The History of the DBCYA Viking Funeral

As remembered by Geoff Stait in July 2015

It was around 1986 that the first Darwin Viking Funeral was held. The ceremony came about due to the timely occurrence of a few factors. About this time there was an old boat in Darwin named Alvis. She was a famous old wooden boat sailed to Darwin from the East Coast by Russian Jim.*Note 1. She held five wins in the Brisbane to Gladstone Yacht Race, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1956 and 1957, a record which is unbroken. She was owned in the 1950's by Fred Markwell from a well known Brisbane boating family. Alvis survived Cyclone Tracey but was too damaged to go to sea again without a lot of money being spent on her. Russian Jim was an aged pensioner and getting the sort of money required to fix Alvis was beyond him. There was, however, a concrete boat at Dinah Beach that had fallen over in the cyclone and had damaged its port side. Jim purchased this boat from Brian Mahoney with the intention of repairing her and using the equipment off Alvis to fit her out. Jim did complete the boat and sailed her to Townsville. I helped sail her to Gove, another story altogether. Somewhere along the line Jim sold Alvis to Norm and Kay Turner. She was floating but needed a lot of attention. Eventually Norm realized he didn't have the time or money to get Alvis sailing again. He decided the best way to get rid of her was to give her a good send off by burning her on Fannie Bay beach next to the Sailing Club boat ramp. After she was burnt he would clean up the mess. This boat burning was discussed at great length, while consuming vast quantities of ale, at the Darwin Sailing Club.

Around about the same time as this was going on, for want of a better description, the 'Round Australia Committee' was formed with the aim of putting a boat together to sail around Australia in the Bi-Centenary Around Australia Yacht Race in 1988. This was anything but a democratic process but worked very well in achieving its aims. Some of the players as I remember were: Bill Jelley snr of course, Peter Buckley, Capt Marty Rycures, Charley Wall, Jon Wardell, Cocky (Cornelliius Goedhart), Baldy Pete (Peter Bonython), Bung (David Emery) and Mary Stevenson, Brother Bear Finney, John Punch and Libby Benson, Rolls (Brian) and Rose Hallet, John Liversley, Clive Colenso, David George, Hugh and Shirley Richardson, Donny Raimont, Noddy (Colin) Blair, Rod Walsh, Geoff Stait and Wendy Flynn, Colin Jack Hinton, Calvin Rae, George La Sette, Jenny Winter and John (Simo) Simonsen, to mention a few. Without any money and a lot of energy and bluff the project was started and schemes dreamt up to raise funds. Somewhere along the line Norm Turner must have thought it a good idea to burn his boat with some ceremony. The burning of the boat was seen as a good excuse for a party and a chance to raise some money. David George had a station at the time and was breeding buffalo for the export market. He was approached and enthusiastically donated two yearlings for the fundraiser. Until the arrival of the beasts we had no idea how much meat was on two yearlings. Well it was a bloody lot, I can tell you. Baldy, Bung, Brother Bear and some other skilled meat workers sort of cut the meat onto useable sizes and duly carted it off to the Darwin Bakery in Brother Bear's Hi-Ace van. The bakery was the only, and the best place, to get large chunks of meat cooked. The price charged was reasonable. It was seen as a sort of community service. You took the meat in the day before it was needed and it was loaded into big baking trays to be cooked then picked up the next day. We bought lots of cheap stuff like carrots, cabbage and spuds, reject stuff or seconds as I remember, and wrapped it in foil. A large cooking fire was lit on the beach and the veggies placed in the coals. Some kegs were donated by the brewery, in fact I think they were left over from the Ambon Race so

were technically still in Indonesia. No duty and no cost to the organizers. Surplus to needs you could say. Not to be wasted. The ladies set about selling tickets. They sold well as they were reasonably priced and the people involved were known for organizing a bloody good party.

After sunset with the paying crowd standing around, piper Duncan McIver and the Darwin Pipe Band ceremoniously played as the boat was set on fire and it burnt like buggery, "a very good fire" as a fireman would say.*Note 2. The crowd stood around and watched the boat burn, some with a tear in their eye and some, well all, with a beer in hand. As I remember it, it was a pretty emotional fire and a moving experience. I vaguely remember Colin Jack Hinton delivering a speech as only he could. It was his training in Theology coming out. He would have been pissed, but charmingly so. As Colin once said to a policeman who had pulled him up at a breath testing station "Of course I'm under the influence of alcohol, it's the level that varies so that's what you're testing". Colin was very skilled at saying the right things at the right time in the manner of a Scottish gentleman. Most appropriate for a Viking Funeral. The burning being nearly complete, the crowd returned to the tables and feasted on the roast buffalo and veggies, which turned out superbly. Mind you there was a bloody lot of meat, but it was very well cooked. An excellent night was had by all and a very decent amount of money raised.

Next morning the boat consisted of white ash and copper fastenings which the Hippies had pinched a lot of. Some of the Sailing club members were disgusted. It wasn't all love and happiness at the Sailing Club in those days but the tough buggers prevailed. These being mostly blue water sailors, the dinghy sailors were a different bunch. Two camps to be sure.

The Around Australia Race came off and the NT Spirit successfully completed the adventurous sail around Australia. This occurred in 1988. The NT Spirit returned to Darwin about 1990, as I recall, at the

end of a very successful project. It would be very difficult to pull off a project like this again.
At some stage around 1990 DBCYA people decided that the place was very quiet around the middle of the 'wet' and an event needed to be staged to bring focus on the club and give members some entertainment. The Sailing Club at this stage was being run by concerned citizens and the big boat sailors were definitely out of the picture there. Any mention of an uncivilized event like a Viking Funeral was dismissed as 'the little children might get the wrong ideas or even hurt'. Definitely not the sort of event a nice club would want to hold. Dinah Beach had plenty of practice burning things and its members were anything but model citizens. Mind you they weren't afraid of work, nor a punt. There were also some old wooden boats in the 'Graveyard' that would be better sent off in a Viking Funeral. Toots (Carol Doyle) had previously held an enormously successful Medieval Feast at the club. It was an animal act with wenches, jousting, knights and serfs. The club floor was covered with straw and the guests sat on hay bales covered with coloured cloth obtained from Vinnies. The feast was roast pig and spuds, mainly eaten by hand off wooden planks. Jugs of ale flowed freely. A wonderful night was had by all but a bit wild to be held again. Somewhere along the line it was decided that the Viking Funeral would be a club open night and not a fund raiser. The club would make enough through the bar and it would attract new members, something for nothing for a change and a return to the members, more importantly a bloody good night and to show the DSC how to do it. Anyhow, the boats were assembled on the beach and filled with driftwood and loose timber from off the beach and there was plenty at that time. I remember a few tyres and some drums of diesel were loaded into the boats as well. The boats were decked out and some Viking bodies (straw packed dummies soaked in petrol and diesel) were loaded on board to be sent off to 'Valhalla'. The Darwin Archery Club attended to set the lot on fire with flaming arrows. They hadn't done this sort of thing before but were very keen. Duncan

McIver was lined up to play the bagpipes, lambs were on the spit, the spuds roasting and the bread baked.
The archers were spectacularly unsuccessful in setting the boats on fire. I think in the end Baldy had to sneak on board and set the fire. Nobody really noticed enough to give a stuff, there were still flaming arrows and flames. The boats started to burn slowly at first but then got going. We had overdone the stuffing of the boats with flammables and you still got burnt a 100ft from the fire. A BLOODY good fire. The piper was hugely successful, the feast was great and the guests drank about $10,000 worth. The next year there was no hesitation in running another Viking Funeral to send off the old boats and sailors. It was not difficult to find old wooden boats in those days.

The Viking Funeral has been an annual event for Dinah Beach ever since. In 2015 it was reported that the bar took over $20,000 and it was a spectacular night. A lot of people in costume and not a spot of trouble.

*Note 1. Russian Jim was noted for taking out his own appendix in the middle of the Indian Ocean. He did this with the assistance of his HF radio and some medical instructions from ashore. Jim carried out the operation on his own, without anaesthetic, as he was a single handed sailor. There is always a stuff up in these situations and with this one Jim started the operation on the wrong side so he had to cut all the way across his stomach to find his appendix. He then cut out the infected appendix and sewed up the wound with a fine sail needle. The knife used was a well sharpened filleting knife. Anyhow he survived, along with a bloody great scar right across his guts. He hardly ever wore a shirt so everyone could admire his scar. He was noted as a tough bugger and a bit eccentric. Not unusual for this neck of the woods. His wife, Nareta, was a beautiful traditional Balinese lady from upcountry who used to shower in the Idi Amin Memorial Shower. Much to the delight of Jacques Schreurs. Jim was a good mate of Viking Vic, another famous Darwin identity connected to the sea and chasing ladies.

*Note 2. In those days Geoff Stait was a fireman. He is also a founding and life member of DBCYA.

Geoff Stait early 1990's

Baldy Pete 2004