

## Lord Howe Island - New Year 1993

LORD HOWE ISLAND, New Year 1993

WRITTEN 26/1/95 by Rod Flannery, Australia

This really starts sometime around mid 1993. Sandra and I were on our boat one night and we were talking to my friend Ivan. We were all having a few drinks and discussing things at random.

Out of the blue he said that there was a yacht race to Lord Howe Island. It was sometime in October and that we should take his boat. I said that it was a great idea, even though I didn't really know exactly where it was, and asked him what we would need to do to prepare. It was at this point that Sandra put the skids down and said that perhaps it was not a good time, and I realised that she was referring to the fact that she was pregnant and due in October. Silly of me to forget. Ivan counter offered and suggested that we go later in the year, perhaps some time around Christmas. I cleared it with Sandra and said that I would check my holiday situation at work.

A few days later I told Ivan I could have about 3 weeks off starting Boxing Day. He seemed to think that this was OK and that was that.

The weeks past and nothing was said until one day I asked him what we would need to do to prepare for the trip to Lord Howe Island. Ivan gave me a funny look and said, 'was I still serious about that'. I said, of course I was, and he seemed surprised. We sat down then and made some plans of things we would need to get, work we would need to do to the boat and possible crew that we could ask.

There were quite a few things we needed to do to his boat. They included building a dodger over the cockpit, putting up a frame on the stern to mount antennas and solar panels on. Redoing his hand rails, two furling headsails, reefing lines for his mainsail, acquiring a GPS to navigate with and work inside the boat to make it more comfortable for a crew. This was not all the things but it was a good start.

A few more weeks went by and again I asked him when we would start to get things ready and again he seemed surprised that I hadn't forgotten about the trip. I said to him that I had put my holidays down, and yes I was serious and I thought that he was to. To this he responded, 'well I guess we are going then'. I don't think it was until that point that he was really committed. A bit more time went by and I pressed him about getting things done and he said he had no money, but some was due later in the year and when he got that we get the stuff done all at once. I wasn't entirely happy about that as it seemed as though we may leave it until it was too late but I had no other choice. I busied myself doing some reading on Lord Howe and some navigation and occasionally keeping Ivan focussed on the trip.

With only about 6 or 8 weeks to go we began trying to organise crew. Ivan said he had a few people lined up but no real commitments. It seemed that there was only going to be Ivan, Rosalin (his girl friend) and me. I suggested that I could organise someone and had my brother Philip in mind. I thought he might be interested, however when I asked him he was less than enthusiastic, besides he had to work. I asked him if he thought Colin or Jason would be interested and he said that Jason was working far too hard to have time and would probably not be interested, although Colin might be.

Colin was between jobs so had the time. As well as that he had spent 3 months working on a long line tuna boat a few years earlier so the open ocean was no mystery to him. I asked him and he was all for it.

It all came down to the last few weeks. We started the work on the boat, Ivan got enough money together to buy the equipment and we booked a mooring at Lord Howe. The only thing not finalised was the crew. We wanted about 6 people so we would have three watches on for four hours at a time. There was still the original three of us as well as Col.

Ivan was still not overly convinced about the suitability of Colin. I think that because he was only 18 and a farm kid Ivan didn't expect him to be an asset. One weekend when I was going down to our boat I arranged for Colin to come down with me and meet Ivan. It didn't take long for Ivan to see that Col was going to be alright, an asset and not a passenger, and expressed his approval at my choice.

It is a pity that some of the choices for the rest of the crew weren't as good. Rosalin had organised a girl named Jodi that she knew of and Ivan had arranged his business partner Ian. Ian had arranged a girl he knew to go with us which made 7.

Christmas day rolled around, Sandra and I spent the morning at her parents. During the morning I rang Ivan and found out that there was still a heap of stuff to be done. After lunch Sandy took me down to Toronto and I got into helping to finalise our preparations. About 9:00 pm that night Rosalin, Ivan and Glenn went to pick up Ian and his woman and to do a car shuffle.

While they were away Jodi arrived driven up from Sydney by her mother. I was a bit surprised, she was not really what I would have expected Rosalin to pick for an ocean crossing. Jodi was young and very over weight. Not that these things would normally exclude her from being an asset to the trip, but she just didn't seem like she was cut out for the type of trip we were planning. Time would tell. The fact is I think her mum would have been a better choice.

The other lot arrived back and things got interesting indeed. I was introduced to Ian and Ian's girl. I had only met Ian briefly, twice before. While we were packing Ian's things on Ivan took me aside and said that he didn't think Ian's girl was going to work out. On the trip down from Thornton in the car she had expressed discontent that she was not going to get her own personal cabin and seemed to have no sense of humour. She seemed to have the attitude that she was doing us an immense favour by adding to the crew numbers. He didn't think she was a team player.

Being a team player was going to be essential. Before the end of the trip we would all have had to depend on the each other, as well as living in their pockets for three weeks. Someone who was going to be aloof and miserable all the time definitely wasn't needed. This was a decision that Ian finally came to all by himself. He marched this girl up the pier and chatted to her for a while and ended up coming back by himself. It turned out that he told her that she wasn't coming as we didn't need the numbers made up that badly that we needed a burden. She apparently changed her tune at that point when she realised her position. She said that she would change her attitude if she could still go. However it was too late, she was out. Then there were six.

Ian went home and was due back at 5:00 the next morning.

Glenn, Ivan, Rosalin and I finished the last few things. It was 2:00 am in the morning on 26/12/93 when we were getting ice from the marina. We were all due to be awake at 5:00 in the morning to make a 6:00 start. The bridge at Swansea was booked for 7:00.

26th December 1993

Daylight arrived very quickly, Colin was also due to arrive at 5:00. He turned up well before time and actually got us out of bed, however Ian couldn't quite manage the same result.

We rang him and he was still asleep, it was decided that it would be quicker to pick him up at a wharf down near Coal Point on the way. We set off with Glenn throwing me a bottle of champagne at the last minute. It was a loss that Glenn didn't come with us. We picked Ian up and made the bridge in plenty of time. Sandra and Josh, my mum and her mum and dad were at Swansea Bridge to wave us on our way. It was a bit sobering to see them and realise what we were going to do.

We cleared the heads and headed straight out to sea. The morning was fairly casual.

There was hardly any breeze so we motored until mid morning. Jodi had brought her fishing rod and proceeded to set

her self up to catch us dinner. After the activity of the previous day I just layed on the side deck and fell asleep. In the afternoon the land was starting to fade away in the distance and Jodi started to get sea sick. In truth I was feeling a bit queasy myself but I wasn't going to let it get to me so I kept busy and stayed up on deck. Not so Jodi. We gave her our best advice about eating something and sitting upright facing the way we were travelling but she did the exact opposite and the spewing started.

At one stage we were about 50 miles off the coast and I heard a load engine approaching.

I looked and on the horizon was a game fish boat absolutely powering along bashing through the swell.

It passed us pretty closely coming out of the south and disappearing into the north. We also saw the first lot of dolphins.

That evening, the wind started to pick up some more and although we didn't know it the Sydney-Hobart fleet a few hundred miles south was copping a huge battering.

During the night the weather built up until we had quite a big blow. Rosalin and I were doing a watch with Ros steering when the boom jibed and tore the fitting off the deck. Ivan heard the noise and came up to survey the damage and was royally pissed off. He accused Ros of not steering properly so took over the steering himself. A few minutes later he managed to jibe the boom and tore the deck fittings off the other side. The wind built up to the point where we had put the first reef in the main. Col, Ivan and I had to get onto the deck while Ros steered. This accomplished it was not very long before it was decided to go to the second reef. Once again Col and I ventured up to the mast. It was the scariest thing of the whole trip. Neither of us had a life jacket or a life line and it was pitch dark on a slippery deck. Stupid really, but exhilarating.

The weather built up to a point where it was decided to drop the main altogether, however when we tried the topping lift was snagged somewhere. We couldn't lower the main sail without lowering the boom and this was not acceptable as it would have crushed the canvas dodger. We ended up hanging the boom out over the side, lowering it onto the deck and lashing it in place. We were not going to need the main that night and figured it would be better to fix it all up in day light.

The best place to sleep was on the floor of the main cabin and this is where I spent my bunk time on the first and second nights of the voyage. The floor is virtually the pivotal centre of the boat and hence has the least violent motion. A good place to be if you feel a bit queasy which I did. Sitting up facing forward is OK but you have to sleep sometime.

7th December 1993

The next morning we woke to find mountainous seas. We were all on a 4 hour rotating watch which means to say Rosalin and I were on one watch, Colin and Ivan were the other watch. Ian proved himself to be useless and Jodi was very sick so they were excused from doing a watch.

We spent that whole day under a partly furled staysail.

It was amazing to watch the sea and to think that there was over 3 kilometres of water under us and that it didn't really give a shit about whether we were there or not. That day we saw heaps of flying fish a few dolphins and even a pod of small whales going about their business. We also had to steer between two sea mountains. This was a point in the ocean where the dept rose to about 800 metres from the usual 3 kilometres. We didn't want to go directly over or even near them as the sea was reported to get very nasty at these points.

I had not done much steering the previous night as it had required a bit more skill than I possessed however during the day I had the chance to get some good practice in and it gave Ivan and Ros a chance to have a well earned rest. That night we changed so that Col and I were on the same watch with Ivan and Ros sharing a watch. Col and I ended up

getting into a groove with the steering and we did a double shift of 8 hours. I was really enjoying the steering. It was a continuous process of lining the boat up with the wave that came up behind us and keeping it straight as it sort of surfed down the front of the wave. It got so that I was steering without conscious effort. I could feel the wind on the back of my head and it was enough to tell me how to steer the boat. If the wind shifted I could feel it and steered accordingly. Its exciting stuff surfing with a 13 tonne boat. At only one point did we have a moment when a particularly big wave broke around the stern and it ripped the wheel out of my hand and we skewed sideways.

28th December 1993

Our third day at sea was much the same as the second with towering seas, more flying fish and dolphins. Ian had proved to be of some value as a cook and washer upper which saved the rest of us for more important things. Jodi was sicker than ever she hadn't eaten anything for 48 hours and sat in the cockpit with a bucket on her lap straining to spit up that last little bit of green stuff. I was well past the point of getting sea sick and watched with interest trying to understand what she had left to throw up. Colin was disgusted and couldn't stand to be near her. She was affecting the rest of the crew as we were all roped into getting her ice water or emptying her bucket occasionally. She was still too clever to take any advice from us. She had started out with sea sickness bands on her arm, fat lot of good they did her.

That day it calmed down enough to let us sort out the problem with the topping lift and to rig up some blocks to replace those broken on the main sheet traveller when the boat jibed.

29th December 1993

The fourth morning Colin and I were on watch as the sun rose and before long we could see Lord Howe Island in the distance. The island grew larger as the day went by and it was as though we were the first people to discover it. The day was mild with a comfortable breeze for sailing.

A perfect day to arrive at such a place. The two mountains on the western end were awe inspiring as we saw more and more of the island we just wanted to get off and explore. We saw a few more dolphins and a big old lazy shark surfaced near the boat. We had expected to be there in no time at all but it was late in the after noon when we finally contacted the harbour master. We had to wait for high tide to get through the channel into the lagoon so we motored around for a while and Colin did some fishing with a hand line. He had trawled a rubber squid nearly all the way from Swansea to the island but had no success. This was a disappointment as we had expected him to be our fisherman, after his experience on the tuna boat. While we waited and he fished he did an odd thing.

Instead of casting out the sinker and bait he threw the hand line itself in. We all had a good laugh while he tried to retrieve it by pulling on the line. After 500 metres it ran out and he lost the lot. These things happen sometimes.

We finally got the go ahead to enter the channel and were directed to the mooring we were to use. As we went through the channel we saw a sea turtle that was far less interested in us than we were in it.

The harbour master (Clive) directed us to our mooring. There is no anchoring in the lagoon at Lord Howe and we had to use one of the permanent moorings they had there. It turned out that we were about a kilometre from the public wharf. Not very far from the island itself, although you could not land a boat on the island at its closest point to us because it was too rugged and there was no path to the inhabited part of the island. The closest we could land the dinghy was the public wharf, which was quite a trek. When I had booked the mooring months earlier they had warned me we would need a dinghy with a good motor, it was now fairly obvious why.

We were actually in the channel so while the wind tried to kept the boat pointing into it, the current tried to swing us around which put us at a bad angle to the chop and made the motion of the boat very uncomfortable. We had been tied up for no more than 10 minutes when Colin came up from below deck with his swimmers on and armed with his goggles, flippers and a diving knife strapped to his leg. He was not so interested in sampling the diving as he was in getting to the shore to go to the toilet. He confessed later that he hadn't taken a crap the whole time we had been at sea, four days. Frightening stuff.

I went over the side as well to have a swim and a snorkel. Right under the boat were two big sting rays about 4 feet across each. The water was crystal clear and you could look up at the yacht and it appeared to be floating in mid air. You

could see easily under water perhaps 150 metres.

It was now late afternoon and while Colin and I elected to stay on the boat the other four headed off in the inflatable dinghy to the island. They were intent on having showers and making some telephone calls. The four of them in the inflatable was quite a sight. They returned just before dark.

When they returned they told us that Jodi's mum had been on to Clive about a dozen times in the previous 2 days. When they rang Glenn he told them that she had even been on the phone to him saying that something must have happened and that maybe they should call the authorities. Glenn apparently told her that if they didn't hear from us in a week then it would be time to worry and she didn't take that to well. She must have been a dill. We had told her we expected to take at least 4 days and quite possibly as long as a week. No wonder Jodi was weird. Col and I then got in my little hard dinghy and rowed across. We didn't have the proper oars and couldn't put the rowlocks in so we just used them as paddles. This was not highly successful but we managed.

We beached the dinghy, showered and set off to search for a phone and just check over the layout

After we had phoned home we got talking to a couple who were holidaying there. We got a rough idea of the place and they gave us a tourist map they had spare. We got talking about the lagoon and got on to the subject of sharks. They told us that there were no sharks in the lagoon except after dark. The locals hooked any that ventured in after hours and had actually got two big ones in there recently. We went back to the dinghy and started to paddle back out. We now had the tide and wind against us and the paddling was extremely difficult. The chop kept washing water into the dinghy and this made it sit lower which washed more water in etc. Of course we didn't have a bailer and if we stopped to scoop water out with our hands we just went backwards fast.

We debated swimming but thoughts of sharks that only fed at night filled our heads so we paddled and paddled and paddled and after a very long time reached the boat. It is hard to describe just how hard we had to work to get back to the boat that night. That night was very uncomfortable as the motion of the boat was very confused. Col was to mention the following day, the fact that he had seen a big fin swimming around during the night when he had got up for a leak.

30th December 1993

The next morning the other four once again went to the island and bought some fresh food and went to see Clive to organise another mooring further down the lagoon. When they got back Jodi was sitting up the front and the inflatable kept taking water. Just as they came along side the yacht the inflatable went completely under, motor and all. Jodi was to be the first to get off. She reached out to grab the boarding ladder and would not make the commitment of stepping of the inflatable onto the ladder. The boat started to drift further and further away from the ladder and she fell in. She couldn't get herself up onto the ladder she was just too big. Jodi had to stay in the water until Rosalin and Ian got onto the yacht then Ivan pulled her into the dinghy then she climbed up the ladder again.

We had to wait for high tide to go to our new mooring as Ivan's boat drew 6 feet which was about the depth of some parts of the lagoon. Clive stood on the beach with his radio and binoculars and directed us where to go and when to turn through the coral in the lagoon.

We got to our new mooring and picked up the chain, no mean feat and the chain was about as thick as my arm. After we had made maximum effort in tying up the boat Clive came roaring out in his boat and told us it was the wrong mooring and that we had to move about 100 metres away. Another big chain and I was just about stuffed.

Col and I were just about climbing the walls, here it was we had been at the island about 18 hours and had so far spent only half an hour on it. The island was further away than ever but at least there was no current between the beach and us so we shouldn't have any problem rowing. We modified the rowlocks for my dinghy and rowed across. By the time we reached the beach the others had organised themselves and arrived at the same time, courtesy of the outboard motor. We pulled the dinghies up above the high water mark and started walking along the road toward the main town.

Col had mentioned in passing that there was a guy on the island that he knew from Clarence Town and we had walked no more than 100 metres when a car stopped, a guy leaned out the window and said "hi Col". Very convenient. The others had gone on ahead of us and were unaware of our good fortune. It didn't matter though, we had transport, they gave us a lift to the place where we could hire some pushbikes. This was the way tourists got around the island. Our local push bike hirer just happened to be Clive our friendly harbour master.

He was also the glass bottom boat operator, the round island boat trip skipper and tour guide and the bowling club president among other things.

We caught up with the others who had also hired bikes and spent the rest of the day sightseeing with the occasional stop for refreshments at the various cafes around the place. We went to Ned's Beach where the fish come right up to you and can be hand fed. We snorkelled around with them and I kept thinking that Josh would think it a good place. We all took in a shower at the yachties amenities building. The facilities were very good and free.

Then at the end of the day we graced the RSL club for a beer and chat with some of the other yachties. We road our bikes back to where we had left the dinghies and pushed them into the bush on the side of the road. Col and I got a tow back to the yacht by the others, as it really was a long way out. We really finished the day off with a few beers then some solid rum and cokes, listening to ENYA on the CD player and looking at some of the best scenery I have ever seen in my life, probably the best. To this day whenever I hear Enya I associate it with Lord Howe and the afternoons spent sitting on the boat and sipping Bundy Rum and coke.

We did a post mortem on the day and decided that seeing as it was such a big deal to go over to the island, from now on we would go over in the morning prepared to stay all day.

The weather and water was so warm that all you needed to go over in the boat was your swimmers. From that day on I left my sand shoes, suntan cream and a cake of soap in the basket on my bike and all I would carry over was my hat, camera, T shirt and shorts. The T shirt and shorts I washed out every day when I had a shower and wore them while they dried.

31st December 1993

Today was New Years Eve. We had gotten the low down on where to go for the best party the previous day. We spent the day going on expeditions. There were some terrific walks to the top of mountains with some truly spectacular views. We split up as the day wore on and went our own ways. The island wasn't big enough to really lose anyone and consequently we kept bumping into each other at different times. Then we would all meet somewhere and have afternoon tea and perhaps wander off as a group again.

Later that afternoon we went back out to the boat, got changed and had dinner. We all then went back over to the island and lobbied into the RSL club. This was where the action was supposed to be and sure enough before long the place was packed. It seemed everyone on the island was there and they all seemed intent on having a good time. I cut out for a while and rode my bike up to the public telephone to ring Sandra. She had previously told me that she was going out to David's for New Year. I rang reverse charges and Charles answered the phone, accepting the call. I had a nice chat to Sand as well as David, Phil and Rosie. I then returned to the RSL.

The party went on until about 9:00 PM when the club announced that it would be closing for a while. It was a hell of a thing to do on New Years Eve but there was no option. It was all in aid of the yearly bonfire up near the main part of town. Everyone went, you couldn't say 'I don't feel like going, I'll just sit in the club till you get back', it just shut.

Going up to the bonfire was an experience in itself. There were about 300 people leaving the club all at once. The bonfire was about a kilometre away. Because of the transport situation on the island a large proportion of the people used their push bikes to go to the bonfire with a few people in cars and the rest walking.

One of the oddities of life on Lord Howe was the police situation. There was one policeman who spent his days cruising around the approximately 20 kilometres of road in a big fancy Nissan Patrol police vehicle wearing a Hawaiian shirt and shorts as well as a gun, just like in Hawaii Five O.

His one big sacred law was 'thou shalt wear a push bike helmet'. He had even given Ian a chat about it the previous day and offered to fine him if he didn't put his helmet on. So the situation was, heaps of people leaving the club, all with a skin full and here was the copper in the crowd under the weather himself and telling people to put their helmets on. He didn't bat an eyelid at the fact that there were no street lights anywhere and we were all riding around dark roads without lights on our bikes. Nor did he worry about the fact that every single car driver was a bit pissed and that there was 10 people in some cars. All he was worried about was helmets. So, who the hell were we to worry, we were on a tropical island and it was New Years Eve.

The roads around Lord Howe were all unlit and overhung with palm trees so it was pitch black as you were riding. It was almost a point of honour that you ride flat out every where.

The bonfire was good with almost the entire population of the island there all intent on having a good time. When it had burned down some, the crowd that had been ejected from the RSL, all wandered back and took up where they had left off about an hour earlier. The drinking and dancing went on until about 1:00 AM when then club shut. Most people went home but a large crowd tramped over to Ned's Beach as the locals had set up a makeshift stereo/loudspeaker rig and the partying continued. Going down the hill to the beach we had to go through the main Mutton Bird nesting area and it was really spooky with these birds making their mournful cry and rushing past you in the dark. About 3:00 AM Ivan, Rosalin and Jodi headed back to the boat. Ian looked like he was doing OK with a local girl. The girl was the local Park Ranger and it appeared she was a bit of a Rambo, apparently she was in a travel video for Lord Howe with her abseiling down 1000 foot cliffs and such. I was hoping Ian was up to the job. I was keen to head back to the boat but didn't want to leave Ian in case he struck out and was stranded on the island for the rest of the night. We got a lift back to this girl's house in her 4WD with our bikes in the back. When we got there I gave Ian some space and rode back to the dinghy and layed down it for a rest. It was just starting to get some light on the horizon.

It wasn't long and Ian turned up driven by the Park Ranger girl. It appears she shared a house with her brother and he was a very large person and Ian had felt a bit uncomfortable when the brother had arrived home. We got into the dinghy and I rowed out to the yacht, it was about 5 AM and the sun was nearly up.

I should mention two other things here. One was Jodi, she had driven me mad all bloody night. It had only been about 10 PM New Years Eve, the previous night, when she asked me when we were all going back to the boat. I told her at the time not to be silly it was not even midnight yet. Not long after she asked again and this went on all night. I told her at one stage that she was free to go back as there was a spare dinghy but this was no good. She wasn't capable of rowing out by herself, so she just had to abide by our timetable, too bad.

The other thing was Colin. He had managed to endear himself to half the population on the island in no time flat. He was going to parties and BAR B Q's every night and apart from the night we arrived didn't spend a night on the boat till we left. He conned a night at one of the lodges on New Year and spent a few nights sleeping in the long grass near where we kept our bikes. He even spent a night sleeping under the hot air exhaust fans from the diesel generators that provided electricity for the population. He said it was a good place as it kept the mosquitoes away and was warm.

Ian was a character. Later that day we were on the boat for lunch and while we were eating we were watching a girl on one of the yachts about 80 metres away. She was perhaps 17 years old and definitely a mermaid. A few people including the girl spent the afternoon snorkelling in the waters not far from our boats. Ian, holding his sandwich walked right off the side of the boat fully clothed. We were all in stitches he was so funny.

One of the days we all went for a glass bottom boat tour, run by Clive's son. We had heard about a fresh water spring under the lagoon called The Comets Hole but we didn't know where it was. The glass bottom boat was great and we all managed to go snorkelling on the reef.

After that we came back and to our surprise we were moored not more than 100 metres from the Comets Hole and the best snorkelling around. No need to wonder why the people off the other boat we swimming around near the boats. After that we spent quite a bit of time just snorkelling near the boat.

We also went on a walk up to a lookout called the Goat House, which was a cave about 400 metres up the side of a cliff. The walk was not so bad but the last bit was done with ropes and this did not cater to my fear of heights very well. Ian, Ivan and Colin all went that little bit further around the ledge to get a better view but Rosalin and I just stayed near the rope counting the view we already had as adequate. Which in fact it was more than adequate, it was spectacular. We could see the whole eastern end of the island.

View from Southern Lookout toward the Northern end of Lord Howe Island

View from Northern Lookout toward the Southern end of Lord Howe Island



The day finally came and it was time for Ian to fly out, as he had to get back to his business and sailing back would have taken too long. We spent the morning just cruising around having fun, although I don't recall exactly what we did. That afternoon Ian was due to be at the airport so after a ceremonial drink at the RSL we rode out to the airport on our push bikes and said our goodbyes. It was a sad occasion, we had all had such a good time with him there we were sorry to see him go. We shook his hand and patted him on the shoulder and finally he was on his way. Then there were five. We went back and got some more snorkelling in during the afternoon.

One day we had spent a fair bit of time on various bushwalks and sightseeing in general.

Finally Jodi was leaving us and flying home. When it came time to get her to the plane we put her bags in the dinghy and motored across to the beach. The airport was at the other end of the island from the main community, joined by a road running parallel with the beach. A shuttle bus ran along this every half-hour or so. We carried her bags to the side of the road, told her, the shuttle bus would be along in a few minutes then got back in the dinghy and went back out to the boat. This might sound mean but we had all had an absolute gut full of her. She hadn't made any effort to fit in, never cooked a meal or washed up and complained about everything. Then there were four.

The weather in general was very tropical while we were there. However the first few days were the best. The wind came in from the north pretty constantly after that. It was still very pleasant on the island but not the nicest on the boat. One day it started to build up and we were getting gusts (bullets) coming down from the mountains of about 70 knots. This was making the boat skew around on the mooring line and we were worried about the security of the mooring. The following day when it calmed down we dived down to see what we were tied to and it was the world's biggest admiralty anchor. No problems there!

One afternoon I went for a walk up to one of the lookouts by myself. On the way I passed the wreckage of the Catalina Flying Boat that crashed on the island sometime around the end of WW2. It was pretty degraded with time and spread over a fairly large area. The most prominent parts and the things that interested me the most were the engines. They were big rotary piston engines. This is the type of engine that inspired the horizontally opposed

BMW bike engine, some time after the end of WW1. A BMW BOXER engine as they were called is what was in the bike I owned at the time. I wandered around the various bits of wreckage for quite a while and could feel the drama that must have ensued years before.

We all went for a swim one day to the only beach that had surf. You might think that surfing is no big deal, but this was the cleanest, cleanest and I might say cleanest beach I had ever been to. The water was so clear that even while in the surf you could see underwater without goggles to the next swimmer about 30 metres away. The sand was so white and clean. It's a pity that we only managed to get to this beach once. No one's fault but our own.

One of the last days we were there I was on the boat keeping a watch for Colin. He had stayed on the island the previous night and I knew he was running out of money. I threw the hard dinghy in the water grabbed the oars and started to climb in to row across. I climbed into the dinghy and threw off the rope. Now the wind was blowing solidly from the North and by the time I had the oars positioned correctly I was well on my way to the bottom end of the lagoon, which was a long way away. I rowed like all hell and only just managed to keep position. I was in trouble. It just so happened that a dude in

a big dinghy with a good motor off one of the other yachts was going in to shore. As he came past he asked me if I wanted a tow. Gratefully I accepted. He dropped me off just near where Col was waiting.

Now getting back was going to be just as exciting. We towed the dinghy through the water all the way along the beach into the wind. We then climbed in and started to row back to the boat. Basically the wind blew us in a direct path back to the yacht. On the way we took a sidetrack to a little island called Rabbit Island. We stopped for a look see before going back to the boat. When we got there I was wet, sunburned and absolutely stuffed.

There came the day when we decided to sail out. We had run out of new things to do. The wind was from the right direction and so we headed off. We had tossed up the idea for quite a few days of going to Elizabeth Reef on the way home. It was about 100 miles north of Lord Howe but in the end it was the direction of the wind that stopped us. A good wind for going home was a bad wind for going to Elizabeth Reef.

We weighed anchor and got Clive to direct us out of the lagoon and said goodbye to Lord Howe Island. We'd all had a truly wonderful holiday but it was time to get back to the real world.

We left the island with only four of our original 6 crew. It quickly settled down to Col and I on one watch with Ivan and Ros on the other with us sticking to 4 hour watches.

That afternoon Col decided to hold his own private celebration and proceeded to sink about half a dozen cans before falling asleep in one of the cabins for the rest of the day. That night when he was woken for our watch he was not the healthy person he should have been. He had turned out to be quite a good helmsman and took his turn at steering, however a few times he yelled out to take the wheel and ran to the side to shout something loud and wet at the water. This appealed to my sense of humour immensely. I kidded him about it heaps.

By nightfall we were out of sight of the island. While I was asleep Ivan and Ros were treated to a visit by a heap of dolphins at about dusk. They stayed with the boat for quite some time. I was sorry they didn't wake me so I could see them as well. During the first night while Ivan and Ros were on watch the wind dropped and when it was Col and my turn we took over with no wind at all. We still had to steer but it was pointless. The sea was confused and we were getting waves hitting us up the back all the time. After a while I got sick of this and locked the wheel off with the locking screw on the pedestal. That was OK for the next couple of hours. When Ivan and Ros came back up it was still locked off. Ivan unlocked the wheel to see if we could make any gain by steering only to find we had no steering at all. He told me this and I thought he was joking, at least I hoped he was joking. We went down below to check the steering linkages and sure enough one of the arms on the steering box had broken on a weld. It was no comfort to think that we had looked at this before we had set out on the trip and talked about it being a weak point. We had no effective way of putting a jury-rigged tiller arm on it even though we had discussed it before we left. I felt sick at the thought of the situation we were in, particularly because it was me who had locked the wheel off. By locking the wheel of when a wave had slapped us from behind it had put stress on the rudder and broken the linkage. The fact that this particular bit of the rudder was amateurishly built was not going to help us fix it.

We tried quite a few things to get even some steering. This included trying to join a double ended ring spanner in between the arms with D shackles. Although this looked lovely it didn't work very well. It gave some control when the arms were in extension but not when they were in compression.

Working on the rudder arm while the boat was being hit from behind by the swell was very scary. The arm was whipping around randomly all the time and the forces involved meant that it would cut your hand off without even trying if you got it caught. We eventually used a piece of stainless wire rope about 400 MM long with a thimble in each end, to secure the arm and stop it whipping from extreme to extreme. The rudder now had limited movement perhaps 10 degrees each way from centre. This did not give us the all important steering but it did allow us to set up the sails so it would sail in a straight line across the wind. We were now on the move again and in roughly the right direction. Our situation was still pretty shaky. We were still approximately 300 miles off the coast and without steering. Not a good thing.

We were in no physical danger as the boat was still secure, we had plenty of food and water and we had the EPIRB if we needed to alert people to our position. However this was not really an option. If we set off the epiRB, so far off the coast, they come and get you and take you home, they don't really give two hoots about the boat, they just leave it behind

as it is to far to tow it. Ivan was not keen to get in a situation where he had to leave the boat so we knuckled down to solve the problem ourselves.

While we were trying to sort out our little problem Ivan, Colin and I spent quite a bit of time with our heads down and our bums up. At one stage Ivan had to shout at the water. This was a shock as he had always boasted at how sea sick proof he was.

We spent the best part of the next 24 hours sailing with the rudder tied off and made quite a distance closer to the coast.

We ended up being about level with Port Macquarie. Our rough plan was to get as close to Newcastle as possible and then radio for a tow, but in the mean time we worked to get better steering. During that night we had to dodge several ships as we were now in the shipping lane.

Although it would appear that we were in serious trouble the days were very relaxed. With no steering to do we relaxed and listened to CD's and slept as the boat was riding very comfortably sailing across the face of the wind as we were. We even had the odd beer. I was feeling very good and not sea sick. I even tried to see if I could make myself seasick. I sat on the cabin floor, drank a few beers, listened to Dire Straights on the CD player while reading the words on the cover and still I felt OK. I felt like a king.

During the days we watched the sea a lot and saw heaps more flying fish as well as more dolphins and whales. We also saw a few bits of rubbish, even when we were hundreds of mile out. At one stage I saw a pressure pack can floating on the surface and it had streams of weed growing on it about a foot long. I wondered at how long it had been floating around on the currents. One thing we never saw was one of the mythical shipping containers, which were grateful for. Although I often joked that if we saw one that had Harley Davidson stenciled on it they could leave me sitting on top with a heap of food and I would wait for it to wash up on the beach somewhere.

The next thing we tried was clamping a piece of 20 mm by 40 mm pine batten between the two arms with two G clamps. To stop the clamps crushing the wood we used two 20 cent pieces which were deformed into a cup shape over a period of time by the pressure. The clamps gave us very limited steering, perhaps 20 degrees each side of centre and you could not afford to put much pressure on the wheel or the clamps would fall off, which indeed they did from time to time. We got very good at rushing down and clamping it all together very fast when the helmsman shouted out the steering was gone again. We spent the better part of another 24 hours steering like this. I kept thinking that there had to be a better way to repair it and on the fourth morning and last day of our return trip it came to me, and very simple it was to.

We already knew that the wire rope was good on the steering to keep it together when the arms were in extension but we needed a system to keep the arms apart when they were in compression. We had already tried the ring spanner but it didn't work and we had limited resources. I finally hit on the idea of using 3 pieces of pine batten, two longer pieces separated by a shorter piece and screwed together, then forked between the arms and held in place with the clamps. This was not only successful, it was brilliant even if I had to say so myself. The steering was almost 100 percent, but how long it would last was anyone's guess. We had gone from getting close enough for a tow to sailing right into Newcastle Harbour.

That last day was exciting. We had been able to see the heads at Port Stephens for most of the day starting when we were still well north and east of them. It seemed that we were nearly there but in reality had quite a way to go. The usual summer north easterly was roaring across the Bight and in fine form, gusting to perhaps 20 knots. The swell following us put the steering repairs fully to the test and when we had to load the steering right up from time to time I gritted my teeth. This was not the time for it to let go as the sea was too big to be able to work on the rudder if we needed. We definitely didn't want it to let go as we were entering the harbour. We were still four or five miles out when I rang Sandy to let her know we were home OK.

When we were still a mile or two off the harbour entrance we started the motor and motored casually in to the Police Wharf and tied up. It was such a good feeling to know that we were home and that considering our predicament of a few days previous, we had made it without help. We had arrived at Newcastle on the evening of 14th January 1994 at about 11:30.

After the boat was tied up Col and I walked up to Newcastle train station only to find we had more than an hour to kill. We filled in some time by going up to my work at the Herald and saying hello to Dave Beesley and giving Col a bit of a look around.

We arrived home at about 1:00 am and crashed out. I had arranged with Ivan to be back at about 10:00 am with the welder to fix his steering but wanted to take Col home to Clarence Town first. Although it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do I got up early, took Col home then went back to Newcastle. The repairs only took about 20 minutes but it was the welder that did the job and it was this one thing we didn't have while we were at sea. After it was fixed I felt better. Even though it was not a particularly strong steering set up, it had been me that had broken it and I wasn't happy until I had fixed it.

We had all had a terrific time. Ivan had gotten the chance to cruise his yacht that he had been building for 7 years to a tropical island. Rosalin also got to go cruising, which although not a new thing for her it was something she wanted to do in Australia. Col had a good time and I had a chance to test myself out on the ocean. The experience was invaluable. I was sorry that Sandra had not been able to come and vowed that I would at least take her on a proper holiday to somewhere similar if not Lord Howe itself in the near future. I was sorry also that Joshua had not been able to swim with the fish at Ned's Beach. This was something I had to rectify as well

There ends the story of Lord Howe Island, although not completely I hope. I shall return one day.

Completed writing this on 1st February 1995

Copyright © Rod Flannery, Australia 1993 - 2007 - All Rights Reserved