

Death of a monster

OF all the bold and colourful crocodile shooters who lived and hunted on Cape York Peninsula during the middle of the 20th century, there was no husband-and-wife team as famous as Ron and Krystina Pawlowski.

In July 1957, Krys, an attractive blonde Polish immigrant then aged 30, killed Australia's biggest known crocodile with a single shot on the banks of the Norman River near the Gulf of Carpentaria town of Normanton. The saltwater crocodile measured 8.63m, a size unheard of in Australia and one that still draws scepticism from some people today.

The shot made her a worldwide celebrity and earned her the nickname One Shot and a place in the Guinness Book of Records. It was the shot that made her a legend. Just below the eye, a sudden and perfect kill.

Yet it was also the shot that she later regretted, a split-second that took the life of a two-tonne saurian that was almost certainly unique among the tens of thousands that populated northern Australia. "I would never shoot one like that again," she said later. "It was such a magnificent specimen."

Having suffered at the hands of the Germans and Russians respectively during World War II, Ron and Krys separately migrated to Australia, where they met in Perth. Ron was a gold prospector and kangaroo shooter who would go to town for supplies. Krys ran the boarding house where he stayed. There was an instant attraction.

George and Stefan, Krys's sons from a failed first marriage, remember the excitement of leaving Perth with the family - including their new dad - in an FJ Holden loaded with all their belongings and heading east across the Nullarbor Plain. They headed north at Port Augusta, took odd jobs and lived off their wits. They reached Karumba in Queensland, where the FJ conked out. Stranded by the wet season, Ron built a shack and fed his family with fish and wild pigs. He also shot dingoes that attracted a bounty of two shillings and sixpence.

The Pawlowskis got into the crocodile business in 1956 in an unexpected and dramatic way. Ron was working on his vehicle when Stefan ran up shouting: "Crocodile, Barbara."

"I looked up and, God almighty, there was my four-year-old daughter, Barbara, playing on the beach with her back to a 12-foot (3.7m) crocodile," Ron later recalled.

"I reached in the car and pulled out my heavy-calibre rifle and blew the croc's head apart with an expanding bullet."

George says: "An old-timer in the town helped us skin the crocodile. It was a bit of a butchered job but we sent it off to a dealer in Brisbane and finished off getting 10 quid for it. In those days 13 quid was the basic wage, so Dad thought we were on to something."

In typical do-it-yourself fashion, Ron built a 5m boat out of scrap and timber and named it Joey.

To start with, the couple had no idea what they were doing but soon established themselves as efficient hunters. It was hot, dirty and dangerous work, but Ron and Krys had survived the terrors of war and were accustomed to hardship.

Krys soon made a name for herself as a glamorous shooter who wore jungle greens and bright red lipstick. Newspapers lapped up her story. She became an expert taxidermist and established a business in mounted hatchlings. She famously told reporters while sipping champagne during a press conference in Brisbane: "Even though I spend hours, day and night, wading thigh-deep through mud and swamps, it's good to catch a glint of my nail polish as I pull the trigger of the rifle."

Krys also made her name as a crack shot, although she'd never handled a firearm before settling in Karumba. "She was better than me with a pistol and she was much better with a rifle at moving targets from a boat," Ron told reporters. She could also skin a croc faster than any man.

Ron and Krys developed an interest in photography and journalism, and Ron won an award for photography. One of his documentaries, *Woman's Strangest Job*, featured Krys in action, shooting crocodiles in the wild.

"I went everywhere with a gun in one hand, a camera in the other and a typewriter in my swag," Ron said.

By 1956, the Pawlowskis had established Australia's first experimental crocodile farm at Karumba, breeding animals from eggs collected in the wild. They also studied their feeding habits and the effects of various types of food on the crocodiles' skin. It was pioneering work, and Ron and Krys became early conservationists. They were convinced that crocodile farms and careful management would preserve the species.

"Crocodile killing had begun to disgust me, as did any other kind of hunting that involved killing," Ron said.

As a shooter turned conservationist, Ron toured Australia and the US espousing his cause. He addressed the UN on saving crocodiles from extinction. But when Joh Bjelke-Petersen came to power in Queensland in 1967, the Pawlowskis' call for crocodile protection was ignored.

"I wanted to ban the export of all crocodile products, which would have resulted in the preservation of the animals, but the political attitude of the day was: 'If it moves, shoot it, and if it grows cut it down,'" Ron said.

A bitter campaign was waged against Ron's conservationist movement and he was targeted by a government intent on destroying his business and influence. The special leasehold on his crocodile farm land was revoked after he refused to soften his public comments against the government.

According to George, the Bjelke-Petersen regime went to ridiculous lengths to silence his father.

"They even tried to get him on a firearms charge. In the film, Woman's Strangest Job, Mum is shown shooting a croc with a revolver, and she didn't have a licence for it," George says. "As a matter of fact, it wasn't hers. Dad borrowed it for the movie. "Anyway, a friendly copper tipped Dad off that there was going to be a raid and to get rid of the gun. We were told the order came from the top of the government. It was one of the many vicious attempts by the government of the day to shut Dad up."

In 1968, sump oil was dumped in their pools, endangering the stock of crocodiles. Ron and Krys cleaned the animals by hand with detergent, and only one died. It was an act of sabotage that bitterly disappointed the couple. In December that year, Ron shot his entire stock of 140 and walked away from the farm.

But he never gave up his attempts to protect his one-time prey and in 1972 was invited to give evidence to the House of Representatives select committee on wildlife conservation. He told the committee that Queensland's crocodile population had declined by 98 per cent since the 1950s and recommended a total ban on hunting.

The Whitlam Labour government followed the advice and protected saltwater and freshwater species. The Queensland government followed suit.

Ron and Krys estimated they had shot and killed 10,000 crocodiles. Legend has it that Krys missed only three times.

In 1998, at home near Mareeba, Queensland, the woman who shot the world's biggest saltwater crocodile said she was "really sorry" to have ended

its life. "He never woke up, and he never knew we were there. He was the most beautiful animal."

Ron, the fearless crocodile hunter who made his name as a killer of the species but later became its greatest protector, agreed. "If someone offered me a million dollars to shoot a crocodile now, I wouldn't.

"One Shot" Krys died peacefully in March 2004. Ron, an old-world gentleman, lives in Queensland.

This is an edited extract from Croc! by Robert Reid, to be published on December 5 (Allen & Unwin, \$26.95).

Extract Reference :-

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