

Log Of The Romance

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GRENADA: In 18 years of cruising strange and sometimes uncertain parts of the world, I suppose its inevitable we would one day run afoul of somebody's war. Grenada has always been our favorite layup port, where shipwrights retain the traditional wooden ship skills of adz and caulking mallet. Romance has always found a warm welcome and safe haven in the landlocked, sun-dappled lagoon of St. Georges. By day, the singing of Teddo's saw, and the tonk-tonk of old Mr. Bristol's mallet, the rasp of sandpaper and the light-hearted chatter of the West Indians. At night, the blessed cool wind, the music of the tree frogs, and just before dawn, the torches of night fishermen bobbing out to sea below the ancient fort at the harbor entrance.

Political upheaval is an old story in hot countries. Grenada's popular Prime Minister Maurice Bishop had been placed under house arrest in a power struggle with the military, there were rumors of an assassination plot against Bishop, and the people were demonstrating peacefully for his release. The spectator of a Head-of-State under house arrest was viewed with alarm by neighboring island nations, and, we learned later, a Caricom force was even then being considered to free Bishop. Radio Free Grenada began calling up members of the Security Forces; and on the evening of October 18th, announced that all Cabinet Ministers had resigned. They were arrested soon after.

Wednesday October 19th began as a typical hot, sunny morning in the lagoon. Schools were closed, and the students massing to try to free Bishop. About 10 AM, the staccato popping of automatic gunfire suddenly erupted in the direction of the Bishop house behind the lagoon, sounding unreal, theatrical. But they were very real bullets that tore through the rigging, and Mate Pat Nelson, taring backstays aloft, set a record sliding down! We were torn between watching, and seeking shelter below the waterline, safe inside Romance's foot-thick wooden hull. The firing was soon over.

After lunch, our Grenadians came back aboard with the news that a large crowd had stormed the Bishop home, and were now taking him to the market to speak to the people, chanting, "We got we leader back!" Some said four students had been killed or "damaged." (Grenadian expression.)

All quiet until 1 PM, when firing began again from the fort across the harbor. Every pair of binoculars in the yacht fleet trained on the incredulous sight of the old fortification suddenly coming to life after perhaps a century of peaceful slumber! Even in the bright sunlight, we could see artillery flashes, and soon a pall of heavy black smoke. People running along the ramparts and jumping from the old grey stone walls, a jump of 30 or 40 feet. Dull explosions and very heavy firing, but soon all was quiet again.

Radio Free Grenada went off the air in mid-song, and it was not until 10 PM that the Security Forces had fabricated their preposterous story. In chilling tones, General Hudson Austin informed the Grenadian people that their leader, Maurice Bishop, and his Cabinet Ministers had been killed "storming the fort." Though weak, half naked and tortured, Bishop was supposed to have "taken the guns away from the officers and men at the fort, and armed the crowd." The Security Forces then called in an armored car to "retake the fort." We were to hear later from eye witnesses, that Bishop had been recaptured at the market, and taken into the fort, the crowd of thousands following. The armored car, filled with masked men, variously described as Cubans and Russians, fired on the crowd, killing men, women and children, who lept over the walls, some to lie injured in the tropic sun, in the underbrush below the fort.

Hudson Austin continued his stunning proclamation: there was now in effect a 4 day and night curfew, and anyone on the streets would be shot ON SIGHT! We sat on deck in the tranquil moonlight and pondered. We were four aboard, Skipper, myself, Pat and 76 year old Matthew Bristol from Carriacou. Our layup only half completed, steering in pieces, engine shifting gear locked up in the Government machinshop, two anchors out, including the 750 pound storm anchor normally requiring a large crew. Our fall crew, due to report in days, would obviously not now be coming to Grenada. By flashlight, Skipper put the steering together, and began to assemble a workable "stick shift" out of a stout oak 4x4. By morning, we were mobile again: haul on a block and tackle on top of the engine to go ahead; kick the oak stick shift out again for neutral. So far so good. There remained the storm anchor to heave up. A patrol boat with machinegun mounted, roared to life as we started to heave, and watched us until sure we were not going to run for it. It took hours in the ominous calm of the curfew. Not a yacht moved. Not a dingy crossed the glassy lagoon. A man lead his cow to pasture along the lagoon, accompanied by an armed soldier.

A Cuban "cargo" ship, with two rows of portholes the entire length of her hull, moved into port and tied up. Not a soul on deck, but she must have been loaded with troops. She had been in Grenada only the week before. The long, hot day dragged on, while neighbor nations called for a recess in the curfew to allow families to get food and water. A second night passed in silence. In the morning, our painters, Lincoln and Cleary, and Lincoln's brother, who had been at the fort and jumped the wall, defied the curfew and stole out to the ship, full of the enormity of the disaster. Lincoln had heard a firing squad from the fort at midnight, and again at 3 AM. And so Maurice Bishop had been executed in the old fort, renamed Fort Rupert just a few years ago, to honor his father, also slain in a political uprising.

The four hour recess came at 10 am, every yacht clamoring for permission to sail. We could see our engine parts scattered on the floor of the machinshop, but nobody had the key. We left without the parts, the tackle performing perfectly. Stealing out under the guns of the fort, with Lincoln and Mr. Bristol hidden below, we felt like an escaping ship-of-the-line in a Hornblower saga. Hurrying north under the brooding mountains, in the brightest of moonlight, each of us wondered if we would ever see that beautiful island again. Armed patrol boats passed uncomfortably close, and at midnight, we hove-to and rowed Mr. Bristol ashore to his home in Carriacou. At 1:30 AM, half way between Carriacou and Union Island, we passed the invisible line into freedom. A week later, the one yacht left in Grenada--caught up on the dry-dock during the shelling--was launched and departed, bringing our engine parts. We sailed our Nov. 1st cruise on schedule, but from St. Vincent. The Down Island cruises were full and happy, especially so for us. In the opinion of those who were there, the rescue of Grenada by US and Caricom forces was absolutely necessary. Sister nations could not stand by and see Grenada, her entire lawful government slain, and a madman in control, fall to Cuban and Russian interests.

DOMINICA remains one of the most beautiful and underdeveloped islands in the eastern Caribbean--often the two go hand in hand. Its unspoiled grandure is said to be more rugged per mile than Switzerland. This year, we "discovered" Trafalgar Falls, high in a spectacular mountain gorge in a setting of feathery bamboo, tree ferns, orchids, bananas and huge crimson poinsettias so thick, we had to part them as we jounced upwards in the back of an old truck. Two major falls and a filmy ribbon tumble over the rim of the gorge against an intense blue sky; very high. A strong wind blows over the falls and fills the gorge with icy mist (on a very hot tropical day!) We swam in Emerald Pool at the base of the falls, so icy cold it takes your breath away--utterly delightful. But the real discovery is the second, and higher falls. This one has intermingled hot and cold running water! The rocks on one side are stained bright orange from mineral deposits, the water as hot as one can comfortably stand. We climbed the slippery face of the falls and relaxed luxuriously in natural rock bath tubs, with hot, hot water plummeting down on us--yet could reach out and touch the icy main stream. No bath ever had a more beautiful view, boulders, tumbling water, rainbows of spray, and a living terrarium of tropical greenery, laced overhead with vines spanning from one great tree to another across the falls.

Historic Fort Shirley is this year being reclaimed from its own jungle of teak, bay rum and mahogany, on Cabrit Hill, the promontory between Prince Rupert and Douglas Bays. Cannon and mortar enough to repel a siege; and workers have collected a sizeable stockpile of grapeshot from the underbrush. There are also cannon on the beach in Douglas Bay, and in the water, lying among innocently beautiful coral heads, that must have claimed some proud fighting ship nearly two centuries ago.

In 1981, homeward bound from around the world, we saw the famous Brazilian JANGADAS, offshore fishing rafts of crude balsa logs, said to attain 15 knots under sail. Now in Douglas Bay, hardly a cannonshot away from our usual anchorage in Prince Rupert, we discovered similar but smaller rafts, called PEPUI. Small boys paddled out to us in a brand new raft. I showed them my Jangada drawings, and to my surprise, they were completely familiar with them, dagger boards, hiking straps and all. "The Arawaks build them in Marigot Bay (NE coast.) Big ones with cloth sails. Very fast! Here we use a palm branch for a sail," they grinned. A novel idea? We had seen a palm branch sail on a dug-out canoe in Malekula, New Hebrides, in the far western Pacific. In the pre-dawn of history, did brave seafarers in crude balsa rafts from Brazil, probe as far north as Dominica? And are the Caribs and Arawaks decedents of Brazilian indians? Intreguing questions. The sea will forever be a broad and beckoning highway for adventurers through the Ages. And it is not at all strange that little boys in Dominica, and Melanesian warriors just emerging from the stone age, should put to sea under a common palm-frond sail.