

# SENIOR MEMBER

## Ion Ullett

This is the next of a series of articles by Barry Allison recording some of the experiences and adventures of the Squadron's prominent senior Members – this time the many years involved with boats and the Squadron of Ion Ullett.



Ion started his long sailing career at 16 years of age when a member of the Mosman Bay Sea Scouts on Sydney Harbour. They hired the boatshed to footballers and Ion signed on as bailerboy and sailed in the eighteen footer *High Flyer* from the Balmain Flying Squadron and regularly raced on the Harbour. Ion vividly remembers the thrill of setting a massive balloon spinnaker hoisted from the tip of the gaff, and gingerly positioning a ring tail on the leech of the mainsail!! With a crew of ten young lads sailing down wind, three had to sit on the transom and two grappled with the helm to stop her nose diving.

Later, *Magic* – an old 36 foot Lake Macquarie racer was purchased and sailed from the Sydney Amateur Sailing Club based at Mosman Bay. Then early in his business career, Kelvinator transferred Ion to Adelaide, and within 24 hours Alan Jordan had made contact and asked that he sail on *Celeste II*. This was the beginning of many years of ocean racing with Alan and with Jim Taylor on *Ingrid*. It so happened that *Celeste II* was moored behind *Kudos*, a motor boat owned and sailed by Bruce Thiem, Margaret's father, and was how Ion met Margaret Thiem, and later proposed to Margaret in the back shed of the Squadron.

So from 1962 began a long period of building and owning many yachts. *Spindrift* was the first, and the plywood hull and masts were built in 6 months. She competed in many ocean races with the 'butter box' fleet, including two Neptune Islands and an Adelaide to Lincoln race. As the Ullett family grew, it became time to change to a larger craft, and so the Mystery Class *Cooroyba* designed by Robert Clark was purchased and raced with

the Squadron fleet. At this period, Ion was progressing through the onerous levels of the Squadron's Flag Officers – Rear Commodore in 1966-68, Vice Commodore in 1968-70, and Commodore in 1970-72. As Vice Commodore, Ion was heavily involved in researching and producing the book to commemorate the first hundred years of the Squadron. Titled 'The First 100 Years', this publication is today a collector's item as only 1000 copies were ever printed.

When Commodore, Ion purchased the 48 foot Alden ketch *Achernar* from the Fricker Estate and successfully sailed her for the next few years. She was a large craft with a 3 cylinder 43 hp Kelvin engine, and required a large crew. After a refit in 1979, she successfully cruised to Port Douglas with the family, but was found to be not quite the ideal cruising yacht. So *Alpha Centauri* – a 40 foot Duncanson design was bought and re-fitted for extensive cruising. Back in the water in 1984, a long extended cruise was planned to sail the waters of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Setting off with an experienced crew of five, half way between Cape Willoughby and Portland, sitting in a relative calm, they were suddenly hit with 60 knot winds caused by an unseasonal polar inversion. The gale blew for around fourteen hours and was only the beginning of their problems, as a halyard had wrapped around the propeller. At 4 am, they knew that they were in considerable trouble and issued a mayday. An Orion aircraft fortunately happened to be in the area and provided air support for the next 12 hours, complimented by two helicopters who hovered over the stricken yacht. At this stage they were dangerously close to the Murray Mouth in the surf, and were considering abandoning ship. After an hour or so of constantly running the engine and slamming into gear, they eventually freed the halyard that was fouling the propeller and they were able to claw their way out of the surf and motor back into the Screwpile Jetty at Granite Island. Fortunately, there was no hull leakage as expected, as the skeg was ripped off the hull when freeing the halyard – breaking two 3/4 inch stainless steel bolts in the process!

Once safe at Granite Island, Ion rang Adelaide Radio to advise Margaret of their safety, but Margaret was already on the jetty well aware of the trauma. So ended the first leg of this cruise, and after



*Alpha Centauri* in Solomons.



*Achernar*



some repairs, *Alpha Centauri* was trucked to Sydney to commence the second leg of the cruise.

In 1985, Pep and Alison Manthorpe joined Ion and Margaret in Cairns and from here they set off for northern waters and beyond. The cruise north was a fast and wet voyage with double reefed main and small jib, and once in the Louisiades, were able to comfortably cruise for the next month between villages and mix with the friendly natives. Pep and Alison left the cruise in Alatoa and Ion and Margaret continued to sail on their own to the New Guinea islands.

They cruised the northern top of New Guinea in the fiord area and in many bays, and at times could not find bottom with the echo sounder. Anchoring became an exercise of attaching a line to a coconut tree ashore and dangling the anchor over the bow with maximum chain. David and Judy Judell joined to continue the cruise in Lae and across to New Britain. A local yachtie in Madang looked after *Alpha Centauri* while Ion and Margaret returned to Adelaide for Christmas and the family.

They returned in early 1986 and cruised the west coast of New Britain and past the caves dug out by the Japanese forces during WWII to service their submarines. Then past Mount Mataput, which literally blew up three years later covering most of Rabaul with volcanic ash and causing considerable damage. Peter and Jenny Last joined the cruise in Rabaul and onto New Ireland and up the Buka Straits. After the east coast of Bougainville, they entered the Treasury Island Group only to find that they were illegal entrants and had to quickly motor across to Gizo to obtain clearance. While in this area, they discovered Kennedy Island where John F. Kennedy lost his patrol boat during WW II. The area is renowned for WW II incidents – Iron Bottom Sound being the graveyard of numerous war ships. Cruising in these waters is delightful with the frangipani fragrance ever present. Jenny and Peter left in Honiara and Ion and Margaret continued cruising the Solomon Islands area for the next four weeks. One memorable cruise was sailing into the Morovo Lagoon where James H. Michener was reputed to have based his South Pacific experiences.

The voyage back to Adelaide was via the south coast of New Guinea to Port Moresby, through the notorious Torres Strait where one must be very aware of the tidal movement of the waters, and then



Marg and Ion on Fine Romance.

down the east coast of Australia and home.

Being away from the farm over this period did require some catch-up and so it was sadly decided to sell *Alpha Centauri* and focus on farm operations with the family. However, the call of the sea was ever present, and in 1989 the Wilf O'Kell designed 51 foot ferro ketch *Fine Romance* was purchased in Brisbane. She was fitted out with the 1990 Ambon race in mind. This particular Darwin to Ambon race was unforgettable for those participants as most of the race was in a flat calm, and most had to motor into Ambon. It was during this race that the unforgettable 'White Ocean' was experienced – 3.00 am and the waters are luminescent caused by a bacteria of sea creatures, and lasted an hour during which one could read by this eerie light. From Ambon they cruised to Makassar for the Makassar Regatta, and then onto Bali. While in Bali, they 'employed' a local lad to stay and sleep in the cockpit to look after the boat for 3 days for \$5. Then to Timor and Koepang to clear customs, and onto Ashmore Reef and across to the Kimberleys. They explored the Kimberleys over a month and in this time only sighted one other yacht. One highlight was to motor for five miles up Crocodile Creek and through the 'bolt hole' to anchor while the creek emptied with a 45 foot tide. Into Prince Regent River to Kings Cascade enabled them to fill up with fresh water.

Peter Last joined the voyage across from Darwin to Cairns and could have ended in disaster as they went aground on rocks in the tricky passage around Elco Island. Margaret busily gathered all valuables expecting to take to the dinghy, however, after four hours and a rising tide, they were able to free themselves without any major damage.

They eventually returned to the Squadron in 1992 and restricted their cruising to local and Tasmanian waters. During one recent cruise to Tasmania they had to motor the entire return voyage from the 'Nut' on Tasmania's north west tip, all the way back to the Squadron.

Over the following years, many enjoyable days have been spent cruising with their family and many friends. *Fine Romance* has been sold and is now in Tin Can Bay in Queensland after seven years of successful cruising.

Today, Margaret and Ion spend much of their time tending their farm in the South East, and living on the farm near their two daughters and family. They have ten grand children and two great grand children. P



per full sail.



*Fine Romance*