

THE ISLAND... THE FISH... THE CLUB.

BY JOHN MCINTYRE



Mark Haley with
of STC with 142.7kg
(314.59lbs). SBT caught on
24kg tackle on "Watermark"
- August 2024.

The Island is Montague, known as BARUNGUBA to First Nation people, is located 9 kilometres offshore from the coastal town of Narooma, on the New South Wales South Coast.

The fish are legendary: striped, black and blue marlin plus other pelagic wanderers such as tuna, broadbill swordfish, short-billed spearfish and remarkably- sailfish!

The club is the venerable Swordfish and Tunny Club of Australia (STC), founded on the Island on February 13, 1934, by a group of Melbourne based anglers who hoped to prove that marlin existed in the region.



Montague Island is classified by the National Trust as a Landscape Conservation Area for its scenic, scientific and historical values. It is the second largest island off the coast of New South Wales, second only to Lord Howe Island. It has a fascinating history prior to and after European settlement.

There is no better detailed history than Laurelle Pacey's wonderful 2001 book "The Lure of Montague", which is recommended as required reading for anyone interested in the area's rich past. The conception, construction and running of the lighthouse atop the Island is a saga of its own, as recounted.

The Swordfish and Tunny Club of Australia is possibly the first Australian club dedicated exclusively to game-fishing. It was Melbourne based but it had wide horizons and over many years members have fished around the country, and around the world. Since its foundation, the STC has adopted the New South Wales ports of Bermagui, Narooma and Eden as its alternate homes.

World record Tiger Shark 115lbs. T.A. Bell - Bermagui, April 1938. L-R: Bill Fagan, Tom Bell, John Bell.



"Merlin" (Bill Warn at Montague Island. Circa 1935.

The STC was formed on a wild and windy night in a tent, under the flickering light of a hurricane lamp, on Montague Island on February 13, 1934. A group of Melbourne anglers had established camp on the island to test the fishing, after the February 1933 capture of a 262 lb (119kg) black marlin by Mr Roy Smith, a farmer from Yass, NSW, Mr Smith was accompanied by Dr Norman Little for the capture. This marlin was hailed as the first marlin to be caught in the country with a rod and reel. Later historical research revealed that several marlin had been boated in the early years of the 20th century, but Mr Smith's black was the fish that ignited the interest in game fishing into the 1930's and later.

The preserved head of Mr Smith's 262 lb black marlin has been recently re-discovered by Mrs Judy Sillis, historian of the Canberra Game Fishing Club, confirming that it is presently without a plaque, but displayed in the bar of the Club House Hotel, 190 Comur Street, Yass, NSW. A "must" visit for anglers' resident in the area or passing through this rural town.

The level of interest to discover if marlin were prevalent in the southern NSW waters had been stoked by the Melbourne tackle store manager and expert sportsman, Charles Reginald Lyne (1904-1961), always known as Reg. Keen sportsmen frequented



Hartley's Sports Store and Lyne saw an opportunity to mount an expedition to the waters off Montague Island.

After many adventures and skilful boat handling by Bill Warn, the professional fisherman and skipper of the chartered launch "Merlin", the eight-man party landed on the island to set up camp in atrocious weather. The boat was a 40 ft. flush decked vessel, powered by a 25-hp. marine engine. At the conclusion of the two weeks stay, it was revealed that Reg Lyne had landed the Club's first marlin, a 320 lb(145kg) black and a subsequent 240 lb (109kg) black marlin, the only bill fish taken by the pioneering party. However, the landings,

and the loss of four striped marlin- plus the sighting of 50 other billfish- convinced the Melbourne party that this was indeed a place for great game-fishing.

March 5th - 6th 1935 Bermagui NSW. 14 Marlin & 1 Mako Shark captured by Roy Michaelis and Bill Wallis, members of Swordfish and Tunny Club of Australia.



STC Committee member Tim Simpson with 300kg Swordfish tagged with satellite tag. Worked with Dr Sean Tracey of University of Tasmania - May 2017.

Mr Roy Smith with 262lbs. Black Marlin at Bermagui - February 1933. The fish that started it all at Bermagui.



The pioneering group that founded the STC that stormy night consisted of Dr John C.R., Lewis, Messrs Roy Michaelis, J.R. Porter, John Bowen, Roy Symmons, I.D. Sargood, John. V. Rittenhouse and Reg Lyne. Dr Lewis was elected first president. An absent Mr H.W. Joseph was appointed first secretary- an honour that we hope he subsequently appreciated after being shanghaied by his friends!

The ensuing several years were busy times for the members of this new club, canvassing for new recruits from families, business colleagues and social acquaintances. It was away and running by late 1935. On 5th of March of the year STC members Roy Michaelis and Bill Wallis had captured the imagination of anglers at home and overseas with the captures of 14 marlin and a mako shark in just two consecutive days! Reg Lyne ensured that the news was passed to the famous author and angler Zane Grey of the USA. Lyne had been in contact with Grey for some time, suggesting that Australia was a new and almost untouched place for big game fish, especially marlin. The duo's feat later led to Grey mounting an expedition to Australia in 1936,

The Tom Bell Trophy



Mr Jim Porter's 672lbs Black Marlin - Jan 1937 Bermagui



after several hesitant plans going awry, due the financial pressures of the Great Depression.

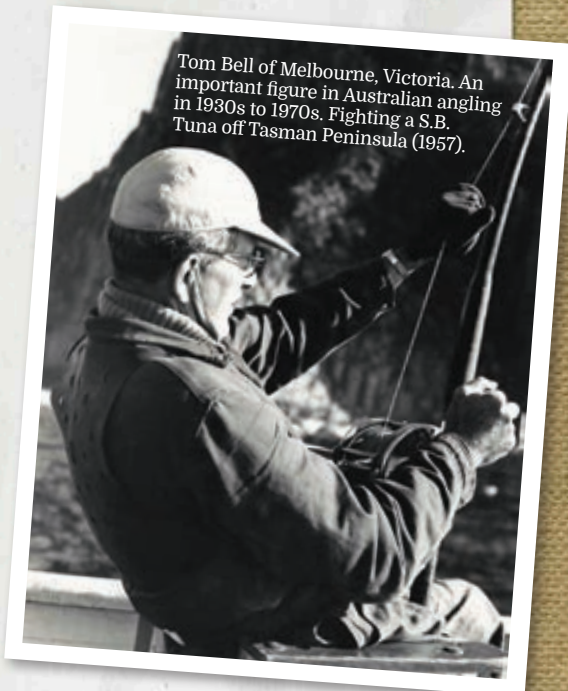


Swordfish and Tunny Club members enjoyed great success fishing off Montague Island and Bermagui in 1935. During February and March, Mr P.R. Rogers and Mr Bill Wallis landed 7 and 12

marlin, respectively. The membership now stood at a tiny 34 ordinary members and three honorary life members- Zane Grey of Altadena, USA; John V. Rittenhouse, an American who had been in the original party to Montague, and who resided in what was then the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia); and the pioneer Australian angler and fishing reel inventor, Mr E.P. (Harry) Andreas of Sydney.

Amongst the earliest recruits was a man who has become a legend in the Australian sport, a true gentleman and sportsman, Thomas. A. Bell (1891-1978) always known as Tom. He went on to have a remarkable career as an angler, administrator and mentor to several generations of anglers. Tom was a pre- World War 1 British immigrant and WW1 veteran, successful wool broker and promoter who, despite a severe war wound, became an expert angler who established several landmark catches.

On the last day of the 1938 sesquicentenary competition to mark Australia's 150th Anniversary, Tom Bell recorded the STC's first World and Australian record, a 1151 pounds (522kg) tiger shark on 39 thread (130lb - 60kg) line. Tom later in the year set the Australian record of a 238 pounds (107.94kg) southern bluefin tuna, also a 60 kg line mark that still stands today, among the oldest on the Australian record chart. The trophy awarded to Tom Bell for his winning tiger shark at the sesquicentenary event was later donated to GFAA by him. It became available for annual



Tom Bell of Melbourne, Victoria. An important figure in Australian angling in 1930s to 1970s. Fighting a S.B. Tuna off Tasman Peninsula (1957).

competition for the heaviest fish, excluding sharks, captured in Australia. The much sought after silver cup is now known as the GFAA Tom Bell Trophy.

Assisted by vigorous committees, Mr Bell worked on game fishing matters for STC and for the new Game Fishing Association of Australia (GFAA), eventually serving as GFAA president for two terms-following on from founding president Clive Firth for 1948-49, and later 1954-59. His influence on activities in the sport extended across states, assisting in the formation of game fishing clubs in South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. Tom Bell mentored anglers such as Ian Cutler, then of Tasmania, later STC president 1974-75, and life member. Ian later also served as president of GFAA over the period 1982-83, elected to life membership in 1985 for his services to the sport for many years. He was also leader in the Cairns fishery landing several "granders" and releasing others from the earliest days of

Reg Lyne with his first Marlin and the first for the Swordfish and Tunny Club of Australia. 320lbs Black. Montague Island - 7th Feb 1934.



north Queensland marlin fishing.

During his 1936 expedition, Zane Grey, a life member, boated a 91 pounds (41.3kg) yellowfin tuna, an unexpected catch and the first large tuna caught on regulation tackle in the country. Subsequent events proved that it was not a fluke capture, yellowfin tuna fishing being one of the highlights of the ensuing decades. In the same year, member Keith Tolhurst raised the national bar for the heaviest marlin with his 481 lb (218kg) black marlin.

Famous US anglers Mike and Helen Lerner visited Bermagui in 1939 to test the local fishing. It was the highlight of the year and STC members were impressed by the popular couple's generous assistance and tuition. As a result of this visit, and discussions with STC life member Clive Firth, it was agreed that a "World Council" should be formed to regulate the sport world-wide. Mr Lerner picked up the project with gusto and in 1939 the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) was born. Mr Lerner financed the entire operation until his retirement as president in 1960.

The declaration of World War 2 in September 1939 led to the closure of the sport for nearly eight years. The club, along with others went into recess until the lifting of stringent rationing in early 1948. At that time Mr Bill Wallis, who had served as president from 1936, resigned and passed the mantle to Mr John B. Wallace. After his tenure, Mr Jim Porter was installed in 1949. Mr Porter was from January 1937, the holder of the Australian and STC record for heaviest marlin - a black weighing 672 pounds (305kg). The fight had extended to three hours off Montague Island on 24 thread line, nominally 78 pounds (35.38kg) breaking strain.

Recovery from the wartime hiatus was only slow and regrettably several prominent STC anglers had paid the supreme sacrifice in WW2, including John Bell, Tom's only son, killed in action as a member of the Second AIF on Ambon Island, adjacent to the now Indonesian island of Seram. This was a devastating blow to Tom and Mrs Bell.

Into the 1950's, several poor seasons were experienced, floods and inclement spells of weather saw minimal catches, with marlin noticeable for their absence. Later in the period, very small marlin, mainly blacks, were quite prolific. Fortunately, sizeable tuna

appeared on the scene - both southern blue-fin and yellowfin. They became the backbone of future activities, as evidenced by wonderful landings over the many

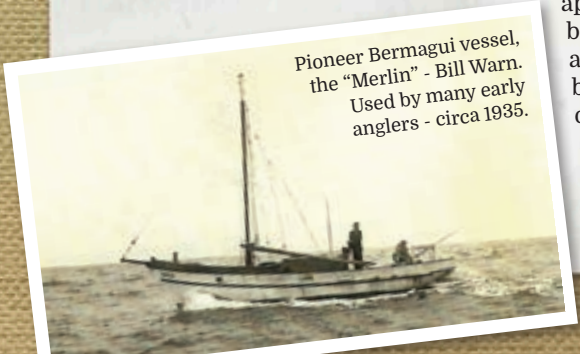


Swordfish & Tunny Club of Australia Annual Dinner. Menzies Hotel, Melbourne - 25th July 1937.



Zane Grey with 480lb Black Marlin caught at Bermagui 1936.

Pioneer Bermagui vessel, the "Merlin" - Bill Warn. Used by many early anglers - circa 1935.





seasons since. Montague Island, and the immediate area, continues to lure the big fish.

STC members participated in some of the most interesting tuna fishing seen in the country- members such as Jack Taylor, Bill Stewart, Tom Mitchell and Ron Carlson of the earlier generations made remarkable catches. Later anglers such as past president Sir Robert (Bob) Southey, his daughter Jane Southey, Geoff Hammond, Jim Allen, Ian Cutler, Peter Goadby, Alan Gowland, Ross Oehms and so many others continued the quest for big fish wherever they ventured. Obviously, major emphasis was on, and continues, on the remarkable Cairns giant black marlin fishery, the longest recorded and still the most consistent big fish region in the world, after nearly sixty years since the

first giant black capture at 1064 pounds (482.6kg) by US angler Richard Obach, on Captain George Bransford's pioneering vessel "Sea Baby".

In the recent past, the southern bluefin tuna (SBT) renaissance in southeast regions of Australia has enlivened the fisheries in South Australia and Victoria. Legions of trailer borne vessels working well offshore, searching for jumbo size tuna during the annual tuna migrations, have experienced exciting and challenging times for the STC members and their friends. A recent example is the capture in August 2024 by STC member Mark Haley of his 142.7 kg (314.59 lbs) SBT on 24 kg tackle in Bass Strait, off Port Phillip Bay. The fish took 1 hr 45 minutes to boat from his vessel "Watermark". Returning after dark through the infamous "Rip" was an additional challenge successfully overcome. This SBT landing won the aforementioned GFAA Tom Bell Trophy for 2024-5 for Mark, along with the rarely awarded STC President's Trophy, which has a history going back to its crafting by Hardy Brothers of England in 1934.

Mark boated a 79.55 kg (175.37 lbs) SBT in the same area off Port Phillip Heads on August 14, this year, well and truly initiated into the tuna fold, now serving as a STC committee member.

There is so much history and so many personalities involved at STC since its 1934 birth and we apologise to many people not mentioned in this short article, but as always, space limitations weigh on publications such as this.

To finish off, we must mention another renaissance, the search and joys of fishing for the broadbill warrior, known as the "king"- swordfish, *Xiphias gladius*. Whilst the pursuit of the peak game fish commenced upon the inception of the sport in Australia, success was slow coming. The first recorded capture was by STC member and benefactor, the late John O'Brien MBE who boated a



Pioneer anglers Tom Bell (left) and Ian Cutler (right) fighting big S.B. Tuna off Tasman Peninsula, Southern Tasmania, 1957. Tom Bell pioneered SBT fishing in Tasmania in Garey Club of Tasmania in 1960. Victorian resident (1891 - 1978). Ian Cutler, also a Victorian, was the manager of the Lufra Hotel, Eaglehawk Neck, Tasmania in 1950s and holder of several world and Australian records for S.B. Tuna.

small fish off Jervis Bay NSW, in the early 1980's which was not recorded in detail due its size. John caught the broadbill at night in the middle of winter, drifting wide offshore, then considered to be the only method to probably succeed, based on overseas practises. Results were disappointing with only a handful recorded but great captures, nevertheless.

Moving right along, a famous US family the Stanczyks, operated charter boats off Florida and successfully developed the art of daylight broadbill deep water drifting in the early 2000's. STC committee member Tim Simpson, then editor of the much-lamented premier magazine "Blue Water", fished with Stanczyks and boated a swordfish by this technique, which the family shared widely. Tim disclosed the details of the technique in July 2010 via "Blue Water". Our NZ cousins immediately adopted the method with sensational results. Australian anglers were a little slower but roughly two years after Tim's article we really entered the swordfish era. Hereabouts is a photo of a remarkably nice broadbill, estimated at 300 kg, captured by STC's Tim whilst research fishing off eastern Victoria with Dr Sean Tracey of the University of Tasmania in May 2017. The fish was satellite tagged and quickly released. So, from here to where?

The Swordfish and Tunny Club of Australia has never had large a membership list, averaging 55 members, with the peak around the high 80's, in the 1980's. But in most opinions, they have punched well above their weight and history records their vital role in our great sport. They value tradition, sportsmanship and friendships- many extending across generations- old fashioned values perhaps but as we say, long may they reign.

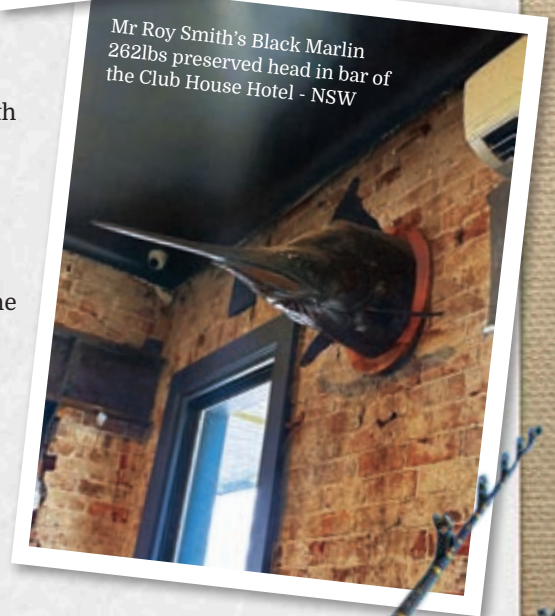
John McIntyre.

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Photo credits: Peter Goadby Collection; Mrs Judy Sillis; Charles Lyne Collection; Stephen Dinse, Bermagui; Bullen Collection; John McIntyre Collection; Game Fishing Association of Australia; Mark Haley, STC committeeman.



Mark Haley with SBJ 79.55kg (175.37lbs) - caught August 2025 off Port Phillip Bay.



Mr Roy Smith's Black Marlin 262lbs preserved head in bar of the Club House Hotel - NSW

