

The Vernon I Knew

by Lars Engvall

BOBP's first Director pays a moving tribute to Vernon Pietersz – who served as Fisheries Secretary of Sri Lanka, as BOBP's first Development Adviser and as FAO's Regional Fishery Adviser in Bangkok. Vernon passed away in Bangkok on August 30, 2004.

My association with Vernon dates back to 1975, when he was Director of Planning in the Ministry of Fisheries in Sri Lanka and I was Project Manager of a FAO regional fisheries project headquartered in Colombo.

Vernon was a first-class fisheries bureaucrat. He never accepted anything at face value. He always did his homework before any decision or action. A fisheries generalist with wide general knowledge, he took great pains to cope with any specialist subject.

He was never voluble: a listener rather than a talker. But when he did speak, it was the voice of reason, of confidence, of authority. Tact and diplomacy were his watchwords. He had a great flair for conveying a negative decision or outcome in a pleasant manner, without offending the person concerned. Result: his decision was immediately accepted.

In the early days of BOBP, Vernon was an invaluable manager. As officer-in-charge during my absence on duty travel, he always took the same action as I would have done myself. The only difference was that he did it better.

Vernon had a rare command of the English language. He often sat late in the office to help refine an important report or a confidential presentation. While ordering another new safari suit on a visit to Bangkok, he advised a leading tailor there to correct the English in his advertisements.

Vernon was warm-hearted as friend, colleague or boss. He was a source of sage advice to the many young "Associate Experts" from Europe who came to Chennai and BOBP, helping them adjust to their new environment.

His integrity was unimpeachable; his quiet manner was always appreciated; his wit and sense of humour clinched many an argument and won him many a friend. I'll miss him.

A Diplomat to the Core

by S R Madhu

His full name was Vernon Lionel Constantine Pietersz, but his middle name was "diplomat". In the early and middle 1980s, BOBP was often in ferment. The 40-odd people in its Chennai office apparently touched people a hundred times that number in many countries. Days were long and tempers short. VLCP was an ace problem-shooter. Sometimes one saw a staffer charging into his office, nostrils afire – and 10 minutes later the same person stepped out gingerly, looking sheepish and abashed. Vernon's reasonableness rubbed off on every one.

"Your Customs people at the airport are very nice," Pietersz once told me. "Not many people say that," I responded truthfully. He said: "The young man at the Customs looked at my passport and said 'You were Secretary of Fisheries in Sri Lanka, I'm sorry I can't stand up while talking to you because I have an injured knee'." Only someone special inspires that kind of respect among the Customs staff at airports.

I was a personal witness to the respect that Festus Perera, then Minister for Fisheries, accorded him. Festus told him in detail about a new policy he had in mind, and asked anxiously, "Am I doing right, Vernon?" "Very right," said Vernon reassuringly, but added many reservations. I'm sure that resulted in a better policy.



Mr Vernon Pietersz (1929–2004)

He was soft-spoken, but he urged speakers at workshops to be loud and clear. "Maybe it's a cultural trait but often we speak too soft. Please speak up." He was the ideal workshop rapporteur because he combined fisheries competence with proficiency in English.

He was a good writer too, concise and precise, with a rare ability to convert masses of technical data into crystal-clear statements. I still remember his article in *Bay of Bengal News* assessing the impact of BOBP's aquaculture project in Phang Nga, five years after the project. Or his technical paper summarizing 15 years of BOBP work on beachcraft development.

Says Arne Andreasson, who succeeded Vernon as Development Adviser at BOBP: "Vernon was the leader on my first mission to Bangladesh in 1977. He taught me a lot about fisheries and fisheries administrations in South Asia. When we were writing up a report on small-scale fisheries in Bangladesh more than 25 years ago, he virtually rewrote every sentence. A very frustrating experience. But what a learning process on fisheries, diplomacy and report writing!

"Many years later (early 1990s), we were together again, this time producing a workshop report. I handed my draft to Vernon, expecting it to be slaughtered. I was surprised that there were almost no corrections. I asked: "Vernon, what is wrong, are you getting old?" The typical Vernon reply: "No, but I

believe your writing has improved a bit over the years”.

Says Uwe Tietze, a senior fisheries officer in FAO Rome: “I remember Vernon as a person with a deep sense of humour. On one occasion I was invited to his house for dinner. He showed his guests around and talked about his new antenna dish on the roof terrace with which he could see Sri Lanka. One of the guests wanted to be shown the terrace. Vernon took us there. The guest: “From where can I see Sri Lanka?” Vernon: “Not from here, from downstairs in the living room on TV.”

Says Rolf Willmann, now a senior planner in FAO Rome, “Way back in 1979, one of the little problems of daily life was getting pure unadulterated milk. The bicycle boys often supplied milk diluted with water of varied origin and quality. Vernon and his wife got a farmer to come home every morning with his cow, where she was milked under the supervision of his house-helper! “As a young professional I have greatly benefited from Vernon’s guidance in many ways but I remember this practical lesson very well.”

Dr Armin Lindquist, formerly Assistant Director-General of Fisheries at FAO, Rome, describes Mr Pietersz as a “dedicated officer” whose knowledge and competence helped in better understanding and implementation of FAO policies.

Some Personal Insights from a Close Friend

by **K Sivasubramaniam**

Vernon Pietersz was born on the 11th of March 1929, in Wennapuwa, and had a brother and two sisters. His college education was in Wennapuwa, Katugastota and Peradeniya University, from where he obtained an honours degree in history in 1951.

He joined the Fisheries Department in 1955 as an Assistant Director, and rose to the position of Director, Planning and Programming. His contribution to development schemes such as motorisation of fishing craft, introduction of synthetic materials, fabrication of fishing gear or establishment of training schools for youth from coastal communities, was immense. Hailing from a coastal area, he had an inherent interest in the well-being of coastal communities. He was appointed Secretary to the Ministry of Fisheries in 1977 and retired from government service towards the end of 1978.

He was ever mild-mannered and soft-spoken and never visibly angry. He was courteous to his superiors, silent if he was ignored or overlooked, and unfailingly kind to his subordinates and to the many fisherfolk who came to him with their problems. He was always very fair in his judgements and decisions. He smiled often but rarely laughed

out aloud. Since he was equally good to everyone, it was difficult to gauge his inner feelings.

Vernon was known as much for his dedication as for his honesty. He rarely took leave. Working late in the office was a habit – whether he had to scrutinise reports, hold discussions or attend meetings. He never wasted time in gossip or idle chatter.

No wonder he was very popular with the entire staff of the Fisheries Department. He would break no rules, nor encourage anyone else to do so, and would not defend anyone who did.

In 1979, he joined the BOBP as Senior Development Adviser in Chennai. Five years later, he moved to Bangkok as FAO’s Regional Fisheries Officer, and retired from the FAO in 1991. He and his wife Chandra spent their retirement in Sri Lanka, also visiting their two daughters in the US and a son who now lives in Thailand. Vernon also helped out Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Fisheries whenever necessary as a consultant. He served on the Board of Governors of NARA for a few years in the late 1990s.

I remember with pleasure the social chats and meetings with Vernon after we had both retired. We had a lot to talk about — fisheries, the fishing industry in Sri Lanka, FAO, family and friends. His death in August 2004 was a shock. I have lost a much-valued friend.



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