

Epsilon's Sydney-Hobart Race 1999

Michael Tromp

After sailing into Sydney on 18 December and with last minute provisioning and jobs done, the crew spent Christmas Day sailing around Sydney Harbour and enjoying a seafood luncheon. On Boxing Day we soon realised the enormity of the event and the way Sydney-Siders embrace it. With a mass of spectator boats and a swarm of helicopters above us, *Epsilon* was well placed at the starter's gun. As the larger boats powered away, the crew worked hard at their first objective, which was to have at least 20 boats of the 80 fleet behind us leaving Sydney Heads. With that achieved, the spinnaker was hoisted and a course set for Hobart.



Michael at the helm.

Flying our largest spinnaker, *Epsilon* began to overtake several boats and spirits aboard were high. Using an inbuilt temperature sensor, we headed offshore in search of the warm, south-flowing current which was to push us S at a bonus of 20 miles per day. The first night winds freshened and a delay in changing to a smaller spinnaker proved expensive, as *Epsilon's* big spinnaker was torn and the remains gathered back on board. At 0300 the freshening NE wind proved too much for the smaller spinnaker, which also blew out. Reduced to a poled-out headsail, *Epsilon* thrived in the fresh conditions and covered over 450 miles in the first two days.

At the 2200 Radio sked on the second day, we found ourselves in the best place for the race, 38th overall and running 2nd on handicap for our division. We were only 11 miles behind last year's winner *AFR Midnight Rambler*, which later retired.

On the third night *Epsilon* was racing to stay ahead of a deepening low pressure system. It was a losing battle, and by 2200 we were battling head winds of up to 50 knots.

A decision was made to tack towards the N coast of Tasmania and sail away from the deepening low as conditions deteriorated further. It was a wet and uncomfortable night, with 6-8 metre seas, many of which were breaking over the boat. The cockpit was filled by breaking waves a number of times and water found its way below deck, covering the saloon floorboards. Every now and then the vessel would power up

through a wave, only to find it had no back and plummeted 1-2 metres to the trough below, landing with a bone-crunching crash. With several crew seasick, everybody fatigued and concerned for the safety of the boat, which was taking a pounding, it was decided to seek an anchorage on the NE tip of Tasmania for a break. Seven other competitors joined us in the same anchorage, and there were many more in different bays down the coast.

By morning 31 boats had retired, but for the crew on *Epsilon* the aim was to finish the race. At 0500, with storm sails set we departed the anchorage in company with two other yachts, who also decided to continue racing. What followed was two days of strong to gale force headwinds. The storm jib was up for two days and the mainsail had two and often three reefs in it.

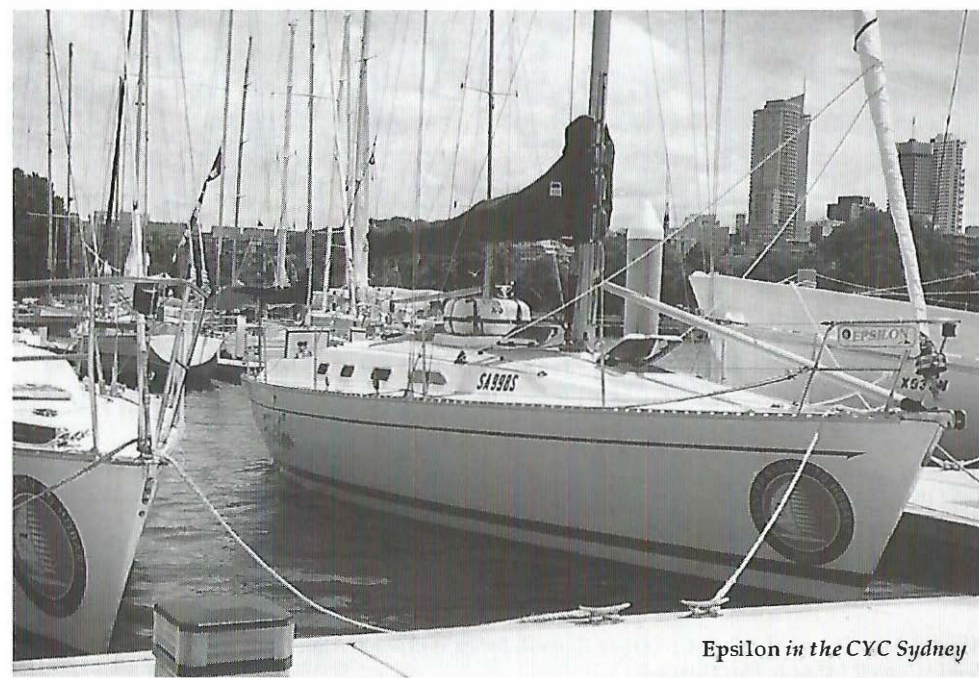
New Year's Eve saw us rounding Tasman Island in a moderating breeze, and full sail was set for the run across Storm Bay and up the Derwent River. The smoother waters were a relief for all the crew, especially Amy Jordan who finally got

her turn on the wheel after being confined to her bunk for two days with seasickness. At midnight the crew celebrated the start of the new millennium with champagne chilled in a bucket of Derwent River water, in sight of Hobart and the celebrations ashore. Finally at 0304 *Epsilon* crossed the finishing line to the cheers of a few late night revellers and family and friends ashore. The relief of finishing was tremendous, and in the company of fellow crew mates and fellow South Australians aboard *Rager* the party continued until the sun rose.

For the crew — Michael, Jack and Fred Tromp, Amy Jordan, Peter Bailey, Jock Veenstra, Lyndon Bartlett and Lex Brown — it was an experience that will be long remembered and well talked about around the yacht club bar.

Official results put *Epsilon* as 44th over the line and 21st on handicap (5th in our division).

For the crew, just finishing was the desired result. The official result has left room for improvement and something to think about in the future. Maybe next year? SQ



Epsilon in the CYC Sydney