

# Delivering the *Liomaran*: Honiara to Yap in 1975

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*The Marine Resources Division of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands first opened its Yap District office in October, 1973, and hired me as Yap's first Fisheries Officer, but provided me with very little other support. Stepping into the void, the Congress of Micronesia provided a grant to obtain a fisheries research vessel for investigations of the demersal resources of the district's outer islands that stretched nearly 600 miles to the east of Yap proper. Obtaining, delivering, and operating the vessel became the main undertaking for Yap's nascent Marine Resources office and its lone Fisheries Officer from 1974 to 1977.*

During the early- and mid-1970s there was very little fisheries development emphasis in the Trust Territory outside of Palau. What interest there was, centred on demersal resources, particularly bottomfish. Very little was known of tuna resources except for skipjack near Palau that were the target of a pole-and-line fishery based at Koror and undertaken by a US company, Van Camp<sup>2</sup>. Although few surveys had been made of the islands and atolls in the Yap District after World War II, Japanese pole-and-line activities prior to the war did not include the central Carolines and it was thus (correctly) believed that insufficient live bait supplies existed to support a fishery such as that in Palau.

Some activity was undertaken in Chuuk (Truk) by the Trust Territory to re-start what had been a Japanese pole-and-line fishery before the Second World War. But no thought or consideration was given by the Trust Territory government to developing a local tuna longline industry. There was little familiarity with the fishery except for the rare occasion when a Japanese longliner called at a Trust Territory port in an emergency<sup>3</sup>. At the time, there was also no knowledge of the extent of tuna fishing activities by foreign fleets in the Territory and no familiarity with markets for longline-caught fish. That situation changed in 1979 when the Federated States of Micronesia declared its 200-mile Extended Fishery Zone and took control of its fishery resources.

After an extensive search for a builder of an appropriate vessel for bottomfishing, Honiara Shipyard and Marina Co Ltd was chosen to build a ferro-cement 16.2 metre, twin diesel vessel with a 900 cubic foot fish hold and blast freezer. Construction of the vessel commenced in late 1974 at the company's boatyard at Ranadi in what was then the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. The vessel was to be named *Liomaran* after the mythical goddess who cast stones into the sea from Yap and created the outer islands.

Construction proceeded slowly and the launch planned for the second quarter of 1975 was set back numerous times. Finally, in June 1975, my delivery crew of four from Satawal Island and I travelled by air from Yap to Honiara via Guam, Majuro and Nauru. At each stopover it was necessary to cajole, plead and beg the relevant airline to allow all the numerous large boxes of equipment to travel with the crew. Fortunately, airline agents were accommodating and everything arrived safely in Honiara. The feeling of relief turned to disappointment when it was found that the vessel was not nearly complete: the refrigeration system, electronics, and deck fittings had not been installed, and other areas such as the fish hold and interior spaces were yet to be finished.

My crew and I were working with an extremely tight budget that did not include funds for hotel accommodation. After a quick search, we found a place for our sleeping mats, mosquito nets and small kerosene stove in a partially-completed and abandoned ferro-cement vessel on the Ranadi foreshore next to the boatyard. Bathing was done in the sea, and the Honiara central market became the source of most sustenance for the next three months. Each day the delivery crew and I helped the shipyard workers with various aspects of fitting out the boat, hoping to speed up the work.

Dewey Huffer, an experienced retired captain from Guam who was hired for the delivery voyage, arrived in Honiara expecting to meet a vessel ready for sea trials. Seeing that was not the case, and not about to sleep in an abandoned boat on the beach, the captain required housing at the Honiara Hotel until the vessel was ready to sail, further straining the delivery budget.

On his first visit to the boatyard the new captain noticed the big padded helmsman's armchair sitting on a pedestal directly behind the helm. His first order was to get rid of it. I

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<sup>2</sup> Foreign companies such as Japanese fishing companies were not allowed to operate in the Trust Territory at the time.

<sup>3</sup> Those vessels were invariably old wooden boats using ice to preserve the fish and nothing at all like the clean, sleek and modern fibreglass or steel longliners that characterised the Japanese longline fleet in later years.



*Liomaran*, a 16.2 m ferro-cement fishing vessel built in 1974 for the Yap District Office of the Marine Resources Division of the Trust Territory undergoing sea trials at Tulagi, Solomon Islands (image: M. McCoy).

was upset, not only because the chair had cost a considerable amount to purchase and ship to Solomon Islands, but also because I thought it would be a comfortable steering location for the long voyage back to Yap. The captain patiently explained that all steering would be done while standing, as in his experience no helmsman had ever been known to fall asleep while standing up. The captain also insisted that a voice pipe leading to the flying bridge above be moved away from the helm, lest a helmsman rest his forearm on it and become inattentive to the job at hand.

Meanwhile, I had another problem: the Yap government Public Works engineer who had volunteered to participate in the delivery voyage had backed out at the last minute leaving the boat without an engineer. A search for a qualified Solomon Islander in Honiara to serve on the delivery voyage began. Eventually one was found and Nepia 'Bia' Leve from Munda, Western Province of Solomon Islands was signed on. He was later joined by Mathew Peroqolo, a young Solomon Islander from the Guadalcanal Weather Coast who worked as a 'go-fer' for the engine installer and had made friends with the Micronesian crew. There was no provision in the budget for additional crew, but Mathew's wanderlust was such that he offered to work his passage to Yap just to see different parts of the Pacific.

As construction and outfitting progressed, the shipyard owner and I spent one evening at the Honiara Yacht Club discussing the remaining work. One item that had not been completed was a small 40–50-gallon water tank that was to be placed on the deck house so that fresh water

could be pumped up manually from the main tank in the hull. It was agreed that the tank would be fibreglass-covered plywood, but on leaving the yacht club the shipyard owner noticed a row of empty aluminium beer kegs stacked behind the club. He quickly threw one of the kegs into the back of his truck and it was soon transformed at the boatyard into the required water tank. Once installed, it remained covered with a tarp until after departure, lest anyone question its origin.

Finally, in early September 1975, the various pieces were in place: a captain, a crew, an engineer, and a boat ready for launching. Although the boat sat on a cradle, it was in a shed about 80 metres from the sea. When the plan for launching was revealed, it became another source of concern to me. I could visualise the entire project collapsing before the boat ever entered the water.

In fact, a collapse in launching was just what the boatyard owner had in mind. The plan was to place a set of parallel rails for the boat on its cradle from the boat shed to the high water mark. Then a series of stacked 44-gallon drums filled with rocks were placed underwater to form a foundation for the continuation of the rails into deeper water. The idea was for the boat and its cradle to pass over the rock-filled drums and rails, which would intentionally collapse, hopefully with enough water under the keel to float the boat. At the appointed time a bulldozer was used to push the boat on its cradle down the rails where it gathered speed until it hit the water stern first and momentarily paused before floating safely away from the now partially submerged cradle.



FV *Liomaran* launching, September 1975 (image: M. McCoy).

Watching the vessel launch in this manner was not for the faint hearted, but in the end the launching was accomplished as planned and without incident.

After a day trip to Tulagi and sea trials, the next chapter in the adventure was the four-day voyage from Honiara to Rabaul. *Liomaran* departed Honiara with a small cargo of local beef (frozen in the fish hold), a deck load of timber for construction of the bin boards and shelves in the hold (which had not been completed), several rattan chairs that were used as deck chairs in good weather, and a considerable amount of Solomons-produced twist tobacco. The twist tobacco was for sale in Yap to help defray delivery expenses.

As the *Liomaran* pulled away from the main wharf at Point Cruz, the tarp was removed from the beer keg water tank to the cheers of the boatyard proprietor and crew who were present to witness the departure. Calm seas prevailed for the next four days and everyone on board was in good spirits. It was declared a good omen when the first fish brought onboard from a trolling line astern was a marlin estimated to weigh 90 kg.

*Liomaran* arrived in Rabaul at daylight on the morning of 17 September 1975 and was tied up to the Burns Philp wharf. It was the morning after Papua New Guinea's (PNG) independence, and there had apparently been a very large party the day and the evening before, as no one was seen

on the streets. There was no response to radio calls to the harbourmaster, and the previously notified Burns Philp wharf agent was nowhere to be seen. Captain Dewey had instructed that the yellow quarantine flag be raised to the masthead anticipating being cleared by the authorities. I was somewhat puffed up in thinking the *Liomaran* was like a larger ship, and should have a PNG courtesy flag to fly as well, even though I had no clue as to what the newly independent country's flag looked like.

Onboard *Liomaran* at the wharf, thought was given to the next steps since both the captain and I wanted to get resupply and refuelling done as quickly as possible. Mathew, the Solomon Islander, volunteered to go ashore and try and find the shipping agent and/or anyone acting in an official capacity. He returned in about an hour and reported not seeing anyone in the town but he did get a big PNG plastic flag to raise on the mast. When asked where he got the flag, he replied that there were hundreds of them hanging from light poles all around the town and he just climbed up and grabbed one.

Eventually the shipping agent showed up, the rest of the town awoke from what must have been a very large collective hangover, and the tasks of refuelling and provisioning were undertaken. The amazing Gazelle peninsula market was visited on several occasions for fresh provisions and the crew took some time to tour around what was at the time a very pretty town.





Edward Olakiman, from Satawal (left), and Mike McCoy with the very first fish caught on *Liomaran*, a 90 kg marlin.

Only one incident marred the hiatus in Rabaul, and it occurred at the local yacht club where the agent had arranged guest passes. After collecting supplies around town on a very hot day, my Micronesian crew and I stopped off at the yacht club for a beer on the way back to the boat. After sitting at a table and ordering, only I was served. The Micronesians had never experienced such a situation and they insisted that the waiter would be coming back shortly with their drinks. After a short while it was obvious that drinks for the Micronesian crew were not forthcoming. I left my untouched beer on the table and exited the premises with my crew, telling them I thought such attitudes would not last long in an independent Papua New Guinea.

Plantation-based economic activity in the area surrounding Rabaul meant there were several shipyards around the harbour, various machine and electrical repair shops, and

engine and industrial equipment dealers that catered to the very active inter-island shipping trade as well as the plantations. In fact, almost anything required for maintenance or repair for a small vessel such as *Liomaran* could be obtained in Rabaul at the time. And as it happened, that was to be a very good thing.

*Liomaran* departed Rabaul in the evening for Chuuk and passed the Duke of York islands before sundown. Later that night strong cross seas were encountered – the first real rough weather of the trip. As the vessel rolled from side to side, an explosion was heard and sparks and smoke were seen in the engine room. All electronics and lights went out but there was no fire. The captain acted quickly and decisively, sending the engineer with a flashlight to check the engine room and report back. He directed others to light the kerosene lamps that had thankfully been brought onboard after

their service in the abandoned boat where the crew and I had slept. Lamps were hung on the mast, and a flashlight was rigged over the compass. The boat slowly made its way back towards Rabaul in the dark without radar, and we awaited daylight before entering the harbour.

Inspection of the engine room found that the boxes containing all the large starting and service batteries had slid off their shelves and shorted out all the alternators (two on each engine) and the electrical service panel. It was quite fortunate there had been no electrical fire. The battery boxes had been placed in angle iron frames well above the bilge, but the shipyard had neglected to weld the frames to the underlying bracket supports. A Lloyd's surveyor was contacted to document the damage and an electrician engaged to repair the electrical system. The delivery budget, already depleted by other unforeseen problems, had been exhausted during the initial visit to Rabaul but the agent agreed to front expenses without a deposit. I anxiously sent daily telex messages to Marine Resources headquarters in Saipan explaining the situation and requesting additional funds.

After another three weeks in Rabaul to complete repairs and receive funds to pay the agent, *Liomaran* finally departed once again for Chuuk. It was an uneventful four-day sail, but upon arrival in Chuuk the captain gave notice and returned to Guam. He said the trip had taken much more time than he had bargained for, and since we were now safely in the Trust Territory we could certainly find someone else for the last 700 miles to Yap. Although I had been practicing celestial navigation under the tutelage of the captain, I was not qualified to take command.

This occasioned another search, this time for someone with a captain's license to take charge of the vessel for the final leg. But Chuuk was not a hotbed of qualified mariners and the only person available was one who had a mate's ticket and was unemployed owing to some dispute or infraction of government rules. The reason for his unemployment was never revealed, but now being in range of Guam's Loran navigation system gave me some comfort that at least navigation on the vessel would have a backup.

After another two weeks in Chuuk waiting out bad weather and dealing with continuing electrical problems, *Liomaran* finally departed for Yap. The first stop was the atoll of Pollap (Pulap) about 120 miles to the west of Chuuk. Pollap lagoon is an exposed anchorage, being open to the sea on one side. A Trust Territory field trip ship was already anchored there servicing the island, and radio contact was made with the ship's captain. He notified me that the latest weather report was that a new storm was brewing in the area and due to *Liomaran's* size he strongly suggested that shelter be sought elsewhere or to try and run back to Chuuk.

Heading back towards the developing storm was not an option; staying in Pollap was not one either. The only practical option was Puluwat (Polowat) atoll about 30 miles

away, but the chart showed it to have a very narrow pass and there was some question as to whether the *Liomaran* could squeeze through. But being the only practical option, a course was set for Puluwat. As *Liomaran* got underway, the engineer came up from the engine room with a concerned look on his face and announced that a hydraulic hose on one of the reduction gears had a leak and there were no spares. The engine was shut down and so instead of racing to Puluwat and possible shelter, *Liomaran* limped along on one engine at about 4 knots while I, the new captain and the crew all felt the increasing wind and watched the black clouds gather on the horizon.

With Puluwat in view, I asked the new captain again if the vessel could get through the pass. He equivocated, saying he was not sure, and in general did not sound at all confident in overcoming the current adversities. I then asked the Satawal crew if anyone had been to Puluwat and, if so, what they thought about the chances of navigating the pass. One of the crew said he had been there once in the past and thought the boat could make it through.

Arriving at the narrow pass just before dark, the crewman who said that he had been there before was sent up on to the flybridge to steer the now one-engined boat through the pass. The wind buffeted the boat as it made its way through the pass, with shallow coral heads visible within inches on both sides of the vessel. After several anxious minutes, the vessel entered the lagoon unscathed. Once safely anchored, the crewman who had steered the boat through the pass said he wanted to go ashore to visit relatives on the island he had not seen for over 15 years. Noting his current age, I asked when exactly it was that he had been to Puluwat and gained his knowledge of the pass. Rather nonchalantly, he said he was 8 years-old the only time he had been there, having come with his father on a canoe from Satawal.

The rest of the Micronesian crew and newly hired captain also asked to go ashore and were not seen again for a week as the now tropical storm became a typhoon and raged outside the reef. The two Solomon Islanders and I manned the vessel during the storm and the engineer managed to repair the leaking hydraulic hose, enabling the use of both engines for the rest of the voyage.

The typhoon finally moved off to the west, but large waves persisted in the pass for more than a week. Finally, *Liomaran* departed through the pass on a high tide on its way to Yap, stopping at several islands along the way. Three of the crew went ashore on their home island and did not return to the vessel to complete the voyage. The full fury of the typhoon was seen at several of the islands visited, where in some cases *Liomaran* was the first vessel to visit after the storm. Quantities of rice and other food were sent ashore at those islands from the ship's limited supplies.

*Liomaran* finally arrived in Yap on 7 December 1975, nearly three months after leaving Honiara. The substitute



Polowat (or Puluwat) Atoll. The narrow passage to the lagoon is at the very right border of what seems a wide pass, just along the heavy surf; but the most stressful navigation took place while slipping into the inner lagoon of Polowat island, close between the island and the sandbar (image: ©Google Earth – <https://www.google.com/intl/en/earth/>).

captain returned to Chuuk and a new Micronesian crew was hired, but the Solomon Islanders were not anxious to return home<sup>4</sup>. I travelled to Guam and sat for my US Coast Guard license and also obtained a Trust Territory captain's license. Fishing operations finally commenced in late January 1976 under auspices of the newly constituted Yap Fishing Authority and in late 1976 a qualified Micronesian was identified and given command<sup>5</sup>.

I am grateful for the trust shown in me by my superiors, which enabled me to undertake this project more than 40 years ago as a neophyte fisheries officer. I learned many valuable lessons that were put into practice later during my work in Pohnpei, Samoa, and elsewhere in the Pacific islands. I hope that young fisheries officers today are similarly provided with ample opportunities to demonstrate responsibility, adaptability, and a willingness to learn. It will serve them and their countries well in the future.

<sup>4</sup> Mathew stayed in Yap where he learned the language, married, raised a family, and was employed for many years at the Yap Public Works power plant. He is now retired and many people in Yap believe he is Yapese and know nothing of how he first arrived there. Nepia Leve returned to Solomon Islands in early 1977 and worked in various engineering jobs onshore until passing away while working in the Shortland Islands. According to relatives in Honiara he had many tales to tell of his experiences in Yap, some of which more than stretched the truth such as the tale of a later voyage on *Liomaran* to California.

<sup>5</sup> The first year of operations and details of the vessel and its equipment were reported on at the 9<sup>th</sup> SPC Regional Technical Meeting on Fisheries in January 1977, and can be found in the SPC Digital Library: <http://www.spc.int/Digital Library/Doc/FAME/Meetings/RTMF/9/WP32.pdf>.

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