



Sully's Yarns

By John Sullivan

That Sinking Feeling . .

One of the little side benefits of being a licensed skipper is one gets to deliver all sorts of boats up and down the coast for all sorts of people.

One of my most memorable, albeit most terrifying trip, was about 3 years ago. I was asked by a broker on the Gold Coast if I would be interested in delivering a secondhand 42 Precision to Merimbula on the Far South Coast of NSW. I said I was, and subsequently contacted the owner, received his instructions and after negotiating a fee I decided to inspect the vessel which was on the hard stand receiving a new coat of antifoul.

I did my usual checks which covers engines, bilge pumps, instruments, radios and safety gear including anchors and ropes. The only thing that I was disappointed about was that she had no auto pilot fitted, which meant we would have to drive her manually all the way.

There is a limit to the amount of items one can check and so I relied on the pre-purchase survey that the new owner had paid to be carried out by a marine engineer. I read the report and it indicated that all was well. I rang a mate and arranged to have him accompany me, as is the rule, and then waited for a weather window.

Three days later we were heading across the Southport bar at 8.00 p.m. enroute to Merimbula, some 600 nautical miles south. I decided to travel at night on radar as it was cooler. The weather was good and the sea conditions were slight with half a metre of swell and 10 knots of sou' east. There was no nasty stuff predicted although the winds were expected to lift a little as we steamed south.

I worked out a voyage plan based on what I'd been told was the fuel capacity, and the relevant consumption of the engines at cruise speed, which was a

comfortable 20 knots.

Our first fuel stop was to be Coffs Harbour some 160 miles down the coast. I estimated we should be in Coffs by about 4.00am in the morning. We could get fuel by 5.00 am, once the Fish Co-op opened. The plan was going well until around 2.00am the radar decided to die on us. I thought, "Okay we still have the GPS, so we can maintain speed and direction without too much risk" until about half an hour later the backlight in the GPS decided to fail. This made it very difficult to see the charts without a torch.

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We found the torch, but the batteries were flat. The vintage of the GPS was such that it was one of the first black and grey LCD screens and was near impossible to read in daylight and only just visible at night. Fortunately I always travel with my laptop, which has backup charts of the East Coast, so I quickly booted it up, estimated where we were, and set a compass course to Coffs Harbour. The North and South Solitary Islands (just north of Coffs) both have lights, so I was able to use these as position checks and run straight down to the harbour. We tied up in Coffs at the fuel dock at 4.30am. I thoroughly checked all the fuses and connections to the failed instruments to no avail, and I hoped that this would be the only ones to let us down.

By 6.00 am we were steaming south towards Port Stephens, 160 miles away.

This was our next fuel stop. The tanks hold 800 litres and she was burning 80 litres an hour at 20 knots, so she had used around 650 litres to get to Coffs Harbour. By mid-morning the wind had picked up to around 25 knots and the southerly swells were around 2.5 metres. I had to pull the speed back a notch to stop getting airborne over the crests.

We finally arrived at Port Stephens some 10 hours later a little worse for wear. After fueling up we both got some well-needed sleep.

Morning brought us rain and strong winds. I checked in with Coast Guard and the report was for 20 to 25 knots with 4 metre seas easing in the afternoon. I decided to continue on as we had a schedule to maintain.

The next fuel stop was to be Shell Harbour. We steamed out around the craggy headland of Port Stephens and headed into terrible conditions. I thought if this is 'going to ease' it had better happen sooner rather than later. It became apparent after a couple of hours that we weren't going to make Shell Harbour that day, so I altered course slightly for Sydney Harbour, which by this time was about 4 hours away. The wind seemed to be increasing to 30 knots by now and the seas were getting worse by the minute.

I had to go below for a nature call and so left my friend Lorry on the bridge to steer. Lorry had no rough weather experience and was already white knuckled and sick with fright but I had no choice at this moment.

As I stepped into the saloon, the large glass door slammed shut and a shot bolt on the outside fell into place, effectively locking me in.

I tried everything I could except smashing the glass for the first 20 minutes, I could not budge it. I then realised that Lorry must not be aware of my plight and has thought I am staying down stairs for a while.

"Why hasn't he coming down to see where I am?" I said to myself. By this

stage the wind had reached gale proportions and the seas were horrendous. Lorry's inexperience was showing alarmingly as he should have pulled the speed back to 6 – 8 knots by now, but was in fact still doing 15 knots. The boat was literally flying off the swells and crashing into the next wave with bone crushing thuds. There was water coming in all the cracks and window seals and the engines were free revving every time he shot off a wave.

All I could think was "I have to get out and take over; this is ridiculous. I have to do something now!"

I picked up a saloon chair to smash through the glass door. Balancing against the massive heaving gyrations of the boat I slammed the chair into the door but it wouldn't break. I realised it was armour plate glass and would take a lot to break. I was trying to get my balance for another assault on the door when I spotted the main switch board in the corner and it occurred to me that if I turn all the instruments off from the saloon, Lorry might notice and come down.

Just then he appeared at the door and I pointed at the shot bolt that had held me captive. He opened it up and screamed something at me about bilge pump alarms. I ran up to the bridge and took the controls. I pulled the throttles back to idle and steadied the boat for the next wave onslaught then took in the drama that was unfolding.

The entire forward and mid ship bilge pump alarms were screaming and their accompanying lights were flashing. I asked Lorry to check down stairs in the vee berth and to look under the galley floor through the trapdoor in the galley and see if he could see any water. A check showed nothing out of the ordinary so I assumed some short triggered the alarms.

In any event they stopped within 3 minutes and the alarm lights went out. Half an hour went by and gradually I could feel the boat becoming increasingly lethargic in response to steering. Also the recovery from the troughs that she was diving into off the crests was very slow. The terrible realisation dawned on me...we were sinking.

I asked Lorry to take the wheel again and headed down stairs.

The scene that greeted me simply mortified me. The water was over the vee berth and was a foot deep into the downstairs cabins. It was almost up to

the steps leading up to the galley. We were indeed sinking.

I lifted the trap door in the galley floor to see if I could determine the source of the leak but was confronted with the water level right up to the bulkhead. I started to think that the motors will get flooded soon and that will be the end. I came up stairs and broke the news to Lorry who immediately turned white and just slumped on the floor in shock. I said "Lorry, we have to make plans, please get up and help"

He finally grasped the seriousness of our situation and asked me what to do. I said get our life jackets and gather all the fenders from the downstairs lockers and tie them together so it will give us something to hang onto when we have to abandon ship.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is the vessel Precision, we are sinking, our position is 6 miles due East of Sydney Heads. Does any one copy?"

Nothing heard. I repeated the call three times and decided that the radio wasn't working. I grabbed my mobile phone and rang Triple 0. Thank God I had a signal. I asked to be put straight through to the Water Police. I explained to them the situation, and estimated I would be 45 minutes at least from Sydney Heads but I doubted we would make it in time. They said to call them direct every 5 minutes and upgrade our status, as they could not get a boat out to the Heads for 45 minutes.

By this stage the boat was handling terribly. With every wave, she seemed to be lower in the bow. The water would run up the front deck and wash over the downstairs windscreens.

I desperately tried to maintain 10 knots and now as the sea was on our port side the tendency for the boat was to roll slowly over on its side with every second or third wave. I would have to steer very quickly to the right (downwind) to stop the boat from rolling completely over.

It was the most dramatic 45 minutes of boating I have ever experienced and the miracle was we made it inside the heads. I immediately turned the boat into the first little bay (Quarantine Bay) and headed for the beach as she slowly sank.

About 50 metres off the beach in about 8 feet of water, the bow keel touched the bottom and stopped it from sinking altogether. About that time the Water Police arrived and immediately put a huge hose down through the bow hatch into the vee berth and started to

Editor's Note: John is 63 years old and has been boating for 50 years. Apart from the many thousands of private hours he has accumulated, he also holds a professional skipper's ticket and has driven fishing and charter boats on and off for 30 years. His love affair with the sea and his undying affection for fishing and boating make his life experiences seem to many an enviable accumulation of adventures.

When John and Annie finished their popular reports on the trip around to the Kimberley (F&B #146), we decided this was a skipper we couldn't just sign off - so we've commissioned John to produce a monthly yarn about his life's experiences on the water - and he's got some ripper yarns to tell! Welcome aboard John Sullivan.

pump out the water.

Two more craft from Sydney's Maritime Services pulled up and they also started to pump out water. Within half an hour we could climb down into the hull through the galley floor hatch. We discovered the problem.

It was a 30mm (inch and a quarter) valve that was open to the sea. A hose and sea water filter used to be attached to it that runs up to the air conditioner to cool it with seawater. The pounding that we took had fractured the fitting so that the hose broke off and left a hole that almost sunk us. It turned out the sea water filter was a domestic pool fitting made of plastic and should never been fitted to the boat.

The engines never flooded because there was a separate bulkhead at the front of the engine room to prevent the ingress of water. Upon full inspection the next day we discovered the bilge pumps had burned out, the VHF radio did not transmit anymore, the radar had blown a tube, and the GPS was stuffed. The water police impounded the boat and told the owner he could not move it until all the equipment was fixed. Lorry and I flew home the next day.

I still deliver boats part time, but now I prefer new boats or at the worst, refurbished vessels. If any equipment is old or not maintained, I ask for it to be replaced.

Oh – and that's correct; Lorry doesn't do boat deliveries any more!

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