

15th July, 1960

STORNOWAY GAZETTE

Adventure Story

IAN MACLEAN was born at Back on 29th March 1884 and brought up at Ness but his later years took him to Australia, to mining and pearl-diving in the South Pacific, to an epic walk over the Owen Stanleys in Papua in 1914 and after that war to become a prosperous planter in New Britain. In the last war he sailed an overcrowded launch round the Battle of the Coral Sea, indeed his previous adventures seem trifling beside his five month escape from the Japanese invaders of New Britain, during which every skill "Jock" Maclean had was used to keep himself and his companions alive and safe. He was in turn doctor, jungle guide, camouflage expert, navigator and cook.

He stayed on his plantation at Rangarere for as long as possible after the invasion, nursing sick Australian soldiers. When the Japs were only seven miles from the plantation he left filling his boat with patients and other escaping soldiers. Two boats and many narrow escapes later, seventeen of them reached Buna on the coast of Papua, the point at which Mr. Maclean's traverse of the Owen Stanleys had ended in 1914.

At one stage in their voyage four Japanese cruisers and four destroyers on their way to the heat of the Coral Sea battle passed their boat while the sky overhead was filled with army planes.

As an infant Mr. Maclean was carried in a creel by his mother and an aunt from his maternal grandfather's home at 26 Back to her married home at 46 Swainbost. His mother's father was Murdo Macleod, one of the men lost in the great fishing disaster about 1890 or 1891. His father was a miller in Swainbost, and the young boy was educated at Cross School.

He first left home to join the 3rd Battalion Seaforth Highlanders at Fort George. Later he went to sea, sailing out of Glasgow in a small steamer engaged in the Mediterranean fruit trade, until he joined the Scots Guards in 1905 in London.

For three years Mr. Maclean served with the Scots Guards and after and after he was discharged in London walked round the East Indian Docks for several days until he found a ship to join - a Blue Funnel steamer bound for Australia.

He left the ship to work for some time around Australia. Moving north to the Pacific Islands Mr. Maclean started a coconut plantation but his venture failed because of labour troubles. He tried pearl diving in New Guinea and followed it with prospection for gold. In 1914 he was given the job of moving heavy machinery from the Papuan coast into the interior for an Australian company which was going to dredge for gold, but when he heard that war had begun, he left the machinery and walked through the Owen Stanleys to rejoin the army. At Buna he walked into the middle of a German spy scare and it took some time to convince the police that he was a Scot and that he had walked through the jungle.

Mr. Maclean returned to the Pacific in 1920 and managed a plantation there until 1926, when he purchased Rangerere, where he produced copra, cocoa and rubber. He also located a small gold field on his estate, and held Massawa Plantation along with several other interests. He married a sister of the Baroness von Mansfield from Luxembourg.

It was against the background of the prosperous life that the threat of Japanese invasion became reality and though Mr. Maclean held on as long as he could after sending his wife, daughter Ishbel and son Donald to safety, he eventually had to flee to New Britain.

The story of his escape to Australia is recorded in his war diary which will be published in instalments over the next few weeks. Often his notes read like those of a man on a normal tour of the islands; one has to read between the lines to realise the hardship he suffered, the danger which subrounded him, and the courage with which he faced both.

Here, as a foretaste, we quote Mr. Maclean's description of his experience as a pearl diver from a letter to a nephew:-

"After a rough experience in bad weather across the Coral Sea on a 20 ton pearling lugger, I arrived at Samarai, commercial port of Papua. On coming ashore I was introduced by my employer Neil Anderson to some divers who met us at the Cosmopolitan Hotel. They had just returned from the pearling grounds with a good haul of pearl shell. They were a crowd of happy go lucky chaps - warm hearted adventurers.

"The pearling fleet sailed for the lonely waters of Soudest pearling grounds, after replenishing our stores for 3 months at sea, with luxuries such as the native crew of the luggers require, - tin fish, twist tobacco, flour, biscuits, Epsom salts, pain killers, clothing, tin meat, matches, scented soap, baking powder.

"We sailed from Samarai one beautiful, morning through a lovely picture of vividly green islands with white sand beaches across which passed the swiftly moving shadows of white clouds hurried under the blue dome above by the Fresh South East breeze. There's nothing to be compared with standing on the deck of a fine pearling lugger like the "Jane" in such joyous surroundings, and feel how very much she is alive. Travelling at 10 knots over the waves, she seems to quiver with pleasure, to feel the scattered splash of spray on her deck, to rush at the next white capped sea, and to show her polished copper in a contented smile.

"Before going over the side for my first dip, Neil's instructions were "Don't forget to ~~close~~^{open} your air valve as soon as you throw yourself backward into the sea, and slide down on the plumper line till you reach the bottom. Coming up ^{again} on the valve and come up slowly after giving the signal."

The tender who had been waiting with the face glass in his ~~MM~~ hand now called to the crew standing by the air pump, "Pump". A nasty warm smelly air began to fill the hemlet from the three cylinder pump. A native boy then threw over-board the weighted plumper line. The tender screwed the face glass on, and patted my helmet as a signal "all clear". I was now at the mercy of the ocean and the tender in 15 fathoms of water - my first dip.

"At first when one tries to swim, a tutor is at hand in most cases to give assistance or advice, but there is no one to give assistance to the new chum diver. His only consolation is the knowledge that he is in touch with the outside world by this thin life line and air pipe.

"There were many things of interest to be seen down there on the bottom beautiful shrubbery of every colour in the rain-bow and many varieties of coloured fish playing amongst the coloured plants, also there were numerous snakes of different colours and sizes, said to be highly venomous.

"After several months at diving I discovered a good patch of shell, and on opening them on deck in the afternoon I picked up a beautiful round shaped pearl, perfect in colour and lustre, weighing 4 carats, valued at £400 by Neil Anderson.

"As the agreement between us was half share pearls and £30 for shell per ton and keep, my share came to £200 - but as the pearl was in transit with other first class pearls, it was lost between Samarai and Port Moresby on way to Thursday Island by Neil and I only received £20."

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