

STAR'S PACIFIC ODYSSEY - April 2011 to October 2012

PART 1 - CROSSING THE TASMAN SEA

We sailed out of Kettering for New Zealand at 11:30am on Wednesday the 20th of April 2011, having successfully negotiated departure formalities with the friendly folk from Customs, who happily met us at the fuel dock. After fond farewells from friends and family, we cast off and headed east.

My crew for the Tasman crossing included two very experienced and capable sailors – Peter Holmes and Ian McCormick – together with fellow CYCT member Ian Macdonald as cook. I couldn't have chosen a better crew for the challenges ahead.

As we headed up the Channel, we were bending on the revamped mainsail and its new boom bag when the Peppermint Bay ferry shot past with Ian Macdonald's son at the helm. With cheerful waves from crew and passengers, we realised this could be our last view of humanity for some time. To our surprise, we suddenly saw 'Aurielle' sailing towards us as we rounded Dennes Point, and managed a brief conversation with John and Sue Cerutti. Their words of encouragement fell behind as we headed out across Storm Bay, leaving the Iron Pot abeam at 1300 Hrs.

With a fair westerly breeze, we made good time to Tasman Island, leaving the flashing light astern as night fell. We had a following breeze of 15-20 knots from the southwest as we set course for the north end of New Zealand – Cape Reinga. After reefing the main at sundown, we were still punching along at 7-8 knots with a following sea building slowly. Ian McCormick was on the helm when one of these waves broke into the cockpit, pinning him against the wheel and sending a shot of water through the companionway which landed on top of Peter Holmes who was asleep in the starboard quarter berth. Pete was not amused! We of course immediately fitted the bottom washboard, although it was a bit late according to Pete. Ian showed us the wheel-shaped bruise on his torso the next morning!

At midday on Thursday the 21st we were nudging 9 knots and so tucked another reef in the main. By mid-afternoon, the wind strength had increased to about 30 knots and we dropped the main altogether, continuing under headsail alone, still doing 6-7 knots. The wind remained W-SW and eased back to 20 knots, but with rising seas off the port quarter it was a wet night.

We had a good day's run of 168 miles on Friday, but later that evening the breeze started to drop out and by early Saturday morning our boat speed was down to only 3 knots – time to crank up the iron topsail! By noon Saturday the breeze began to fill in so we hoisted sail again, and mid-afternoon saw us nudging 10 knots. At nightfall we had clocked up 500 miles from Kettering.

During the afternoon on Sunday 24th, the breeze started backing to the SE although still blowing at 15-20 knots. We were making good progress, with our daily runs averaging about 150 miles.

Pat Price had left about a week before us on 'Pendulum', and we had expected him to enter NZ at Nelson. However, after

attempting to make for Nelson against the strong sou'easterlies, he decided to press on over the top end of the North Island down to Opuia and The Bay of Islands. This confirmed our decision to do likewise. With the SE wind now blowing at 25-30 knots, Nelson would have meant a hard bash to windward!

Despite the rough conditions, our cook Ian Macdonald managed to turn out a beautiful roast pork for Sunday dinner, with all the trimmings including crackling, gravy and a selection of roast vegetables. Ian's ability to operate in the galley while hanging onto a glass of red in these conditions is the stuff of legends.

It was around this time that our HF weather charts started showing a deepening low north of Cape Reinga, but the consensus seemed to be that it would soon drift off into the Tasman and allow us to sneak in behind it. However, we knew that we were in for a bit of a blow!

Over the next three days we continued on a beam reach in the strengthening sou'easterlies, hoping that by Friday we would be approaching the Three Kings. The log ticked over 1000 miles on Tuesday evening, less than one week out of Kettering. Wave height slowly increased to over 5 meters, but the good ship STAR and its crew handled the conditions easily.

On Friday, the wind began to back more to the east and built to over 30 knots, knocking our boat speed right back and pushing us onto a course just east of true north. By Saturday morning the wind was gusting at over 45 knots. We then sailed into a patch of beautiful blue sky and the wind suddenly fell away. That told us exactly where we were – right in the eye of that deep low - and we knew what to expect when we came out the other side! By now we were well north of our rhumb line and on the same latitude as Cape Reinga, but still 135 miles west of the Three Kings. There was little chance of gaining any more easting until this weather system moved away.

At about 1430 Hrs on Saturday, I remember being in the forward cabin (which was getting a bit hard to sleep in!) and looking up through the hatch at the staysail, stretched as tight as a drum. Just as I decided it was time to drop back to the storm jib, there was an almighty bang as a wave broke over the bow and hit the staysail, ripping both the clew and sheet tangs off the aluminium boom so that the staysail (undamaged) started flogging and sounding like a machine gun.

Pete and Ian went forward and got the wildly flogging staysail off, and because the staysail boom was no longer useable for the storm jib, we decided to set the trysail. Although all the sails had been checked and serviced by Hood Sails before we left, they had neglected to fit new track slides onto the luff of the trysail, so we had to rob some off the furled mizzen. Pete and Ian did a great job of hoisting the trysail while I remained at the wheel as we motored just off the wind. Once the trysail was sheeted down to the port chainplate, we cut the engine and tested the helm. With a tiny amount of genoa eased out to pull the head off and balance the weather helm, Star remained at about 60-70 degrees to the wind regardless of how the helm was swung, slowly plugging along at 1-3 knots.

The wind was now gusting at over 50 knots from the east, and Star was effectively hove-to on a NNE heading. We estimated the wave height at over 10 metres by now, but after several days of hard SE weather, wave length had increased considerably and it was exciting sailing. The problem now was that as the wind was rapidly building from the east, there was a steep set of new easterly waves on top of the big sou'easterly swell. When the crests of both sets of waves occasionally coincided, there was a low roar as this 15m-high mass of water collapsed into the trough below. It occurred to me that this would not be a good place to be!

With darkness coming on, and there being no need for anyone to remain on the helm, I decided it was time to batten down the hatches and retire below. We were now about 65 miles north of the Three Kings, but still 120 miles to the west. Pete proceeded to fill in the log in the Pilot House while Ian and I retired to the Saloon. It was shortly after 1830 hours on Saturday the 30th of April and the log was reading 1448 miles from Kettering.

Cook Macdonald was busy in the galley heating up a tasty pre-cooked stew with some spuds, and of course juggling the obligatory glass of red. Ian and I grabbed a can of beer from the fridge and sat down on the starboard settee, with our feet braced against the table. We had just cracked the tops and toasted our good health when we were suddenly thrown bodily across the saloon into the port side lockers. Ian put his head through a teak door panel, but I managed to head-butt one of the knurled knobs securing an opening porthole, and ripped my scalp open down the part line. Ian Macdonald was sitting on the port settee and was thrown back, smashing his head through another teak door panel. At least thin teak panels don't tend to splinter! Pete was being thrown around the Pilot House like a rag doll.

When McCormick pulled himself upright, he saw me with blood streaming down my face, and Macdonald lying under the table, which had broken loose from its mounting bolts. This may have had something to do with the fact that it contained half a dozen bottles of red and a slab of beer, but we discovered later that the steel frame to which it was bolted was only screwed to the floors with four small gauge wood screws!

McCormick threw me a towel to help stem the blood flow (Margie later told me he can't stand the sight of blood!) and then proceeded to pull the table off Macdonald. Luckily, neither of them had incurred any significant injuries, although the massive bruising we all suffered took weeks to heal. Pete appeared from the Pilot House and also seemed to be still in one piece. The loose table was secured in the entrance to the forward cabin where it couldn't do any more damage.

At this stage, we were still trying to work out what had happened, when it became obvious that we had just been rolled 360 degrees – the top loading fridge and freezer had both emptied themselves, and contents of the rubbish bin were splattered over the deck head above. The saloon and galley were in a real mess, with water sloshing over the floorboards. We still seemed to be sailing along on the same tack, with no sign of having lost either mast.

Anyone who understands the way water circulates within waves would know that we had simply been spun off the top of this 15m wave, with the 15m high mast being buried into the trough and rotated out the back of the wave – and we were still sailing on the trysail! Even the wind speed and direction instruments on the top of the mast were still working.

We had taken quite a bit of water on board during the capsize, so Macdonald proceeded to pump the bilges (with limited help from me), while McCormick set about bandaging my head wound, so that I began looking rather like an Egyptian mummy. Pete began preparations to drop the trysail, which seemed to have survived the capsize intact, and he and McCormick soon had it off and stowed. Luckily the trusty Yanmar fired up without complaint, so that we could maintain direction head-to-wind.

We then hauled out all the heavy anchor warps and chain to use as a drogue, but Pete and Ian soon found that trying to set them off the bow would be a very difficult and dangerous task in wild seas at night. We agreed that we would have to run off before the storm, heading back towards Sydney. This meant exposing the aft pilot house windows to impact from breaking waves, but we had no option. At least setting chain and all warps astern was a much safer task working from the cockpit, using the large powered genoa winches to control the lines.

After a couple of hours of hard wet work, Pete and Ian retired below again and decided to get some rest. Firstly though we cranked up the Sat phone to call home. We knew that our four wives were out to dinner together on Saturday night, hoping to hear that we would soon be rounding Cape Reinga and heading for Opuia. I didn't want to talk to Alex about my head wound, so Ian called Margie who had just arrived home. He outlined our position and confirmed that I appeared to be OK, with no sign of concussion. I was also very relieved that none of the rest of the crew had been seriously injured. Ian asked Margie to report our incident to Canberra and request that they inform the NZ authorities as a matter of routine. He promised we would call again in the morning, and left the phone on standby in case we got a call back from Canberra SAR.

I had my harness tied off to the grab rail above the settee, and was told not to go to sleep – the crew were still worried about delayed concussion, but the adrenalin seemed to be keeping me going! McCormick burrowed down into the rather soggy port aft quarter berth while Pete figured it was safer to sleep on the floor of the Pilot House, still in his wet weather gear of course.

At 0030 hours on Sunday morning I was half-dozing when there was an almighty crash from the Pilot House. I looked up to see a wall of water cascading down the lower companionway into the saloon. It hit the fridge, shot up into the air and then landed right on top of me. Pete was half-drowned on the floor and leapt to his feet spluttering, while Ian looked out from his aft berth to see a couple of tons of water pouring through the two portside windows in the Pilot House. It was obvious that another breaking wave had just dumped on us from astern and smashed in the windows, which may well have been cracked during the earlier capsize. We grabbed some cushions and plywood panels from under Macdonald's forward berth, and the boys began to brace them off against the broken windows. They then wrapped the storm jib around the outside of the openings and lashed it securely.

We discovered that the GPS Chart Plotter and depth sounder in the cockpit had died, not being a fully waterproof unit, so we were now reliant on Pete's hand held GPS, with mine to back it up. We were not surprised to find both HF radios were dead, but the biggest disappointment was to find our Sat phone under water in the bilge, so we couldn't call home to let the girls know how we were. We were using Spot Messenger to report our position via satellite, and the standard message was "Star and crew all OK" which we sent. What we later found out was that Spot had stopped sending the 'OK' messages from 1615 on

Saturday until after 1030 on Sunday, so for over 18 hours nobody knew how we had survived the night. Whether that was operator error, or the fact that we had fished Spot out of the bilge is hard to say! There was also a second pre-set message on it which said "Sat Phone not in service" but that didn't get through to the girls until after 1600 hours on Sunday. All they knew was that no EPIRB signals had been picked up from any of our three transmitters.

For those who are familiar with Spot Messenger, it is worth noting that there is an emergency HELP message which is used in the USA to alert a nominated rescue service, but is of no use outside the USA. For some reason, Spot started transmitting this default HELP message at 1540 hours on Tuesday 3rd May, with a further 10 messages sent through to 1130 hours on Wednesday. This certainly did cause more concern back home, despite the fact that no EPIRB signal had been picked up.

The next job was to man the pumps and get rid of all the water sloshing around the saloon floor. We then started to feel a little more in control of our situation, although there was a spirited debate about whether to set off the EPIRBs. I felt that we were in pretty good shape for the time being, and that an EPIRB signal would simply initiate a NZ search effort, and we could expect a search plane overhead by the morning. By now we were almost 200 miles off the coast, which probably put us out of helicopter range. In any case I didn't really feel like jumping into the raging sea for a winch rescue by chopper. A ship would take more than a day to reach us from Auckland or Wellington, although there could be a merchant vessel closer to our present position. I felt quite safe on the good ship Star, which had looked after us well so far. We also knew that the recently serviced RFD 8-man liferaft was still lashed to the foredeck, despite the fact that both mounting chocks had been washed overboard during the capsizing. We were lucky that it hadn't inflated.

The main issue now was to try and avoid another wave attacking these temporary portside repairs, so Pete took over the helm in the cockpit in order to hold her head down to starboard. McCormick relieved him for short spells, and when Pete came below I asked what he thought the wind strength was. He replied "well, I've sailed in winds over 60 knots, but this has got to be over 70 knots". We later learned that Cape Reinga had recorded winds of up to 79 knots that night! Pete continued on the helm until well into the morning when the weather started to ease. He did a magnificent job for about 10 hours, as Ian McCormick can attest after relieving him for 10 minutes at a time. Ian is pretty fit, but couldn't manage more than 10 minutes before tiring, surfing down those monster waves at up to 10 knots under bare poles. The heavy 100m-long warps streaming out port and starboard quarters had all our spare chain and kedge anchor shackled to their ends, and were as taut as tug hawsers, stretching like rubber bands every time we caught a wave.

The wind began to moderate by 0930 on Sunday morning, but then built again late morning. At 1600 hours the drogue warps were winched back on board and we found the stern Flook anchor had vanished. The only obvious damage was that the fibreglass bimini top was rather askew, as two of the SS pipe supports had pulled out of their sockets. We had also lost the BBQ off the aft pushpit - no grub screws to secure the spigots into the mountings when we were upside-down!

We set the genoa and broad-reached all night at 6 knots, heading back towards New Zealand. By 0730 on Monday

morning we were almost exactly back to the same position reached on Friday night, and 150 miles from Cape Reinga. We covered that distance in the next 24 hours and so by Tuesday morning we were looking for the Three Kings. With the fridge and freezer out of action, we spent a fair bit of time throwing out a trail of rotting food retrieved from the bilges. It was sad having to heave all those beautiful home-cooked casseroles over the side that we had been saving for the end of the trip.

Although overjoyed at finally seeing land at last, the landforms didn't make sense until Pete realised he had forgotten to apply the Magnetic Variation of 18° E to our true course! We were obviously very tired and none of our brains were working very well by that stage. We found ourselves halfway down Ninety Mile Beach and even saw a tour bus driving along the white sand beach! We tried the VHF radio without luck, and later discovered that the aerial had become disconnected in the capsizing.

As we turned to sail up the coast to round Cape Reinga, we suddenly became aware of a light plane cruising up the coast behind us. We turned on the hand-held VHF and heard them report back to Radio Kaitaia that they had found the yacht STAR! So we thanked them for their efforts and confirmed their identification. They told us that they weren't out on an official search mission, but had taken the opportunity of going up for a training flight on such a lovely day!

We then called up Radio Kaitaia to report our actual position, and they asked us to report back to them every 3 hours while sailing to Opuia. They then asked us if we needed any food, water or fuel, so we thanked them and told them that we were OK. Indeed, Macdonald had been cooking up a late lunch from our last piece of vac-packed fillet steak with sautéed onions and the last of our spuds, and had already cracked a bottle of red. When I offered to exchange a dozen cans of Cascade Draught for a bag of ice, the terse reply came back: "we drink Tui here"!

We finally rounded Cape Reinga that night and continued along the coast to North Cape. As we headed down the East coast on Wednesday morning the 4th of May for the last 80 mile run to Opuia, we found ourselves in a 5 knot northerly. With the motor ticking over at 1500 revs to conserve the last of our fuel, there was not a breath of wind in our sails, so we furled them all and motored on under clear blue skies. We cruised in close to the rugged coast and the scenery was impressive.

At least we were now in mobile phone range, and were able to talk to family and friends back home. Margie McCormick had already flown to Auckland and was driving up to Opuia that day. We rounded Harakeke Island and approached the Bay of Islands just before dusk. We started heading in on the Waitangi leading lights, but lost them after an hour or so. I suddenly realised that we were in a thick fog, which we later discovered is a common occurrence in the channel approaching Russell and Opuia. As we entered the channel, visibility was barely a boat length beyond the bow. I was all for dropping the anchor until dawn, but the rest of the crew were keen to make harbour. Margie was already waiting for Ian in the Opuia Yacht Club bar with Pat Price. Even knowing that there could be no jumping ship before we had cleared Customs tomorrow, Ian insisted that we press on.

With both Ians at the bow looking for channel markers, Pete on his GPS plotting our position on the chart, and myself on the wheel, we slowly picked our way down the channel. There were many calls from Pete of "starboard, hard to starboard, back to port now" with each Ian calling messages like "pile dead ahead,

but can't see the colour; yes it's red – hard to starboard!". I had backed the engine off so that we were only doing about 3 knots in case we hit something in the fog! At that speed, the response of an 18 tonne cruising boat to helm changes was a little sluggish, which gave the forward crew a few nervous moments.

Opuia Marina and the Quarantine Dock slowly emerged from the mist, and then we saw Pat and Margie madly waving to us! We tied up to the Quarantine Jetty at 7 minutes past midnight on the morning of 5th of May 2011. Pat and Margie came alongside in Pat's tender but knew better than to come aboard in case someone from Customs was watching. We almost had to put a leg rope on McCormick to stop him jumping ship, but then Pete appeared with a bottle of whisky so we all retired to the saloon after sending Margie off with a few bags of washing.

PART 2 - BATTLING THE INSURANCE BEAST

As we were approaching Opuia, I gave notice of a claim to our insurance company, Club Marine. Their initial response was that we were not covered, which was a shock to say the least!

Before departing Tasmania, I had submitted an application to Club Marine for Bluewater cover. They insisted on a new survey report before they would proceed with this application, even though the existing survey was less than two years old. Chris Wells had carried out a survey when Star was slipped at Kettering in preparation for the voyage, but I had not yet received his report.

When it came time to leave, I rang Club Marine to see if they would give me a cover note for a few days until the survey report was received, but they declined my request. As we were covered for the 250nm coastal zone around Australia and New Zealand, I decided to save the considerable additional Bluewater premium cost by covering the risk in the central Tasman myself. I then checked with them that I would be covered once I was within 250nm of the NZ coast, and they agreed on the basis that if I made a claim, I would have to prove that I was within the 250nm limit. I had no problem with that, as Spot Messenger provides third party verification of GPS location. This turned out to be an essential factor in having the claim accepted.

When I lodged the claim, Club Marine pointed out a clause in the Policy General Exclusions which says:

"Your Policy will be automatically suspended when Your boat clears Australian Customs and Immigration for the purpose of leaving Australian waters and will recommence when it clears Australian Customs and Immigration on return (unless You advise Us and We agree to extend in writing.)"

I was not previously aware of this condition, having relied totally on the terms outlined in the annual renewal schedule, which simply stated the Geographic Limits as: "250 nautical miles off mainland Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand North and South Islands." Had I been aware of the exclusion clause, we would obviously have headed straight for Nelson, rather than risk circumnavigating half of the North Island before clearing into New Zealand.

Following much argument between both parties (and the creation of a 5cm thick file!) I referred the matter to the Financial Ombudsman Service, which requires an initial

I then remembered that our daughter Zoe had presented me with a bottle of VSOP brandy on leaving Kettering, and that I had carefully stowed it in a deep forward locker with my undies and other dry clothes. When I went to dig it out, I discovered that the screw top had been severely battered and the bottle was now completely dry. However, my clothes had a beautiful brandy aroma about them for the next few days!

The next morning dawned bright and sunny. The Customs and Quarantine guys had to step over Pete's prone body on the floor of the Pilot House to reach the Saloon. He was obviously exhausted, but that guy can sleep anywhere! It had been two weeks of tough sailing from Kettering, but I couldn't have done it without such a magnificent crew to complement the tough little ship designed by Nathaniel Herreschoff.

qualifying period of 45 days. The FOS eventually agreed to pick up the case and it was finally settled in my favour after a further six months. Although I had already carried out considerable work at my own cost, the more expensive repairs and equipment replacement tasks could then commence. It was now February 2012 and we were keen to have all work completed in time to cruise the Bay of Islands during Easter.

For most of the time spent in Opuia working on Star, the weather was surprisingly wet, so it was difficult to carry out any external work including replacement of windows in the Pilot House. After removing the internal teak trim surrounding these windows, it became obvious that the main reason they had failed was that they had been bolted to the inside of the framing. Although the fastenings were closely spaced, the 10mm acrylic sheeting had cracked along the line of holes, which had then allowed the windows to fold inwards under the immense pressure of a breaking wave. On checking the original design drawings, it was interesting to note that the specification required the windows to be made from 8mm toughened glass and fitted in an external aluminium frame. This has now been done for all nine windows, although the insurers were only prepared to pay for the two windows broken at sea, despite the fact that some of the others had begun to show signs of stress cracking.

Most repairs were completed just before Easter, but the continuously wet weather prevented us from applying antifouling in time to launch Star before the yard shut down for Easter. With our daughter Mae visiting from Samoa, we had to be content with a land-based tour of Northland in the Subaru Legacy I had bought through Phil Zisakis, who runs 'Cars for Cruisers' in Opuia.

We were finally able to get Star back in the water after Easter, and Alex and I had a few days cruising the Bay of Islands before we had to return home.

As a brief summary of lessons learned in dealing with our insurance claim, I offer the following comments:

1. The first response to any insurance claim is usually negative. I am convinced that claims managers are paid a substantial bonus based on the number and value of claims that they reject!

2. Be aware that many issues such as seaworthiness of your boat and experience of your crew may come under challenge from the insurance company.
3. Studies involving insurance claims in the US which were initially rejected, have shown that less than 30 percent of these are pursued to a final outcome. That is, most people give up doing battle with their insurance company due to the burden of proof and the level of documentation required, even if they have a reasonable claim.
4. The cost of legal advice cannot usually be claimed against the policy.
5. Beware the fine print, and make sure that any clarifications or agreements are confirmed in writing.
6. When it comes to replacing damaged equipment (which was the bulk of our claim), the assessor will nominate the expected service life of the item and then subtract the number of years since the item was installed. They will only pay for the proportionate value of life remaining. Thus even if your equipment (eg radios, inverters, fridge and freezer) is perfectly serviceable, you may wind up paying for most of the replacement cost.
7. Check that your insurance company has an agreement with the Australian Financial Ombudsman Service with respect to mediating a disputed claim. Once the FOS have made a determination, there are appeal provisions, but the insurance company will generally be happy to pay up. They probably know that this doesn't happen very often!

Needless to say, I am now no longer insured with Club Marine.

PART 3 - CRUISING TO TONGA 2012

On returning to Tasmania in April 2012 I was diagnosed with bowel cancer. The subsequent colectomy took a while to recover from, so it wasn't until July that I was ready for a return to sea.

I had negotiated an extension of our 12 month stay with NZ Customs, but they seemed fairly insistent that we depart by the end of July. Cousin Bob Tanner and nephew Michael Churchill from Melbourne had agreed to join me as crew on the next leg to Tonga, so the last week of July saw us busy checking out sails, rig and systems ready for the 1150 mile leg north to Nuku'alofa. The weather continued as wet and windy as ever, and as our departure date drew near we saw a deep low moving in from the Tasman, bringing more rain and winds of over 60 knots.

We could see an opportunity to make our escape on the back end of this system as the southerlies moved in, so we loaded provisions and refuelled for a departure on the last day of July. The weather had moderated by the time we sailed out of Opuia, and the wind dropped away as we left the coast of New Zealand behind. This left us bouncing around in rough seas for the first night, which proved to be a challenge for all of us in trying to find our sea legs!

We soon settled into the routine of life at sea and experienced fair winds most of the way to Tonga, although we decided to motorsail some of the way in order to maintain our daily target of 120 miles. We experienced some spectacular sunsets, and only encountered one ship crossing our track as he headed east across the Pacific. We chatted to the captain on VHF, who turned out to be a keen yachting waiting his chance to go cruising after retiring from his day job!

After 9 days at sea, we picked up the mountains on the Island of 'Eua and set course for 'Eueiki off the north end of the main Island of Tongatapu. We had a strong northerly right on the nose and by nightfall it had started to rain – not quite the welcome we had expected for our first Pacific Island landfall! By dawn the next day the weather had begun to improve as we sailed up the east coast of Tongatapu. We then turned west into Piha Passage and after some careful navigation, rounded

Makaha'a Island and headed towards Nuku'alofa Harbour with our Q flag flying.

Our VHF calls to the Port Authority were not answered, but we were eventually able to contact Customs as we entered Fuaa harbour. We tied up east of the fuel dock and waited for Customs, Immigration and Quarantine officials to find us. Clearance formalities were relatively simple and straightforward, and we were soon ready to explore the town after anchoring off the breakwater on the northern side of Fuaa Harbour and taking our lines ashore.

We found a very friendly and helpful taxi driver by the name of Wesley Lau (+6767719436) who looked after us every day we were in Nuku'alofa, and at a moderate cost. He took us to a small guest house for showers and laundry, then gave us a guided tour of the town. On the following day, Wesley drove us around all the sights of Tongatapu including the impressive blowholes along the south coast, culminating in a Tongan feast and floor show with fire dancers in a cave on the east coast.

The next day was Sunday, when physical work of any kind is frowned upon in Tonga, so we headed across the bay to Pangaimotu Island and anchored off the small resort run by Ana 'Big Mama' Emberson. We were able to complete a number of maintenance jobs on deck as well as changing over a failed alternator, then went ashore for a welcome beer and a great feed of fish and chips.

Bob and Michael were due to fly out to Melbourne on Monday, so we headed back over to Fuaa Harbour and called up Wesley for the ride to Fua'amoto Airport.

Alex arrived later in the week with another friend from Hobart, Ryan Cantrill, and we decided to repeat the island tour, complete with Tongan feast and floor show that evening. The following day we stocked up on food and other provisions, filled the tanks with fresh rainwater, and headed back over to Big Mama's at Pangaimotu Island.

We left the anchorage after lunch the following day, heading for Nomuka Island in the Ha'apai Group, about 60 miles to the north. With a brisk sou'easterly blowing, we ran on under

reefed genoa during the night to ensure that we didn't arrive too early, and picked up the light off the northwest end of Nomuka'iki just before dawn. After anchoring on the north side of Nomuka'iki within sight of the wrecked fishing vessel Takuo, we made our way ashore to explore the island, but we were unable to locate the old prison ruin.

As we continued our cruise through the Ha'apai Group, we were lucky to make a few sightings of humpback whales and their calves, lazing around in the sun. We kept our distance and decided not to spend too much time chasing whales at this stage, as we expected many more sightings in the Vava'u Group. We were later to regret this decision, as we only saw one more whale from a distance during more than three weeks cruising the waters of Vava'u.

Our next anchorage was off the west side of Ha'afeva Island, where we spent some time snorkelling around the surrounding reefs before continuing on to Pangai on Lifuka Island. As the harbour was busy with commercial shipping including the inter-island ferry, we anchored outside and then went ashore for a meal at the Mariner's Café.

Considering the limited attractions of Pangai, we decided to head north to Ha'ano Island in the hope of seeing more whales, or at least finding better snorkelling opportunities. We anchored off the mushroom-shaped rock north of Pukotala Point, and immediately recognised our old friends from Opuu, Mike and Devala, on their Oyster 45 'Sea Rover' out of the UK. They had spent the last few weeks in the Ha'apai Group, encountering very few other cruising boats, but had sighted a great many Humpback whales and had even swum with some of them. They later followed us up to the Vava'u Group and were rather taken aback at the lack of whales and the number of yachts in every anchorage, so returned again to Ha'apai for the rest of the season.

After another overnight sail from Ha'ano Island, we picked up the light on Foeata Island at dawn and sailed up between Hunga Island and Nuapapu Island to Neiafu Harbour, arriving in misty rain around noon. On checking in with the Customs

PART 4 - BACK TO BUNDABERG VIA VANUATU

We returned to Neiafu on the 20th September in time to pick up Andrew Edwards, who had flown in to join us for the trip back to Australia. Julie flew back to Hobart on 24th September after waving us goodbye from the fuel dock at Neiafu.

The sun was setting off our bow as we sailed out of Vava'u north of Hunga Island, back into the Pacific towards Fiji. We had considered stopping at Fiji en route to Vanuatu, but decided that as our time was now limited, we would head directly for Port Vila, which is about halfway between Tonga and Australia.

As we headed for Laté Island, we remembered the two Australian sailors who were lost here the previous year when their yacht ran into the rocky cliffs of this unlit mountainous island. We were on the same course, so took great care in giving Laté Island a wide berth as we set course to pass north of Vatoa Island in the Lau Group.

The trade winds treated us well as we sailed westward past Fiji, and we watched the mountains of Kadavu rise out of the sea as we passed south of Matuku Island at dawn on the 28th of

authorities, we discovered that we had a minor problem, in that we had not obtained clearance on leaving Nuku'alofa as it was a Sunday when we sailed. This seemed to take most of our stay in Vava'u before it was resolved on our departure!

We spent the next week exploring the islands of the Vava'u Group before Alex had to return home on the 4th September to prepare for a trip to visit our daughter Mae in France.

Julie and Ian Macdonald arrived on the 5th and immediately settled down to life on board *Star* and the fleshpots of Neiafu. The highlights included a wonderful crayfish meal at one of the many cafes and the Fakaleiti (the third Tongan gender) show at Tonga Bob's!

For the next two weeks we cruised among most of the islands in the Vava'u Group, visiting our favourite anchorages at Port Maurelle, Nuku Island, Lape and Vaka'eitu Islands, Tapana Island, Ofu Island and many more. Julie had brought with her a good selection of pens, paper, books and children's clothing for distribution among the more remote communities, so we had a number of visits to various schools throughout the islands. It was good to see that education in these small communities is well organised and is given a high priority.

We did our best to patronise the various island resorts, with memorable meals at Mounu Island and Blue lagoon Resort on Foeata Island. Unfortunately, La Paella on Tapana Island and Ika Lahi Lodge on Hunga Lagoon were not operating when we called in.

While moored off the Ark Gallery at Tapana Island, we heard radio reports of a woman who had suffered a shark attack while swimming between Eueiki and Taunga islands, and was being brought ashore on the beach opposite us, where an ambulance was waiting to take her to Neiafu Hospital. She had suffered severe injuries to her thigh, but these were not life-threatening. Ian Macdonald offered to donate blood for transfusion but the hospital seemed to manage without his help! The patient was eventually air-lifted to hospital in Brisbane some days later.

September, with the larger peaks on Viti Levu forming a backdrop. Even though we were experiencing more alternator problems, we resisted the temptation to head into Suva and continued on our course to Port Vila. With the south sub-tropical current in our favour, we were making good time and by the 1st October we could just make out the peaks of Erromango Island in the distance.

We picked up the light on Efate that night and by dawn the approaching coastline began to take shape. As we sailed into Mele Bay and approached the channel into Port Vila, we passed several impressive sailing ships at anchor. We recognised one of them as being the original four-masted single-handed staysail schooner '*Club Mediterranean*', now fitted with a luxurious deck structure and flying the Maltese flag. We later heard stories of drugs and gun running, with some local politicians being implicated in arranging residential status for the captain and crew. We never heard the final outcome of this intrigue, although there was an election held just after we left Vanuatu!

After anchoring in the harbour, we waited for the Port officials to come on board that afternoon, then arranged for a stern-to berth at the Marina to make shore excursions a little easier. We found the town of Port Vila very lively and its people charming. Everyone speaks English, but the French influence adds a sense of style that is missing in Tonga.

While Ian explored the island, Andrew and I spent most of our time over the next few days sorting out alternator problems and fixing the auto pilot which had begun to trip out. We eventually discovered that the 10 Amp circuit-breaker was tripping at about 6 Amps, so we swapped it over to a lighting circuit and the problem was fixed! We couldn't find a suitable replacement alternator and I was not inclined to risk trying to bring one in from Australia. The local mechanic assured us he could fix our damaged alternator, but on the day of our departure finally admitted defeat! The spare alternator seemed to be working at about half capacity, and with the WhisperGen performing OK we decided to head off.

After celebrating Ian's birthday on the 5th October with a most enjoyable dinner ashore, we made ready to depart Port Vila the following day. The weather forecast looked favourable and several boats from New Caledonia had already left. We sailed out of Mele Bay, setting a course for Petrie Reef north of New Caledonia and through Grand Passage.

No sooner had we left Vanuatu behind than our spare alternator decided to die, leaving us totally reliant on the WhisperGen to keep our batteries charged. It was shortly after this that the WhisperGen began to give trouble, tripping out on over-temperature after warming up. We could reduce demand by switching off the fridge and freezer and hope that the two solar panels could keep up with the remaining load of navigation lights and GPS plotter, but our options were limited. Andrew and I set to work on the WhisperGen and eventually realized that if we hot-wired the cooling water pump, we could bypass the control circuit that was switching it off. This seemed to work, and we were most relieved when it appeared that we could still keep the beer cold!

Our course took us between Chesterfield Reef and Booby Reef, and by 11th October we were heading towards Bird Island. The wind was light and so we were motor-sailing in order to maintain a respectable daily run when we noticed a vibration developing down aft. The shaft packing gland had begun to leak, with the likely cause being excessive vibration of the prop shaft, which in turn suggested that the cutless bearing was worn out. After tightening up the packing gland, I decided we should stop using the engine until we were closer to port.

David Tanner

30th June 2013

The forecast was for strengthening westerly winds, so our preference for keeping the wind aft of the beam was about to be tested. The next day saw us reefed down in 25 knots of breeze, putting in some long tacks to windward which gave us a 12 hour run of only 20 miles made good! The seas were very steep and uncomfortable, and we had the feeling that we were experiencing the tail end of a storm event further south. We later found out that this was indeed the case, and a lone sailor out of Newcastle heading down to Eden had been capsized in his Cavalier 36 and had lost his mast. He spent three days motoring before running out of fuel, and was eventually rescued a week later, having been blown almost halfway to NZ.

The next day saw a return to trade wind conditions as we sailed on towards Bundaberg in bright sunshine. During the evening of 13th October we saw the lights of Lady Elliot Island and Sandy Cape. By dawn the wind had dropped out enough for us to start motoring at low revs, heading up the piled channel towards Burnett Heads. We finally dropped anchor east of the Port Bundaberg Marina, and as it was Sunday with no Customs staff on duty, we settled down for a well earned rest.

Monday morning dawned bright and sunny and we headed over to the quarantine berth for clearance formalities to be completed. It felt good to have *Star* back in Australia after having left Kettering 18 months earlier. We were allocated a marina berth and soon found ourselves ashore to celebrate our arrival with a beer and lunch at the café.

Andrew headed back to Hobart on Tuesday while Ian stayed on board to help with hauling out on Thursday. The travel lift was able to clear the mizzen mast on *Star*, which avoided the hassle of having to drop the forestay off as we had done at Opuā. After cleaning down the hull, *Star* was moved into the dry storage yard for the summer, which at \$15/day is a cheaper option than the Marina at \$25/day. Little did I realize that Bundaberg would shortly be tested yet again with massive floods down the Burnett River, but our location on dry land near the mouth of the river was never at risk. John and Miff Fry chose to moor their S&S 39 yacht '*Sorcerer*' up river near the town centre and it was swept out to sea during the floods, sustaining considerable damage in the process. Their insurance company wanted to write it off, but they finally succeeded in having '*Sorcerer*' repaired and will probably return to Tasmania this spring.

I flew back to Hobart on 19th October and managed to arrive home a day before Alex returned from Paris.

It is now over eight months later and I am about to head back to Bundaberg to get *Star* back in the water for a planned cruise north to Townsville.