

Inside the Tales

The water was brightly lit, reflecting the Tuna's iridescent colors off of their elongated muscular bodies as we arrived at sunset. Getting to the offshore oil rigs, our fishing destination had been no easy journey.

An eight-hour trek through an unpredictable yet calm sea. On the way we had managed to land a bull dolphin. In Spanish they are called dorado. An apt name that perfectly captures the golden essence of their beautiful multi-colored skin tone with differing vibrant shades of blue, green and striking yellow capped off by a flat squared bulging head creating a color combination as diverse and beautiful as any fish in the sea. Most know them as mahi-mahi, a Hawaiian term that means "very strong." The bull, a male had a companion with him, a female called a cow. Male lions are the kings of the jungle, but in the world's oceans females wear the crown, reigning supreme. Captain Mike had made the trip many times before, but even an experienced seaman cannot help getting those little butterflies in the pit of his stomach as the departure time draws closer. The excited anticipation of what could happen good or bad when leaving the dock is a different-yet-no-less-satisfying feeling than a successful trip's return. Filling the coolers with ice, rigging bait, setting the rods and reels to the proper length and drag are all necessary tasks to be done ahead of time, because as any fisherman knows you want to be ready when you get that make-or-break strike. Which as every fisherman who has ever told tales also knows happens each time you put your baits in the water. Doing these required tasks for the Twister's crew team would be Troby (known as Drawbridge to his friends). Drawbridge was an experienced fisherman who had more stories to tell than Popeye the sailor man, only he did not derive his strength from spinach. Drawbridge was a jovial fellow with the look of an experienced fisherman written on the lines of his face, who like many seamen had an unquenchable thirst for the suds, which often led to some amusing and at times not-so-amusing circumstances. There was never a bridge Drawbridge did not want to cross or a fish he didn't like to eat (once comparing the taste of a tiger shark's liver to a chocolate bar). Drawbridge's father had been an airline pilot for a major airline, before becoming an early settler in Destin while it was still known as the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village."

Drawbridge spent a lot of his childhood traveling the world through the air.

Choosing for himself as an adult to travel by water. Also joining the crew was Gary, a local kid who had grown up fishing the local waters. Bob Jr. a former ballplayer who enjoyed all aspects of the seaman's experience from preparation to scrubbing the boat down after a long run. Bob Jr.'s favorite baseball memory was of a home run he hit in a championship game. "I still don't know how that ball traveled so far. It felt like the ball slipped off the bat, it must have gotten caught up in a favorable wind current." In baseball like at sea it's better traveling when the currents are in your favor.

Bob Jr. hailed from the mountains of Northeast Pennsylvania. He and Bob Sr. fished for bluefish off the coast of New Jersey every summer. Bob Jr. likes to retell the story that brought him of age as a fisherman, the first Bluefish he reeled in by himself at age nine. The

warrior in him came alive, refusing to hand the rod off. "It was going to be the fish or me," he likes to say. Bob Jr. had taken a renewed special interest not wanting to call it outright pride in his gaffing. Line up the gaff to the fish then give it a quick short snatch instead of lunging at the fish. He would say, "You won't get them all but your batting average will definitely improve. His love of gaffing was born out of a near miss of a 100lb. wahoo that had somehow managed to slip off the hook after repeated gaff attempts (by others), the shockwaves of which felt like a harpoon had lodged itself in his heart, needing to be carefully removed. Bob Sr. was the boat's principal owner. Bob Sr. is not your typical sit in the chair, content to reel in the fish kind of a boat owner.

Bob Sr. likes to get his hands dirty with everyone else. He once caught a giant albacore tuna off the shores of Barnegat Light New Jersey on an old party boat called "Doris Mae" that won him the day's pool prize. The pool prize was a potluck all the day's fishermen contributed to before heading out for the day. Barnegat Light was known for their catches of bluefish in the summer and cod in winter. Bob Sr. had been on such a hot streak of late.

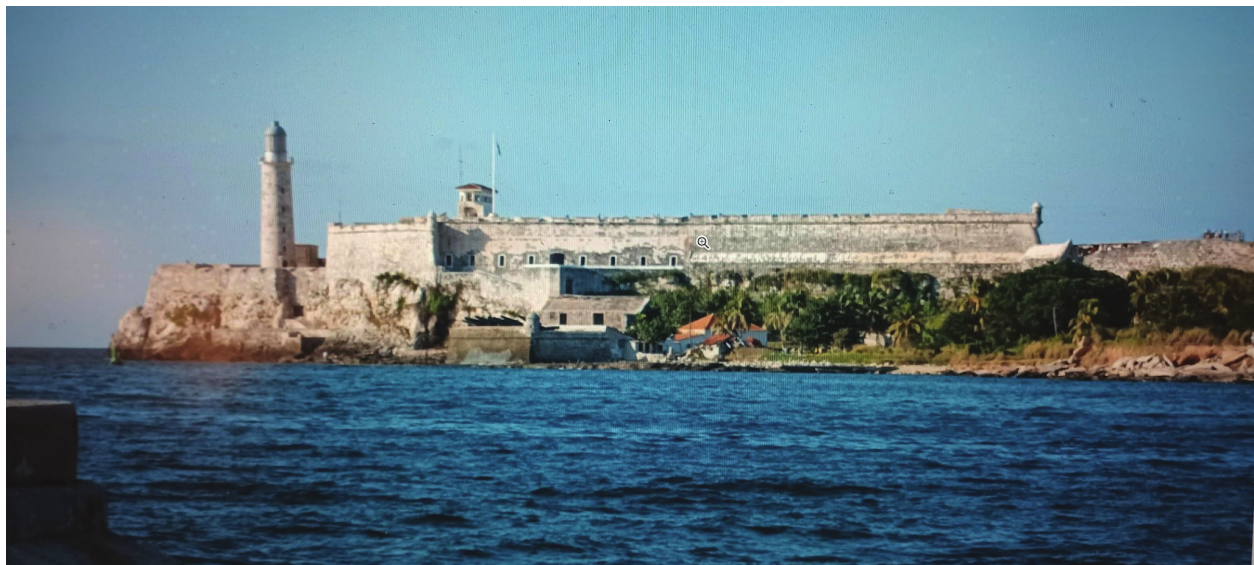
He caught a 42 lb. red snapper three pounds shy of the Florida state record and a 60 lb. grouper all within ten minutes of each other. Having grown up in Cuba, Bob Sr. spent much of his childhood on the ocean; he learned how to swim before he could walk. In the tradition of fishermen of that day he started fishing with an old school hand line. The crusty fishermen, many of whom made their living with their hand lines developed hands so calloused they felt like sandpaper to the touch. But their hands were really tender when it came to working a fish. As a ten year old in Santiago de Cuba, Bob Sr. caught his first fish on a hand line, a tarpon who at the time weighed as much as he did 80 lbs. within view of the EL Morro Castle, the stately looking fort sitting at the mouth of "La Bahia de Santiago." Bob Sr. put a rope through the fish's gills, threw the fish over his shoulder, the fish's tail dragging on the ground behind him. The experience would come in handy (literally) years later when he had a three-sided treble hook get stuck in his finger when he brought a kicking bull mahi on board. Each time the mahi kicked the treble lodged itself deeper and deeper. After subduing the fish, we used a wire cutter to slice the steel hook pulling it out of his finger. Bob Sr. didn't flinch. We bandaged his finger, applied some ointment with a dose of hydrogen peroxide, and continued fishing without skipping a beat.

Little did Bob Sr. know his recent hot streak was about to continue. This was no ordinary bottom fishing trip they were embarking on. No, sir, this time around they were after one of the sea's toughest competitors. Tuna are known as being finicky feeders, and on this day they lived up to their well deserved reputation. Arriving at dusk you could see their stout bodies pro-truding from the water in a way that said, "yeah, we know you're here. Now see if you can catch us." Tuna are so unpredictable many times they don't even let you approach them without going under water, losing themselves in the depths without a trace to be seen. There hasn't been a depth finder made yet they haven't been able to outrun. To catch them, we tried, then tried, then tried again. Nine long hours had passed since the tuna began teasing us. Up to now they were winning the battle of wills in the depths of the 5,000 feet we were fishing. They gave us no indication that they were even still around, seeming to have disappeared. In the interim a few cases of beer, which would have tasted much

better with some freshly caught raw tuna fish as a side dish, had been consumed. Innate in the fishermen's nature is the pleasure of believing the fish always tastes better when it's caught with his own hand, the pursuit accomplished.

Drawbridge had on a past voyage had a harrowing experience with a boatload of beer. Drawbridge was commissioned with delivery of a vessel from Destin Florida to Cabo San Lucas in Baja, California, where he and his team were going to fish in a marlin tournament. In years gone by Drawbridge had won first prize in this tournament, leading the pack weighing in a grander blue marlin. The boat's owner was a builder who built condominiums all along the Gulf coast. Drawbridge was always proud, not boastful, just proud the winning grander he landed was measured by girth and length being hung in the entrance way of the first condo his boss built. He could be heard saying from time to time, "Oh yeah, when my dad helped settle Holiday Isle, he never dreamed his son would leave a lasting legacy to carry on his family name." On this current excursion things would take on a decidedly different twist. No one really knows how or why, but legend has it the boat Drawbridge commandeered was loaded with cases of beer from bow to stern with only enough space to walk from the bridge to the bathroom through a narrow aisle down below. He and his girlfriend Gail set sail in what was thought to be balmy, ideal conditions, feet up enjoying a brand new day's sunrise. As is often the case, Mother Nature makes plans of her own on short notice, rarely if ever consulting anyone about them. Crossing the Florida Straits at nightfall can be delightful with a following sea allowing tired hard working engines a temporary reprieve.

The vast current propelling the boat forward. Going against those same currents can often be a challenging if not downright horrifying experience, as Drawbridge and Gail would soon find out.



EL Morro Castle overlooking the bay of Santiago de Cuba. Santiago was once the capital city of Cuba. The fort was built to protect the city from pirates in the 1600s. Today it is used as a

museum, culminating each day at sunset with a ceremonial firing of the cannon. This is where Bob Sr. caught his first tarpon with an old fashioned hand line.



The view overlooking Santiago de Cuba from atop from El Morro Castle.

According to UNESCO, it is the best preserved and most complete example of Spanish-American military architecture. The view is not too shabby either!



Bob Jr. displaying his gaffing skills. He was able to get this one through the mouth, saving all the wahoo's tasty meat in the process.