

# Of cane, silk and tarpon

**PETER LAPSLEY** meets Harold Almond, who ran a tarpon camp in Nicaragua for six years, spent 21 days adrift in a boat in the Caribbean with two others, and now fishes fly for both trout and carp, with a preference for using silk lines and cane rods

People sometimes ask me how I continue to find new subjects for articles. The answer came when I posed the same question to our esteemed editor some 15 years ago. He suggested writing a series of profiles of interesting people. It was an inspired idea; the world offers a limitless supply of such people, some of them well-known or influential, some of them just plain interesting. A good example of the latter is Harold Almond.

I first met Harold during a visit to Walthamstow fishery in north-east London. He came pottering along the bank with an enormous bag of doughnuts, offering them to everyone who was fishing. Gary Inward, chairman of The Walthamstow Flyfishers, told me a little about him – that he had run a tarpon camp in Nicaragua, been adrift in a powerless boat for days on end, and that he fishes mainly with cane rods and silk lines. As I watched him net a 3lb rainbow, I was acute-

ly aware of how little we usually know about the other anglers fishing the water with us, and what intriguing stories some of them must have to tell.

So, I emailed Harold, asking if he might be prepared to be the subject of a profile. He was hesitant, not because he thought the ques-

tions I outlined for him were intrusive, but because he is a modest man, wary of ‘celebrity’ and happy to maintain a low profile. But he agreed, and we met at Walthamstow on a crisp, bright, January day.

Harold Almond was born of English parents just after World War II in Managua, Nicaragua. His father, who had lived there before the war, was working for the Tropical Radio Company. Harold spent three years at a Christian Brothers school in Managua, five years at Eastcourt Independent School in north London, and then five years at an American high school in Managua before studying business administration for a couple of years at the local university.

Hunting and fishing were in his blood. As a child, he began by netting tiddlers in England and then graduating to a rod and bread paste. By the time he was 14, he and his younger brother George were trolling in the Pacific for king mackerel, snapper, bar- ➤➤



The moped on which Harold arrives at Walthamstow says much about his healthy sense of values.



Although he is no purist, Harold's preference is for cane rods and silk lines.





◀ racuda, bonito, dorado, roosterfish, jack crevalle and wahoo.

Lightly populated and not much more than a causeway between the Pacific and Caribbean, the Nicaragua jungle and the seas around it are a wildlife paradise. When he was 19 or 20, Harold took charge of statistics for the Philips light bulb factory in El Salvador. Although the job had its perks, it was no fun, so after five years he returned to Nicaragua to work for Philips there. Then, out of the blue, his father mentioned that he had been playing golf with the Minister of Tourism who had said he could find no-one to manage his fishing camp in the jungle. To his father's dismay, Harold seized the opportunity.

A couple of weeks before Harold left for the fishing camp in January 1973, an earthquake wiped out Managua. The family's compound was five miles (8km) out of town and there was plenty of space. Friends and family who had lost their houses descended on them. The grounds were full of tents, cars and people. Between them, they amassed supplies, had a huge covered water 'pila', a well, generators, a huge chicken run, horses and five German shepherds; it was a great refuge.

## Tarpon times

The camp was remote, in classic rain forest, across an uncharted 90 mile wide lake and then 20 miles down a river with some tricky shoals. Harold ran it for six years, only seeing Alfredo Bequillard, the owner, a handful of times. When the river flooded in the rainy season, he went back to live near Managua.



Harold had never used a fly rod but watched his first guests using them and went out with a pair of rods, broke one on his first tarpon and fell out of the boat. The fish escaped. He then caught two of about 65lb each. In the years that followed, he caught close to 180 on fly, ranging from 50-140lb, mostly on a Joe Brooks Blonde. Tarpon of over 100lb were rare. The camp record was one of 180lb, caught by a woman, of course. Harold also caught snook, including a superb 30-pounder, and several bull sharks that took the fly and miraculously failed to cut the braided wire leader. The best thing about the camp was that the tarpon fishing was spectacular. Harold always felt he was sending his clients off to the best fishing experience of their lives.

The camp attracted many interesting people, Michael Tobin, president of the Hibernia

Bank in San Francisco was but one example. As he and Harold lay in adjoining hammocks on the front porch, with thousands of cane toads singing and the odd massive splash in the river, Tobin told him how he had had to take William Randolph Hearst the photos from the security cameras showing Patty Hearst holding up his bank with the Black Panthers.

Gradually, the communist-led rebellion became more intense and Harold and his staff had an increasing number of close calls, from both sides. In 1979 a friend offered him a job at his General Motors dealership, which he accepted. A few months after he had left the camp the rebels machine-gunned it before burning it to the ground. Then things became worse. A soldier was filmed executing an American reporter and all aid was cut off. The UK severed relations with the Nicaraguan government. Anyone connected with the government fled the country and the communists took over.

Harold ran an American bookshop selling old stock for a few years. Then he managed an hotel on one of the Corn Islands in the Caribbean for a year, where he caught some good kingfish and took people hunting and fishing. He later did some professional hunting.

## Of cane and silk

Eventually, though, in 1988, he returned to England, settling in north London. Now retired, he is able to devote as much of his time as he wishes to his passion for fishing.

## Adrift

Bob Campbell and his girlfriend, Sandra, arrived at the tarpon fishing camp unannounced in a 19ft Mako boat. A few weeks later Harold, Bob and Sandra went fishing. They reached the Bat Islands where the water was boiling with sailfish – more than Harold had ever seen. He was trolling a short pistol grip bass rod with a small bait casting reel loaded with 150 yards of braided 12lb line and a CD 13 Rapala deep diver. A sailfish of about 140lb took it.

Bob handled the boat well. The fish jumped perhaps 20 times. After two hours it was almost dark and the fish was ready. Bob went up to the bow to release it. The seas were high and dark, and as he grabbed the bill there was water swirling around their feet. The outboard motors sank, the bow lifted, Bob yelled something about staying at the bow and Harold put his rod down with the sailfish still attached. Both the rod and sailfish disappeared during what followed.

The islands receded from view as they were blown out to sea and then it got rough. They went up the rollers as if in an elevator; at the top there was a loud



**On board the American Lancer after the rescues – (l to r) Sandra, Bob Campbell, the 1st Mate (who spotted them) and A.N. Other. (Photo: Harold Almond.)**

swirling sound as the white water flushed by. Harold secured some fishing tackle, an ice chest and a five-gallon cistern of water. The three of them tied themselves to the railing on the bow of the boat.

The storm went on for five days. They heard later that no commercial fisherman

had dared go out. The salt water rotted their skin in little spots that felt like cigarette burns. Harold caught a dorado and pulled it into the boat, where it swam around for a while before disappearing over the outboard motors.

At the end of five days the storm died, and they were in the doldrums. Amazing – as flat as a mirror. They used the icebox to push water out over the outboards. The boat was suddenly above water level. They bailed her out. (She had filled because a bilge cover had come loose and water had poured in during the sailfish fight. Inbuilt floatation had prevented her from sinking.)

So, they had a dry boat. They let the sun cure their salt water sores. Harold started fishing, catching a dorado on a spoon. He then put a strip of fish on two trebles and let that drift beside the boat, hooked a sailfish and handed Bob the rod because he had more fat to burn.

Throughout the whole experience Sandra was wonderful. Never complaining, she practised yoga and ate hardly anything until the last few days. Harold dried strips of fish in the sun. In the





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Nowadays, Harold seeks by far the greatest part of his British fly fishing close to home – for trout at Walthamstow, Hanningfield and with occasional trips to Grafham; and for carp in Essex.

He ties all his own flies and uses no oth-

following days they ran out of water so they drank fish blood before it could coagulate. They killed a big shark and two turtles, the best of all as they provided a lot of liquid.

Eventually, a massive container ship, the American Lancer, heard their mayday cries and spotted them at moonlit midnight. It turned around, all its lights blazing like a massive skyscraper, and a door opened at the waterline. Something out of *Close Encounters*.

Harold shoved Sandra aboard and was right behind her while, amazingly, Bob fussed around in his boat. It was set adrift. Captain McGinty entertained them all night laughing at the clean shirt Harold had stored away for such an occasion. The transition from being lost at sea in the Mako and close to death to a ship with great food, kind American people and best of all going down to the communications centre and calling his family was indescribable.

They had been adrift for 21 days and were picked up 500 miles from the Mexican coast. Five days later they arrived in Long Beach, California.



Game on! Harold fighting a tarpon. (Photo: Harold Almond.)



Harold at 16 (left), and his brother with some good barracuda and mackerel caught off the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. (Photo: Harold Almond.)

ers. He says modestly that his fly tying is not good, which may give the fish a bit of an edge.

Although he is no purist, happy to use modern tackle and flies when that seems sensible, his preference is for cane rods and silk lines. I asked Harold what so attracts him to them. He said he loves the idea that one is using something organic requiring fine craftsmanship, and the satisfaction of keeping up with others who are using the latest tackle. He also enjoys the care one has to give the silk, and the smell and feel of it. The restoration process is so long you almost feel you have made it yourself. It is the same sense of satisfaction one gets from fishing with one's own flies.

Cane rods, he said, transport him back in time to fishing with the tackle of Halford, Skues and Kingsmill-Moore. Unlike carbon, the rods increase in value and are almost unbreakable. But he still hears comments like, "fishing with those old bits of wood again," or his favourite, which he read recently, that "cane rods are just elaborately decorated panda food."

Harold's hunting ground for silk lines is eBay. It is a gamble. He asks about diameters and tapers. Usually he only gets one good taper on a DT as the other end has been used up by knot cutting. Prices vary from £10-£40. Boxed lines are more expensive but the line does not often correspond to the box.

The first thing he does having bought one is to put a flame to the tip – if it burns to ash it's silk; if it boils into a blob it's nylon. (There have been nylon lines produced that look much like silk.) An old silk line will have been impregnated with many coats of deer or bear fat, or Mucilin. It will be stiff, sticky and useless. Place it in a gallon of water mixed with bicarbonate of soda, leave it for 15 minutes and then wash it off with clean water pulling it through a rag. "You now either have a beautiful, clean line of bare silk – or it has disintegrated and you have made another bad purchase" he tells me.

Thereafter, mix one part spar varnish, two parts turpentine and four parts double-boiled linseed oil. Harold puts some bin ➡





Harold Almond with five of his 15 or so cane rods.

◀ liners on the floor, the liquid mixture in a saucer and pulls the line through it, from one edge of the bin liners to the other, rubbing the mixture in well using plastic gloves. Wipe the excess liquid off with a rag and hang the line up to dry. This can take from two weeks to forever.

Once you feel it's hard and dry repeat the process several more times. Then polish the line with a rag and talcum powder. Wipe off with a damp rag and hang up to dry for a day. Then attach a braided loop to each end, whipping them on carefully so as not to use up more than an inch or so of the precious silk.

Now attach the line to some backing and a reel; it will take up a lot of space. Rub red label Mucilin into the line generously and wind it onto the reel. Let it sit soaking up the Mucilin for a day or two then repeat several times. Put a final coat of Mucilin on the line, this time hang it up to dry overnight then polish it with a rag – and go fishing.

The line should float for a couple of hours then you must let it dry well before applying another coat of Mucilin, or you can skip that and use it as an intermediate. If the line does not float initially, a rub through a chamois cloth should get it floating. Scum or algae on the water's surface can sink the line. Harold finds that a line will sometimes float on Walthamstow #4 reservoir but not on #5 a few yards away.

Back at home, wipe the line clean and hang it up to dry. Apply Mucilin before your next trip. Do not use heavy leaders; a silk line tests 15lb at best; an old, restored one will be even more fragile. If anything is going to snap, better the leader than the silk. A silk line will get better the more you fish it and you will get to know its characteristics. Casting distance is not bad. On a good day Harold can put out 25 yards, but 15 yards is enough for him on reservoirs. Silk lines have no stretch, so

## HAROLD ALMOND'S TOP FOUR



### Joe Brooks Blonde (tarpon\*)

**Skill level:** ⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡

**Hook:** Standard-length saltwater size 1/0 to 3/0.

**Silk:** Yellow.

**Tail:** Yellow-dyed bucktail.

**Wings:** Yellow-dyed bucktail.

*\*There are several variations on this classic Joe Brooks fly for different fish species. This is almost the only fly Harold ever found he needed for tarpon, especially if there was colour in the water.*

*Tarpon have armour-plated mouths and it is essential that the hook should be 'triangulated' – filed down along the bottom of the point and its sides at an angle – to make it as sharp as possible.*



### Sinking Booby

**Skill level:** ⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡

**Hook:** Size 10-12, Fulling Mill 31550 All Purpose Medium Hooks or similar.

**Silk:** Black.

**Tail:** Black marabou.

**Body:** Black chenille.

**'Eyes':** 4.8mm Olive Funky Britebeads or similar.

*A curious experiment; at the very least it makes a change.*



there is a risk of breaking off on the strike.

Catching reservoir trout on a split cane rod built to Garrison's tapers by a master-craftsman, and a silk line that was used 60 years ago and which you have restored to its former glory ... what more is there to say?

*Peter Lapsley has been a fly fisher for over 50 years. A qualified game angling instructor, he has published nine books and has been writing regularly for the national game angling press since the early 1970s.*



### McDonald's Emerger

**Skill level:** ⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡

**Hook:** Kamasan B100 or similar, size 12-14.

**Silk:** Brown.

**Body:** Hare's fur ribbed with fine, flat, gold tinsel.

**Wings:** Cut from a McDonald's burger carton.

*A very adaptable emerger. It floats 'forever', and the wings can be adjusted to make the body sit in the surface film, hang from it, or lie anywhere in between.*

