



Sully's Yarns

By John Sullivan

This month marks my 30th anniversary as a Queenslander.

It was September 1978, when we decided to leave Sydney and head north for the promised land. I had an aunt who lived in Redcliffe, and she had told me about this waterfront land being released at a new canal estate. She went on to say that it was terribly expensive at \$30,000 a block . . . (!)

I had mentioned to her several times that I would love to live on the water, but the average price for a canal block in Sydney then was around \$100,000. Needless to say, I took a quick trip up and upon inspection I immediately purchased a block at the bargain price of \$31,000.

On returning we placed the house on the market and it was soon sold. I had recently traded my Cruise Craft Rambler in on a 22 foot Cruise Craft Rover, which was the Nichols Brother's flag ship in those days.

They were a class boat for their times, but solid and very heavy. I didn't much like the prospect of towing this heavy boat all the way to Queensland, so I decided as an adventure, I would cruise it up. It didn't take long to recruit a couple of willing mates for crew. So after 'flat topping' the boat trailer with timber to handle all the extra junk the removal truck couldn't fit, we headed off to Queensland. Three days later I flew back and prepared the boat for the trip north.

She was fitted with an Evinrude 200 hp outboard, which you older guys out there might remember, and used more fuel per hour than a B-17 bomber and was much less reliable, but it was a new engine and Cruise Craft had a good reputation as a rough weather boat, so we figured not too much to worry about, except the weather.

We planned the trip around fuel capacity and fair weather ports. We had a 100 litre main and carried four 25 litre portables. This would give us about 120 miles range, based on

approximately 48 litres an hour doing 26 knots average. The actual distance from Botany Bay NSW to Redcliffe in Queensland is 465 nautical miles. We were hoping to do it in 5 legs over 5 days.

All our friends turned up at the marina to wave goodbye. They threw streamers and some even shed tears as we pulled away from the dock. I couldn't help thinking they were actually acting as if they were never going to see us again. This really added to our confidence.

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We headed out of Botany Bay onwards to our first port of call, some 90 miles north to Port Stephens. After refuelling, we stayed the night in Shoal Bay and around 6.00am, we headed off to Port Macquarie. We had a slight nor'east head wind, so we ambled along around 15 knots for a few hours when we spotted some fish trap flags. Now everyone knows that when you see fish trap flags that means that the local fisherman has set them on to his favourite reef. We decided to do a slow drift along the line of traps, and bang!!

We all hooked up within a few seconds of each other. We hauled in snapper after snapper with the occasional morwong as compensation. Within an hour we had over 40 kg of good eating fish, so we called it a day and headed into Port Macquarie.

The new marina had just opened a few weeks before and was almost

empty. The manager met us at the fuel wharf and asked us where we were from. After explaining our mission, and showing him our catch, he asked us could he buy our fish, as he also owned the local fish shop. We did a deal for full fuel tanks and one night's marina fees.

I know he got the best end of the deal, but really, what were we going to do with 40 kg of fresh fish. We did, however, keep two snapper for our BBQ dinner that night.

By 6.00 am the following day, we were over the bar and punching into 20 knots of N.E. It was going to be a tough section if the wind didn't ease. By mid-morning we were forced to travel at 6 knots to be comfortable. We now had 25 plus wind, with 2 metres of sea on a rising swell. The 70 miles to Coffs Harbour felt like a thousand miles, but we made it intact by mid afternoon..

There was no petrol at the jetty in those days, so we had to hitch a ride into town and get a service station to fill a drum and bring it down to the jetty. Another night on anchor in the harbour and away again next morning at 6.00. The wind had dropped slightly but the swell had increased overnight so the going was very tough. We covered the 27 miles to Wooli by mid-morning and decided we'd had enough, and braved the reasonably dangerous bar to get out of the weather.

By this stage the adventure was wearing thin and all we wanted to do was get there.

The next morning came with 20 knots of southerly, so we pressed on the 65 miles to Ballina deciding it would be a lot better and economical to run with the swell. I had never been over Ballina Bar until then, and I remember sitting off about a mile looking at the swells crashing right across the entrance and deciding just where the best line of approach was.

The winds were now around 25 knots

and the swell was close to 3 metres. The problem was we were there at almost low tide, the worst time to hit any bar, let alone Ballina. We called the Coast Guard and got their advice which was basically “Don’t come in at the moment, unless you really have to”, so that didn’t help much, nor boost our spirits.

We had to get in as it was very uncomfortable where we were and most importantly we didn’t have much fuel left. We were connected to our last 25 litre carry tank and it felt almost empty. It was a time for decision, and quick.

We donned our life jackets and I pointed the Rover at the centre of the bar and headed in.

Trying to muster all my bar experiences together dominated my immediate thoughts, so I started to look for any obvious break in the wave pattern. It seemed to be a little more inviting on the South approach so I eased her over a few degrees towards the southern breakwall, at the same time I tried to gauge the swells so I could set the boat on the back of a big one and ride it in. Reaching a nice 10 foot swell I committed to it and headed in.

About half way in the motor started to flutter, “She’s running outa fuel” I shouted, just as we fell off the wave and

started to go sideways in front of the next one. My friend grabbed the tank and tipped it towards the pickup end and squeezed the primer bowl a few times, at the same time I hit the starter, she fired up and I turned the wheel hard to left towards the entrance and gunned it as hard as it would go. We avoided being swamped by milli-seconds, with a huge wave that had built up behind us.

The motor kept going until we were safe inside the river then it died abruptly again, this time it wouldn’t start, the tank was dry. We grabbed the anchor and set it as quickly as possible and sat back looking at each other realising just how lucky we were a few moments ago. We were eventually taken in tow to the fuel dock.

The next day the weather dropped a little and the rest of the trip to Southport and over the original old Southport Bar, was without incident. We did the sixty miles through to Redcliffe the next day using the inland water way through to Moreton Bay. This is always a pleasant journey through the many mangrove everglades.

I must say now I have never run out of fuel again, and come hell or highwater, I now always have plenty in reserve.

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!

The trip took 5 days doing about 6 hours a day at 15 knot an hour average. We used around 900 litres of fuel, which back then, was about 50 cents a litre. It was a lot of fun and a great experience.

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