

Reflections on Motu Kaikoura by Don Mardle, January 2013

Tuesday the 8th of January, like most days this summer, was windy. Our 1:00 pm departure was delayed, first by two hours, then another two hours, as we waited for the wind to drop. Finally at 5:00 we had a briefing on emergency procedures, donned inflatable life jackets, packed a life raft between the seats, and took off from Kaipara Flats airfield – a stiff breeze still blowing. We were four-up in the little Cessna - Rod in the right-hand seat, Rod's granddaughter, Rochelle, in the left-hand seat, and a passenger and me in the back. It was a bit bumpy initially but beautiful flying over Sandspit and out over the water with Little Barrier in full view. Once in the air, Rochelle took the controls climbed to about 2000 feet, and flew straight and level making good time with the fresh breeze behind us.

Large numbers of boats-at-anchor came into view as we approached Motu Kaikoura and Great Barrier – every cove and bay that could offer any sort of shelter was packed with pleasure craft – anything from modest yachts and launches to palatial super yachts. Our passenger was headed for Okiwi, a grass strip on Great Barrier, but Rod wanted check out the windsocks on Motu Kaikoura so we over-flew *our* island first. Rod took the controls and after a lazy loop to line up the runway we were soon on the ground at Okiwi, and our passenger had disembarked.

From the rear seat, there was no indication of the strong cross wind as we took off. Rod dug the right-hand wheel in to counter the wind and we were quickly airborne, turning into the wind, and rising up the valley, heading to Motu Kaikoura. We were buffeted by a bit of turbulence approaching the airstrip but then the wind all but died - blocked by scrub either side of the strip. The Cessna seemed to just hang in the air – it felt as though it didn't really want to touch down, but Rod soon had us on the ground and taxiing to the parking area. We climbed out, tied the plane down, got the quad bike out and headed down to the lodge.

What a beautiful trip - the decision to fly had certainly been a good one.

As we approached the lodge we could see the other volunteers with whom I was to spend the week - teenagers Blaze, Keagan, and Matthew. They were lounging on the deck - locked out! They had come out on the DOC boat, a fairly rough trip, by all accounts. The last group to use the lodge had forgotten to leave the lodge keys, and as we were soon to discover, the keys for the mule were also missing. The boys had already been on the island a few hours, but were in good spirits – any discomfort from the boat-trip, or inconvenience from being locked out, was soon behind them. My intention for this trip was to try to repair the dinghy and return it to a sea-worthy state, so the previous day I had packed a box of tools, sandpaper and paint, along with a box of clothes, bedding, and food, and a pair of oars, and taken them to Devonport so they could get to the island to the Island on the DOC boat with the boys; I was relieved to see everything had arrived safely.

After quick introductions and a health and safety briefing, we were off to sort our sleeping arrangements, start the alternator, and sort the food into the fridge, freezer, and shelves.

Rod took the boys out to show them how to operate the alternator but seemed to be away rather a long time. I went out to investigate and found them busily siphoning fuel out of the alternator – there had been a mix-up and petrol had been poured into the diesel tank! This meant that not only had we contaminated the diesel that was already in the tank, but the 20 litres of diesel we thought we had in reserve turned out to be petrol. Bugger! We were going to have to ration fuel.

After dinner I wandered up to the barn to have a good look at the dinghy. My first trip to the island a few weeks earlier was when I first met Rod and he had asked me if I could do anything with the dinghy. Hopefully I had everything I was going to need. I thought I was going to be able to make a start on this first day, but the delay getting into the air put paid to that plan. I wondered if I was going to have time to finish the job because I wanted to head back on Friday. I need not have worried – later that evening I discovered that Rod was not going to be back until Sunday. Oh dear! I only had food and clothes 'til Friday – I was going to be very pleased that I had brought my fishing rod!

Wednesday

Wednesday morning we discovered we didn't have the keys for the mule. We turned the lodge upside down looking for the spare set. We were locked out of the office but discovered a breach in the security and were soon inside - but still no keys. Having *broken in* to the office we decided we had no option but to continue on our criminal path and try to hot-wire the mule. Rod and I proved a great team and soon not only had the mule ticking over beautifully but had also created a simple and effective starting system that would serve us all well for the whole week. If times ever get tough enough, I'm now confident I could embark on a successful criminal career!

The day dawned still and bright and from first light we could hear the constant drone of inboard and outboard motors alike as the bays and coves lining Man o' War passage emptied out. On my way to the barn all I could see on the water was the sterns of many boats taking advantage of the calm morning to carry on with their journeys after what had probably been days sheltering from strong winds.

The old dinghy was relatively sound and after many months in the barn, completely dry. Some of the ply had delaminated as a result of being left out in the elements for a long period. Some stiffeners and stringers, originally just fixed in place with copper nails, had also come loose, and the paint was peeling inside and out. Almost all the damage was on the inside, so I was confident my plan was going to work. Also, the day was already hot, even though it was still early, so I knew the epoxy glue I brought with me was going to crack off nicely.

The first job was to scrape off the loose paint on the inside of the dinghy and give it all a fairly coarse sand. I had the portable alternator so I was able to use my

random orbital sander. It wasn't long before the sweat flowed freely and I was drinking the first of many litres of water. I made some running repairs on the old lodge vacuum cleaner and vacuumed up the dust and debris. Next I used a craft knife to carefully cut through the top layer of ply (with the grain, of course) and with five areas prepared set about cleaning up and refitting the stringers and battens. Now I set up a series props and clamps to apply pressure to everything while the epoxy hardened. I photographed my propping/clamping construction to ensure I could recreate it, dismantled it all, and set about mixing the glue.

I used a long and flexible pallet knife to spread the epoxy between the layers of ply, covered the patches in some bond-breaking plastic strips cut off a plastic bag, and referring to the photo of my propping arrangement on my iPhone, began applying pressure to the patches, battens and stringers. It was all fairly precarious, but after some time, and a few modifications, I was happy that sufficient pressure was applied to each patch. It was now mid-afternoon and the first work-day was over – my thoughts now went to catching something for dinner, and hopefully for breakfast too.

I returned to the lodge gathered my fishing gear and headed down to the water. I pulled some mussels off the pontoon and tried to catch some bait. It took a while, but eventually a hapless spotty took my tiny hook. I quickly despatched it, cut off the fillets, changed my trace and cast into the deeper water. Again, fishing was slow, but my last bait resulted in a nice pan-sized snapper! Perhaps I was going to be able to survive 'til Sunday after all.

Among other things, Rod had shown Rochelle and the boys how to clear and re-bait the rat traps on the roadside, and begun mowing the airstrip. The drive belt had burnt out on the mower, so the boys got a lesson in mower maintenance in the baking hot sun. Rod also showed the boys how to drive the mule – it being important that everyone can drive in case of emergencies. The boys didn't even have their driving licences yet but they were soon confident and competent drivers of the trusty mule.

The others were soon back and we all headed down to the pontoon for a swim – the day had been so hot, I think we all sizzled as we hit the water.

Before bed we said farewell to Rod and Rochelle – they were to stay that night, but got up at 5:30 the next morning to fly back to Warkworth.

Thursday

After a fairly leisurely start I headed back to the barn, stripped the props and was pleased that everything was sound. I did a bit more scraping and sanding back to sound paint and was just about done when the boys dropped in on their way to the airstrip to finish mowing. They helped me turn the boat over and I began scraping and sanding the bottom. Some repairs had already been done and everything seemed pretty sound. I patched a few deep gouges then did a final sand, followed by a dust off and vacuum, then after a bit of spot priming, applied the undercoat, thinned with a little turps.

I did a few minor jobs around the lodge buildings, had a swim, and caught another snapper that was to be my breakfast Friday morning. At about 7:30 the boys helped me turn the dinghy over and I spot-primed and undercoated the inside. We were running short of diesel and I was trying to organise someone to bring us some but wasn't having any luck – plan-B was to finish the dinghy and use it to go into Fitzroy to buy some myself.

Friday

To that end, I set the alarm for 6:00 the next morning and was up at the barn by 6:30 after a nice snapper-fillet breakfast – I hoped to get a gloss coat on both the inside and outside all on in one day. I gave it a light sand, thinned the gloss coat with a little turps, and set about painting while the temperature was still relatively cool.

I spent the rest of the day with the boys. We got some gear together and headed off to poison a stand of pine trees. We formed a bit of a track into the bush, but the drills wouldn't start despite them running perfectly the night before. Back at the lodge the boys began demolishing an old shower cubicle and sink bench in one of the chalets and I showed them how to de-nail the good lengths of wood we wanted to salvage. After the mandatory swim and dinner, the boys helped me turn the dinghy over and I painted the outside with the gloss coat, finishing just as it got dark.

We had been running the alternator just long enough to keep the freezer cold, but even so, we had less than $\frac{1}{4}$ tank left and nothing in reserve, so my plan for Saturday was a trip to Fitzroy – it would be a good test for the 'maiden voyage', and a good test for me as I was not quite sure exactly where Fitzroy was!

Saturday

On Saturday morning we took the mule up to the barn and loaded the dingy onto the roll-over bars, the shiny new paint protected by some old blankets and a rubber squab from a yacht I had found on the beach the night before. We tied the dinghy down firmly, collected a life jacket, put the old 2hp, 4 stroke Honda in the back of the mule, and drove round to the next bay. We put the dinghy in the water, mounted the outboard and tied it down, and I motored around to the pontoon. The direct drive motor took a little getting-used-to, but everything looked promising for the trip to Fitzroy. The fuel pumps at Fitzroy had already returned to winter hours and would be closing soon and not reopening until 3:00 so the voyage would have to wait until the afternoon.

The boys went off to do a few more jobs while I took the spark plugs out of the drills to dry them out and then attended to a bit more maintenance around the lodge. Early in the afternoon I tied the oars into the dinghy, mounted the motor, fuelled up, collected the VHF radio, and put it along with some water and spare fuel, into a large plastic container. I collected the 20 litre diesel container, filled out the intention board, applied a heap of sun screen, put my phone in a zip-lock bag, donned an inflatable life jacket and sun hat, and headed off in search of Fitzroy. I had looked at a chart and thought I could navigate using the mussel

farms as a guide. As a fallback, I had a marine GPS app on my iPhone, and there were still lots of boats around.

I hugged the coast of the Island until I reached the mussel farms then cut across the water and into Fitzroy – a journey of about half an hour and according to my GPS a about 2.3 nautical miles. The little Honda performed brilliantly, as did the dinghy itself. It wasn't yet 3:00 so I had a wander around the metropolis of Fitzroy, and bought an ice cream at a busy grocery store. I also drew some cash for the fuel. By the time I got back to the jetty the pumps were operating so I was able to fill up with about 22 litres of diesel.

I topped up the fuel in the outboard, put on my life jacket and headed back to the lodge. The boys were swimming by this time so they were able to help unload the dinghy. We took the motor off and the boys picked up some more life jackets and rowed across the bay to check out the rubbish barge while I had a swim.

The dinghy had proven itself sea-worthy and the little Honda a reliable and capable little outboard. I caught another snapper, although I had to work hard for it, and we had diesel for the alternator, so I was set for the evening.

Sunday

Sunday dawned just as beautiful as each preceding day. After a leisurely breakfast I packed up my bedding and clothes, then headed up to the barn to pack my tools and complete a final clean-up.

I grabbed Matthew and we restored the office to its previous 'secure' state, then I spent an hour or so giving the stove/oven a bit of a birthday.

Early that afternoon a boat arrived with a group from Auckland University involved in some rat research so I picked up their gear with the mule then began introducing them to the luxuries and intricacies of island life. Rod arrived with Harry Doig, the chair of the Trust, and before long Matthew and I were putting on life jackets and climbing into the Cessna. It was a stunning afternoon and this time I was in the right-hand seat. Forever the instructor, once we were at altitude, Rod went through the controls, and I found myself flying straight-and-level all the way back to the mainland coast.

After sunny, relatively still, and clear days we flew back to rain showers and more strong winds. We helped Rod fuel up, and after a handshake and promise we'd be back, Matthew and I headed back to Auckland, and Rod to the Island.

It had been a fantastic and rewarding few days; Motu Kaikoura is a wonderful place, and it seems to attract great people. There is a lot to do there, and will be for many years to come, so if you have the time, I strongly recommend having a chat to the Trustees and heading over there for a few days. I'll certainly find my way back – hopefully sooner than later.

Don Mardle.
January, 2013