

Interview with Brad Ives, captain of SV Kwai.  
Honolulu, Hawaii. 2015

Stephanie Guyer-Stevens: Thanks for letting me come on your boat, it's been an incredible trip.

Brad Ives: Yeah I'm glad it worked out for you. You can't over plan these things you just have to..

S: I know it felt to you like over planning I'm sure.

B: I just meant you know, we ended up not going back to Christmas [Island] which seemed like a big change, but that's just how it is.

S: Well actually it was really. I mean it was a little bit of an arduous journey going north. But actually, I was really glad to stay on the boat, because I think if I'd only done that loop I wouldn't have gotten to know the crew, I wouldn't have gotten to know the personality of the boat at all. You know. I would've just seen what that boat is like in that little tiny cluster of islands, and it's obviously got so much more of a personality than that.

B: That's the whole thing, is the huge distances between places that the boat has to handle, the boat is built for. But it's what it's all about.

S: And this passage between Washington and Honolulu, is that the longest passage that you do?

B: Well actually between Christmas and Honolulu is a little bit longer but it's basically the same passage.

S: How long is that?

B: It's another 150 miles. And that's usually what we do because we almost always go back to Christmas before heading north. And a lot of that decision this time, some of that, was based on the winds were not strong trade winds which they normally are? So, you don't really want to start from Washington because it's that much further west. You gotta fight your way further east. But in this case, with the reversal of the wind patterns and the lower first half of the trip, it didn't really matter.

S: Yeah it was amazing we had this incredible southwest [wind], usually nonexistent, huh?

B: It's very unusual. It's El Niño - it's all tied in with El Niño.

S: So, I have a lot of questions about the Kwai but I also have a lot of questions about you. I mean Ben was telling me that your ancestor is Nathaniel Bowditch, so you have a little bit of a history of being on the sea.

B: yup.

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B: He was - I'm a direct descendant, and also a lot of other people in my family and that side of the family were captains in New England.

S: So, has it been consistent since the 1700's that your family has been at sea?

B: No, I would say not because my parents or grandparents generation there was

nobody who went to sea. But before that it was captains.

S: So, your great grandfather was a captain. What kind of a captain?

B: He was on a schooner that went out of New England and went all over. And the tall ships too, the clipper ships. That's a little further back.

S: Your great grandfather was on schooner, and before that was on clipper ships.

B: I haven't followed it actually to know but I just know that from the stories that they work at, I can't tell you he was on this or that. It would be fun to research it can be one but I haven't done it.

S: So when did you start sailing?

B: Well I ran away to sea when I was 20, and got involved in a boat that was a floating commune.

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Basically 20 people got together and decided to go buy a boat. The idea was to fix it up in six months and sail around the world in two years and go back to college. And we did it, but after two years we were still fixing it up and it took eight years to finally sail around the world and most of the people did not survive that trip. You couldn't - it wasn't an investment. You put in \$1500. And that bought you a - you could be on the boat but if you weren't on the boat you had no say in what happened. So, it wasn't really an investment. So, some people came and did some time. A lot of people didn't like it and left. In the end there were over 50 owners of the boat.

S: Where was the home port.

B: The home port - there wasn't a home port. But we sailed around the world and we had the name on the stern - we actually sailed around the world without ever registering the boat. Something you can't do any more - this isn't the 70's.

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You can't do that now. You can't come close. Finally, we registered it in St. Thomas because we wanted to go to the US and we figured we needed some kind of registry to go to the US.

S: So where did you get on it? Like where were you living when you got involved?

B: I was living in Massachusetts. I went to Denmark to join the boat where they just bought it and we started from there. At that point you could buy boats for really cheap. We bought a 90 foot boat for \$7,000.

S: Sailboat.

B: She was originally a sailboat but when we bought her she had no sail on her. But she was originally a three masted sailing vessel and we rigged her again as that.

S: And so, is that where you got the idea to do that, was from that boat?

B: Yes, the second boat I had was commercial. We did cargo with it and that was that evolved from the first ship. And now Kwai is the third ship I've done.

S: And so, what was the name of the second boat.

B: The second boat was Edna.

S: Oh. Ok, right.

B: Which I later sold to Nancy Griffith and Terry.

S: So where was the Edna? How did you and Terry and Nancy meet? 0:07:24.53

B: Well I met Nancy when she bought Edna. This was 1987. And I met Terry through that connection I'm not sure exactly where but we have a group of people that know each other from that time.

S: And the Edna was in the Pacific?

B: yeah

S: ok. But had you brought the Edna from—

B: I brought her from Denmark and fixed her up in Europe, in Portugal. And we worked a little while in the West Indies, the east coast. We started a lumber business that I ended up keeping actually from Surinam in the West Indies to Saint John.

S: Really?

B: Yup, Cruz Bay. I bought her in '78 and I sold her in '87. So it was... it was in the 80's because we didn't finish her until April of '80 and then we came over to the east coast.

S: I think I heard about you from a friend of mine who was born and raised in St John. She was telling me there was a sailing cargo ship.

B: We worked [with] Glen, who has Mongoose Junction, an architect. And then we worked with David Knight. He had a wood business there for a while.

S: I know who he is. I don't know him personally. Oh ok. So, you were bringing lumber to them.

B: Yeah. And to St Thomas, and to the US east coast and to Beckway. Quite a few islands we stopped at.

S: And so, did you have the Edna in Martha's Vineyard? I heard something about Martha's Vineyard.

B: No, we had the Edna once in Martha's Vineyard, but we had Kwai in Martha's Vineyard for a year and a half.

S: Ok, and I think that's when I first heard about you.

B: We were living there and I was working at Canada Benjamin? The boatyard there. And April, my wife, had a job at the health food company, White Wave, she was the regional manager and we were living on Martha's Vineyard. And that's when we actually bought Kwai and ended up bringing her over there, 'cause we had a great deal from Ralph Packer because he had a dock there that he let us use.

S: And so, where did you bring her from?

B: We bought her in Norway.

S: ok.

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B: And she was abandoned, she had been burned for insurance and was going to the scrap yard. I was looking for another boat for another guy actually, Ralph

Packer wanted to buy a boat. And I was looking for a boat for him and we found her, and realized that we could make something go with her.

S: And so, what was she in her past life?

B: She was built as a fishing boat. A drift net fishing. They set their drift net on the side of the boat you know they stay out for months because there was not freezer in those days it was salt fish and that was a big trade in Europe. The first salt fish of the season would always come in and be presented to the Queen in Holland. It was like cod in the east coast. It was a big business with a lot of tradition. So, she was built for that in 1950, but then in the 60's she was bought and went to Norway and converted to carbon. And then her last trade as a lot of these boats was asphalt, they'd load them up with hot asphalt and drive to somewhere and get it out quickly to pave a road or make a parking lot or whatever.

S: So, when was the Kwai built originally?

B: 1950.

S: So she was never built to sail.

B: yeah she had a sailing rig but not so much to go long distances, it was a small short rig that was intended to keep her stable while on the fishing grounds so that they could work the fish and stay headed up into the wind and hold their position basically. I mean you could have used the sails too if the engine broke down. It was just a short rig, very similar to the rig we're putting on her now.

S: So, with the Edna, you bought the Edna with the intention - was the Edna also rigged to sail or-

B: She was also built as a herring fishing boat.

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B: And she had a sailing rig on her the same kind of small rig at one time. But when I bought her there was no sailing rig on her again but we put the rig back on.

S: and you did that in Portugal?

B: Yes

S: And so, once you did that why did you decide to sell the Edna?

B: It had some setbacks. Really I wanted to live ashore and I couldn't find anyone else to run the boat. My family had been on board and they had gotten off in Hawaii when we came out to the Pacific. And I wanted to be with them and live on shore and I just really couldn't find anybody else who could do both the captain and the business. And so, I decided to sell her.

S: And so how did you and Nancy - how did you and Nancy connect?

B: I don't know I think it was word of mouth I'm pretty sure we didn't advertise it.

S: Because the Edna was still in the Atlantic and-

B: No no no, we'd been in the Pacific for four years.

S: I see ok so word of mouth.

B: I sold her first to a guy who was going to make a dinner cruise out of her in Manila Bay. They actually put a deposit and came to pick her up and then the guy who runs the dinner cruise boats here Rob - and he came to Palau where we were

doing the sail and convinced the Filipino guy not to buy her.

S: Did you give him his deposit back?

B: No, we ended up with the deposit. It wasn't much. But then I got the – I think Nancy had already contacted me before that and I said well she's still for sail. And she bought her.

S: So, it was Nancy's idea to run cargo to the Line Islands. Is that right?

B: Yes, that's right. We had never worked in the Line Islands.

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B: We'd been working in Micronesia, all north of the equator. Well the Line Islands are still north of the equator. She had been - I'm not sure how she knew about the Line islands I guess she'd been there on her other boat she had a boat with Terry, the Goodewind.

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B: So, I think she'd sailed there, so he knew about it. And she worked there - I did one trip with her the first trip and was very successful and she - just the politics - actually what really happened, the guy who she worked with decided to buy her own boat and they yanked her license and she went on to the Cook Islands. And worked there for three years before she lost the boat on the reef.

S: So at what point did you go, I should do that?

B: No I didn't - that was not an idea really except when we got the idea going and started going with it. Remember this took a long time it wasn't four years fixing her up before we came out to the Pacific. So, it was organic but really we chose the route because you go across the wind both ways. Hawaii to Raratonga, the Cook Islands is pretty much a north south run and that way you can use the trade winds all the way, because a boat wants to go across the wind. It's much better than going either – upwind of course is slow, and going straight downwind is slow. But what's the most efficient way to use the wind is to have the wind on the beam, on the side. And so that was out intention in picking the route. And right away it was clear that it was a winner. Because Kiribas was not supplied, the Line Islands was not supplied. There was no ship going there from Hawaii, there was only the plane. And they were not very well supplied by Tarawa, their capital, which was almost twice as far as Hawaii is from Christmas Island.

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S: Wow, yeah, I didn't realize it was that far.

B: Not quite. It's 1800 miles. But that trip is straight upwind and straight downwind so even for a motorship you don't want to go straight upwind.

So, I went also to the cook Islands and discussed with them because they had also a shortage of shipping. And you know our idea was to keep serve both countries. You never know when something is going to go wrong and we've balanced it. We can

go wherever there's the most work and the most need, and we've spent quite a lot of time in the Cook Islands when they were short on ships. And now they're not and we've tapered off, because we'll still serve the northern group because they're close enough that we can get there and get back in a short amount of time. But whether or not we go back to Raratonga again, that's going to depend on the shipping down there.

S: So how many years have you been doing this with the Kwai?

B: we started in 2006, so we're in our 10th year.

S: Yeah, and what does the future hold?

B: I don't know. Business wise we're very subject to changes in the exchange rates between the US dollar and the Australian dollar and the New Zealand dollar. In 2008, the only year we lost money, was because those rates. You know the US dollar strengthened and the other currencies devalued a lot 30-40%. And it's actually happening again now although it's not so extreme but it is a big challenge for us.

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B: A cheap dollar is much better for us because we buy our cargo in the US. So, that makes if we pay in US dollars and sell in Australian, a weak US dollar gives us a much bigger advantage.

S: So where does the Australian dollar come in ?

B: Oh, that's Kiribas. Kiribas uses Australian dollar and Cook Islands uses NZ dollar.

S: I didn't realize that. So, it's a sort of touch and go operation still even after ten years.

B: No, it's not really touch and go. because we have so much – we have so much goodwill is mostly why. We could do great with the people, the people have never been an issue and we do pretty well with the government. You know with the licensing authorities. We manage to stay out of the politics of both areas pretty well. And that's been the need of the ship because the ship does such an important job in both countries. Even more in Kiribas than in the Cooks. So, we - we can survive a pretty bad exchange rate. At a certain point our goods will get too expensive and we'll have to find some other way to do it. For now, we're ok. Even with the high US dollar we're still all right.

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B: And we also now, what's changed since we started is we get work inside the Line Islands which is not subject to any exchange rate problems because that's all in AU dollars. When we convert it back to the US we don't get as much but that work within the country is–

S: what kind of work is that?

B: The passengers and local cargoes. And that, that is a different license than the license we have to bring cargo in from the outside. And it's

regulated by the foreign investment commission. And that license the government gave to us, they said here apply for this and we're going to give it to you. Because they wanted a ship that would sail to Christmas, Fanning [Island] and Washington [Island] because they are so short of ships that are able to operate such a long way from civilization and survive.

Evy!

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Talking about going to get food with Evy.

Zoom 0178 [New Tape]

S: So, I was where you were in the middle of telling me something. You were explaining how the licensing works because they needed you to run people.

B: And then in the Cooks was a similar situation but they never gave us- they did finally give us a license to carry passengers and cargo between islands. Only after they lost everything except one ship so they really needed a ship. But they also gave it to us every time we were there every time there was cargo they gave it to us but we had to get a particular dispensation they call. And that's the situation now because there's plenty of ships there and it's political. The whole shipping industry is hugely political in the Cook Islands because it's a nation of islands and it's the life blood. And today there's three boats operating there which is plenty because you don't need more than three boats operating.

S: So, do you think you're going to stop operating?

B: No, we'll still go to the northern group. Because there - our business is really different. IN the Cooks we are also licensed to sell directly off the ship and that's a license that took a little bit to get, but really again it was the people who asked for it. All of those islands- Kiribas is the same way

- there's nothing they would like more than to be able to buy something right there. Pay the money put their hands on it and walk away with it.

Because it's such the opposite of the usual situation where you put in your order and send your money and you hope that somebody brings it to you. And a lot of times it doesn't it doesn't come. You might have paid for your stuff and you don't get it. And then you have to make a claim and it's just endless. They really prefer the traditional system that's been around for hundreds of years which was the ship would come as a store. And the people would come out to the boat and stuff would come in and they would look at it and buy it and pay.

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B: And that's what we do in the Cooks and Kiribas we don't have a license to sell off the ship so everything has to be ordered. And that is what we do uniquely is we take orders. And bring them the next time. And they will buy for people, because we have access to Costco and Home Depot and Best Buy all the good stuff is

available right here so we take the orders and charge 20% purchasing fee, we measure it, add on the freight, and then we deliver it to them. In the coops we sell it directly off the boat we just pay one, we get one invoice and then that's it. Because we import it. We do the import paperwork. In Kiribas that's not allowed so everything is presented with the customs papers and we do a customer makes the entry. They pay the customs duty, the VAT, and they pay us and they get the cargo.

S: Yeah, I mean the sense I get from everybody who I've talked to is they're totally devoted to you and the Kwai. The passengers the crew, the people on land, it's like they have a greater allegiance to Kwai and to Brad than they do to the nation of Kiribas, I'll tell you that.

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B: Well I guess we treat them better. Well you know. Kiribas is, they do the best they can they - but we understand the nature of commerce and we have direct connection to suppliers at reasonable price and our system allows that connection to work. It's just not available. If you want to buy something from Tarawa, the capital, it's got to be ordered from Australia, come to Tarawa be trans shipped on another ship and come to Fanning Island. It's too many steps it doesn't happen you don't get the possibilities that we can do coming straight from Hawaii.

S: But do you ever feel like, I mean you're kind of in it for life in a way. I mean what would people do if the Kwai stopped?

B: The Kwai can stop any time it just takes one time the engine doesn't start, and the boat's gone. They will accept that just like we will have to. And you know they're islanders they're used to it. The Kwai is not the first ship that's served them even though we do a good job.

S: So, you don't feel some moral compulsion like oh my god—

B: Of course, we do. They're our customers, we can't - if it's not possible it's not possible. It has to work for a lot of ways. It has to work here in Honolulu. The stevedores have to support us enough that we can load the ship without problems that would make it impossible.

S: What kind of problems?

B: You know the we have a working relationship with the stevedores which is a good relationship. But if we were treated like Matson is treated, if we had to have a gang of eleven guys every time anything moved, we couldn't support it.

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B: It wouldn't work. Just not enough money to make that happen. And our flag state is the Cook Islands. That means that we sail under their jurisdiction, their inspection, their certificate. But those are also enforced by the coast guard. The port state control has the right to come and inspect the ship at any time. All of those factors are hugely, we're hugely dependent on them working and any time you're dealing with a bureaucracy and international commerce system, you could



run against something that makes it not possible. The good thing is we've been doing it so long we're kind of grandfathered in. And you know because we are different and we work differently than any other ships out on the ocean.

S: So, it seems.

B: It is different. It's a throwback really to the old system. And that old system there was a lot less bureaucracy than there is now. You've got the IMO that controls shipping around the world. They can make all kinds of rules that are applicable to big ships. If they get applied to a ship our size and the business we're doing, again it could be a brick wall that you can't get through. But we hope that doesn't happen, we trust that doesn't happen and we keep going.

S: I wasn't really thinking we'd talk all about business, but actually it's really interesting and Evy was telling me about the sustainable shipping conference that you went to in Fiji.

B: Yeah he went.

S: Oh, he went. I thought that you went as well.

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S: he was saying that people were asking you to replicate the Kwai in other parts of the Pacific, or something like this?

B: It's a good model and there's lots of islands where it could work. Once we got started and had the ship going we could have worked on other areas. I think there's room for other ships to work.

S: But do you have actual offers? Of people invited you to come to this island.

B: Oh sure, all the time. Not from governments but from people. they want service. They see, oh wow. Here in Hawaii you've got lots of islander from the Marshall Islands, all over the Pacific. And they always traditionally come to us and say can you come to us? And we say sorry we've got our route, this is what we're doing, we can't —

plane noise 0:09:48.39

S: Yeah, but do you imagine doing that? Do you imagine expanding and getting another boat?

B: No, I'm too old to expand. I'm not getting another boat. But the opportunity's there.

S: So, what makes the difference? Obviously you're different.

B: You know we do it for the love of sailing and the islands and the people. You have to make a living and you can't dismiss that in any way. You don't make money you're not going to survive. And we don't want to be subsidized, we don't want to be nonprofit. We want to be a for profit business that we have shareholders and we want to pay them a dividend. That's what our intentions are and occasionally we do that. And we wouldn't want it any differently. But none of us are in the to get rich. We would find other ways if that was our goal. I'm not referring only to the

investors. I'm referring to the crew, everyone that works with us, we're not driven by money, it's not that's not the goal. The lifestyle is the goal. The lifestyle and all the wonderful things that happen when you're doing it.

S: Is there a certain moment that you can - I'm sure there's a million of them. But is there any moment that you can - when you were out on the Kwai when it all clicked and it all came together?

B: Oh, it happens all the time.

S: Yeah?

B: And it's like this magic moment when it all when everything works together - you're just there and it just happens and this deal comes up and yeah. That happens and what also happens a lot is just the ship doing her work and you just stand up on the bridge and you go wow. it's so amazing and your full moon night, you got 60 passengers on deck and they're all singing. It's a nice calm night. Everybody's happy. And it's wonderful, It's nothing like it.

S: Yeah. And then tell me about your crew. It seems most of your crew is Kiribas now. And is that a choice that you made?

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B: well they're the most suited to the job and the most loyal. We don't want people coming for one or two trips. That's fine and that can work. But for the real basic job which is handling the cargo and doing the deck work we want people who are here all the time. And for them it's a really good job, not just because the pay is reasonable compared to what they make at home. But because they get to come to Honolulu. And like all Polynesian communities, if you can provide for your family or your group, that builds up yourself and they're able to do that here. Even if it's just going to Walmart and buying the toys that go back to the kids that's huge. Nobody else is going. So, they get to do that. And also, this is family here. This is for them it's a Kiribas it's very important to be part of a group. And Kwai is a good group to be a part of, it's got a lot going for it. As a result, they're very loyal and it works. It works for us. We're trying to expand it really because you know for the licensed positions we don't have anyone from Kiribas, although we had one mate from Kiribas but he was Cook Islands. He lives in the Cook Islands. But we'd really like to expand the Kiribas participation in the business if we can.

S: So, what does it take to get the Kiribas licensed?

B: They gotta go to school.

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S: Where do they do that?

B: Probably New Zealand or Australia. That would be the normal channel for them.

S: How is it for the crew when they get to Honolulu? How are they treated? How is it for them?

B: Well there's a big Kiribas community here so they're pretty much - that's their connection to Hawaii society I would say. It's strong, it's fine. They got places to go

and people to take them shopping. They're well taken care of. And they know their way around too.

S: So it seems. So, I feel like we need to wrap up, but I wonder if - I'm trying to think what to narrow it down to - I feel like this ship has such a personality. I mean do you ever think of this ship as a person?

B: The ship has her own personality.

S: And how would you describe her as a person?

B: Oh, she's just a workhorse. You can just watch her plowing through the ocean I told you she was almost went for scrap. She's so happy to be out in the world, in a new place, being loved. and service, she just wants to go. The only time thing she doesn't want to do is to sit around too long in port. The only time she gets unhappy.

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S: how does she express her unhappiness?

B: I can't really tell you that. I can tell you the happiness. If you go stand on the bow and watch her cutting through the water there's no doubt in your mind, you just know it.

S: I can't imagine you cutting yourself loose, ever. I mean what do you think you would do if you didn't do this?

B: I'm going to retire. I'm looking for people to take over, and I'm going to retire. You can't go to sea forever when you get old.

S: What are you going to do when you retire?

B: I'm going live on my farm, home with my wife, go surfing every day. The things I do now when I'm off the ship. So, it's in place already.

S: And you won't miss it?

B: Of course, you know. But I will I hope to stay involved even if I'm not going to sea. We don't know what the future will hold. I've got enough memories too. I can retire.

S: That's good. So is there anything else - that you had in mind that you wanted to make sure. If anything else comes to mind

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