

Vol 2 No 61 September 2012

# THE CAPE HORNER.

JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CAPE HORNERS



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## A Story of Wood

This is the first Sunday at sea after 18 days at Pitcairn. We had arrived at Pitcairn Island a couple of days before Christmas after a long and windless passage from Acapulco. The surf was almost quiet in Bounty Bay, and I suspect some of our crew were disillusioned, but not for long! We were able to hang on off the Bay through Christmas Day, Skipper spending the first three days all alone on the ship, though I did return for a late night watch. The Christmas Eve community dinner was its usual magnificent display, quite easily over 100 different dishes and all superb. Of course, after a month at sea, and Mexico before that, what attracted us most were the fruit salads, pineapples, strawberries, sweet-corn, cucumbers, green onions, tomatoes, passion-fruit juice, banana cakes, etc. Christmas Day the trees in the Square were more laden than ever, especially with gifts for the *Romance*; and the individual family Christmas dinners followed. By now, it was fairly blowing a gale from Henderson, and we were again anchored at Tedside in cross tides, rolling our guts out, and of course, not a prayer of going for wood. The next day was Sabbath and all pinned their hopes on starting for Henderson Sabbath evening. But by then we had a real gale blowing, no boat out that day, and none expected the next. (The last boat very nearly bought it trying to shoot behind Young's rock - I know - I was in it and saw Len, Steve and Jacob goes white!) Bounty Bay was no picnic either - a big boulder flew across the jetty and right through their new storage building. They said first there was almost no water in the landing, and then like a tidal wave. Boulders everywhere St. Paul's point was extremely beautiful, the surf going nearly over the finger, and the suds flying around like a bunch of white butterflies.

By next morning, the gale had sung its song, and the sea was almost calm. I was just about to sit down to breakfast at Jacob's house, when a determined Len and a delegation marched in.

"Well, how about it?" he demanded.

Skipper had announced we were to continue the voyage next day, New Year's Day, and here was a day fit to start for Henderson. I told him I would have to go out and talk with Skipper. The sweet-corn smelled so heavenly boiling away on the bolt (wood fired stove) and I told Mavis I would be right back in. Little did I know I would not see her for a week? (And that whole week I could smell that sweet-corn!)



Brigantine *Romance* at sea January 13th 1980.

There was another big boulder on the skid-way. Len, Steve and I launched the rescue Avon, a hard fibreglass hull, with the rubber doughnut around it. The surf was definitely still big at the landing. We backed and filled for about 10 minutes until they decided to try it. Steve gunned her as far as the end of the jetty, saw a huge monster coming, and made a very fast round turn. The sea broke on us and on the motor, choking it and filling the boat about 6 inches deep. We bobbed: about the rocks with Len over the side trying to hold us off, while Steve got her going again. I sat in the water thinking it would be nice to have a bailer in the boat, and maybe some oars. (Oars, I found out later, would probably have clubbed us.) The prop chewed up some rocks, Len hauled himself aboard and after a spell they agreed to try again.

This time we got beyond the jetty before we ploughed into a huge breaking sea. The Avon climbed straight up, and nearly went over backward. I hung on to the straps, and I swear my feet must have pointed straight up when I came down. My knees nearly went through the fibreglass bottom of the boat. The water inside was now considerably deeper, but that was only a fleeting impression. The next thing I saw was a terribly beautiful solid green wall of water, growing with incredible speed and sound. I watched the top begin to curl in slow motion, had time to think, this is an interesting way to go, but no time to develop fear. It broke on us, I screwed my eyes tight shut, and hung on till my arms nearly pulled out of the sockets. How far the Avon flew I'll never know, but miraculously it came down right side up. We crashed back into it, cushioned somewhat by its being nearly full of water now. I looked back at Steve still at the tiller, and at the gas tank floating around his knees and realized Len was not in the boat! "I told him to jump;" Steve grinned "lighten the boat!" He pointed back to where Len was stroking strongly for open water, between two huge combers. "Got to bail," Steve shouted, pulled the plug and went tearing off in a wide circle. We made two passes by Len, who was now clear of the breakers, treading water and wearing a bemused expression. On the third circuit he flagged us down, and hauled himself aboard. We made the rest of the way to Tedside just a bit farther than normal from the surf, which was flying halfway up the cliffs, in deference to the outboard's coughing spells.

Skipper said "yes" to Henderson, and I never got my corn . . . no way was I going to overload that boat again!

**Romance** motor-sailed up in 25 hours: the launches towing **Dumpy** having arrived a few hours earlier. They pulled out to us to take off the first of our crew. The surf was still pretty high on the north beach, but we all expected it to go down. Instead it just kept building, a long low swell,

with increasing wind, force 4 and then 5 from the NNE, blowing nearly directly onto the beach. We sailed in close and watched the bottle-green backs of the breakers rise up and explode into acres of white foam on the reef. The pass, which is marginal at best, could not be seen. The two motor launches were anchored just outside the breakers, with **Dumpy** pulled high up on the sand. The camp was deserted, and we could hear chain-saws going. Soon piles of Miro appeared near camp. Steve and Glen Clark swam out through the pass to pump the launches, and had to be hauled ashore with safety lines. By January 3rd, the launches had to put to sea for safety. Four men swam out and got them under way.



Longboats at sea

We gave them food, and water, and they drifted together through the night. The camp was nearly washed out at 2 a.m., the hard-won timber starting to be sucked out to sea. We had communication with the camp only through twice-daily schedules with Pitcairn radio - and began to devise ways to float provisions and water ashore if necessary. No easy task, as the undertow carried everything out to sea. Len prepared to abandon the wood and evacuate the camp at the first possible moment if we must sail. We are already a week late, but Skipper says no way is he going to leave that timber behind!

The boat crews come aboard on the 4th for a meal and a conference. It's decided to try to anchor the launches outside the surf on our 150-lb Danforth (both their anchors are mangled by this time), try to get a long polypro line ashore; and tow the Miro wood out, and using one launch as a depot. They leave with two big coils of polypro, buoys and the big anchor, and spend 3 hours trying to swim the line in. Each time they get

close, the buoyed line is snatched from them and carried out. Everyone ashore is in the water, or manning the tag end of the shore line, and finally Len, standing on the very coral lip of the pass, succeeds in throwing a line over the oncoming breaker, and snagging the offshore line, with its buoys, seconds before the breaker sends him tumbling head over heels up the beach. The team ashore manage to drag the line in before it untangles and the link is established. Dragging the Miro over the reef and through the breakers was killing work, even with our crew in the launches to help, but they did get a pretty good load before dark. They buoyed the anchor and came out to lie on a long hawser astern of us for the night.

Meanwhile, another drama was being enacted. Two days before, a Norwegian motor ship had contacted Pitcairn with a medical emergency. Was there a doctor on the island? No, our doctor was aboard at Henderson in case of injury to the woodcutters. The ship was diverted to Henderson, and so on this night, at 1.30 a.m., an 1850's brigantine, with two Pitcairn Island longboats in tow, rendezvoused with a big Norwegian container ship 7 miles off an uninhabited island in the loneliest regions of the Pacific Ocean. The nature of the emergency? A crewman had got fibreglass in his eye repairing the Captain's swimming pool. Believe it or not! Next morning our flotilla motored back into the lee of Henderson, and transferred the wood aboard. This being the Sabbath, nothing further was done, though we fumed secretly as the surf was going down. What if it was up again tomorrow?

At first light Sunday, we were back off the beach, and with great relief saw **Dumpy** being run out at last. Under any other circumstances, I'm sure the surf would still have been considered impassable, but they were determined to load and break camp today. We loaded drifting with the longboat to windward, with the theory that the ship would drift faster, and keep a separation between them. In theory, it worked, but every big sea still slammed the longboat into us, and we drifted so fast it was necessary to go slow ahead on the engine to keep us off the reef. The trunk-sized pieces which had to be slung from the fore yard were the worst to handle, and there were crushed fingers and people bowled off their feet in the boat. One of our crew remarked, "The price of carvings has just gone, up 500 per cent."

At long last the crew got ashore in pairs to photograph the surfing operation that is the non-productive members. The bull types were sorely needed, and made every trip in and out, and loaded timber on the beach between. In all fairness, I should say everybody lumped Miro, even the lightest girls. I went in on the third trip, and it was the worst surf running I've seen in five voyages. How they ever held that boat off the

coral waiting for a chance to shoot the pass, I'll never know. You could see bare brown coral right under the bows. Huge surf would shoot the boat skyward, everybody pulling furiously "back aft", and when we came down again, we were still in the same position seaward of the coral. When we did shoot the pass, we failed to carry over, and hung up on the inner lip. Each successive surf bumped us a little farther in, until the women on the beach could wade in and drag us to safety. Of course, the men were pulling oars for all their might as well!

As it turned out, only one more trip was made to the ship; it was becoming far too dangerous to load in the open sea, and *Romance* ran for the lee for the balance of the Miro. It was loaded into *Dumpy*, taken through the surf, and off loaded into the two motor launches. The tide was dropping and *Dumpy* could only be partially loaded they were surfing her over coral showing a foot out of water in the pass! But finally every stick was off the beach, and we non-essentials were taken with the timber out to the ship. *Romance* boys and the boats now returned to break camp.

On one try to shoot the pass, the boat was tossed back all the way up the beach. On another, Len as coxswain was washed overboard, leaving the longboat without a tiller, which would have been "werry bad" if the boat had not been hard aground in the pass at the time: Our boys said the sight of Len's great paws coming up over the stern would have been funny if they weren't so scared. They made it through that time. I can tell you we were mighty relieved to see the three boats coming safely around the northwest point. All the men said it was the worst Henderson trip they could remember, and for many, that was in 15 trips.

It goes without saying we had virtually no wind to sail back to Pitcairn, and took 39 hours. We anchored off Bounty Bay, and the unloading went easy. Here was the largest pile of Miro we have ever moved. People were astonished to see it all piled on the jetty.

One of our boys dived and found the *Bounty* and came back with some copper sheeting and nails. We had a repeat of the Christmas dinner in the square, under a sky full of stars, and not a whisper in the palms. Ivan tried to make' a speech about our five trips, and how this may be the last one. I tried to respond, but just choked up. That Island and those people 'just mean too darn much to me after all these years. I know and love everyone. The Island had a few years reprieve, but now they are very, very short-handed again'. You look around, 65 people and. almost all of them under 12 or over 70, and most of the dwindling able-bodied work force grey-haired and aging fast. Yet! Some of the young people want to stay. Clarice, who had her Achilles tendon severed by a Wahoo, refuses

to go to New Zealand for an operation she says vehemently.

"I want to live and die on my native island."

Even the ships dwindle. **Yankee Trader** may or may not make it this year, but if so, it will 'be the last time.' Costs are just too high. The same is true of us of course. It is only a matter of time until we will have to give up. The world has gone crazy and money is worthless. **Linblad Explorer** was wrecked – will she be out again? Who will go for the Miro? That is why Skipper would not hear of abandoning the wood this time. The men also say they need a young crew like the **Romance's** to help them at Henderson. They can no longer really do this on their own. Yet they will. People ask me, can the community survive' much longer? The only sane answer is no, but they will. No other like community on earth could, live in the same circumstances, but Pitcairn will. In what they can accomplish, these people just aren't mere humans. "Good Lord, be kind to them! Make somebody come back to help' them! "

PS: Moorea, Society Islands, February 21<sup>st</sup> 1980:

We've said our farewells 'to Tahiti and are now lying in the lovely bay of Moorea, Skipper seaming "chapter one, page one" of yet another mains'l. We had a minor adventure between the Marquesas and Tuamotus, when the tiller parted - don't ask me how a 2-1/2" square iron bar can part, but it did, thank God, not on a lee shore. We rigged up tackles, and she steered herself embarrassingly well under 'all sail but the mains'l, and nobody on the helm. We banged away for three days trying to drive out the stump, gave up, and rigged an and rigged an alternative steering system, which worked so well we were not afraid to negotiate the pass at Takaroa. In Papeete, we cut out the old tiller with an acetylene torch, and now have a pretty new one. (We were making 100 miles a day on course for Takaroa, with nobody steering, which was a weird feeling!) ⚓

GLORIA KIMBERLY



Eastern Point ——— Pitcairn Island, G. Kimberly