



# TUNA TAKE A SPELL IN THE SOLOMONS

BY CAPTAIN ASPARAGUS



One big piece of boat...



Fishing master Milko Djukanovitch shows his electronic eyes and ears that help him track down the skipkie schools

This year has seen some interesting times in the tuna fishery around the Solomon Islands, reports Tony Sarcich, the operations manager for the fishing giant NFD, based at Noro.

Basically, the problem has been that over the winter months, from May until early August, the weather has really nailed their purse seining operations in the area. How? It was too warm!

With an open ocean temperature nudging 31°C (Yep, 31. Ay caramba!), the tuna had headed for cooler waters further to the south of their usual haunts, emptying the seas of the seiners' targets. Very quiet times indeed.

However, in late July, the weather pattern broke, and cloudy, wet weather let the sea temperatures drop to a much more tuna-friendly 27° to 28°. The trouble now was that the steady 20 knot-plus winds and the associated huge tropical swells made fishing almost impossible. A bad season all round, really!

However, not all was doom and gloom. The warm waters over the winter months meant that there was a huge explosion of baitfish in the Solomon Sea, so that when the temperatures did finally drop, the amount of food available for the tuna was prodigious, and the tuna returned in September with a vengeance. The two NFD seiners working the Noro area were both capturing 150 tonnes per day.

The quiet times over the winter were not slow for the NFD team at Noro, however, far from it. Due to the costs of refitting the seiners offshore, most often in Cairns, Australia, NFD's management decreed that much of the refitting work should instead be done on-site at Noro. Now as much non dry-



The brine tanks full and ready for the skipjack, yellowfin and the odd rainbow runner to be offloaded



Chief engineer Kevin Goodwin of Nelson shows the fish freezers full of skipjack

dock-type work as possible is done there using local labour.

This has magnified the complexity of Tony's job as ops manager, as he has to arrange shipment to the Solomons of huge amounts of machinery, over and above their normal inventory of containers of ropes, nets and spare parts. Add to this tonnes of iron work, machinery and so on, and Noro is starting to become a busy little container and fisheries port once again.

Noro was probably the best deepwater port in the Western Pacific Islands before the unrest in the early part of the decade. It was a bustling little container port, with the large Solomon Taiyo tuna cannery there, along with a booming, and still thriving, timber trade making regular calls by container ships necessary. When the Taiyo plant closed down, this steady stream of vital international trade dried up.

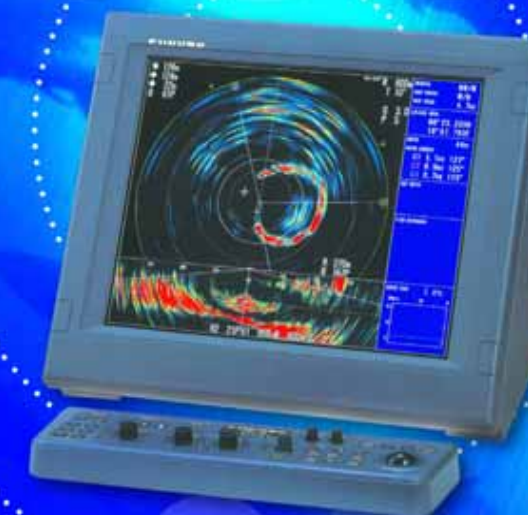
It is great to see container ships once more returning to Noro now, thanks to the expansion of industries and the fisheries such as NFD's operations.

The biggest task was re-fitting the old open ocean seiner *Cape Cod*, which had a major engine overhaul. An old generator set was removed and replaced with a new one, along with a new sonar to replace one that had seen better days. Other electronic work was done as well as pipe work, refrigeration, mechanical and deck repairs. This is just the usual repairs and maintenance work required on such hardworking large fishing vessels.

The process of catching the tuna is pretty impressive, with the huge seine nets dropping hundreds of metres deep ▶

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A school of skipjack tuna heading for reincarnation as tinned tuna

below the schools of (mostly) skipjack tuna, and often yellowfin, too. Once the purse is closed, tonne upon tonne of this finned gold is scooped aboard the big seine boats. It is an impressive sight.

As the tuna are processed they are shot down below decks via a huge stainless funnel positioned so the end is directly above one of many huge brine tanks.

This brine slurry is chilled down to around -15°C (pretty damn cold), ensuring the tuna die almost instantly, as well as freezing them for easy handling. Once all the fish have been suitably dispatched and frozen, they are transferred to big chillers on either side of the brine tank deck, freeing up the slurry for the next school of hapless tuna.

From here the fish are often trans-shipped to large freighters moored in the deep waters of Noro Sound, and ultimately head for canneries in Asia, although sometimes the tuna is also sold to the local Solomon Taiyo cannery at Noro if the Taiyo Pole boats have not been able to find enough fish to keep the plant going.

I have to say, the canned chilli (yellowfin) tuna from the SolTai plant is delicious, especially on the cheese, tomato and chilli tuna toasted sandwiches they make at the Zipolo Habu Resort, just 15 minutes away across the lagoon.

NFD's presence in Noro is a huge and very much-needed boost to the local economy, and many jobs have been created to help handle the supply and maintenance of the boats going to the locals. It spreads further than just the immediate Noro-based workers.

Expert technicians are flown in from all over the world, such as Lee Beck from Electronic Navigation Ltd at Auckland and Nelson, or Alan Jamieson of RZOSKA Electrical of Nelson who arrived to help with the refit of the *Cape Cod*, and Cookes,

## REMOTE ISLAND RAISES CHALLENGES



BY LEE BECK

I FLEW FROM AUCKLAND to the Solomon Islands in June, not knowing what to expect, as this was my first visit there.

The flight from Honiara to Munda Airport was a problem, as there was a weight limit for the small, single-engine aircraft. Fortunately I was relatively light and was able to get on the flight. We landed in the dark at Munda, which is basically a grass field, with a local's car headlights lighting the runway for landing.

I was met by Tony Sarcich, a New Zealander living in Noro who works for NFD, which runs four purse seiners there. The drive between Munda and Noro is 40 minutes through rainforest.

Noro is in the North Western Province of New Georgia Island. It is largely unspoilt, and many of the locals still live in villages, using dugout canoes instead of cars to get around.

Electronic Navigation supplies and services marine electronics in the Pacific Islands, but due to the remote location of Noro there are no skilled people locally – there's not even a Dick Smith – so every part, even the most basic, is supplied from either New Zealand or Brisbane.

The primary purpose of my visit was to fit one of the vessels in the NFD fleet, the *Cape Cod*, with a new sonar system, a 28kHz Furuno CSH58 full-scanning sonar. The same unit was already fitted on another vessel in the fleet, the *Solomon Empress*.

The 90m *Cape Cod* was built by Campbell in San Diego in the 1970s. Her previous sonar, a Furuno CSH55, had provided good service, but due to its location in the bottom of the pipe alley, through the fuel tank, it had suffered water ingress. When I arrived the pipe alley was flooded with diesel and the hoist unit was almost entirely immersed!

There is no slipway or dry dock in the Solomons so the hull unit change was performed at the dock. The unit is about 7m below the waterline, so divers from Lola Island resort plugged the sonar tube from the



outside before removing the hull unit. There is always a moment of relief when the hull unit flange is removed and no water enters the ship. We then fitted a cap to the top of the sonar tube.

We had to wait for an adaptor flange that had been made in Nelson to arrive, so in the meantime the area was chipped and painted. I also installed the transmitter, receiver, power supplies, display and interface units. A new set of cables was run between the units in the pipe alley and the wheelhouse.

Other work on the *Cape Cod* included servicing and adjusting the three Furuno radars, replacing an antenna unit and fitting a new azimuth motor to the Fleet 33 antenna.

When the adaptor flange arrived the assembly was able to be completed, and the sonar unit was connected and tested at dockside. This is the largest sonar I have fitted, and the unit produced a picture of the bay, including schools of fish.

While I was on my visit I also replaced the old HF radios on the *Solomon Chieftain* and the *Solomon Empress* with new Furuno FS1503 units connected to a buoy selcall system, along with other repairs.



The top deck, where the fishing is interspersed with hammocks and banana action. Who said bananas were bad luck on a boat!


RIGHT: The onboard pond with fish heading below to the brine tanks

who supply the nets. (See Lee Beck's sidebar story). Diving masters from the nearby resorts, make some welcomed extra pay by giving the hulls and transducers a darn good clean while the ships are at anchor in Noro Harbour.

All in all, NFD's operations at Noro in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands are a massive benefit to the whole area. It is very good to see the wealth from local resources being spread around the local community like this. If only all the other tuna companies harvesting the waters in the Solomons and other Pacific islands could make a similar boast!

My thanks to Tony for arranging a guided tour around their seiner, the Solomon Premier, as well as the chief engineer, Kevin Goodwin, and fishing master Milko Djukanovich, for showing us through the ship. Cheers guys, and good fishing!





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