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***Alpha Centauri's* distress call**

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On Sunday, 13th April 1985, off the Coorong, conditions on board *Alpha Centauri* deteriorated to the point where it became necessary to issue a distress call. Although the incident was subsequently widely reported in the press and media, the following resumé has been published to provide members with an accurate and detailed report of the events associated with that distress call.

Alpha Centauri is a 12-metre Duncanson 40 f ibreglass sloop. She displaces 10 tons and is powered by a 80 hp Ford diesel. Her crew for the first leg of our two year cruise comprised myself (Skipper), Howard Byerley, John Myall, Anthony Evans, and Robin Coles.

We left the Squadron at 9:30 pm on 12th April 1985 and during the first night we experienced varying conditions, including one period of two hours which required a deep reef in the mainsail, and a reduction in the jib. When we reached Cape Jervis, a strong SE wind of about 20 knots was blowing through the Passage, and with an outgoing tide, was creating an unpleasant sea. We therefore decided to sail across to Penneshaw in the lee of KI, have a peaceful breakfast and receive the weather forecast from Adelaide Radio.

The weather report gave an indication of a SW change and a strong wind warning 20-30 knots for the West Coast, slowly spreading to the East. This was what we wanted, so we motored along the north coast of KI to Antechamber Bay and anchored to await the change, did a little fishing and had a good solid lunch. About 1 pm the first puff s of a SW change arrived and we got under sail. Clearing Cape St Albans, we laid the course for 10 miles to seaward of Cape Northumberland. At the 6:15 sked with Adelaide Radio we reported our position as approximately 30 miles on course from Cape St Albans. The weather report was still only a strong wind warning for Gulf Waters and SE Coast, 20-30 knots.

At about 6:30 pm the wind hit from the SSW, and even whilst reefing it was up to 50 knots, so I decided to take the main right off and use only a small jib. Whilst bringing the main down, the halyard clip released itself and the wire halyard trailed from the masthead like a stock whip. This meant that we could no longer hoist the mainsail.

By this time the wind gauge was showing 50–60 knots and the boat was smashing heavily into the seas. At 9:30 pm I informed the crew that I thought that we should heave to. I had never hove to in conditions like this before, and in fact I had never been in conditions like this before, and we did not know how she would behave. I turned the boat downwind, left the small jib sheeted hard on, and as she came around with the wheel tied hard to windward, she fell into the 'hove to' position. To our great relief she sat very comfortably, rather like an old seagull on a rough day. With the lower wash board pinned in place, we battened ourselves below and climbed into our bunks.

We stayed hove to all night, and with our bow pointing west only the occasional sea broke over us, and down below it was reasonably comfortable. At times during the night I checked the wind speed indicator and the needle just sat, without budging, against the maximum stop position of 60 knots. The wind gusts still came through well above this with screams like all hell let loose, together with deafening crashes of thunder and lightning. The lightning lit up the terrifying seas, which roared down upon us with their whole face moving like white rivers. The wind velocity must have been of a tremendous magnitude and we could not see how the boat could take such punishment.

We undoubtedly owe our lives to the Satellite Navigator, which unfailingly plotted our exact position every hour or so. For without knowing this I would have believed that in the 'hove to' position, we would have moved a little to windward and so be safe. At the time that we hove to, we were a good 30 miles from the Coorong beach. The Satellite Navigator indicated that instead of holding our own, we were being carried at least 4 knots straight before the storm and directly towards the beach, and at dawn we had been hove to for 9 hours.

I contacted Adelaide Radio for an update on the weather, gave them our position, and advised that we would have to try and battle into the storm. We started the engine, and with the small jib we made progress for about 2 hours. Then suddenly with a bang, the engine seized. We found that the rope tail of the jib halyard had broken free of the mast and had wrapped around the prop. This also meant that we could no longer change the jib.

I contacted Adelaide Radio again and gave them the 'PAN' condition of distress. I also informed them that whilst we were still under control, there was a real possibility of a full distress condition developing. I gave them our position, which at that stage was approximately 15 miles South of the Murray Mouth and advised that we were being driven towards the beach. The boat was holding a course of West but was making a great deal of leeway. Adelaide Radio asked me to standby whilst they contacted Canberra. In a matter of minutes we were advised that an Orion was on its way to pin point our position, and that a helicopter was on standby.

I then told the crew that we were in a possible survival situation, and we went through the life raft, jackets etc drill with them. The Orion arrived over us in what appeared to be a few minutes and the pilot spoke to me on the same frequency. He confirmed that the position that I had given him was accurate and advised that he would keep an eye on us. He also stated that he had dropped sonar buoys around us. Victor Rescue also advised that the seas break 2 to 3 miles out from the Murray Mouth, and the Orion pilot confirmed that we were then 2½ miles out.

I had never seen such seas as we experienced at this time. We fell sideways off their near vertical faces and buried ourselves in their valleys. As we climbed over their breaking crests, we seemed to be airborne before we smashed into the next valley. On three occasions, a big sea hit our stern, the boat fell stern first before it, and in the space of three seconds swung through 180 degrees; remember *Alpha Centauri* is 40 ft long and weighs 10 tons. We were then rolled before one large wave, well down below the horizontal. Gear flew everywhere, food in the fridge flew across the boat, books and bottles from under bunks also flew across the cabin.

John Myall, who was on the helm and fortunately properly harnessed, went over the side and Jock Evans who was at the hatchway, immediately went to his aid, assisted by Rob Coles who came from below. This was no easy task as John weighs 17½ stone. By this time our jib was in tatters. John Myall resumed his position at the helm to find that it was jammed. I went to the radio and put out a 'MAYDAY' call.

John Myall decided that if this was the last straw, in an attempt to break the rope free he would savagely attack the engine by reversing it at full revs, stalling it and then full ahead and stalling it again. He tried this for 5 minutes and then suddenly we were underway. There was a loud banging from under us, but what the hell, we were underway. By some miracle, this action also freed the steering. At this moment we observed the helicopters moving in. I contacted Adelaide Radio and cancelled the 'MAYDAY' as it now looked as if we would make it. We motored into 50–60 knot winds to Granite Island.

The next day an examination under the vessel revealed that John must have broken the bronze propeller bearing bracket in front of the propeller clear off the hull, thus releasing the rope. I cleared a ball of 20 ft of rope from the propeller, and this, together with the bracket, must have been spinning with the propeller whilst we motored to Granite Island.

Our deepest gratitude goes to the following organisations who stood by, and assisted us during this distress:—

VIA ADELAIDE OTC,
Federal Sea Safety and Surveillance Centre Canberra, and
Victor Sea Rescue.