

"WE ROARED DOWN THE SEAS LIKE A SURF BOAT"

Skipper's story of Nerida's win

By COLIN HASELGROVE

ON Christmas morning, the day before the Sydney-Hobart yacht race started, we took the Nerida on a "shake-down" sail to Broken Bay, 15 miles north of Sydney.

We ran down Sydney Harbor in a most spectacular fashion, rehearsing what we would do next day if the hard southerly wind continued.

As we neared the Heads we found a very heavy sea running, and as we hardened sheets and felt the full force of the wind and sea, the starboard highfield lever on the runners crumpled like a squashed jam tin. We held our breaths for an instant waiting for the mast to go over the side.

But it stood up, so the crew jumped to the sheets and smartly put the ship on the other tack, thus placing the strain on the sound runners.

We ran back to Watson Bay feeling rather panicky and wondering how to get repairs

done in a strange city on Christmas Day.

After a hasty conference, we started the diesel and went to Halvorsen's slip in Neutral Bay, where we found Trygve and Magnus Halvorsen putting the finishing touches to their beautiful little yacht Solveig.

The Halvorsens put the repairs in hand, and their head mechanic worked through Christmas dinner welding, stiffening pieces round the runner levers. They would not accept any payment for their help.

Boxing Day dawned cool and cloudy with the southerly breeze of the previous day blowing harder than ever.

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After topping up the water tanks and fastening the racing flag permanently at the main-

Here for the first time is the full story of how the South Australian yawl Nerida won the Sydney-Hobart yacht race. It was written exclusively for "The Mail" by the yacht's captain, Colin Haselgrove.

• Haselgrove is now sailing the Nerida from Tasmania back to Outer Harbor. He hopes to arrive next week-end.

mast head, we took anti-seasick tablets all round and sat down to await the starting time.

The race was due to start at 11 a.m. At 10.45 a.m. we left the moorings in Rose Bay and sailed to and fro in Double Bay looking over our competitors.

And very formidable some of them were, particularly Guy Rex's sleek sloop Mistral V., sailed by veteran Jock Muir, and the yawl Margaret Rintoul with new mainmast and a sail locker crammed to overflowing with big extras and hard-weather sails for all occasions. She was skippered by Mervyn Davey, last year's race winner.

Many others caused us qualms — Fortuna, in which I had sailed in 1949, and Gypsy Queen. We had conceded handicaps of many hours to both these yachts, but any of a dozen yachts could beat us given the right conditions.

The start was down-wind, which made it more spectacular than usual, and the boats were well-bunched running for the Heads.

We were about third across the line, and Mistral V. quickly took the lead, followed by Solveig and the big schooner Mis-

tral II. Then came Nerida, Kintail, and Fortuna in a close bunch. Seevogel was luffing Fortuna until we were put in danger of a foul either with Fortuna or Mistral II., which was close on our weather bow.

But we all managed to keep clear and we gradually widened our lead on Fortuna and Kintail as we neared the Heads.

Most of the yachts were carrying spinnakers, but we had decided not to do so. The wisdom of the decision became apparent when we came into the

dom of the decision became apparent when we came into the wind and shot ahead of Kintail, Mistral II., and Fortuna while they were clearing up their spinnaker gear.

Outside the Heads there was a very heavy sea and a lot of wind. We shortened sail, taking the mizzen off. We settled down to a hard slog to wind-

ward which was to continue for the next two and a half days.

The fleet soon opened out with Mistral V. going to windward and Margaret Rintoul through our lee in hot pursuit of Mistral.

Little Solveig amazed us, carrying on with full working sails, and it took us many hours to pass her and drop her astern.

At nightfall on December 26, seasickness was beginning to worry most of us, and a small fraction of the torrents of water pouring over the ship as she smashed her way through mountainous seas, was finding its way below.

The picture below decks was not a bright one, but at least there was warmth from the stinging spray.

I called up the "mother ships," Mistral II., Wayfarer, and Solveig, on a pre-arranged radio schedule, but only Solveig replied.

We afterwards learned Mistral II. had taken a wave down her main hatch, flooding the main switchboard and blowing all the fuses.

The constant pounding had loosened the caulking in Wayfarer's forward seams and her crew were kept too busy keeping the water down to worry about radio.

For 56 hours this went on, and we began to think the race might well take 16 days instead

and we began to think the race might well take 10 days instead of the usual five.

We had a fair idea of the position of our chief opponents from the occasional radio reports they managed to give. It added greatly to the interest of the race.

At noon on December 28, our log reads: "Received positions Mistral V, four miles east of Tathra, Solveig 65 miles east of Bermagui, Mistral II six miles north-east of Montague



NERIDA crosses the finishing line in the Sydney Hobart race.

Island, Seevogel 20 miles east of Montague. No reports from Maggie Rintoul or other vessels. Our position 23 miles east of Bermagui."

This showed us Solveig was

This showed us Solveig was counting on a change of wind to the eastward and was committed to an offshore course, while Mistral V. was working short board along the coast.

which was working short board along the coast.

We adopted the middle course of working to and fro across the rhumb line, that is, the direct line from Sydney to Tasman Island.

About noon on December 28 the wind lightened and we eased our sheets for the first time, setting our big Yankee jib and Genoa staysail.

It was a great relief to be steering for Tasmania with moderating seas and bright sunshine. The spirits of the crew soared as the wind came aft. At 2 a.m. on December 29, we were able to set our big parachute and mizzen staysail.

Then we really began "going places." For the next 24 hours the speed indicator flickered between seven and 10 knots with the ship roaring down the faces of the big following seas like a surf boat.

Several yachts reported runs of more than 200 miles on this

day. Although our log readings totalled only 188 miles, the rotor was surfacing frequently and we reduced the Margaret Rintoul's reported lead by about 20 miles after they had logged 208 miles for 24 hours.

At 10 a.m. on December 29, the spinnaker boom fittings were showing signs of strain imposed by the 1,400 square feet of sail we had been setting on them in the 30 to 35-m.p.h. breeze.

So we took off the big spinnaker and set the small one. We ran for a short time until the breeze began dropping and we decided to shake out the reef in the spinnaker.

But the sail took charge as it was being loosened, threw the winch handle violently into the air. It struck my right knee, put me out of action as far as any forward work was concerned, for the rest of the race.

The spinnaker went overboard and the boom broke at the socket.

But we got the sail aboard without damage, soon had it

without damage, soon had it set again on the big boom which had meanwhile been repaired.

By 8 a.m. on December 30 the north-easterly had petered out and a southerly change was obviously close.

By this time we had sighted the Tasmanian coast, identified our position as 15 miles south-east of St. Patrick's Head. Just before 9 a.m. the change hit us with a violent squall which threw us aback with full sail set.

After some confusion, we snugged her down with a double-reefed mainsail and working staysail.

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