDML, the initials standing for Harbour Defence Motor Launch. The original idea of stationing a vessel in the Territory to patrol the coastline was in order to keep an eye on pearlers and trepangers, industries which had virtually ceased to exist by 1949. At this time, the ship was controlled by the Department of the Interior.

The Kurru sailed to Brisbane for a refit in 1950 and never returned and the idea of keeping a vessel for surveillance of the Territory's coastline was discontinued.

The Kurru was many times larger than the Amity, being a 'Fairmile' motor launch and thus far more suitable for transporting passengers, although far from ideal, as the sole space which passengers could occupy was on the upper deck in the open. We were loaded to the gunwales and, as the two of us, plus Jocky Bundabunda, his brother Naliva and Irindilly No. 1 were aboard, there was hardly room to move.

At Escape Cliffs, scene of an early attempt at settling the North, we were used as a ferry to carry passengers out to the Kurru which was unable to come close inshore because she had a much deeper draught than the Amity. I won't go into the details of our trip out to the Liverpool River, except to say that it was dreadful and that we almost lost her several times because of her advanced age and dubious ability to stay afloat. Syd gives a blow by blow description in Whispering Wind.

The Kurru sailed without us and Syd gave notice of his Jesuitic tendencies soon after. Laying out the necessary charts on the deck and pointing to the compass, he announced 'OK Jack, you were in the Navy so you can navigate from here on'. 'I don't know the slightest thing about navigating and can't even read a compass' I replied. 'I was in the Navy alright, but I was a stoker on a bloody coal burner most of the time.'

Syd's disappointment was obvious, so together we learned to navigate, hitting probably every reef and fortunately bouncing over them on the way along the coast. To Syd, who had conceived the whole idea of the trading station, we were going to get to the Liverpool or die in the
attempt and having got to this stage of the exercise, there was no thought of our giving up. Knowing him as I did, he probably told everyone who asked that I was about the greatest navigator since Captain Cook.

It didn’t help much that the charts we had had been compiled in the main by either Flinders or P P King. I forget which, with some updating by the Navy survey vessel HMAS Moreby in the 1930s. On the coast at North East Point, where we intended to commence operations, the information clearly showed ‘Natives Hostile’, which cheered me up no end. The charts, however, were the current charts in use at this time and the only ones available in any case.

After many trials and tribulations, we arrived at the Liverpool River and again acted as a ferry taking the Aboriginal passengers from the Kurru to North East Point at a place which the Aborigines called Djuda.

On the morning of June 9th, we bade our farewell to the boys on the Kurru who had been more than helpful to us on the way out from Darwin. Most of the crew were longtime Territorians, many of whom remained up here after the Kurru paid off. The skipper, Captain Wells, was the father of Peter Wells, the present Surveyor-General of the Northern Territory. Others of the crew who come to mind were Laurie Coffee, ‘Snowy’ Yoogood, Tas Festing and Ted Justa. I know that Tas and Laurie are still residents of the Northern Territory.

Our first job was to establish a permanent camp and with the two brothers, both of whom were speakers of Gunawidji and now back in their own country, we were soon shown an excellent spot on an elevated position only a couple of hundred yards from the beach and with a permanent spring close to our camp. This spring was known as Maningrida and our trading station derived its name from the spring. There was reasonably deep water some three hundred yards from the beach, and the anchorage was protected on the seaward side by a small rocky point in the river. The river water, as is all river water on this coast, was muddy and dirty, and we were not long in beginning to curse a government that sent us out without a dinghy. We worked out a system whereby one of us would remain on the boat with a rifle while the rest would jump in, splash like hell and head for shore as fast as possible. Once on shore, either Syd or myself, whoever had remained on the boat, would dive in while the other one ashore covered the swimmer.

Having established our base camp, our next job was to contact as many people as we could to advise them of our presence and of what we intended to do in the area. The plan was to encourage them to kill crocodiles if possible and bring in the skins. Syd had tried his utmost in Darwin to obtain permission to take out half a dozen rifles for native shooters, but to no avail. An Ordinance then in existence expressly forbade the use of rifles by Aborigines unless they were employed by and in the company of an European. This of course, meant that only the boys with us could use a rifle when they had no possible need to do so as we were always armed. To kill a crocodile with a spear and get it ashore for skinning is an extremely difficult and dangerous thing for even a skilled Aboriginal hunter, so we did not build any high hopes on crocodile skins, except for the skins which we ourselves managed to obtain. However, there were quite a few other opportunities and avenues for trade goods. Dingo and snake skins were other saleable commodities.

The sea offered a rich harvest of edible food for both ourselves and the Aborigines and provided goods for trade by way of bailer shells, those beautiful pink and roseate shells which could be used as they were as ornaments or easily converted into delightful lampshades. The meat from these shells was greatly prized by the coastal people as food, although I found it a bit too tough and rubbery. Turtle shell, particularly the shell from the Hawkbill Turtle, was easily
sold although the meat from this species of turtle is poisonous to humans unless the poison glands are first removed.

Some of the men had worked for and observed Japanese pearlers and we had high hopes of finding some of this valuable item. Our hopes were never realised however, but we did manage to ship a small quantity of shell back to Darwin.

One item which we believed would be an excellent source of income for our store was trepang. It would have been too, except that some hundredweight of the dried and smoked sea slugs which were shipped back were simply allowed to rot in a store at Bagot. I was particularly disappointed about the trepang as I had already arranged for a buyer in Darwin, but no-one in the Darwin office even bothered to advise the buyer that it was in Darwin for collection.

The gathering of trepang was one hopeful enterprise which went down the drain through no fault of ours or the Aborigines. In fact, they were quite delighted at once again being involved in work which they knew well, and not just the collection of the slugs, but many of them had a great deal of experience in the smoking and curing of trepang, learned themselves or through their fathers who had worked for the Macassans. Later on we were to establish a few trepang camps at strategic points on the coast nearby.

Other articles sought for trade were woven baskets and grass mats. Most of the women were quite adept at weaving and some had learned the art of colouring the finished product with native dyes obtained from the bush. These dyes were fast dyes, easily obtained and quite colourful which resulted in a most attractive finished article.

In spreading the word of our presence, we travelled up the Liverpool River as far as was navigable and fairly close to the headwaters of the Tompkinson River, one of the tributaries of the Liverpool. Whenever possible, we managed to do as much shooting as we were able. This necessitated being as quiet as we could, as crocodiles would quickly disappear at the sound of loud talk or laughter, although the noise of the Amity's motor did not appear to disturb them unduly. Movement, in particular, would result in a sudden and rapid slide from a mud-bank into the water, so that we were obliged to stand like statues whenever we sighted one.

As I said earlier, the Gunavidji people were the owners of the country around the mouth of the Liverpool River and all of the eastern bank of the river. On the western bank lived the Ganbalang, sometimes called Wahlang people. West of this group, along the coastal area were the Maung people, most of whom had now gathered at Goulburn Island Mission. The Superintendent of this Methodist Overseas Mission at this time was the Rev Alf Ellisson.

On the eastern side of the river, inland from the coast, lived the people of Muragidliiban, on the creek of the same name, who were speakers of the Gunwinkaku language. Visiting these people meant a few days foot-patrolling to a chain of waterholes near the head of Muragidliban Creek. Tidal influence in the Liverpool extends inland for roughly forty miles and around this tidal head, on both sides of the river, lived the Gungarrangoni people. This group were fairly regular visitors to Oenpelli Mission (CMS).

As we could no longer proceed by boat, we left the Amity in the care of Naliva and undertook another foot-patrol up river towards the stone country of the dreaded, at least to the Gunavidji, Rembarrnga people.

Many stories were told of the Rembarrnga's reluctance to come into contact with Europeans. The Gunavidji, who detested them, had all sorts of tales about their bestial habits and sexual
aberrations which were described in exact and lurid detail, and Gunavidji women in particular were terrified of all Rembarrnga.

One story, probably the true one, was that gold prospectors on the southern part of the escarpment around the head of the Waterhouse River had left flour, heavily laced with strychnine, lying around their abandoned camp, with the result that the Rembarrnga people had been almost wiped out. Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that these people were an extremely timid and frightened group when we met them. They wore no clothes at all, not even pubic tassels, and the men had fairly long beards and long, wild-looking hair. As might be expected, our sales talk about the trading station had little, if any, effect in this locality.

Fuel supplies were running low, so we headed back down river to Maningrida. Apparently the word was spreading rapidly and we found the population much increased. This, we decided, was an ideal time to build our house, with such a group of enthusiastic workers available.

Building a house presented not a few problems, as we had no carpenter's tools at all and no nails. As a matter of fact other necessary things with which the Government had not supplied us, apart from the dinghy, included a ship's compass, a compass for land, binoculars, camping equipment and a radio. We also had to provide our own rifles as well as the above essential items. They had, however, provided marine charts, a few mechanic's tools for the boat and, best of all, three cases of trade tobacco (nikki-nikki) which proved invaluable as a trade commodity in bartering and payment for services rendered.

After marking out an area for the house, Maningrida became a veritable hive of activity. Amongst any community, irrespective of race or creed, which becomes involved in such a community effort, someone invariably will emerge as the foreman of the building project. We were not disappointed at Maningrida. A gentleman named Charlie quietly and unobtrusively soon took over the role of foreman and general organiser of the project. He was a character in his own right, having left home at a fairly early age and worked for an old buffalo shooter, George Hunter at Woolner, as well as having spent some time during the War employed by the Army at Adelaide River. As a consequence of his knowledge of Europeans and their peculiar ways, Mairumba was acknowledged by his people as the person most likely to cope with our obvious eccentricities. We were quite plainly fairly mad in requiring a house of the dimensions suggested, and, in any case, it wasn't even 'rain time' yet. Although he was held in high regard by his fellow tribesmen, he felt himself slightly superior to them because he had some degree of sophistication. In private, he would sometimes refer to his mates as 'proper myall blackfellies'. Mairumba also appointed himself to be my guide and mentor, and in no time we became firm friends and I truly appreciated the advice he gave me, as a stranger in a strange land.

Gangs were organised to cut timber for posts and bearers, whilst others set about cutting stringy-bark for the walls and gathering ant-bed for our floor. The roof, which consisted of paperbark, was a job for the ladies who, being badly in need of a smoke, gathered so much paperbark that we were eventually provided with a roof 8 inches in thickness, which proved delightfully cool.

As the material began to accumulate the girls with their yam sticks soon had the necessary post holes dug for the uprights which were dropped into the holes and stumped by many feet until they were sufficiently firm. Each of the fourteen uprights had been left with a fork at the top, on which were laid the bearers with a long ridge pole along the crown of the roof. Paperbark sheets were laid over the bearers and poles placed on top to hold the roof down. Bush string was readily available and a great deal of this was used to tie down the roof and bind the poles together.
Stringy-bark collected for the walls was wet and flattened out between saplings both inside and outside the house so that it became a reasonably straight wall. It was interesting to observe the collecting of this bark, which Aborigines had been using for many centuries to construct their bark cases. They would go out near daylight to trees which had been previously marked out. Two horizontal cuts, about six feet apart, would be made around the circumference of the tree, then a vertical cut would be made between the horizontal cuts and the bark peeled off in a single sheet and carried back to camp.

In a few days our country residence was completed and we stood back to admire it. As we had built it without any tools at all and no nails whatsoever, it was a pretty fair effort for a pair of amateurs. It was a great wonder to me and, I remarked to Syd, ‘Necessity is indeed the mother of invention’. ‘Yes’, he said ‘but a few yards’ of No. 8 wire would have saved a damf lot of trouble, mate’.

One long pole was left, so we decided, in true British fashion, that it should be a flagpole. Not having a flag to fly, we found a piece of yellow floral cloth, I pinned up the pole and fixed it in place. As we had neither a pulley nor ropes, our flag was there as a fixture.

Syd had a canvas shower and we enclosed an area with string-bark for privacy, and soon had a deep pit toilet as well. Inside the house we built ourselves a couple of four-poster beds with saplings across the main frame. With a swag on top, they made comfortable beds. Syd had brought a collapsible card table and one canvas chair. I claimed a four-gallon drum for a seat and, although furniture was a bit light on, we had a place to call home.

When all was in order, we had a stream of Aboriginal visitors to admire the finished article. I brought Naliwa and Mairunba in to admire our four-poster beds and tables and chairs. Mairunba, ever the cynic, looked around without expression, and remarked ‘Too flash, Jack’ and walked out. I felt hurt at such indifference.

Having a house of sorts not only made us happy, but it was obvious that the Aborigines were delighted as well. Both of us agreed that it was probably because they were starting to believe that from now on they would have either us or our successors on a more or less permanent basis. They were to be sadly disillusioned.

People had been walking in from the bush camps and our population had increased to around 200. The health of most of them was good. However, Syd had reports of a group of very sick people camping within a couple of hours walk from our camp, so we decided to investigate.

Saying that they were a very sick people was an understatement. Most were, in fact, in the last stages of leprosy, which I prefer to call Hansen’s disease, to avoid all the connotations of mutilation and disfigurement which automatically come to mind at the dreaded word ‘leprosy’. Many victims of Hansen’s disease, even people who have been cured, show little if any physical disfigurement as a result. Most of the disfigurement comes about from burns and accidents to limbs which no longer have any feeling.

These people, however, had very much advanced Hansen’s disease and many of them had lost limb extremities and were hideously ugly. They were a multiracial and multilingual group, no longer capable of caring for themselves, who had found a secluded place where they could hide from prying eyes and they were being fed and cared for by local Aborigines.

When we entered this camp, the people were obviously terrified, as disclosure of their disease to an European usually meant transportation to Channel Island Leprosarium, in those times a virtual sentence to death. No one sent to Channel Island had ever returned, hence Aborigines
were more than reluctant to seek treatment. It was quite evident that, because of the concern shown by their fellow Aborigines, they were cared for as adequately as possible under the circumstances, except, of course, they had no medicine or bandages to cover sometimes shocking wounds.

There was little we could do for these unfortunates, except that mentioning this colony of Hansen’s sufferers in our reports probably had something to do with the arrival of Dr John Hargrave some years later, who had amazing success with both the treatment of the people and inducing them to go to Darwin. Dr Hargrave arrived at about the time new treatment drugs became available, and the return of some of these people from Darwin after hospitalisation worked a miracle. Much of the fear of disclosing their illness disappeared when former sufferers returned to their homelands.

Dr Hargrave is now probably the No. 1 authority in the world on Hansen’s disease. His assistant in Arnhem Land for some years was Phillip Roberts of I, the Aboriginal fame. I spoke with John Hargrave recently and he told me that, but for a very occasional new case, Hansen’s disease has been almost eliminated in the Northern Territory and a great deal of credit for this remarkable medical achievement must go to our extremely modest Dr Hargrave.

With the growth in population at Maningrida came one of the most delightful periods of our stay there. One of the items transported out by the Kars when she accompanied us was a large quantity of powdered milk. Although far too much for our needs, it did not go to waste. Most of the kids had never before tasted powdered milk, but were not long in acquiring a taste for it. To get rid of the surplus, we used to mix it up in a four-gallon drum of a morning and dole it out, a jam tin full for each child. This parade was eagerly awaited and a great crowd of kids would mill about the issue point waiting for their milk. So great was the ensuing clamour that it apparently offended Mairumba’s sensibilities. He had been the chief ‘doler-out’ of milk, but he now appointed Naliva to this position and took over as regulator of the milk parade. ‘Sergeant Major’ Mairumba then drilled his small charges, shouting out ‘One line, one line, you mob piccaninny’ and the piccaninny formed one line without further ado, greatly lessening the confusion.

One morning I was guilty of a most serious breach of conduct according to Aboriginal ethics. Bundabunda was assisting me with something or other, when his sister, Mondalami, happened to pass. I called out ‘Good-day Mondalami’, whereupon Bundabunda clapped his hands over his ears and fell to the ground, giving every indication that he was suffering extreme pain. What I had not realised in my ignorance was that a person may never hear the Aboriginal personal name of a sibling of the opposite sex under any circumstances whatsoever. Similar rules apply to the calling of the personal name, or any close contact with one’s mother-in-law. This may be a very sound idea indeed, however, like the Trappist monks who have taken a lifetime vow of silence yet have developed a very comprehensive method of finger talk, the Aborigines have evolved what is known as a mother-in-law language. This is quite separate from their normal language but enables a man to speak with his mother-in-law, and vice-versa, in this separate language provided that they do not speak face to face and provided that personal names are not used.

We were glad that now we had a house which was larger than we actually needed, as a number of trade items starting to come in could not just be left in the open. One corner of the house was accordingly set aside as a storehouse and the problem was solved.

It was now time to move further afield and make contact with more of the people of the region. With Mairumba, Mickey Marung and Bundabunda we left the Liverpool and headed east to Boucaut Bay which was the country of the Nakara people. The Gunavidi and Nakara were on
the most friendly terms even to the extent of arranging intertribal marriages whenever there happened to be a shortage of available brides in one or other of the groups. Both Gunavidji and Nakara were reasonably friendly with Burarra, who lived around the Blyth River. The Blyth was locally known as 'Koopa' Creek, the 'Koopa' being an abbreviation of Koepanger, so called because it had been a favourite camp for Maccassan trepangers.

East of the Blyth, towards Milingimbi, lived another unspeakable group, known to the Gunavidji and Nakara as 'that Mulark mob'. Mulark is not the real name of these people, but rather a derogatory name given to them by the Gunavidji who told us that their conduct and personal habits were even more reprehensible than the stone country people, the Rembarnga.

Boucaut Bay had been one of the most important camping and water places of the Japanese pearl-lugger during their pre-war activities. One reminder of their presence here was the only part-Japanese person that I had known along the Arnhem Land coast, although there were quite a number of part-Japanese, part-Aboriginal people of both sexes at Garden Point, now called Pularumpi.

Arrangements were made to set up a trepang camp at Boucaut Bay and we moved on to the Blyth River. Close to the mouth there was a large camp of Burarra people on the sandy bank. From the jungle behind the beach came an almost deafening thumping noise. We walked up to find out the reason for the terrible din and found a long dug-out canoe sitting in the bush, right side up, with a line of old people, smooth rocks in their hands, busily thumping and grinding the nuts from the pandanus trees into a powder. This powder was used as flour meal to make Johnnycakes which had a nutty flavour and an excellent taste. Covered with sugargum (native honey) they were indeed a delicacy.

The Blyth River was a broad stream, even after we had passed the tidal head, so we were able to continue on upstream for a number of miles in fresh water. This was just what the doctor ordered for poor old Anity, as fresh water soon kills all salt-water marine growth, including the teredo worm which can bore through stout planks in remarkably short time and Anity's planks were anything but stout.

We reached a rocky bar which had insufficient water running over it to allow us further passage and camped in an ideal place with an abundance of shady trees. Using the necessity of de-worming Anity as an excuse, we decided to spend a couple of days in these idyllic surroundings. In truth, we had earned a rest. Both of us were beards which by now were pretty much salt-encrusted along with the rest of us, and the prospect of spending a day or so luxuriating in crystal clear fresh water, not forgetting to keep a wary eye out for crocodiles, was too much to resist. Syd had walked through this country some time earlier and told me that he had found a tree blazed by the explorer David Lindsay, not far from this rock bar.

While we camped here we had an extraordinary experience. We were cooking a meal when Bundabunda looked up and noticed a man peering at us from behind a tree. Without making it obvious he said 'Miall blackfellow over there'. Mairomba and Mickey Marung took the hint from Bundabunda's quiet tone of voice, as did we two 'Balanda'. Syd instructed Bundabunda to keep watching the place where he had seen the man and it was not long before he announced that there were several other people behind trees in the same direction.

Most Aborigines, Arnhem Landers in particular, are remarkably good linguists and speak several dialects. Other dialects, which they cannot speak but can understand, they refer to as talk which they 'can hear 'im'. The most accomplished of any Aborigine who I ever met was Old Willie, skipper of the mission lugger Areeva, who not only spoke almost every language of

13 — kilometres
the Arnhem Land coast, but was quite fluent as well in English, Malay and Japanese. Charlie Mairumba, because he had done a good deal of travelling, knew more languages or 'could hear 'im better than our other crew, but between the three of them it would be no exaggeration to say that they either spoke or comprehended as many as a dozen different tongues. Each man in turn began to call out to this shy group in the bush. Our unseen visitors called back in return, but none of our people could make the slightest sense out of what they were saying.

Having exhausted all the languages and dialects which they knew, our boys gave up.

On the first day, this group of people still remained in the bush and so we ignored their presence. Late on the second day a little fat boy of about four years emerged from the bush, round belly stuck out belligerently and tears rolling down his cheeks. Bravely this small emissary approached us and stood in front of Syd, eyes downcast and still streaming tears, but not a sound did he make. We had been living mostly on bush tucker but we did have some flour and hot johnnycakes were cooking on the coals. Bundabunda handed one to him which he promptly ate. Someone gave him another, and another, and another, and another, all of which disappeared in short order. The tears dried up and the little round belly had eaten four men's rations. We tried to shoo him away but he just sat down and wouldn't budge. A few old men came out of the bushes and made signs that they also fancied a johnnycake or two. Marung, (OC Stores), declined, and as we had plenty of trade tobacco, Syd started handing out a few plugs. The old chaps promptly popped them into their mouths and started chewing.

It was not long before they began spitting out the tobacco, making threatening noises and then stamping off in high dudgeon. Our small friend stayed with us and slept that night around our camp fire.

These people had both us and our Aboriginal helpers baffled, as conversation was mutually unintelligible. Those that had come out to us were completely naked. Bundabunda and Mairumba thought that they were Gumuwarri tribespeople, but if this was correct, then they were out of their tribal country. That they had never before seen white people was quite evident. An anthropologist once disputed this theory of ours, but simply on the common sense evidence of having no knowledge at all of the use of tobacco, I needed no further convincing. In fact, I had never heard of a tribal Aborigine who did not smoke at every available opportunity and certainly had never met one before now. Aboriginal people living along the coast must have been smoking long before the European invasion of the Territory, as they usually smoked tobacco in a long pipe with a tiny bowl, which they called a Larawa. This word is said to be a Macassan word for pipe. As most Aboriginal people on missions were no strangers to smoking, I came to the conclusion that not only had these isolated people had no previous contact with whites, but in all probability had little if any contact with either mission or coastal Aborigines.

When we were packing up to leave, most of the group emerged from the bush and one old man walked up to Syd and began feeling his arms and legs and smiling broadly. I was ignored, being pretty skinny, but Syd jumped away in pretended fear — at least he told me that he was pretending. Syd's antics resulted in everybody having a good laugh. Our small fat friend would have been quite content to come with us and had to be handed to one of the adults when we pushed the boat out into the stream.

By this time we had come to the conclusion that shooting crocodiles in daylight was mostly a waste of time. A crocodile on a mud-bank, even with a fatal head shot, almost always manages to leap or slide into the muddy stream. If you were determined to get the thing the only alternative left was to jump into the water with a harpoon and, as the boys said, 'feel about' and hope to prod it and jam the head of the harpoon, which is detachable and attached to a rope, somewhere into the carcase, then pull it out with the rope. It was also necessary to hope rather sin-
cereally that it was already dead. The whole process was fairly unnerving and must surely have been the only time that a couple of 3rd Division permanent officers of the Commonwealth Public Service earned their pay as crocodile hunters.

As might be supposed, we lost quite a number of crocodiles in swift flowing and muddy streams. With this in mind, we decided to concentrate on night shooting only. Our greatest problem here was that we had no spotlight and only a couple of two-cell torches. Using a two-cell torch to try to dazzle a crocodile by shining a bright light into its eyes was a bit foolhardy, but we had no alternative.

Kyle-Little preferred to shoot from the Anity because he was a marvellous shot, but I found it better to use a canoe if we could scrounge one from somewhere. I used to sit in the bow with the torch and my rifle, with Marung behind me holding the harpoon and Mairamba paddling. The crocodile in these rivers had never before been shot at, which was fortunate for us. We would paddle up a mangrove creek as high as we could get before the tide started to run out, and then just drift downstream, shining the torch along the banks as we drifted. When we picked up a crocodile, the eyes would shine a brilliant red like the tail-lights on a vehicle. When we were so close that we could hardly miss, the brilliant ruby would suddenly turn into an equally brilliant emerald green. This was the time when everything depended on the total understanding between the shooter and harpoon man. If Marung, who would be standing up in the canoe, considered that he could plunge the harpoon into the croc's head, he would throw, first nudging me in the back with his toe just before he threw. It was then imperative that I fired at almost the same time. On the other hand, if I felt that I had a certain kill, I would shoot first and the harpoon would whiz past me almost as soon as the shot sounded. We were not long in developing an almost perfect understanding.

Later crocodile shooters used aluminium boats with outboard motors. They covered a much greater distance but killed only a fraction of the crocodiles they sighted. Our method was much slower but we could guarantee that we would get almost every one that we spotted. As well, outboard motors frightened them with the noise of the motor to such an extent that a creek or river could be shot only once because crocodiles became so gun shy that the particular croc would have to be given a rest for some time afterwards.

I could go on for ages and tell many hairy stories such as crocodiles in their death throes, despite having a 303 bullet in their head and a harpoon embedded in them, trying to dive under the canoe when it had but a few inches of water under it and upsetting the canoe and tipping the three of us in the river, together with a crocodile thrashing about at the end of a rope. I will just say that I can guarantee that shooting crocs, in a dugout canoe, never became a boring experience.

We had been shooting for several nights and anchored some miles from the mouth of the Biyath, when disaster struck, which was partly my fault. We dropped anchor about 15 yards from the bank and threw out the lead line from the bow. Plenty of water there. I walked to the stern of the boat and again tried the depth. Again, deep water, so we felt we had a good anchorage.

Unfortunately I neglected to drag the lead line the length of the boat. Both bow and stern anchors were thrown out and secured, so that we lay fore and aft to the current and well out from the bank.

The boys swam ashore and we decided to remain on board as we were both extremely tired and hoped that we might miss some of the myriad sandflies and mosquitoes. We had a tiny cabin and two bunks and soon bedded down for the night.
Syd’s account of the sinking of *Aunity* in *Whispering Winds* differs only slightly from what I remember. My recollection is that I awakened with the feeling that something seemed wrong. Even at anchor in a river a boat will always have some movement and the faint noise of water rushing past the hull can be heard. There was no movement at all, and I called out, ‘Wake up mate, the boat is not moving and I think we must be aground.’ The next minute, the hatch over the cabin being battened down, a wall of water roared into the cabin, through the tiny open passage from the cabin into the engine room which had to be crawled through to get out of the boat. Syd said that he was first to surface, but I dispute this as I distinctly remember kicking him in the face in my panic to escape from the sunken boat. Even more vividly, I remember bumping face first into the white belly of a big crocodile. Emitting a piercing yell, I am sure that I would have broken an Olympic record in swimming to the bank. I may even have walked across the water, but I remember another ghastly yell and seeing Syd thrashing through the water. My poor mate had almost bumped into a large crocodile surfacing.

What caused *Aunity* to sink was the presence of a submerged paperbark tree which lay in the water at right angles to the boat. When the tide fell, it had left us balanced across the log lying almost afloat. *Aunity* had been suspended in mid-air on this log some feet above the water, finally slipping off and diving bow first to the bottom. The crocodiles which we had bumped into incidentally were quite dead, as we had shot them before we sank and had left the carcasses in the cockpit of the boat.

As neither of us had any clothing except for the jocks we were wearing, we were soon being almost eaten alive by sandflies and mosquitoes. Deciding that the old adage ‘when in Rome, etc’ was sound thinking, we plastered ourselves with stinking mangrove mud from head to toe, leaving only holes for our nostrils and mouths. Despite the obnoxious smell, it was infinitely preferable to providing a meal for the wee beasties feasting on us.

Kyle-Little has told of the aftermath of the sinking in detail. Briefly, because of the tortuous winding of the river, it was almost impossible to use sails in the Blyth, and much of the way to the mouth, after we had kept running aground on mud-banks and heading at speed into the mangroves, was accomplished by being towed downriver by our crew who had managed to acquire a couple of canoes, by generously handing out ‘nikki-nikki’, taking the canoe owners with us to help in paddling and eventually handing the canoes back to their rightful owners. A photograph of this towing operation appears in *Whispering Winds*.

We decided to try to sail west to Goulburn Island to repair the *Aunity*, as it had remained underwater for several tides before we managed to raise her. The motor was now totally useless after being submerged and we attempted to sail her to Goulburn. We eventually managed to achieve this, but not after many close calls, amusing in retrospect but fairly desperate at the time. One notable event was being hit by a violent storm which left us no alternative but to run before the wind. When we finally managed to get properly under way, we had been several days out of sight of land and were probably not too far from the coast of Timor.

We reached Goulburn and reached the *Aunity* and commenced making running repairs. We rigged a tripod on the beach and after borrowing a block and tackle, managed to take out the motor so that we were able to work on it. Syd, now having the use of the Mission radio, was giving Darwin hell trying to get necessary parts, but not having any significant success. We were worried about making contact with the Mangereida people as we had not been back there for about six weeks, and worried also about our stores and trade goods, in particular the crocodile skins which had to be constantly unrolled and resalted to prevent them going rotten.

As I was not much assistance to Syd at Goulburn Island, he knowing a great deal more than I about motors, I suggested that I take a couple of Aborigines with me and walk back to
Mainingrida to check out the situation. Syd, knowing that it would be no mean walk, was too kind hearted to order me to go, but was obviously relieved when I volunteered.

It was obvious that to carry food and much equipment on a walk like this would be impossible. I had a rifle and as much ammunition as we could comfortably carry and I selected Mairumbra, Irindilly No. 1 and the teenager (about 14 or 15 years) named Charlie Irawalla, who was the only part-Aborigine part-Japanese that I knew in Arnhem Land, to be my companions and my choice proved excellent. Mainingrida was about 112 kilometres distant as the crow flies, but a hell of a lot further on foot. Two fair sized rivers, the King and the Gumadirr, had to be crossed as well as several tidal creeks, but we did not anticipate the longest swim of all, which was nine miles across the top of Rolling Bay.

We left the mission in two big canoes as a group of people wishing to go hunting happened to be about to cross the Macquarie Strait, so we arranged to get a lift with them. Our canoe, with the addition of the four of us, was very much over-crowded, having a motley collection of old people, kids, nursing mothers and dogs. Halfway across Macquarie Strait, having only about two inches of free board, we caught a big wave on our beam and swamped. The ensuing bedlam, with kids yelling, the younger ones in fear, the older ones with delight, dogs trying to climb up our backs, billy cans and assorted gear floating all around, old men calling out words of wisdom to the younger men endeavouring to right the canoe and bail it out, had to be seen to be believed. My attempts to assist were declined and I was politely told to 'push off'.

Eventually, order being restored, and the canoe partly bailed out by several enthusiastic wielders of billy cans, the younger men held the canoe while the rest of us clambered aboard and once again it was 'Ho and Away' for the mainland.

Walking back to Mainingrida was a story in itself, so I will eliminate most of the details. It took us twelve days, which was fairly good time considering the amount of meandering around we were required to do. One thing that I learned is that the popular conception that an Australian Aborigine cannot become lost in the bush is a fallacy. They are superb bushmen, probably the best in the world, but out of their own country, which my mates were, they were little better than I was. Their greatest attribute is that they are able to find water and food, due to their nomadic lifestyle and marvellous powers of observation, where most white men will either perish or starve.

We had to swim the King and Gumadirr Rivers because there was no other alternative. At the Gumadirr, I asked Mairumba if there were any crocodiles in the stream, which was a particularly stupid question as there is an abundance of crocodiles in all Arnhem Land tidal waterways. He just grinned at me and replied, 'Aw cripes Jack, this one full up, no more room!'. Which meant that there were so many canbe (crocodiles) in this particular river there was 'no more room' for any more. I asked him if anyone had been taken in crossing the river. He replied 'One fella Ringitch, canbe bin bite 'im here'. I asked him if the man had survived and he answered 'Him alright now, only he got 'im one side leg'.

Later I found that when Ringitch had been grabbed by a crocodile crossing the Gumadirr, his sole companion had carried him all the way along the coast to the beach opposite Goulburn Island, lit a fire for a canoe to come over and taken him to the mission from where the Aerial Medical Service had flown him to Darwin and his leg, though badly mutilated, had been saved.

We emerged from the bush onto Junction Bay and walked for so long on the long sloping beach there that our legs began to ache from walking with one leg on a higher level than the other.
Rolling Bay presented us with a real challenge. The end of the bay was a delta of many tidal creeks with a jumble of mangroves running in for miles. As the bay was the only significant obstacle between our position and the Liverpool River and we were all anxious to get home to Manningrida, I decided that we would take a chance on swimming Rolling Bay, which was nine miles across, rather than walk the many miles to get around the extensive delta system and then have to head in a northerly direction to reach a point on the Liverpool opposite Manningrida. The boys agreed so we gathered a few light logs and tied them together with bush string and reeds, threw our swags on top with my rifle firmly secured and kicked off from the beach.

It is an exaggeration to say that we swam the whole distance, as we did have the flimsy little raft to hold onto and kick ourselves along. Every so often, after crossing some deep channels, someone would discover that his foot had touched bottom on a mud-, or sometimes sand-, bank which gave us a temporary rest when we were able to just push our raft for a short time.

Two eventful incidents occurred while we were crossing. The first was the sudden appearance of a very large dorsal fin quite close behind us. My rifle was useless as I was in the water and if I tried to climb out onto the raft it would have certainly sunk Irawalla, our little part-Japanese teenager, without a word from any of us, grabbed his wire-pronged fish spear from the raft and dropped back behind us. Swimming sideways, or backwards and keeping his eye always on the shark, he circled when it circled and changed direction when the shark changed direction. Meanwhile, with the three of us kicking like crazy, the little raft was moving so fast that a casual observer would have imagined that we had an outboard motor attached to it. Finally, the shark approached so close that Irawalla was able to give it a vicious prod on the snout with the sharpened wire points of his fishing spear and to our great relief it took off in a mighty swirl and didn’t come back.

The second notable event was the sighting of the Mission lugger *Larripar* when we were about two-thirds of the way across. It appeared to be quite close, but all our yells were to no avail as she showed no sign of hearing us. I was very angry at the time, but on reflection, it would have been a thousand-to-one chance of one of the crew sighting four bobbing heads and a tiny raft in the middle of a large expanse of water.

We reached the eastern shore of Rolling Bay with a good deal of relief and were soon on our way, walking along an elevated ridge covered with more cypress pine than I have ever seen before. We walked on a thick mat of pine needles which were quite springy and just before dark we stopped for a cup of tea and a bite to eat. Aboriginal people, as a general rule, are extremely reluctant to walk through the bush in the dark, but on this night they made an exception. As they were now back close to their own country on the Liverpool River and therefore on reasonably good terms with the local ‘debi-debi’, we kept going until near midnight and camped opposite Manningrida, which looked like a fairyland with its dozens of camp-fires reflected in the river. We lit signal fires and in the early morning two big canoes arrived to transport us across the river.

Syd was not there when we arrived and had left me a note to say that the *Amity* had lost her mast in a storm and that he had left for Elcho Island Mission to try to obtain a new one there, where Harold Sheperton ran a saw-mill. A few days later I was awakened by the sound of an aeroplane flying very close overhead. Running outside I saw ‘Sheppy’s’ tiny plane going into another power dive which nearly dipped the top of our flagpole and Kyle-Little’s bearded countenance hanging over the side. A tobacco tin with a handkerchief as a parachute came flying out with a note inside telling me to meet him at a salt-pan on the other side of Gundjerama Creek, a few miles away. I had hoped not to be swimming any more tidal creeks, but
this time I had no real excuse and, in any case, I wanted very much to have a yarn with him.

As a pilot, Harold Shepherdson was a legend in his own lifetime and he had little trouble landing on the salt-pan. He was certainly the first person to ever land an aeroplane at Maningrida. Syd gave me a few instructions and asked about our walk from Goulburn Island. They both took off again after about an hour and I was once again left to my own devices.

This story is becoming far too long so I will just mention a few significant events. Syd came back from Elcho Island with Amity sporting a brand new mast. The NAB supply ship Phantom, skippered by George Haritos, better known as Nundi, arrived with a load of trade goods and the local people were deliriously happy with the abundance of 'looking glasses' (mirrors), 'stinkin' pretty soap' (toilet soap), 'stinkin' pretty oil' (hair oil), calico (red cloth for skirts and nagas), some tomahawks and many other prized goods. George Haritos had his wife, Joan and baby son George, now deceased, on board the Phantom and they were indisputably the first white woman and child at Maningrida.

I was recalled to Darwin and returned on the lugger Larapin but was only back for a week when an outbreak of measles hit the people at Maningrida. As a result of an urgent message from Syd, I was flown back by Jack Slade in a Dragon Rapide medical plane with a large quantity of necessary medicines and drugs. We landed without too much difficulty but Jack had to make several attempts before he could lift the plane from the salt-pan.

So far I have not said much about the Aboriginal people of Maningrida. Many of them had little if any contact with Europeans, and therefore had not been contaminated by European attempts to turn first-class black people into second-class white people. They were a proud people who stood up straight and looked you in the eye when they spoke. They were seldom aggressive and seldom demanding. They were generous and kind and forgiving. Social Security was unheard of, yet people who were old and infirm never went hungry and in fact, were always given the choicest cuts from the kill, the very old ones in particular because many of them were toothless and therefore unable to chew tough meat. In Aboriginal society, no-one ever goes hungry and no-one ever wants. Theft was unknown, although theft of promised wives did occur occasionally with dire results for the transgressors. We could leave our house for weeks at a time and nothing of ours was ever touched.

Children were well cared for and well loved. For a child to grow up as an orphan was impossible, because they were always adopted by relatives who would sometimes actually come to blows over possession of a child whose mother was too ill or too infirm to give it adequate care, despite the fact that another child meant simply another mouth to feed and there was no inducement of extra child endowment in those days.

When they were very small most Aboriginal kids were dreadfully spoiled. On the very rare occasions when a child was smacked, other adults would show more concern for the adult stupid enough to punish a little child than they would for the child who had been punished. This indulgence ceased fairly abruptly when a child reached the age of puberty. From then on, boys in particular led a highly regulated and indeed regimented existence. The liberty of childhood was gone and they were obliged to mix only with their peer age group. This regimentation carried on well into adulthood and it was considered bad form and indeed punishable to become too familiar with a person who held a higher tribal status. Every person was aware of his own social standing and status within his own tribal society and there were few transgressors from this accepted norm.
Thus Aborigines led an extremely well-ordered life within the confines of their own extended family group and within their own tribal situation. I have always considered myself extremely fortunate to have lived amongst these people of Arnhem Land, who naturally possessed many of the qualities in themselves which our society finds so admirable and often tries hard to achieve.

The Maningrida mob, in just a few short months, certainly made a deep impression on my life, which is no doubt my reason for choosing to spend most of my life since then working amongst Aborigines.

The promises that we made to return after the wet and continue with the operation had to be broken through no fault of ours. An administration and a new director of the Native Affairs Branch were both unsympathetic towards continuation of the trading store at Maningrida. A group of people, more forgiving than most, laid no blame at our feet despite the fact that their hopes and aspirations, as well as ours, were dashed. The unfortunate fact was that Syd's idea of an outstation type community was twenty years ahead of its time.

Maningrida, as a standard type Aboriginal settlement, grew to be the fifth largest town in population in the Territory in the 1970s, and was an absolute disaster area about this time. With the development and progress of its many outstations some resemblance of sanity now seems to have been restored.