

# Almost PACIFIQUE

## On board the D'Entrecasteaux, BSAOM.

### Part 2

INVESTIGATION PAR EMMELENE LANDON

“A French Naval Writer will be on mission from the 28<sup>th</sup> January till the 4<sup>th</sup> March 2019, on board the BSAOM *D'Entrecasteaux*, a vessel of overseas support and assistance, in Nouméa, subject to the ship's operational constraints. This embarkation has been authorized by the French Navy (ALFAN / CAL) within activities of research led by the French Navy's Centre for Strategic Studies.”

Sunday, February 10th, 2019  
25°04'732S 157°27'776E

### Vessel / Stage

Just before my departure for New Caledonia, I heard of a man whose parachute had not opened when he jumped. He didn't die from his free fall but, shattered, alone, he realized how much he had needed others when they finally came to his rescue.

It was the brother of a fine musician who told me this tale. We were backstage, like a ship. From the stage, the deep voice of his elder brother resonated: *Quand reviendras-tu, quand ?* Ship/ocean, the space between the stage and the public, between those on board and the sea. *La chaleur, l'ancienne chaleur, qui accablait les chevaux et le pont des cargos*: the suave voice of another singer. A good dose of controlled stage fright keeps your wits about you. When you climb the gangplank, a flash of adrenaline jolts through you like a bolt of lightning. The public watches, hypnotized. And the same sensations sweep over you: density and depth, like swimming under water.

“I can swim, I can fly. I dive at the right moment, and I surface at the right moment. I avoid the approaching wave or, on the contrary, I surf it.”

### At sea

The “laps in the pool” and the exercises are over. The *D'Entrecasteaux* is heading for Australia. We sail through the Uitoe Pass, noting the difference in colour between the waters of the lagoon and the open sea. Beyond the Uitoe Peninsula is an inaccessible, *unsurveyed*

bay. On the bridge, Map 146 shows the natural reserves; coral reefs dotted with numerous shallow waterholes and more unsurveyed zones, scattered with dangerous deeps. We re-enter the lagoon by the Mara trench.

La Foa, the Bay without Water and the Island of the Dead are situated in the southern part of Grande Terre, the Bay of St Vincent, Le Havre trompeur and Vexation Island were named by Admiral Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, our ship's namesake.

The last words of Louis XVI before being beheaded on Monday January 21st 1793 were: "Have we received news of Monsieur de La Perouse?"

Jean-Francois de Galaup, Comte de La Perouse, was lost in the seas in which we're sailing, in 1788. An expedition set out to search for him in 1791, directed by Antoine Reymond Joseph Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, known as the Chevalier d'Entrecasteaux, with two frigates, *La Recherche* and *L'Esperance*. In 1793, the expedition discovered an island, Vanikoro, named the Island of *La Recherche* by Admiral d'Entrecasteaux, where the survivors of La Perouse's expedition had perhaps taken refuge. D'Entrecasteaux continued in the direction of New Caledonia by a route that had never been taken, except, perhaps, by La Perouse.

But what news of him?

None.

"Any time is the right time for brave soldiers," sighs the midshipman. He has the most difficult watch for lack of sleep: from 4AM- 8AM.

## Representation

We approach Brisbane too quickly, that won't do for a military ship. The *D'Entrecasteaux* treads water like a guest who knows he'll arrive too early. Off the beach, the sea growls, regurgitates, breathes.

The Pacific is peaceful, blue, immense, rather calm, except that the Coral Sea is not really the Pacific. Prussian blue. Hot. Humid. Less waves. Flying fish with blue wings.

On the loudspeaker, a message from the bridge announces: "Whale port side!" It gambols, we can see it on the horizon. "Astonishing for this time of the year," says the Captain. I hope it will leave this area as fast as possible, because its appearance coincides with our shooting practice hour.

"And you, Madame Landon, would you like to shoot?"

"No, thank you."

As we approach Brisbane, it's time to think about Representation.

The First Mate asks me, "Madame Landon, what should we do about the seating arrangement for lunch. We'll have a Lady on board."

"Put her to the right of the Captain."

The pilot comes on board at 3:30AM. Wind 10. Sea 3. Speed 12 knots. Moreton Island, the same shape as Fraser Island, Stradbroke Island. These sandy islands protect the bay. Unexploded ordnance is marked on the maps. Australian voices with a nasal twang can be heard on the radio.

The ascent of the Brisbane River is bordered by port and industrial zones, the historic port, and the airport. Planes take off and land over us.

The far-off skyscrapers create a little skyline. Brisbane can now be considered as a real city.

The day of Representation arrives, and Justine prints out the seating plan for the Captain, Lady B, the CR, the CMDR Head of the Brisbane Naval Base, the Inspector of Police, the Midshipman and the French Naval Writer.

The discussion heads off in all directions, led above all by Lady B, a businesswoman, and the CR, a blonde in a white dress who works for the City of Brisbane.

Police Inspector: This port area is new to me. Previously, I worked at Fortitude Valley, a rapidly developing area, like an expanding doughnut, with plenty of nightlife that I wouldn't like my 16 year old daughters to attend.

CR: It's crazy how young people are afraid to communicate by phone these days. They do everything via Messenger. My children can't even pick up a phone to contact me.

Lady B: A young woman I've just hired, when she has to rapidly contact a client, repeatedly tells me that he doesn't reply to messages, because she doesn't want to actually speak to him. However, it would be far more simple!

CMDR: Trams in olden times had a certain charm...

CR: By the way, congratulations, Lady B, on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of your career!

Lady B: It's all passed so quickly! June Dally-Watkins, the Australian etiquette queen, remains my absolute role model, she's still around at 92. Such beauty and elegance!

CR: And Peter Hackworth in real estate, that great lady from Brisbane who is now 83. Her father was an English pilot who died in the war, and he wanted to call his son Peter, that's the explanation for her masculine name... But let's rather talk about this beautiful Naval vessel. What kind of operations do you carry out?

Captain: For example, we intercepted a shipment of cocaine heading for Australia, 578k.  
(Everybody goggle-eyed.)

Police Inspector: Great haul!

Naval Writer: When I last made a stopover at Brisbane in 2001, there weren't all those skyscrapers.

Lady B: Since then Highrise Harry has passed by...

CR: How do you call - the coloured vests - in France?

Captain: Les gilets jaunes (the yellow vests).

CR: My husband's been on holiday in Europe for two years now. I joined him, to go skiing. Sometimes we were blocked on the roads by the demonstrations.

Lady B: Thank you for that wonderful lunch, so French! What a pleasure it's been to see you again.

(On the side, to the CR): I'm going to Morocco, with some friends, I've heard the beaches are magnificent.

CR: Don't forget to take some antibiotics, just in case...

The next day, a strategic visit is planned to the Australian Army base, Gallipoli Barracks, for the early stages of setting up a collaboration between the French Navy and the Australian Army.

"Welcome back," the soldier at the entrance of the base says to me, as I hand him my Australian passport. We're ushered towards the parade ground, three large vehicles are parked there. "One wouldn't park there like that in France," Justine, the officer cadet, tells me. On the left of the parade ground, three musicians, a bagpipe player and two drummers, rehearse "Waltzing Matilda."

Their trio is like an Australian Bagad de Lann Bihoue.

The Australian soldiers are two metre tall giants. They show us their equipment, speak to us about their missions. In 2012, OP Slippet Anode and Pakistan. In 2015-2016, Afghanistan and Iraq. On land in Australia, they come to the aid of the population in case of flooding and forest fires.

The idea is to create an interoperability, a mutual understanding between French and Australian forces, an Amphibious work group.

From ship to shore. Wet to dry. The Bushmasters. Their weapons. Their 50 kilo backpacks with a spade and food rations for 24 hours: Koma lamb, beef and noodles, bread, mi-goreng, muesli, Werthers, mashed potato, Vegemite, crystallized fruit, chocolate, condensed milk, jam sandwiches, dried beef, cheese...

We listen politely under the fierce sun.

Later, they'll visit the *D'Entrecasteaux*, which seems too small to welcome them all, plus their equipment.

## Life on board

At sea once more.

Shake hands with all the crewmembers the first thing in the morning.



Stow away all your belongings so they don't crash to the floor, including those in drawers, especially pens that make an annoying noise when they roll from one side to another.

Place whatever you put on a table in a careful manner.

If possible, lie down and take a nap in case of fatigue or headache.

Make your bed neatly.

Store the chair to your desk with an elastic belt.

Dress every day in the Naval uniform, a T-shirt underneath, and wear sensible shoes.

Brush your hair.

Address everybody by the formal French 'you'.

Say "Capitaine", "Second," and "Ops" (for the Captain, First Mate and Chief of Security), and call the others by their first name, or no name at all.

Debriefing sessions at 6PM. Everybody rises when the Captain enters the room. He says: "At ease, be seated," even before I've had the time to rise.

We go over the weather forecast, conditions at sea, the "pépins": things going wrong, the fuel situation, training and activities planned, in what is sometimes used as a detention room, now called the passengers' room.

Cyclone Oma pursues its route towards Australia.

We're just to the north of it. Outside, the moon is full. Sea 6, very rough, big swells.

The *D'Entrecasteaux*, solid as she is, is tossed in the rough sea like a cork. We all keep to ourselves, slightly seasick. Perhaps rather more so, because of the full moon. The ship sways from one side to the other; rather too much, and everything it contains is swept upwards, thrown against the walls, and clatters to the floor. In bed, the pitching tightens the stomach. The wooden furniture creaks and the noise evokes the rigging of another ship, a former version of the *D'Entrecasteaux*, from another century.

The *D'Entrecasteaux's* mission was to cross the Coral Sea to give the crew a chance to train, and then to meet the Australian Army to study the possibilities of an amphibious collaboration. As for the return to Noumea, the aim is to flee Cyclone Oma.

The chief of the deck department, who has been studying the maps and the weather and sea conditions to determine our route, decides we should head north to avoid the cyclone, which is now heading south, and to change our course to 90°, directly towards New Caledonia. We'll save 220 nautical miles, which will allow us to reach the east coast twenty hours early, and have time for exercises. One says "the idea of the manoeuvre" because it is not an exact science, he explains to me. There are many known elements, but one can never forecast the environment at 100%.

The chief of the deck department proposes his idea to the Captain, who decides to validate it or not.

All of a sudden, rather than surf the waves that were propulsing us from behind, we head

straight into the swell. I write on my bed, my computer wedged between my feet. The sea is wild. I sleep with my more fragile belongings, so they don't take off.

## The mess rooms

A reduced crew obliges crewmembers to be polyvalent and extra work abounds aboard the *D'Entrecasteaux*, from the bridge to the engine room where the average temperature is above 40°. That means lots of dirty T-shirts to wash. Working outside, for everything to do with the piloting the ship, in all weather conditions, is a tough job. Nevertheless, the helmsman would never exchange his job for that of an officer, behind a computer, even considering that officers earn much more. I chat to the quartermaster who works with the bosun. He has eight years of experience in the Navy and would like to move up the ranks to chief of the deck department, for example, but still keep his hands dirty.

In the crew mess room everyone talks at once, relaxes, watches TV, sport, generally. They all seem close and considerate one of another. On land, they often meet to have picnics with their families. Their wives have found work as nurses, journalists or cleaners. The crew not having the same salaries as the officers, a division exists, between the two worlds. The majority of the officers' wives do not work.

As for the officers, they don't consider that they are practising their profession behind a computer. In the Officer mess room, for what would normally be an evening drink, the choice is between fruit juice (I must say I've never tasted such delicious fruit juice), lime Perrier and Pepsi, the First Mate is watching a program on Arte about North Korea: workers on holiday. Perhaps their first paid holidays.

I'd like to go on holiday in North Korea...

Well, why not? I ask him.

Impossible. Top secret defence reasons.

He goes on to tell me that for security reasons, it's difficult for soldiers to have families with certain nationalities, be they from the Far East, Russia, Korea, China... In case of conflict, the enemy could take family members as hostages. I never know if he's making fun of my naivety, so I change the subject.

The Captain has the power to order his crew to "shoot to kill." He remains the "Master on board after God." Where could the Captain of the *D'Entrecasteaux* wish to work after serving this ship?

In the 21st century Navy, the Captain is the one who decides, above all in combat, but he is also hugely responsible to the Chief of Defence Staff. On a daily basis, combat is reduced to exercises like those we carried out at the beginning of our mission. At the most, one shoots to intimidate, closer and closer to the target until they surrender. The *D'Entrecasteaux* is not a warship but, as its name indicates, a support ship. Normally, we don't have to shoot before

approaching blue boats or boats we suspect of transporting drugs.

So what could be the next step after commanding the *D'Entrecasteaux*?

The Captain could progress to an aircraft carrier with 2000 sailors aboard. 262 metres long, 64 wide, with two nuclear reactors generating 82000 propulsive horsepower and 16 megawatts of electric power. These vessels are incredible, they can remain self-sufficient for eight years, sailing 500 nautical miles per day at 25 knots almost permanently. Self-sufficiency and resistance are imperative for this genuine city at sea, used to control large local conflicts, and also participate in international missions. In 2011, France was present during the Harmattan mission in the Gulf of Syrte, off Libya, and maintained a strict control over the maritime embargo imposed on this country and its government. In 2018, during the Hamilton mission, chemical sites were fired upon. Arms are used when under threat. Like when Yemeni and Libyan civilians were evacuated in 2015 and 2016.

How do you accede to this promotion?

You have to prove you're a warrior. Not just somebody concerned about his air-conditioning at 15° and his cosy bed.

But how do you prove you're a warrior?

The First Mate immediately replies:

By your career. Your fighting spirit: by being always ready to act, even in times of peace. We are trained to be ready for combat, as a natural reflex, but above all not in a routine manner. You can't just consider what you're doing as the third exercise of the week, so you don't give a damn. You're not just hanging around waiting for dinner. It's a real mentality.

## Houailou

Outside it's so hot and humid, especially compared to the inside air-conditioned temperature of 20°, that one's glasses fog up. This evening we'll see land, the east coast of New Caledonia. Next morning, at Houailou, the Captain sets off in a Zodiac to ask permission of the chief of the tribe to carry out exercises on his territory, and to thank him for letting us moor in the bay. For this, he brings a "manou," an offering: two *D'Entrecasteaux* T-shirts and a bank note of 1000 New Caledonian francs. It's the custom. He is accompanied by two divers and Justine, and they'll come and pick me up in an hour if all goes well.

Eight o'clock in the morning, it's hotting up. The landscape is splendid, native, unchanged, unlike what we can see several dozen kilometres from here, visible from the *D'Entrecasteaux* anchored in the bay, red and ragged in the distance. Probably the Canala and Thio mining centres.

The Zodiac collects me and lets me off on the beach at Houailou. Justine and the two divers, who are also master-at-arms and helmsman on board, calculate the landing spot with geometric instruments. I set off towards a conical shaped hut that I'd noticed with

my binoculars from the ship, intrigued by its straw roof. Behind the beach, I come across the carcass of a car, and then an abandoned aeroplane landing strip. The round hut is surrounded by sculptures, like totems. "Don't go beyond this beach," warned Justine, who had been present at the offering. "There, the land belongs to another tribe."

Accompanied by a bird with a long thin beak, perhaps an oceanite, although this species of bird is rarely seen on land, preferring to live on the high seas, I take care not to approach the dividing line. I film a man in a canoe. In the blink of an eyelid, he has disappeared.

I stroll along peering at the various shells and driftwood washed up on the beach. Half a construction worker's white helmet in this natural environment is like a nautilus. And then I spy the spiral of a big intact shell, just recently vacated by its inhabitant, striped violet and white. A true nautilus.

Later, I read in the local newspaper:

"Houailou: Maureen's companion has been arrested. The gendarmerie made this information public in the middle of the night: the companion of the young woman who who died on February 12th at Houailou, who was sought for murder, was arrested at 10PM, by the GIGN.

The death of Maureen, 29, had been communicated on February 12th, just after 2AM. A death at first described as an accident. But Momo's family and friends were sure that she'd died from her companion's violent blows. On Friday, a march protesting violence against women was held in her memory. The inquest confirmed that Momo had indeed been beaten *extremely violently*.

Violence against women and interfamily violence are increasingly devastating in New Caledonia.

## Being there

We're not leaving?

Be patient, there are 170 metres of chain to pull up with the anchor.

The Captain had announced that around 1AM the sea would become rough. The anchor strikes the ship's flanks. The constant hum of the motor accompanies the more irregular rocking and creaking noises.

A sailor comes in to draw my curtain each evening at nightfall. I then get the red safety jacket down from on top of the wardrobe and put it behind my pillow, to read and write. To get out of bed, I leg over the wooden railing, like you would a child's cot. The walls are papered with my watercolours and a few maps from the roll of out-of-date maps that the helmsman has given me, on which I'd like to paint in my studio in Paris.



The sheets are light blue and the blanket, royal blue. Furniture in the cabin: bed, desk, shelves and a wardrobe in which to store one's clothes. On board, one only wears the blue navy outfit. The Captain had given me 2 T-shirts and a *D'Entrecasteaux* cap, along with a medal and two patches. The other piece of furniture, the same size as the wardrobe, has open shelves and a moveable iron rod to prevent the documents falling out – right now, for example. Most likely because we're sailing from east to west of the island; we were warned.

I wrap up my paintings. Everybody prepares for the GI, general inspection, on Monday. My bags are packed, the cabin is clean. At 6:45AM we all assemble on the rear deck. I prepare the paintings I'm giving to the two mess rooms: *Exercises CAGOUI and II on the D'Entrecasteaux*, and *The Bay of Houailou from the D'Entrecasteaux*. It's time to leave the confines of the *D'Entrecasteaux*. No big speeches. Just like every morning when everybody shakes hands, an act of being present. Each to his post aboard the *D'Entrecasteaux*.

## Return to shore

I have several days in Noumea before returning to Paris via Darwin, Australia. The return to shore changes radically one's organization and perception of time, after life on board where each instant is organized, without leaving a moment to feel depressed. Once ashore, one is confronted by a gaping space, an emptiness. Being somewhat used to this state, it doesn't bother me, but I wonder how the crew deals with it.

I see my friends Phuong and Guillaume, I make the most of the beautiful golden light and I fly over the Chesterfield Reef in the *Gardian*. And I remain haunted by a video exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, that I'd visited with a cousin, by a New Zealand artist of Maori origin, Lisa Reihana: *In Pursuit of Venus (Infected)*, 2015-17.

On a background of 19th century panoramic wallpaper entitled *The Savages of the Pacific Ocean*, or *The Voyages of Captain Cook*, representing a European, idealized vision of Pacific landscapes, actors interpret scenes of life of the native islanders and their interaction with the crews of the European explorers. Lisa Reihana uses numeric techniques to stage historical and contemporary stereotypes, in order to rethink history from a present-day point of view, encouraging questioning of generally accepted opinions and tolerance. The projected video ten metres long and two metres high is accompanied by a sound track of ceremonies, performances, meetings and conflicts, and runs a good twenty minutes.

What to do with my voyage aboard the *D'Entrecasteaux*? I have a great thirst for fiction, to plunge into the world of the Pacific, of Oceania, its strengths and its weaknesses, and what's at stake. I have begun writing a novel, *Pacifique Ou presque* | Almost PACIFIC.

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Translation by the author