

Some Notes on Tribal Warfare and an Event at Tambo Crossing

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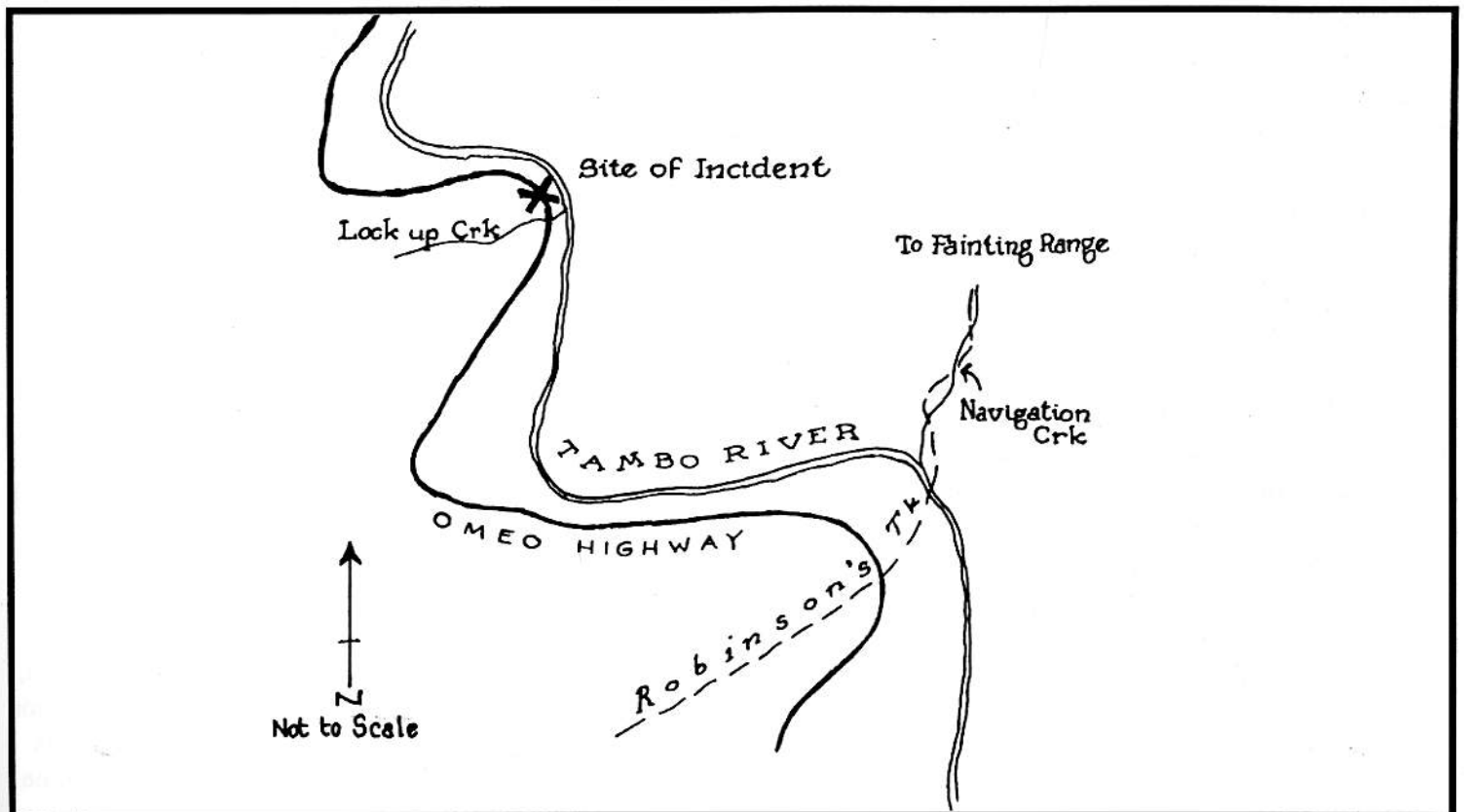
My interest in tribal warfare was revived by the recent *Gippsland Heritage Journal* article by Ian D. Clark on George Augustus Robinson's journals.¹ Having read the microfilm copy of the journals many times I have noted that they are 'often illegible, lapse into strange abbreviations, poor English, incorrect spelling and are correspondingly difficult to transcribe.'² With this difficulty of transcription in mind I realised that a tribal warfare event I had previously located at Tongio had actually occurred at Tambo Crossing about 25 miles to the south.³ A recent attempt to unravel this problem using the microfilm was no more successful and I am grateful for the transcripts supplied by Ian Clark which has helped clarify much of the information on this event.

The transcripts show clearly that the tribal clash that Robinson referred to was located at Tambo Crossing and not at Tongio. Robinson briefly referred to the event in the report of his trip in 1844:

A deadly animosity exists between them and the natives of the coast; a whole tribe having been destroyed by the Yatemitongs and their allies a short time previous. Blanched human bones strewed the surface and marked the spot where the slaughter happened.⁴

In his journals there is much more detail. The entry for 15 June 1844 stated:

Two miles above the crossing place up the stream is the spot where a great slaughter of gipps land blacks by the Omeo and the Mokeallumbeets and Tinnermittum their allies took place; was shown the place by [blank] alias Charley who was present. Saw the human bones strewd about bleached white. Strange idea occurred to me whilst viewing the scene of the slaughter. I thought it appalling best forget the whole sale slaughter by Christians. Charley spoke of it with zest went through the whole scene shewed the camp of wild blacks upwards of 70 camped besides fire. Canal of water in bed





The Tambo Crossing site, 1995 (Author's collection)

of tanbo 30 feet wide 500 feet long. Shew how the black found in line, then gave yell; the point of the attack; spoke of it with zest; five young women spared but I believe killed some time after. All the old women and children killed. Two young men escaped.⁵

The location of this event is almost certainly the flat immediately to the north of where Lock Up Creek enters the Tambo River at Tambo Crossing.⁶ The event occurred sometime during the four years previous to Robinson's journey of 1844. The victims were members of the Bruthen group of the Brabiralung tribe.⁷ According to Robinson's notes the instigators were the Jaitmathang [Omeo tribe - Yatemitongs] and their allies the 'Mokeallumbeets and Tinnermittum'. The latter was possibly a division of the Jaitmathang located in the north of their tribal area or else from the Duduroa tribe - an allied tribe to the north. The former group was almost certainly part of the Minjambuta or Mt Buffalo tribe, called by Howitt the Buffalo River tribe or the 'Mogullumbitch'.⁸ But the most intriguing part of Robinson's journals is the sentence 'I thought it appalling best forget the whole sale slaughter by Christians'. Nowhere in his notes or journals does he claim that any of these Aborigines were

Christians. In fact this one sentence throws the whole scenario of the Tambo Crossing affair as an event of tribal warfare into considerable doubt. Other most unusual aspects of this event include the obvious one-sided nature of it. There were seventy casualties on one side and none mentioned on the other. There also appears to have been considerable organisation involved, and that a substantial group of attackers moved rapidly deep into enemy tribal territory and yet maintained the element of surprise.

At the Jindabyne Symposium in 1991 on the cultural heritage of the Australian Alps I noted that:

I have stated elsewhere my objections to the use of tribal warfare as a major factor in population decline.⁹ It should be noted that the tribal conflict was not a new element, and that certain tribes such as the Jaitmathang and Brabiralung were traditional enemies. This lends some credence to the Tongio [ie Tambo Crossing] site as it was on the border of two tribes. However the fact that a whole tribe, or almost certainly a large number of individuals, could be destroyed within the few years prior to Robinson's visit, and after European occupation, when this enmity had almost certainly existed for many, probably hundreds, of generations seems suspicious. An equally likely explanation for the

