
Raising Nerida

12/10/2009

YACHT RESCUE

Sir James Hardy's classic 1933 gaff cutter sank at her mooring in Sydney during a mid-June storm. David Salter supervised the yacht's recovery:

THE FIRST THING that floated up through the for'd hatch as the crane slowly lifted Nerida to the surface was a half-drunk bottle of Hardy's Black Bottle pot still brandy. That symbolic little moment of larrikin defiance gave me my first laugh for more than 30 hours. This had been one yachting adventure no sailor ever wants to experience.

The call came early on the Sunday morning. 'Dave' John Sturrock here. I don't want to alarm you mate, but I've just been phoned by a bloke who lives overlooking Neutral Bay. He reckons Nerida sank in that storm last night.' John had contacted me because he knew Sir James was in Valencia for the America's Cup and that I was the yacht's unofficial but longstanding bo'sun.

My initial reaction was shocked disbelief. 'Do we know for sure?' 'No, Dave, but it doesn't sound good.' Even for the ever-laconic Johnno, that was an understatement.

Within minutes I was in the car and trying to keep to the speed limit during the 20-minute drive to the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron at Kirribilli. Nerida lives on one of the RSYS moorings across Careening Cove from the club house.

As I jumped out of the car into persistent drizzle one look across the bay told me it was true. Nerida's distinctive topside profile, bowsprit and blue boat covers were nowhere to be seen. In their place I could just make out the cross-trees and top 12 feet of her mast poking above the water. At least she'd gone down straight!

Motoring out in the Squadron tender to confirm the sinking was like being asked to identify the body of a relative at the morgue. The port side runner seemed to have come away but the rest of the rig appeared intact. I asked the RSYS driver to circle the mast so we could check for any trailing lines that might foul a passing prop. The rain strengthened and there was nothing more to do other than ask that someone come back out and tie a few brightly-coloured objects to the cross-trees as a hazard warning.

Time is the enemy of effective salvage. Every hour a yacht remains submerged is an additional threat to its recovery. The bottoms of most bays on the North side of Sydney Harbour are a mixture of sticky mud and seashell grit. Nerida displaces more than 13 tons. She'd settled directly on her long, flat keel but in a bow-down attitude of about 30 degrees. That meant the bowsprit must already be gently digging its way further into the sea bed. My fears for the damage already done to the engine and electrics were the stuff of nightmares.

Compounding the situation was news on the radio that another big East Coast Low was forming in the Tasman and that Sydney could expect a SW blow of up to 70 knots within the next 36 hours. Nice!

The RSYS boatshed staff shared my sense of urgency and hit the phones to help arrange a recovery. Polaris Marine could give us a 40-ton tug, barge and 10-ton crane. The Diving Co would bring their punt and a three-man dive team. We agreed to assemble at Nerida's mooring as soon as possible after first light the next day.

Meanwhile, I had plenty more Sunday work to do. A brief text message was sent to Sir James in Europe alerting him to the sinking. Next, a call to Sean Langman of the Noakes yard in North Sydney to ask if he could help with a lift-out and temporary hardstand space once we'd raised Nerida. Sean, who has a very large soft

spot for classic yachts, agreed without hesitation.

Then I reached Norm Hyett, the shipwright who's looked after the yacht for decades and kept her in such splendid trim. Norm was away on holidays, but gave me some valuable advice about the many problems I would now be facing. Trevor Cosh, a friend who's a veteran of the salvage business, provided useful tips on saving the donk.

During this blizzard of phone calls I learned that Nerida had already been quite badly damaged when a runaway yacht collided with her during a storm the previous weekend. Could this have contributed to her sinking? There was no time to speculate. Overnight, an email arrived from Sir James authorising me to act as his 'owner's representative' during the salvage. To be frank, it was a responsibility that I was not overly keen to assume.

Monday morning. The first problem was to keep the 180-ton barge stationary above the yacht. The lads from Polaris solved this by using the crane to drop a temporary 5-ton mooring block off the bow. The diver then took a second stabilising line from their stern down to Nerida's mooring 'a neat trick. We were lucky that the yacht was on an 'outside' mooring that allowed us enough swinging room to establish a steady platform.

The only information the salvage crew had been given was that the boat was 45 feet overall. Most modern yachts of that dimension have relatively flat hulls and a simple fin keel. The positioning of fore and aft recovery slings from a crane is therefore not difficult. But Nerida is huge and deep below the waterline. Being a gaffer she carries no permanent backstay so the counter sections are relatively weak. A sling under the stern might well break her back.

I drew a rough sketch of the yacht's full profile for the dive master and suggested that they try to thread the aft sling through the propeller aperture. That's an immensely strong part of the boat and the sling would be held firmly in position. The for'd sling could then go beneath the bobstay fitting, which is just below the waterline. In case that for'd sling wanted to slip forward as the crane began taking the full load, we agreed to tie the two slings together on each side with extra fore-and-aft lines.

Developing that plan took us no more than a few minutes, but putting it into effect consumed the next two hours. As feared, the diver reported on the 2-way that Nerida's nose was stuck in the mud. He would have to dig out a space under the bow, by hand, for the for'd sling. Then came the laborious process of lowering the slings, bringing them around the keel and finally shackling their upper loops to the lift chains.

With the whole rig in position the crane driver slowly took up the slack while we waited for the diver to report from below on how Nerida was 'hanging'. The news wasn't good. The slings were compressing the upper topside strakes and threatened to crack the bulwarks at the deck join once the crane lifted the hull clear of the bottom.

The obvious solution was to reconfigure the rig with athwartships spacer bars. There were only two difficulties with that approach. First, we had no spacers 'but they could be fetched from the Polaris yard. Second, it isn't legal to use lateral spacers without suspending them from a longitudinal beam. But that arrangement would then consume so much of our crane's lift height that it would be impossible to get Nerida to the surface. Stalemate.

Meanwhile, the BoM was confirming that the big Southerly blow they'd predicted was definitely on its way. We just had to get the old girl up and safe by the end of this day. It was a sickening feeling to give the order to lift, knowing that we risked doing the old girl some damage. 'There's no real choice, lads. Let's do it.' The crane's deep-throated diesel

'and up she came. Suspended beside the massive steel barge poor old Nerida looked drowned, dirty and pathetic. The bobstay dangled from the end of the bowsprit. The timber cross-trees were split and bent forward. The flaked mainsail bulged with tons of water trapped between the gaskets. The lift seemed to have caused no serious damage beyond a bad split running along the scuppers on the starboard side.

Nerida was held in the slings so that her decks stayed level with the water. Two big pumps were then rigged and the scene was soon dominated by the sound of petrol motors straining to lift thousands of litres from inside the hull. For a while, nobody spoke.

‘I think we’re winning! She’s coming up!’ Inch by inch, the topsides began to appear. Nobody needed a degree in physics to understand that if the pumps could keep ahead of the leak that had sunk her, Nerida might yet live to fight another day.

This is a boat I’ve sailed regularly for more than 25 years. Over that time the gorgeous saloon has become part of my own emotional fabric. Impatience soon got the better of me and I clambered aboard to take a look below.

The scene that greeted me was one of total disorder. Internal planking lay everywhere at bizarre angles. Lockers and drawers had either burst open or swollen shut. Wet weather gear, sails and the contents of the galley swirled around my feet. Everything was tainted with the stench and slime of engine oil.

But where was the leak? Even with some of the cabin sole removed I could find no obvious hull damage in the saloon. I clambered into the filthy engine compartment. It was a greasy mess, but also seemed intact. The forepeak was chaos yet the planking all looked sound. The doors to the chain locker were stuck fast, but that area is mostly above the waterline anyway. We would have to wait another day before the riddle of the sinking was solved (see box).

The pumps chugged on. Eighty minutes after her boom first broke the surface, Nerida was again floating on her marks. We shut down the pump motors as a smaller tug came alongside and secured the yacht for a gunnel-to-gunnel tow down the Harbour to the Noakes yard at Berry’s Bay. As a precaution, we left the pumps and their motors on board just in case moving the yacht suddenly aggravated the leak.

The light was already beginning to fade when Nerida was manoeuvred into the dock. Sean Langman operated the travel lift himself as the yacht was gently raised until her deck was level with the hard stand. Two engineers scrambled aboard to see what they could do to save the Perkins diesel. The boat was a sorry sight, but at least she was safe.

It had been a long day and there was now not much more we could do. Sean and I stood beside the yacht in fading light, chatting about the salvage and the best way to approach the long repair job that lay ahead.

An insurance assessor chose that moment to appear out of the gloom. ‘You know, this boat could well be written off completely,’ he declared. ‘It mightn’t be fixable.’

I stared at him, so taken aback by that horrible prospect that no sensible words would form in my weary brain. ‘Wha’!’

But Langman is made of sterner stuff. He just fixed the assessor with a steely frown and declared: ‘Let me tell you something, fella. This boat will be fixed.’

All it needs to sink even the most well-found yacht is a sequence of bad luck. Not until the yacht was drained and propped up on the hardstand did a thorough inspection reveal the cause of the disaster.

During the first big Sydney winter storm on June 10 another boat moored nearby in Neutral Bay, Irish, broke away from her mooring and tangled with Nerida.

That collision snapped the port runner, stanchions were ripped out, lifelines broken, a bulwark cracked and the toerail badly split and scoured.

But, not noticed among all this damage, was a major whack to the forestay above the bowsprit turnbuckle. The jib headfoil was bent at the point of that impact.

The upward force of this blow was transferred down the bobstay and loosened the two big coach bolts that secure the bottom end of the stay. Those bolts pass through a V-plate set into the stem, just below the waterline.

During the next storm, on the night of June 16, a steep chop was whipped up in the bay. Nerida’s heavy pitching at her mooring slowly loosened the bobstay bolts and they eventually pulled out, fracturing part of the V-plate and leaving two holes behind as they parted from the stem.

Water then entered through those holes and, as the storm continued, the yacht quickly filled through the chain locker. This also explains why Nerida sank bow down.



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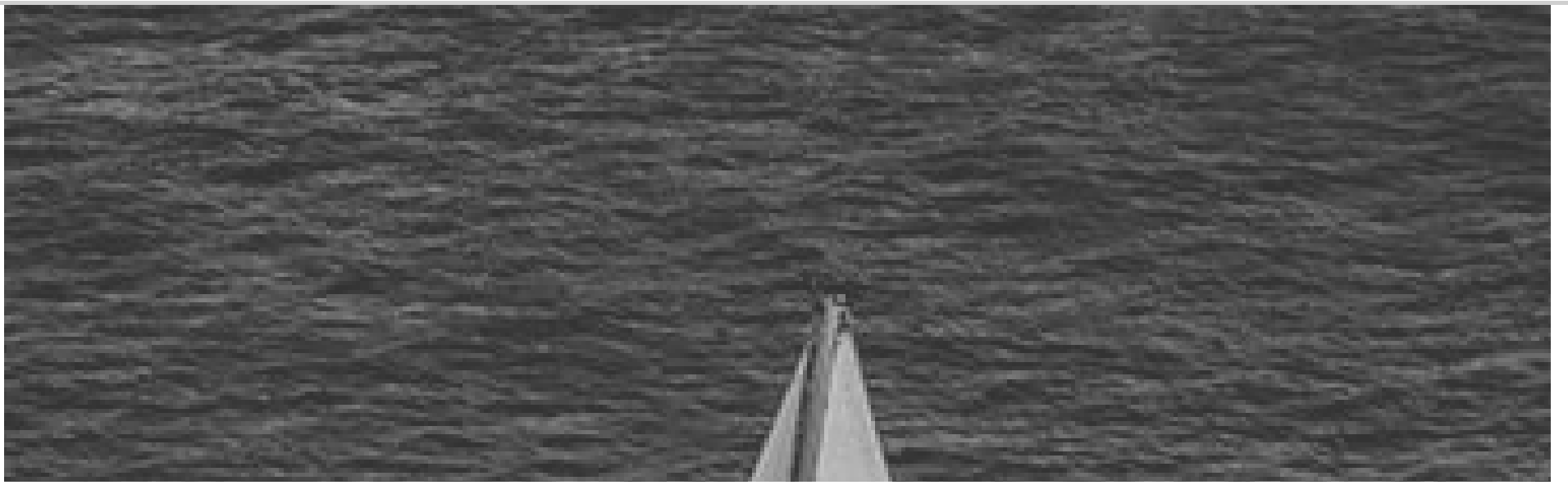
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