

## Where Have All the Blue Fins Gone?

~ Written in 2010 ~

Bill Boudreau (Billy a Cyriac)

“Strike on the right pole!” Captain Jacquard yells. He swivels the steering wheel, heading the boat in the same direction as the tuna swimming away. “Strike on the right pole!”

The fish has taken the bait and hook and swims at high speed out into the open sea. In less than thirty seconds, everyone in the boat—Mr. Cash, Captain Jacquard, and Joseph, the guide, are ready to fight the Blue Fin. Mr. Cash’s airplane pilot, Marlow, watches.

Captain Jacquard adjusts the engine speed and navigates to keep up with the big fish. The waves slap the wooden hull and bounce the craft as if it were a toy in a bathtub. The captain increases the speed, just enough to keep a light tension on the line as it unwinds.

Everyone moves with precision. The tuna takes line at a high rate. Joseph removes the rod from the side swivel socket and places it in the crouch socket of the fighting chair. Mr. Cash, who had hired Captain Jacquard, sits in the chair, puts his feet on the foot-brace, wraps the leather strap around his back, and hooks the other end to the rod. He is ready for the combat between man and fish. Joseph yanks the back of the fighting chair so that Mr. Cash can lean backward in the tug-of-war that is to come. The challenge excites Mr. Cash.

“When do you think he’s going to stop taking line, Captain Jacquard?” Mr. Cash says.

“Hard to say. He’s a big one and has a lot of strength. I’d guess he’s eight to nine hundred pounds.”

Mr. Cash’s face lights up as he waits for the giant of the sea to slow down and begin the battle.

“He’s taking a lot of line,” Mr. Cash says.

Joseph stands behind Mr. Cash and gives advice on how to handle the reel and rod.

“Joseph, I don’t want to break the line. I want to bring him in!”

“I think we’re in for a long fight. I hope we can bring him in before dark. It’s three o’clock. The few boats that were here on the Soldier’s Rip are gone,” Captain Jacquard says. He keeps the boat heading at a slight angle away from the tuna’s direction. He picks up the CB, “This is the Blue Wave, Zachary Jacquard. We have hooked. It looks like a nine-hundred-pounder.”

“Congratulations!” Came a response.

“I think he’s slowing down!” Mr. Cash says.

Joseph and Captain Jacquard study the line and motion of the reel.

“I think you’re right,” Joseph says.

“Yes, he’s slowing down a bit,” the captain confirms.

The Blue Fin jumps over the dark blue white-capped waves of the Soldier’s Rip.

“Look at the size of that fish!” Mr. Cash exclaims.

“He’s a biggie,” Joseph agrees.

Captain Jacquard slows the engine to idle as he watches Mr. Cash’s line.

The tug-of-war between man and the giant of the sea begins. The instinct of the fish to be free and man’s desire to dominate, again, is set in motion. Mr. Cash, in smooth steady sways, lowers the rod forward and takes line. With each subsequent movement of the rod, it seems Mr. Cash senses that it's easier to pull up as the fish's strength diminishes. And with each lift of the rod, Mr. Cash acts as if he knows that he's closer to reaching his goal, land a big fish.

“Damn it, he's losing strength, but he can still pull!” Mr. Cash elates.

“Don't pull too hard,” Joseph says. “You'll break the line.”

Captain Marlow, Mr. Cash's private airplane pilot, watches from the boat's cabin door, adjacent to the steering wheel, where Captain Jacquard stands.

Captain Marlow tells Captain Jacquard that he is impressed at the coordinated efficiency. “How long do you think it'll take before he's brought in?” Marlow says.

“Difficult to predict. I've fished these Blue Fins for over thirty years and they're unpredictable. But, I can say it's going to be several hours, at least. I've seen smaller fish, take up to six.”

“Incredible!”

“You're doing all right,” Joseph says to Mr. Cash.

“I—think he's—weakening—somewhat!” says Mr. Cash pulling upward on the rod and extending his body in a backward horizontal position. The rod bends almost to a half circle.

“Don't be fooled,” Joseph says. “Maintain a steady reeling when the fish relaxes. If you pull too hard, the fish will react, and break the line.”

“I get y'ah,” Mr. Cash says.

Captain Jacquard's job now is to keep the boat in a good fighting position. He sees Marlow gaze at the deep blue water of the Soldier's Rip, and beyond at the ocean. Sharp waves jerk the boat from side to side.

Marlow says to Captain Jacquard, “How long have you fished in this area of the ocean?”

Captain Jacquard watches Mr. Cash's motions and the fish's struggle. “I started fishing with my father when I was twelve years old. I'm now sixty. This's my last season. When I started in this part of the ocean, southwest, there were many fish, of all kinds. I've fished tuna, cod, herring, scallop, sword-fish, lobster and dug clams and sea worms on the mud flats at low tide.”

“I've heard that twenty to thirty years ago, the Blue Fin tuna was plentiful and now it's very scarce.”

“Yes, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the Blue Fin was in abundance. On a day like today, there would've been close to a hundred boats here on the Soldier's Rip, and, anywhere from fifty to sixty Blue Fin tunas would be caught and landed. Where are they gone? Over fished? Maybe?”

The fish changes direction slightly. Captain Jacquard adjusts the steering.

“You're doing fine,” Joseph says to Mr. Cash.

“I don't seem to be gaining any line,” Mr. Cash says.

“Yes, you are,” Joseph says. “Continue as you're doing.”

Captain Jacquard's weather-beaten lined cheeks, keen squinty-eyes peer at the tormented fish fighting for its life. Although the captain's face is like stiff discolored leather, it is a gentle face.

Captain Jacquard says to Marlow, “Look at that fish fight. It's a beautiful fish. I don't know if you've ever seen one—but it's so well made for its environment. Why do we interfere? Catching this fish is not going to serve me any useful purpose. I'm only doing this because I'm paid for it. I know Mr. Cash gets a lot of joy. He likes a good fight and likes to win.”

“You're very right,” Captain Marlow says. “Mr. Cash loves to win. It's an addiction.”

“Mr. Cash is lucky. This summer we've seen very few Blue Fins. It's the first strike we've had this season. Usually, this late in the season, we don't see tunas at all.”

“I know Mr. Cash was very persuasive with you,” Marlow says.

“Yes, at first I didn’t want to come—but, when he called me, he made me an offer I couldn’t turn down.” Captain Jacquard makes another correction, giving Mr. Cash the advantage. “That fish is still strong. I know he’s a big one. Look at that!”

The Blue Fin jumps several feet above the Rip's waves.

“He’s a son-of-a-gun! Now he’s about seventy-five feet away,” Joseph says.

Captain Marlow and Captain Jacquard look at Mr. Cash. They see a man who’s determined to win at all cost. He seems to be oblivious to his surrounding, as he challenges the Blue Fin in the same manner he attacks business deals.

Joseph turns to Captain Jacquard, “We’re making some progress. He’s still strong, though,” Joseph says.

“I think we’ve got a way to go—there’s still a lot of life in him. I hope we can bring him in before dark. The sun is lowering,” Captain Jacquard says.

Suddenly, Joseph says, “Stop the engine! Stop the engine! He’s gone under the boat!”

Captain Jacquard puts the motor in neutral.

Except for the sound of a couple of gulls overhead and the waves slapping against the hull, a ghostly silence envelops the rig.

“Where in hell is he?” Mr. Cash asks. “He’s not pulling the line.”

“You just be still. He’ll surface,” Joseph advises.

In a flash, the Blue Fin rockets out of the sea, about ten feet in the air, and a few feet from the boat. Everyone is startled. The fish falls back into the waves and its dorsal fin barely visible, slices the water. Just below the surface, a dark shadow swims away.

“Give him line!” Captain Jacquard says and gears the engine, u-turns, and follows the Blue Fin.

“Hope he doesn’t take too much line,” Joseph says.

“I don’t think he will. This was his last attempt to escape. He’ll slow down after this. We’re not far from bringing him in,” Captain Jacquard says,

“I’d say he’s about fifty feet away,” Joseph pointing. “He’s calming down. You should slowly reel him close to the boat. We’ll hold him there, until there’s no life left in him.”

Mr. Cash complies. As the fish gets closer, Mr. Cash gets more excited. “Hell! What a fish!”

Captain Jacquard gears the engine to idle.

The fish flaps its tail and jerks its head.

“He’s too strong to bring on board,” the captain warns.

“Should I try to gaff him—he’s only a few feet away? Should I wait until he stops moving altogether?” Joseph asks Captain Jacquard.

“Get him along side of the hull. I don’t want him to give a last burst and get away.”

They wait for the big fish to die.

“It’ll be a few minutes before we can pull him in,” Captain Jacquard says and remains silent for a few moments.

Captain Jacquard says, “I guess I’m getting old and soft. I don’t see the point anymore in catching such a beautiful fish. Maybe, Father Doucet was right. I remember when I was a young man, I started as a guide, and fishing on Sunday was a big change for the village anglers. Most of our clients would come on the weekends. Tuna fishing business brought a lot of money.”

“What was the problem in accepting clients on the week-ends?” Captain Marlow says.

“Well—until the commercialization of the tuna industry, our village was isolated from the rest of the world to some extent. Rarely did we see outsiders. Our customs were intact and rarely

changed and were observed by everyone. Father Doucet, the priest at that time, had total control of what was right and wrong. But, this changed with tuna fishing going worldwide. Rich people came from all over the globe. The money was good, and it was hard to turn down. Father Doucet saw this as a threat to the morals and values of his congregation. He particularly detested working on Sunday. He strongly believed in the old ways that Sunday was for God and family and no one should earn money on the Sabbath. He damned the tuna fishing business. The Wedgeport fishermen were faced with two powerful forces—their long standing traditional values or material wealth.”

“He has stopped moving, I think he’s ready to be gaffed. I can reach him,” Joseph says.

“Okay,” Captain Jacquard says, “go ahead.”

Joseph takes the long gaff and reaches out.

Mr. Cash and Captain Marlow watch in anticipation.

The tuna is just below the surface.

The end of the day veiled an eerie calm over the Soldier's Rip.

The Blue Fin now close, they stare at the beautiful fish—the eyes as if saying, “Why? Why? Why?”

With the gaff, Joseph reaches for the bottom jaw. The Blue Fin jerks sideways, then swings its head in the opposite direction, rips the hook from its flesh and swims away at high-speed, westward, along the sunset's golden trail smeared on the water. Like a knife, its dorsal fin cuts the sea.

The men stand there and in silence, as the boat floats in stillness, stare at the Blue Fin escaping, and free once more.

“Damn it,” Mr. Cash says, “I had him in the palm of my hand. I would’ve given anything to land him. How big do you think he was, Captain Jacquard?”

“I'd say between nine hundred to a thousand pounds.”

“The son-of-a-bitch!”

Darkness falls as the boat sails among the Tusket Islands and through the narrow rocky gate, which separates the largest island and the main land. In the distance, as the boat enters the bay, the Tuna Wharf's lights loom into view.

Captain Jacquard is glad the Blue Fin got away. This is his last trip out fishing the Blue Fin. Mr. Cash didn't win this one.

On shore, the four men enter the Tuna Wharf's Cafe. They each order a drink. In silence, they listen to the old folk singer sing with a guitar accompaniment. They listen to his rich and mellow voice as the lyrics echoes off the café's walls:

“Many years ago, in boats afloat  
On the Rip, it was a great sport  
Giant tuna fish caught for fun  
By the hundreds at day's done

The Blue Fin was a beautiful fish  
At high speed on the ocean swells  
Tuna and sea in perfect harmony  
In schools they swam so very well

But man with blindness and greed

Always taking more than he needs  
And Fish the beauty out of the sea  
The tuna no longer there to see

The word of the prophet came to be  
The Blue Fin is gone from the sea  
The fishermen wander in haze  
And hear voices across the waves

The wind echoes the prophecy  
His word has become legacy  
For the tunas have gone away  
And no more tunas there today  
And no more tunas there today  
And no more tunas...”