

A pair of clubs

Jim Porter's Aust and STC record.
672lb black marlin at Bermagui



Australia's gamefishing historian, John McIntyre, explores the origins, the early days and the achievements of two of Australia's oldest gamefishing clubs - the Swordfish and Tunny Club of Australia and the Bermagui Big Game Anglers Club.

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Photography: Courtesy of John McIntyre's collection



Possibly the first club in Australia dedicated exclusively to gamefishing was the Swordfish and Tunny Club of Australia (STC). This is an organisation based in Melbourne, but one with wide

horizons and whose members have fished all around the world. Since its foundation, the STC has adopted the southern New South Wales port of Bermagui as its second home and members have fished there with great success.

The STC was formed on a wild and windy night in a tent, under the flickering light of a hurricane lamp, on Montague Island, some 15 miles northeast of Bermagui. It was February 13, 1934.

A group of Melbourne anglers had established camp on the island to test

the fishing after the 1933 capture of a 262lb (119kg) black marlin by Mr Roy Smith of Yass, NSW. The level of interest to discover if marlin were in fact prevalent in the southern NSW waters had been stoked by the Melbourne tackle store manager and expert angler Charles Reginald Lyne (1904-1961), who was always known as Reg.

Keen Victorian sportsmen frequented Hartley's Sports Store and Reg quickly saw the opportunity to mount an expedition to the waters off Montague Island. After

many adventures and some skillful boat handling by Bill Warn, the professional fisherman and skipper of the chartered launch *Marlin*, the party landed on the island to set up camp in atrocious weather.

Appropriately, Reg Lyne landed the club's first billfish, a 320lb (145kg) black marlin and a subsequent 240lb (109kg) black, the only fish taken by the pioneering party. However, these landings and the loss of four striped marlin – plus the sighting of over 50 other billfish – convinced the Melbourne party that this was indeed a place for great gamefishing.

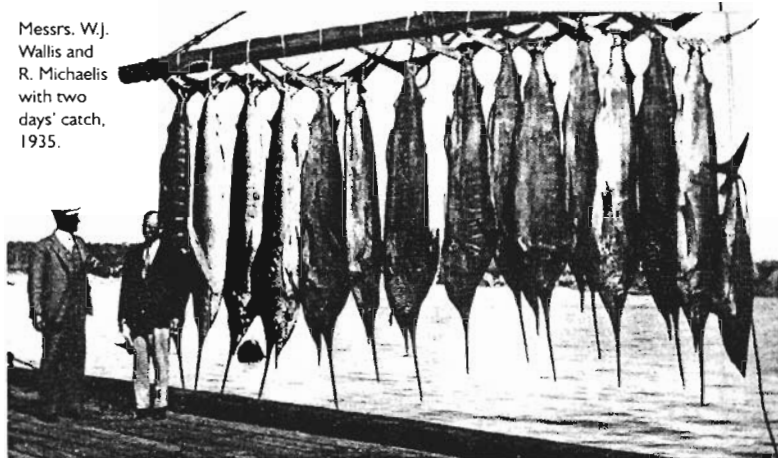
The pioneering group that founded the Swordfish and Tunny Club that stormy night consisted of Dr John C. Lewis, Messrs. Roy Michaelis, J.R. Porter, John Bowen, Ray Symmons, I.D. Sargood, John V. Rittenhouse and Reg Lyne. Dr Lewis was elected first president. An absent Mr H.W. Joseph was appointed first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

STC NEWS SPREADS WORLDWIDE

Members of the STC persuaded various friends and business acquaintances to join the new body that had as its primary objective the fostering of this new sport. It was away and running by the summer of 1935.

On March 5th of that year, Roy Michaelis and Bill Wallis weighed

Messrs. W.J. Wallis and R. Michaelis with two days' catch, 1935.



14 marlin and a mako shark at Bermagui after just two days of fishing. This was an event that set the sporting world on its ear and sent the message about Australian angling around the world. One recipient of the news, compliments of the STC's Reg Lyne, was Zane Grey, the famous US western adventure author and angler, whose reputation had been trumpeted around the globe. Grey journeyed to Australia with a full expedition in early 1936 and enjoyed considerable success at Bermagui, Batemans Bay and Sydney.

Other STC members enjoyed a great success fishing off Bermagui and Montague Island in 1935. During February and March, Mr P.R. Rogers landed seven marlin and Mr Bill Wallis landed 12.

During its first year, the STC's membership stood at a tiny 34 ordinary members and three honorary life members – Zane Grey of USA, Mr John V Rittenhouse, an American who had been in the original party and who resided in what was then the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), and the pioneer Sydney angler and gamefishing reel manufacturer Mr E. P. (Harry) Andreas.

A 1936 recruit to the STC ranks was Thomas A. Bell (1891-1978), always known as Tom, who went on to have a spectacular career as both angler and administrator of the sport. A British immigrant and World War I veteran, Tom was a successful wool broker and promoter who, despite a severe war wound, became an expert angler. His capture of a 1151lb (524kg) tiger shark on the last day of the 1938 competition to mark Australia's 150th anniversary became the Swordfish and Tunny Club's first World and Australian record. Tom also set an Australian record for a 238lb (107.94kg) southern bluefin tuna in May 1938. This record still stands and is among the oldest in the GFAA record chart.

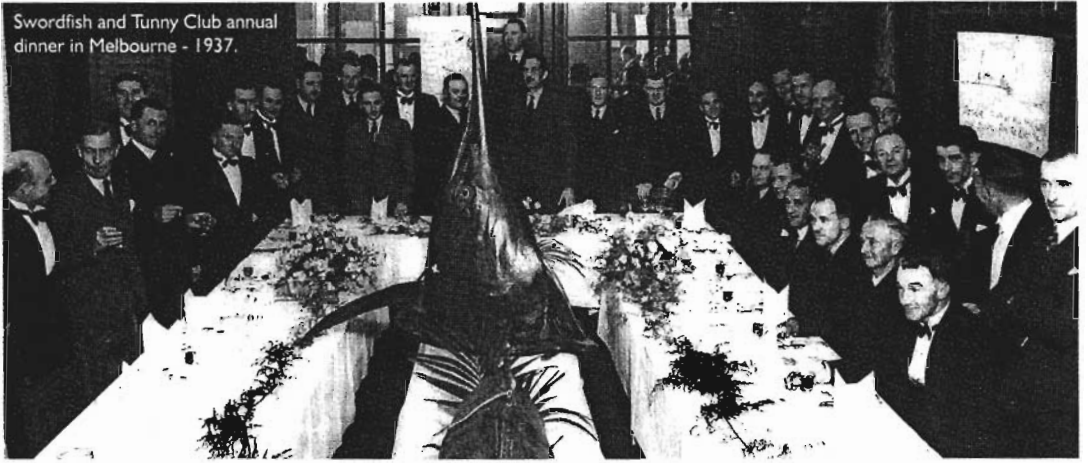
Reg Lyne with his 320lb black marlin at Montague Island.



Zane Grey with a 480lb black marlin caught off Bermagui in 1936..



Swordfish and Tunny Club annual dinner in Melbourne - 1937.



Tom Bell worked assiduously on gamefishing matters for STC and GFAA, and served two terms as GFAA president. Tom took over from the retiring founding president, Clive Firth in 1948-49, and later for the period 1954-59. His influence at various levels was very important and he actively supported the formation of gamefishing clubs in South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania.

Tom mentored Tasmanian anglers such as Ian Cutler, later STC and GFAA president (1982-83), as well as founding members of the Tuna Club of Tasmania, such as John Jacob, Eric Canning, John Stanton, Tom Jenkins, Lloyd Phillips, Ray Vincent, Ed Wigston and Mark Cook.

On the recent occasion of the Tuna Club of Tasmania's 50th anniversary, the members were no doubt reminded of Tom Bell's and the STC's roles in its birth in 1960.

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST BIG TUNA

Dr Lewis stood down as STC president after three years and he was succeeded by Mr Bill Wallis who occupied the chair from 1936 until 1947. During the 1936 season, life member Zane Grey boated a 91lb (41.3kg) yellowfin tuna off Bermagui, the first large tuna taken in Australia on regulation tackle. STC members were understandably chuffed with Mr Grey's catch, as it justified their choice of name for the club. Later

events, of course, proved that this was no fluke catch!

The heaviest marlin for the 1936 season was a new Australian record 481lb (218kg) black landed by Mr Keith Tolhurst. Membership of the STC had doubled during that year, standing at 69, with 10 honorary life members, including most of the charter members.

The succeeding several years were busy times for the STC with their close involvement in the formation of the Game Fishing Association of Australia, the 150th Anniversary competition and the burgeoning fishing at Bermagui, Eden and Narooma.

AUSTRALIA FUELS BIRTH OF IGFA

Famous US anglers Michael and Helen Lerner visited Bermagui in 1939 to sample the fishing. It was a highlight of the year and many STC members were impressed by the popular couple's generous assistance with advice and tuition. Subsequent events from this visit, and discussions with STC life member Mr Clive Firth, led to the 1939 formation of the International Game Fish Association (IGFA).

Regrettably, the declaration of World War II in September of 1939 led to the complete closing down of the sport for nearly eight years, from early 1940. The club went into recess until the lifting of stringent rationing and restrictions in 1947.

At that time, Mr Wallis retired as club president and Mr John Bruce Wallace was elected, a position that he held until 1949 when Mr Jim Porter was elected to the chair.

Mr Porter was then the holder of the club and Australian record for the heaviest marlin. He'd caught the 672lb (305kg) black in January 1937 while fishing aboard the Bermagui charter boat *Vida I* with Capt Ern Millican. The large black was caught five miles north of Bermagui and took Mr Porter three hours to land on 24-thread Hartsport linen line (with a breaking strength of around 78lb).

After the war, fishing returned to normal only slowly and a 1949 season of small marlin was recorded with no notable catches made. In 1950, record rains on the coast led to extensive flooding and the fishing was judged to be very poor. The following year, the run of small marlin was remarkable for their lack of size, but at least they were plentiful. However, the presence of sizeable tuna filled the gaps and high hopes were held for this species to become the staple for Bermagui-based STC members. This proved to be so in later years, when expert anglers such as Jack Taylor, Bill Stewart, Tom Mitchell and Ron Carlson, to mention only a few, cut a swathe through the yellowfin population. These anglers, and other STC members, were also in the first groups of gamefishermen who

helped to open up the now famed black marlin grounds of Cairns and the Great Barrier Reef.

The Swordfish and Tunny Club of Australia and its early members were pioneers of the sport in this country and their tradition of ethical angling and service to the sport continues today.

BERMAGUI'S OWN CLUB

Bermagui had been one of the centres of gamefishing since the beginnings of the sport in Australia. The port regularly attracted gamefishermen from both Melbourne and Sydney. A frequent visitor from Sydney was Clive W. Firth (1895-1974), managing director of a pharmaceutical company and a very prominent member of the New South Wales Rod Fishers Society. In 1936 he believed that the port should have its own club.

Following the canvassing of local and visiting anglers, Mr Theo Roughley, a prominent fisheries scientist from Sydney, chaired a meeting that formed the Bermagui Big Game Anglers Club (BBGAC) at O'Shea's Bermagui Hotel on February 21, 1936. A local enthusiast, Mr H. Levick, was elected foundation president and Mr Fred Sissons was first secretary of the club. Mr Firth apparently declined office on the new club's committee to avoid any conflict of interest due to his imminent election to executive office at NSW Rod Fishers. He was, however, a strong and consistent supporter of the Bermagui club for all of his life. In late 1936, Clive Firth was elected to honorary life membership of BBGAC, joining Theo Roughley and the US author/angler Zane Grey.



ZANE GREY AT BERMAGUI

Much has been written about Zane Grey's expedition to Bermagui

Bill Fagan with Tom and John Bell with Tom's world record 1151lb tiger shark caught off Bermagui in April 1938.



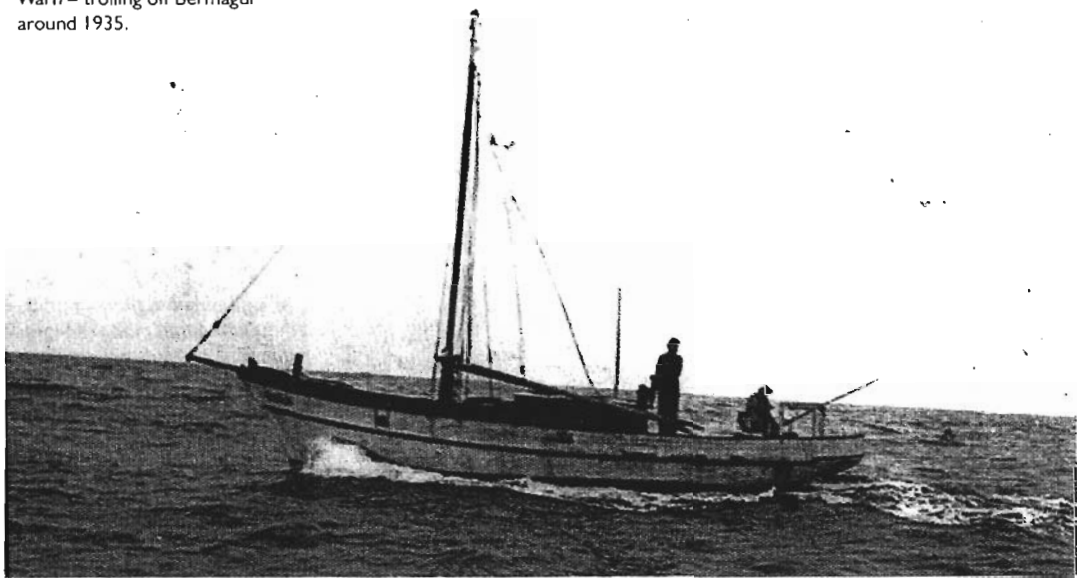
and without doubt his writings and pronouncements provided a great boost to the region and to the Australian sport generally. Some of his criticisms and attitudes rankled local anglers, for he was certainly no diplomat, but his views on fishing techniques and methods went on to become standard practice in the sport. Details of his adventures contained in his book *An American Angler in Australia* led to the recruitment of a new generation of saltwater anglers immediately prior to and after World War II.

Facilities at the Bermagui harbour were poor and the new club's immediate emphasis was on obtaining local council and government support for appropriate wharfage and boat moorings. Complicating matters was the ongoing economic depression, with many rural and regional businesses having closed down or pulled back to survival mode. The NSW Government was heavily lobbied to assist and

finally the dredge *Forster* arrived to commence work on the harbour. A jetty with weighing gantry was erected with the aid of subscriptions coming from BBGAC members and the stalwart weighmaster, Sam Sinclair, continued in this role with the new facilities.

The fishing attracted a wide range of anglers in addition to the locals. Visitors from within NSW and from interstate, mixed in with a smattering of overseas anglers, provided a vibrant mix during the season, which was judged to extend from around Christmas until early May each year. The principal prey was, of course, marlin and the most practised techniques were trolling dead baits from the rod tips on the way out to the favoured grounds, usually around Montague Island, and then drifting with deep baits across reefs. The use of outriggers for trolling did not commence until after the visit by the US anglers Michael and Helen Lerner and their party

Pioneer Bermagui charter boat *Marlin* with Capt Bill Warn – trolling off Bermagui around 1935.



in 1939. Once the effectiveness of these devices was demonstrated by the visitors, they became the principal method of marlin fishing. The local charterboat skippers quickly adopted any new techniques that could improve their capture rates and the small fleet became renowned for its success.

As noted in the Swordfish and Tunny Club section, the Australian 150th Anniversary competition held in 1938 gave the sport a significant boost. In addition to the huge tiger shark caught by Mr Tom Bell in Bermagui's Horseshoe Bay, Mr Clive Firth, BBGAC life member, landed an 88lb (40kg) yellowtail kingfish on 12-thread linen line (breaking strain around 17kg) to win the game fish trophy and establish the Australian 50lb/24kg and All Tackle record that remained unbeaten until 2006.

The next several years saw great fishing at Bermagui, with sizeable striped marlin up to 322lb (146kg) and a new Australian record black marlin of 680lb (309kg), landed by Mr Cuth Starling, a member from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Mr Starling's fish was one of the last

weighed before the closure of the sport due to World War II.

POST-WAR RESURRECTION

It was not until January 1949 that the remaining Bermagui members were able to start the revitalisation of the club that had remained just solvent, thanks to the enthusiasm of local businessman and weighmaster Sam Sinclair.

Mr Dyson Rudder was elected president and, significantly, Tom Bell was elected as a vice-president. His administrative skills and contacts would become essential to the rebuilding that the new committee undertook.

Seven charter vessels were available and several private boats were operated by their owners, including Colonel J. M. Bruce Steer's *Boy David*, a fine launch that this retired Indian Army officer had built. He became

a very successful and energetic BBGAC president from 1955 until his untimely death in 1959, following on from Sam Sinclair who had chaired the club from 1950.

This briefly traces the origins of 'A pair of Clubs' that have made a significant contribution to the sport and whose pioneering personalities have influenced the formation and direction of other Australian clubs. 🦈



Scottish entertainer Sir Harry Lauder on left with Clive Firth and Capt Jock Dinse aboard *Edith* at Bermagui in 1936.