

Crystal Creek

Matt Eliason

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The sun beat down on rocks that reflected the heat. Another bead of sweat formed on the man's brow and slowly trickled down into his eyes. The burning sting briefly interrupted the throbbing pain coming from his contorted thigh. This pain is only surpassed by the anger he feels for being in this hopeless situation.

It was a name that had appealed to him at first. That and the promise of fishing some almost untouched water. Crystal Creek. Clear flowing streams were hard to find in this remote northwest corner of Australia. Of course the water hadn't been clear when he arrived. Experience had told him that clear water and mangrove creeks that cycle through big tides don't go together, especially not this stumpy backwater. Crystal Creek consisted of a string of soon to shrink freshwater pools above the tidal reach that were the remains of the recent wet season, while the tidal section was a muddy brown watercourse ebbing and flowing between cliffs of jumbled sandstone. The creek was almost strangled at its mouth by dense mangrove stands; it was only big tides that kept it alive.

The man had driven hundreds of kilometres from the nearest town over rough corrugated roads and heavily eroded tracks to this spot, magnificent in its beauty and virginal in its isolation. The tall cane grass that crowded the track as he edged his four-wheel drive along the slippery track suddenly stopped as he dove onto a rocky plain covered with spinifex grass. Ancient baobab trees and spindly gums struggled for survival in thin sandy soil that covered the sandstone bedrock.

He guessed only a dozen people a year would make it this far, and this year's bunch was still a few weeks off as they waited for the dry season to become firmly established and the tracks to dry out and rivers to settle properly within their banks. He was keen, however, and had tackled the washed out tracks and tough creek crossings to be the first into this isolated region.

He traveled alone, preferring his own company. This prevented any disagreements with traveling partners of how long to stay in any spot and where to go next. He understood the dangers of being alone, but was an experienced traveler and had already made several trips into this part of the continent.

On the first day he had erected a crude shelter consisting of a worn tarpaulin strung between some spindly trees. Underneath he arranged a battered camping chair, small folding table and his swag. There was little chance of rain and the tarpaulin served to keep off the heavy dew at night and provide shade during the day. A smouldering fire was maintained to spread smoke throughout the camp in an effort to keep the biting sand

flies and mosquitoes at bay. The camp was but a speck of human incursion in the rugged grandeur of the isolated northwest coastline of Australia.

The fishing had been as he had expected. Long casts into the muddy water and steady retrieves as the lure throbbed its way through the water attracted hard-hitting strikes in swirls of water from powerful fish racing off, sometimes gaining freedom when the line broke. He had experienced the exhilaration as high leaping silver-bodied fish erupted from the dirty water in a display of red-gilled fearlessness and the will to live. There was a feeling of satisfaction as he released most of the fish caught each day.

It was on the third day that he had first noticed he was not alone on the creek.

At first he thought a hunting shark had caused the sudden eruption of fish along the opposite bank. He had seen it before along similar creeks. The mosquito's drone is drowned out by the noise from the shower of fish as they leapt in panic waves from the hunter below.

The sinister presence of a more dangerous predator had come at dusk, when he had seen the drab snout of the croc as it had snapped shut on the final moments of an unwary pelican. The sound of the jaws as they locked shut, more than the sight had sent an icy shiver down his spine. Any feelings of the man's dominance on the creek had been replaced by a primeval wariness and a renewed acceptance of the nakedness of his position.

Of course the existence of crocodiles had never been any doubt. But the size of the massive head had surprised him. There were tales about giant crocs that had managed to outsmart the shooters earlier in the century - myths and fable most of them. But not this one.

The sensible thing would have been to leave the master to his domain. But the man had spent enough time in these parts to know that anyone following him to his lonely spot would be in danger as the monster's food supply dwindled in the advancing dry season.

City folk, in their expensive 4WD vehicles were now reaching even the most remote parts of the country. While they may be street smart, their ignorance of the dangers of the cunning saltwater crocodile that stalked its prey and attacked when they ventured too close to the water's edge once too often, would be their own downfall. It was best to remove the beast.

So he had taken his old and trusted 303 rifle from behind the seats of his vehicle and unwrapping it from its well oiled cloth he set off across the stony ground towards the gorge. He had picked out a good position to wait for the croc as it passed on its patrol. The large flat slab of rock jutted out over the steepest part of the gorge afforded a perfect angle for the shot. One careful shot would be all that would be needed to penetrate the crocodile's thick skull.

The edge of the gorge was a mixture of large sandstone slabs lying at various tilted angles, between which spiny spinifex filled all the gaps. The leaves of the spinefix have sharp points, capable of penetrating jeans, so the man's progress involved stepping and leaping from rock to rock to avoid them.

He paused for a moment and picked his path forward, one that took him close to the cliff edge. While all the rocks so far had been stable, one was unbalanced and as he leapt to it his weight caused the rock to tilt, throwing him off-balance. His search for an easy shot on unsuspecting prey suddenly turned into a free fall down the steep cliff face that ended in blinding pain moments before he blacked out.

He was not sure how long it was till he came around. He found himself lying on his back on the muddy bank of the creek, just a few metres from the water's edge. He tried to sit up, but the pain from his contorted right leg caused him to gasp with pain when he moved. His right arm and wrist ached but he could move it. His head ached and his eyes were half closed with dried blood from a cut on his forehead. Twisting around he saw there was little hope of scrambling back up the sheer 15-metre face of the gorge.

He looked back at the water and realised he was exposed to attack from the crocodile at any moment. The situation was confirmed as he saw the water swirl as the primeval hunter quickly submerged to avoid detection by this new prey.

The man realised the tables have been turned. His hands shook as much from fear as from the after effects of his fall. A temporary refuge was the large boulder that he had bounced off before coming to rest on the muddy bank. With an incoming tide he knew he had to reach the top of this rock to avoid being overtaken by the rising water.

Retrieving his rifle that lay half-buried in the mud beside him, he bent his left leg and burying his heel in the mud, pushed hard to force his body back up the slippery bank. The movement and clinging mud made the bones of his broken leg move and with each push he screamed in pain and lay gasping on the mud panting before repeating the move.

The salvation of the boulder was imperative in the face of the incoming tide. The sanctuary offered by the boulder would offer his jaded mind time to think of a way to prevent his life ending in the jaws for the giant reptile, just as the hapless pelican had suffered. He again scanned the water but saw nothing. He knew the croc would be floating just centimetres under the water. The new hunter had time on his side and was in no rush.

Clouds of mosquitoes and sand flies kept up a steady assault as, with agonizing slowness he pushed and pulled his way through the mud to the base of the boulder. One of the many stunted mangroves lining the bank provided the opportunity he needed for easing his way up the side of the rock.

Aching muscles and the laborious climb sapped his strength while his broken leg caused him to shriek every time it bumped the boulder or mangrove roots. His trusted 303 added to the frustration as the barrel caught the tangled branches of the mangrove. A desire to shed the cumbersome rifle was dismissed with the realisation he may still be able to kill croc, though his own future, here in this remote location may only hold a long, painful and lonely death.

"Come on you bastard you can do it!" he cursed to himself as he made his way to the upper part of the boulder. "Another metre and you can have a rest!"

With clawing fingers he flung himself onto the peak of the boulder. The scream that escaped his clenched teeth was echoed from the rocky walls of the gorge as a wave of

nauseating pain swept through his body from his shattered leg. His head spun and throbbing brain whirled again into the escape of dark unconsciousness.

The sun was high in the sky when he eventually came to. His head swam in the oppressive heat reflected off the rocks and any movement made him feel the jagged ends of bone buried in the muscles of his leg. Twisting his torso he managed to achieve a sitting position with his back against the cliff. Twenty metres in front of him he could make out the ugly hump of the croc's snout and the ripples it created as it gently moved its tail to maintain his position against the tide.

"Now," he hissed. "If I can get rid of you, you bastard, half my problems will be over."

He had one round in the breach. He checked his shirt pocket for the other six he had stuffed in there back at camp, but his search for the six revealed only one. The others had obviously scattered in the mud during his fall.

He let his head fall back against the rock face and inwardly cursed. Two shots. Probably more than he would be able to get at the big lizard anyway, though it would have been nice to have had more. He carefully checked the rifle, scraped the baked mud away from the barrel, stock and trigger. Using the spare bullet he cleaned the muzzle and sights before propping the rifle up on his good leg.

If he could kill the crocodile, maybe he could float up the creek to where the sheer sides dipped low enough to provide easy access to the ground and back to camp. Maybe he could slide himself along the ground or if he could stand, use his rifle as a crutch. Once there he could try to raise help using his CB radio.

Licking chapped lips with a swollen tongue he trained the sights on the twin lumps that drifted with the tide. The water was only a metre below the base of the rock, within easy lunging distance for an attacking crocodile. It would only be two-and-half hours before the water lapped at his feet.

Slowly he squeezed the trigger, pain spreading from his finger through his injured wrist. That shot rang out and a burst of water erupted between the two lumps that slowly moved to become two separate sticks. He stared open mouthed in disbelief. In his dazed state he had shot the wrong target!

Twenty metres from the separating sticks a swirl of water showed where the croc had quickly submerged at the sound of the shot. The rifle clattered against the rock as his sweat soaked body slumped in defeat. One shot and no reason why the croc would not attack at any time. The water was close enough to him that at any moment a mad flurry could mark the last moments of his life.

Within an hour the water was breaching the top of the rock. His head ached from the glare and concentration of watching the croc. Several times the quarry had submerged. Each time his furtive searches of the rising water had been rewarded as he saw the tiny ripples caused by the surfacing reptile. The dark snout barely showed above the water.

It could have easily been a fire-darkened pandanus fruit floating there, but half a metre away the twin lumps of the eyes were just visible. Most of the six-metre body was hidden as the crocodile ever so slowly pushed forward towards its prey on the rock. But it was

much closer now, perhaps only 15m away, its tail now visible as it gently moved against the current towards the man.

He knew that a shot now would be useless. The angle and the thick bony skull would result in a ricochet. His only chance would be when the croc came closer, but it would be a gamble as to how long he could wait as the croc would use all its cunning after his wasted shot.

His injured leg had swollen and strained at his jeans while the exposed skin at the top of his boot was blotched purple. He knew that delirium would soon affect him. Lack of water meant that if the croc didn't get him, dehydration and blood poisoning would.

It was now he started thinking about his final bullet. Should he wait and try for a final shot at the crocodile, one that might fail and his life end in further pain and drowning as the attacker grabbed him and dragged him back into the water, or use that final shot to take his own life quickly and painlessly...

A swirl 10 metres away brought him out of his stupor as the crocodile suddenly submerged. The man, panicking and thinking that this was the final attack, backed up against the wall and swung the rifle to a spot he anticipated the croc would emerge.

"Come on you bastard," he screamed. "Come on and we'll go together!"

Minutes went by and the man slumped as fatigue and pain took its toll. He closed his eyes in half-consciousness and rested his head back against the cliff.

Through ringing ears the deep throb of an old single stroke engine dragged memories from his youth when his father had taken him fishing in a boat with an engine just like that. Slow, reliable and easy to work on. A smile split his cracked lips at the boyhood visions that filled his head. His father sat at the tiller while he sat in the bow with a breeze on his face and gazing across the sparkling blue water as they puttered across the lake to their favorite fishing spot.

He stiffened suddenly and was brought back to the present with the realization that he was not imagining the thump, thump, of the old motor of his boyhood. Cocking his head he was sure it was real and it was getting louder.

It was with some disbelief as he watched the faded aquamarine boat, low in the water and with scarcely any free board come around the bend in the creek. The brightly painted rail and red eye painted on the bow was not typical of the normal boats that plied these waters.

A chuckle escaped him as he realized he was about to be rescued by a party of Indonesian fishermen poaching trochus shell. A search for fresh water would have been the only thing to cause them to come up this isolated creek.

Frantically waving his arms he shouted, even though it would have been impossible for them not to see him in this creek no more than 60 metres wide. An excited chatter greeted him as the boat finally drifted to a bumping halt against his rock. With agitated gestures he outlined his story.

The crew listened then moved to the far side of the boat where an animated discussion started. The crew's conference on board the boat seemed to last forever as the crew argued amongst themselves whether this half-crazed Australian was worth rescuing.

"Take me on board," the man gasped through his pain as he struggled across his now wet rock towards the boat. "PLEASE!"

One of the crew, a young man dressed in a tattered Nike tshirt turned to him. "You wait, we decide," he said in faltering English.

"What do you bloody well mean, decide?" the man replied incredulously. "If you leave me here I'll be dead before you clear the creek!"

"You wait," was the simple reply. The chatter and argument continued, with the crew casting constant glances at the man and occasional pointing in the direction of the creek mouth. Eventually they seemed to reach a decision.

"We take you to Australia fish boat we see yesterday. But you must promise us," said the Nike man.

"Yes, yes, anything!" the man pleaded.

"You make fish boat captain not say we here, we need shell. Understand?"

"Yes, yes of course. I will stop them from reporting you and I won't say anything till you have gone home."

The Indonesian fishermen considered a moment.

"OK, we hurry, get good water first. All water go from here soon," he said pointing towards the mouth of the creek. "Hurry, Hurry."

Several crew members leapt onto the rock and the man found himself being hoisted on board, his trusty rifle quickly spirited away as the old motor once again beat into life.

Two hours the crocodile lay on the bottom, warily sensing the thumping vibrations of the old motor as the aquamarine boat passed overhead.

Shaded by the wheelhouse, the now delirious man felt no pain as he was once again lost in the boyhood memories as the old thumping motor pushed the aquamarine boat towards the creek mouth and the open sea.

Footnote

Crystal Creek is a real place located on the far north coast of the Kimberly region of Western Australia and is shown on the book cover. The author visited the site of this story in 1989. On the next page are two images taken during my visit. A big crocodile was sighted during his stay and the sand flies and mosquitoes were very much in evidence! The area has since been returned to its traditional owners. The big croc is probably still there.

About the author

Matt Eliason has traveled Australia extensively and has had more jobs than he has fingers and toes, including: police officer, journalist, government communications person and

currently business owner. He has three children and lives an abnormally quiet life in a small inland city in Queensland, Australia.

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Looking east, inland



View from the southern bank