

25 Nov 1998


Voice of American Vega Sallors

No. 11 - 98

- Well, none of our members have responded to my call about replacing me as editor. So, I suppose I'm stuck running the newsletter for another 20 years. But I don't think I can make it to November in the year 2018. I'll be 100 years old at that time. My only thought is still "who will wind the clock when I am gone?" I hope it will be you!

- Correction : In our last issue my email address was in error. The correct address is: sidnock@aol.com.

- Have you checked out our website yet? It is: <http://www.targetsoft.com/vega>



- Both copies of our video "Vega Westbound" are long overdue by the members who borrowed them. Unfortunately, due to computer problems with my old computer which recorded the loan of the tapes, I am unable to determine to whom they were sent. If you have the tapes please return it immediately.

A Vega reunion in the Puget Sound Area?

We have more members living in the Puget Sound area than in any other area in North America. Your editor has always "pushed" for a Vega reunion in that area - either ashore or afloat. From past experience, you skippers could meet your fellow Vega skippers and have a grand time. (I remember our old VODCA raftups. WE HAD SUCH FUN! About 12 years ago, after I moved to Florida, a few of us Florida skippers met in St. Petersburg; sailed and had dinner together - all the while exchanging our experiences. We viewed the film "Vega Westbound" and enjoyed breakfast at a local restaurant the next morning!

At last count there were 12 members in the Puget Sound area. Even if only four or five show up you can have a great time. As I have said before, *I will be glad to prepare a "flyer" and mail it to all members in your area.* All I need is for someone to make the arrangements & set the date.

My telephone # is (407) 352-9250. Won't someone call me and say they will be glad to "honcho" the event!

Creating an Email address list

At the request of several members I want to publish an E-mail listing of members so they may contact other members "on line". So, please send your E-mail addresses to Sid Rosen as soon as possible. The address is: Sidnock@aol.com

Have a happy Thanksgiving holiday!



Wendell Lloyd (Vega #2925) writes:

6/2/98

Dear Sid:

Since I had that temporary interruption in getting my newsletter, I was not aware that you had e-mail capability. Good news!

Although the manual Whale Gusher had been inoperative for a long while, I took advantage of the excellent services of Davidson Marine in Corpus Christi to get it replaced. Now I have a fancy installation replete with a hinged cover over the front, where the handle is inserted. Also, its color is beige, which blends nicely with the cockpit. You will recall that the original is black.

I need a cabin light cover, the large one. I will probably have to install one of Perko's units, but it would be nice to find one just like its mate in the main cabin. This one is for the head area. Speaking of heads. The one I have works all right, but it has begun to show its age. That will probably be the next item.

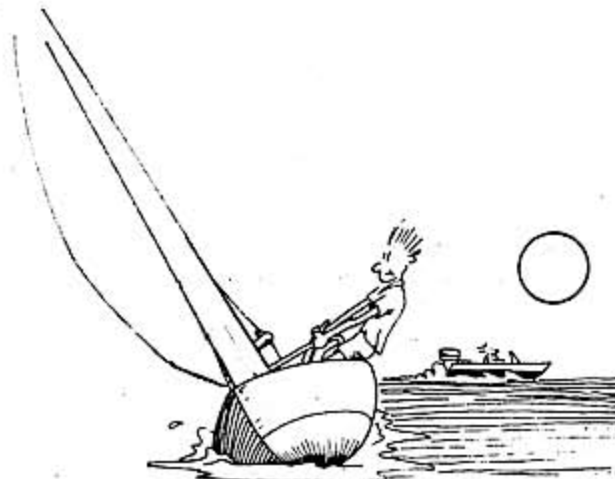
You will recall that I finally got rid of my big headache, the Ducati diesel that was installed in 1988. If I had my head on straight years ago, I would have done what I did a year ago: I took out the diesel and replaced it with a 25-hp Nissan outboard. Now, I have plenty of power to drive the boat. Also, I have a starter and alternator(70 watts). This outboard runs quieter than the diesel by far with excellent economy. I have a sturdy mount that enables me to tilt the propeller out of the water when not in use.

This motor was recommended by a marine surveyor friend of mine. He was right about the Nissan. It is great!

Keep up the good work!

Regards,

Wendell



Shining the Light on Visual Distress Signals

If there is one type of boating safety equipment you are unlikely to use until you need it in an emergency, it's pyrotechnic visual distress signals — as in flares, rockets, smoke signals and other attention-getting devices that burn, sputter, smoke or explode.

The Coast Guard requires most recreational boats 16 feet and larger to carry equipment to signal for assistance and approves two types. Non-pyrotechnic devices are straightforward and include a three-foot-square orange signal flag for day use and for night, an electric light that flashes the international SOS signal 50 to 70 times per minute. (Dye markers and signal mirrors, though useful to attract attention and often carried by boaters, are not Coast Guard-approved.)

In the pyrotechnic category, the regulations are broad and how you fill the requirement for your particular type of boating is fairly flexible. The choices include a

rotechnics, you must carry three devices approved for day and/or night use but beyond that, you have the choice to mix and match what you wish to carry.

By far, pyrotechnics are the popular choice and the majority of boaters opt to meet minimum Coast Guard requirements with handheld flares or gun-launched meteors that are approved for day/night use.

But is that the best choice for you? And with the variety of pyrotechnic devices on the market, are there others that would be better for the kind of boating you do?

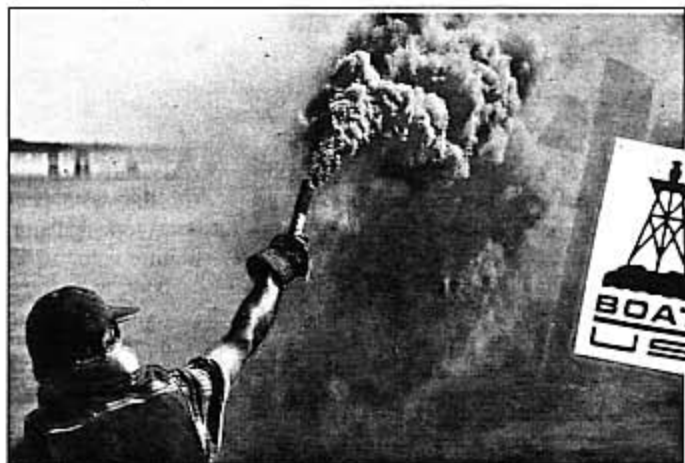
Since few boaters get the chance to actually use pyrotechnic visual distress signals prior to an emergency, the BOAT/U.S. Foundation for Boating Safety decided to test a range of commonly available Coast Guard-approved devices.

We hope this vicarious visit with visual distress signals will help you think through your options in making what could be life-saving decisions.

Don't Try This at Home

We conducted our tests on the Chesapeake Bay off Sandy Point State Park in cooperation with the Maryland Natural Resources Police, Maryland State Police and the U.S. Coast Guard.

Our technicians established two stations for the test boat, one at a quarter-mile off the beach and the other at a half-mile. On shore they set up equipment to gauge the approximate altitude above the water attained by aerial flares, measure



Attention getter: smoke flares proved best for daytime use.

burn time for all devices and to document each test photographically.

The crew, comprised of experienced boaters and landlubbers alike, recorded subjective assessments for brilliance and overall visibility as well.

The crew afloat, using a 29-foot powerboat as the anchored test platform, launched flares with the help of a gunwale-mounted device to maintain a consistent firing trajectory. They also confirmed burn times with a stop watch and took notes on "user-friendliness" and safety values.

The Cold Light of Day

Since so many boaters carry handheld and aerial flares that are approved for day/night use, we wanted to see just how effective these are in daytime conditions. They aren't.

Our shore crew found the Coast Guard-approved hand-holds very poor at attracting attention. SOLAS flares were only marginally better in daylight but burned only half as long. Luminosity ratings range from 500 candle power to 15,000. We found the lowest-rated flares virtually invisible in daylight at one-quarter mile and the highest rated flares only slightly more visible. But the 67-second average burn time was less than half that of the three lower-rated devices tested (see Table).

While all hand-holds exceeded manufacturer specifications for burn time, beware: These devices generate considerable slag as they



All hand-held flares have limited use in daylight conditions but SOLAS flares (bottom) offer significantly more brilliance and secondary smoke.

variety of red hand-held or aerial flares for day and/or night use, and devices that emit orange smoke for daytime use.

The Coast Guard sets a 42-month service life and expiration dates are stamped on the devices. The International Maritime Organization approves signals for commercial use on the high seas with a SOLAS (Safety of Life At Sea) rating. These devices far exceed Coast Guard standards for luminosity and many boaters use the more expensive SOLAS devices for the added margin of safety they provide.

If you opt for py-

A Note About Disposal

The U.S. Coast Guard no longer accepts old pyrotechnics for disposal, but check with local Coast Guard Auxiliary flotillas; they may be able to use them for safety demonstrations. However, the devices must be Coast Guard-approved, U.S. made and less than five years old. Failing that, the Coast Guard recommends you take them to your local hazardous waste authority.

TEST RESULTS HAND-HELD FLARES

burn (hold them well overboard) and they get hot, especially SOLAS flares which burn inside a metal tube that gets *really* hot.

Aerial flares are also not very visible or attention-getting in daytime, either, and except for the parachute types, burn time is a scant five to six seconds, on average. Real-world conditions of wind, vessel motion and the angle of the shooter's arm at firing moment can dramatically affect height.

Remember, these devices are like firearms and should be treated with equal respect. In fact, we found that aerial flares with self-contained launchers can deliver a strong recoil, posing a risk of injury.

For daytime use, we found the orange smoke devices to be, by far, the most effective at attracting attention. All smoke devices exceeded manufacturers' specifications for burn time and the "hang time" of the brilliant orange plume, even in a moderate breeze, makes smoke our choice for day signaling. Save the flares for after dark.

Rockets' Red Glare

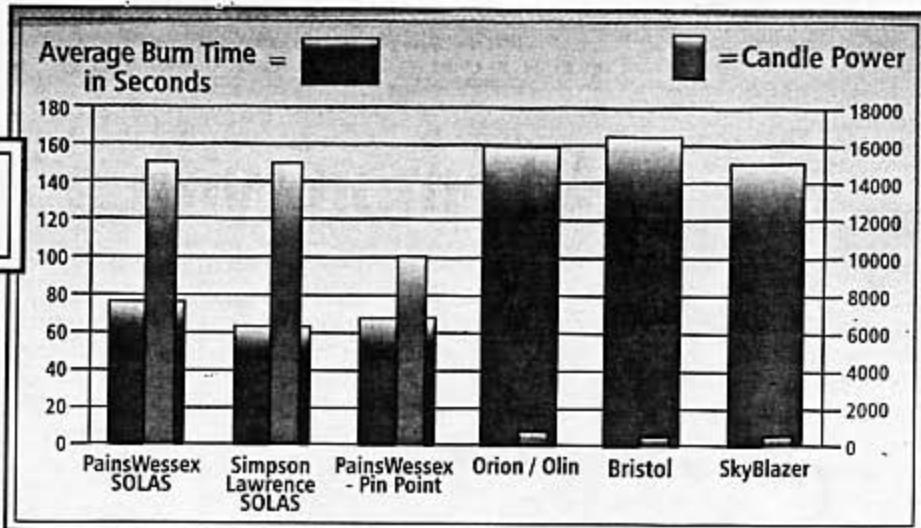
For nighttime distress signaling there are three factors to consider: brightness, burn time and, with aerials, altitude. In the textbook night rescue, your aerial flare, be it meteor or parachute, gets attention and the hand-held flare is then used to guide the assisting vessel or aircraft to you.

Unless you are quite a distance from shore or from other help, altitude may not be as critical a factor as luminosity and burn time. In our tests, we found that the Coast Guard-approved parachute flares burned for an average of 25 seconds while the SOLAS parachute burned 43 seconds.

Yet depending on where you go boating, on rivers, lakes or other confined waters, for example, meteor flares could be just as effective. Remember they have a short (5-6 seconds) burn time but cost considerably less so you can stock up accordingly.

Expiration Counts

When it comes to buying visual distress signals, let's face it, you are spending money for something you may never use. If you've been a boater for any length of time,



you've probably got a pile of out-of-date hand-held flares and signal rockets aboard your boat.

But to be in compliance, you must have unexpired units. Many boaters, however, keep expired units aboard for backup.

Since this is such a common practice, we decided to test a variety of expired devices — some long out of date — to see if their performance had diminished.

The answer is yes. There really is a reason for those expiration dates. These devices use a variety of chemicals, all of

long as their advertised claims. A few failed to fire at all. However, we still think (and the Coast Guard does, too) that expired pyrotechnic devices are good for backup; just don't depend on them.

Conclusions

In considering which pyrotechnic devices to equip your boat with, remember the twofold purpose of visual distress signals: to signal that you're in trouble and to direct help to your location.

From our experience, small boats in daylight near shore and with heavy boat traffic should consider carrying three hand-held smoke flares to guide assistance vessels to them.

Big boats on large bodies of water and night boaters may be best advised to carry aerial meteors or parachute flares to attract attention and hand-held flares for help to home-in on.

Think of it this way: Aerials give height (that is, visibility from a greater distance) while hand-helds give duration. Smoke is the best option for day-only signaling.

Also consider that exposure justifies expenditure. While SOLAS flares and aerials can be three to four times more expensive, in offshore or remote locations that could be money well spent. As a compromise, however, you may want to carry extra non-SOLAS devices.

You and your crew should be thoroughly familiar with how each device operates, even if you can't discharge them (it's against the law in non-emergency situations). Attending demonstrations of proper handling and use of these devices that are offered by many U.S. Power Squadrons and U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary flotillas is a great way to gain firsthand knowledge.

Store your pyrotechnics in a red or orange watertight container marked "Distress Signals" and store in a dry but readily accessible place. ■

PYROTECHNIC VISUAL DISTRESS SIGNALS					
Manufacturer	Type	Burn Time in Sec.	Candle Power	Height in Feet	Cost
PainsWessex - Parachute SOLAS	Aerial	43	30,000	920	\$39.89
Olin - 25 MM	Aerial	5.67	30,000	300	\$10.77
Sky Blazer - XLT	Aerial	6.8	20,000	256	\$ 4.67
Olin - 25 MM Parachuet	Aerial	25	17,000	820	\$33.79
Orion - Startracer	Aerial	6.17	12,000	315	\$ 5.17
SkyBlazer - Twin Star	Aerial	6.5	11,000	253	\$ 5.67
Orion - PWC	Aerial	7	10,000	185	\$ 4.67
Olin - 12Ga	Aerial	5.84	10,000	145	\$ 2.64
PainsWessex SOLAS	Handheld	75	15,000	N/A	\$12.99
Simpson Lawrence	Handheld	63	15,000	N/A	\$12.89
PainsWessex - Pin Point	Handheld	67	10,000	N/A	\$ 6.66
Orion / Olin	Handheld	159	700	N/A	\$ 5.10
Bristol	Handheld	500	500	N/A	\$ 4.66
SkyBlazer	Handheld	150	500	N/A	\$ 4.99
Simpson Lawrence SOLAS	Smoke	223	N/A	N/A	\$39.89
PainsWessex SOLAS	Smoke	190	N/A	N/A	\$39.99
Bristol	Smoke	140	N/A	N/A	\$ 9.85
Orion	Smoke	90	N/A	N/A	\$ 9.98
PainsWessex - Pin Point	Smoke	69	N/A	N/A	\$ 9.99

which can deteriorate over time, either limiting burn time or altitude, or causing the device to fail altogether.

We found expired hand-held flares that were very hard to ignite or didn't seem to burn as brightly as they should, and meteor flares that didn't fly as high or burn as

The following email letter was sent to the editor of "Good Old Boat" Magazine



Dear Karen:

I bought my Vega 27 new near Houston in 1976. We cruised to Vera Cruz with the Amigo Regatta that year.

I had difficulty with the variable-pitch prop system from the get-go. I could not stop the stuffing box from excessively leaking, which ruined a few sets of batteries over time. After swapping out the engine to a Ducati 24-hp, which had a transmission, I enjoyed a few years of peace from the swamping.

The "SERENIDAD" was trucked to California in 1984. It was docked at Port San Luis (near Santa Maria) for about one year. Brrr! Avila Beach and Port San Luis are chilly even in summer. That location is near that nuclear power plant (Rancho Seco) that drew many demonstrators from time to time during some of the years that I was there.

After Port San Luis, I moved the boat to Santa Barbara for a month, then to the permanent berth at the Channel Islands Harbor in Oxnard, a great location for serious sailors who are employed.

Following the Challenger Orbiter explosion in 1986, the boat was initially trucked to Cocoa Beach, FL. But, sadly, I had to move on to New Orleans. My aerospace position that I thought was set up when I was transferred from the West Coast did not materialize. I had to take another position at NASA-New Orleans. The boat was trucked to Lake Pontchartrain, a huge lake near New Orleans. I sailed that lake for a year, then I moved the boat to Gulfport, MS. I wanted to be on the Gulf of Mexico and not be landlocked on the lake.

I sailed to the barrier islands offshore of Mississippi for some five years, then I sailed across the western portion of the Gulf of Mexico to Port Aransas, TX, where the boat is berthed now.

I had bad weather enroute and was forced into an oil drilling platform. The Vega withstood several slams against the cement foundation there, and the rigging was smashed into disarray by the railing above. But since we had the advantage of a prevailing SE wind, we finally arrived near Port

Aransas and were towed to the city marina by the Coast Guard.

Luckily, I met a helpful and resourceful marine surveyor/insurance adjuster who not only helped me get the boat back into sailing condition, but he also installed a Harkin jib furler on the boat.

But the most important thing that has happened to the boat is I scrapped that Ducati diesel, which had become a rectal pain, and had my marine surveyor friend install a Nissan 25 outboard motor, something I should have done a decade earlier. For coastal cruising, this motor is ideal. I have regular electric starter and there is enough power from the alternator to keep lights burning and the battery charged. Also, it is quieter and more economical than the diesel. With the mount that was installed, I simply tilt the motor, and the propeller is kept out of the water. No corrosion problems. No stoppages like I had experienced so many times with the diesel.

I think that the provision on the Vega for a diesel is disappointing for one who is not an agile mechanic. Too much attention is needed in locations that are virtually impossible to reach.

But allow me to get to my reason for writing. I need a cover for the cabin light near the head. The cover that I have probably is repairable for the right guy, who is not I. Also, if you have or know of a listing of new or used parts, excluding the engine, please send me the information.

Happy Sailing,

Wendell R. Lloyd
2401 Hwy 35 North
Rockport, TX 78382
512-729-7560
USA

To: karen@goodoldboat.com
June 2, 1998



16721 Mark Lane
Tinley Park, Illinois 60477
20 August 1998



Sidney Rosen
10615 Whitman Circle
Orlando, Florida 32821

Hello Sid,

As a part of a trip to Great Britain last month, my wife Pat, son Reed, and I attended the International Friendly Regatta (IFR) hosted by the British Vega Association (VAGB). Our trip consisted of 3 parts; a 9 day guided tour of England, Wales, and Scotland, followed by 4 days in Cambridge and Portsmouth (on our own), and concluded with 6 days with our Vega friends at the IFR in England. The regatta was headquartered at the Hoo Marina near Rochester, both of which are located on the River Medway in the county of Kent. Among other points of interest, Rochester has the distinction of having the third oldest Cathedral in England, a medieval castle, as well as a bridge dating back to the Roman times. The Hoo Marina which hosted most of the Vegas, is located further down stream and could be accessed by our Vegas for no more than 5 hours during high tide. We arrived on the regatta opening day, Monday 13 July and were met at the train station by Diana Webb, VAGB Secretary and Steve Birch, VAGB Treasurer who brought us to our 300 year old hotel, "Kings Head", in Rochester. For the next 3 days we traveled back and forth to the marina for regatta activities. The folks that came by boat stayed on their Vegas in the marina, and those without boats stayed in town at the Kings Head Hotel. On the first evening, there was an opening ceremony with a bagpiper piping the raising of the national flags, which was followed by a welcoming buffet. Later there was a great deal of socializing and entertainment by a "calie band" made up of a mother, father, and daughter who sang and played a guitar and penny whistle. Much fun and a great time was had by all, although many of our European mates had not yet arrived.

Thirty-four boats were registered to attend. The weather on the southern North Sea was force 7 and 8 and so 20 of the 21 Vegas from Europe were not able to get across for the regatta. Some of the skippers returned home with their boats and other skippers, with their crew, left their boats either in Belgium or in the Netherlands and flew across on Tuesday so they would not miss the regatta.

On Tuesday morning Diana Webb gave a tour of the Upnor Castle which is located on the River Medway. The Castle was originally intended to defend the upriver communities and the Royal Chatham Dockyards. It seems that over 330 years ago a handful of Dutch vessels got past the castle and raised general havoc, sank some ships, and escaped with a prize much to the chagrin of the English; so much for the castle. Back to the regatta; racing and cruising class racing was conducted on the river in the afternoon during high tide. At low tide, the marina which is a dredged pool, becomes landlocked with mud flats all around. Quite a sight for someone who sails on Lake Michigan. In the evening, the regatta hosted a barbecue at the marina which was again followed with more socializing and entertainment by the Hartley Morris Men. The Hartley Morris Men are one of many clubs affiliated with the Morris Ring of England who regularly perform ancient and traditional dances in celebration of England's oldest commercial Brewery which is 300 years old. They were very entertaining and were great singers later, over a pint.

On Wednesday morning, the Vega One Design Association (VODA) met and discussed various matters including the election of new officers, activities of the member associations, and the location of the next IFR (The Netherlands). It was reported that a Vega is now on display in the Stockholm Museum for Sea Travel. (The minutes of the meeting will be sent to you, Sid). In the afternoon sailboat racing resumed, this time with the addition of some European crew members who had arrived on Tuesday afternoon.

Because of the effort of the European sailors to come by air after leaving their boats behind, VAGB hosted another welcome party that evening with a buffet, socializing and more entertainment. This time the entertainment was a trio with instruments who provided Edwardian and Victorian songs as well as humorous sing-a-longs. Again, a great evening with much camaraderie.

On Thursday a tour of the Royal Chatham Naval Dockyards was arranged for most of the regatta attendees. The Chatham Dockyard is a 400 year old dockyard that was taken out of service by the British Naval Board a few years back and was made into a museum. Fighting ships of all sorts from sail to steam, both wood and steel, were build and rehabilitated in this yard. They continue to make rope and gave a demonstration of rope making. About mid afternoon everyone went to their vessels for the trip to their overnight anchorage at Stangate Creek before the trip the next day up the Thames to London. Since there were quite a few people who were at the Regatta without boats, the VAGB chartered the "Alice" which was an old time coastal sailing barge variously called a "Themes Spritsail Barge" or "Smack" that had been outfitted for passengers. Pat and I were guests of Brian and Margaret Herring aboard their Vega "Krista" 1834. We sailed down the Medway to Stangate Creek where we anchored for an evening meal and overnight stay. All of the Vegas, and Alice, were spread out at anchor for the night with some visiting between boats before turning in. It was a nice quiet evening with a light breeze and a touch of rain.

After breakfast at anchor on Friday morning, all of the boats weighed anchor and proceeded down the Medway past the fort at Garrison Point and into the Thames estuary. We proceeded up the Thames on a rising tide. We sailed as long as we had a favorable tack but eventually had to resort to the engine. The wind was more or less in our face at 20 to 33 knots and so coupled with the rising tide gave us quit a rough ride. The spray hood, which everyone has, was very helpful but we still had plenty of spray coming over the top of the hood. The sights along the way including freighters, loading docks of all sorts, the Thames Tidal Barrier, industry, and development were very interesting. Upon arrival in the early evening at St. Katherine's Dock, we locked through with most of our fellow Vegas. St. Katherine's which is next to Tower Bridge is a small harbor/marina that is full of boats with the water level being maintained at a foot or two above the Thames high tide. Most of the folks stayed on their boats and the rest of us stayed at a hotel in the Docklands and commuted by the Docklands Light Railway.

On Saturday VGBA hosted a tour that took us on the Docklands Light Railway and a walk through the Victorian Tunnel under the Thames to Greenwich where we visited the Cutty Sark, the Old Royal Observatory and the National Maritime Museum. Later we toured the Thames by scenic launch from Greenwich to Westminster Bridge which is near the houses of Parliament and St. Stevens with its clock Big Ben. In the evening everyone attended the Regatta dinner. Awards were handed out for racing and in recognition of service to the regatta followed by dancing and socializing. It was a memorable evening.


On Sunday morning, closing ceremonies, with bagpiper accompaniment, were conducted on the Alice. The VODA flag was handed over to the Dutch for their safekeeping until the next IFR to be held in the Netherlands in two years. The Alice and all the Vegas that were departing then moved into the locks for departure into and down the Thames on the tide. As we watched our mates depart the locks, to the music of the bagpipe, there was a real sense of melancholy at their leaving us behind. WHAT A REGATTA Sid, so many have asked to be remembered to you that it's hard to recall all of them but Diana and Lars come to mind.

Pay Your 1999 dues now!

**US
Canadian
Overseas**

**\$15.00
\$18.00 (US\$)
\$22.00 (US\$)**

Sincerely,


Ross W Dring
Critters 3027


The following was extracted from an unpublished manuscript by Nick & Jenny Coghlan of their world circumnavigation:



Suvarov is a classic coral atoll, almost seven miles across, with two or three palm-tree clad islets around its circular rim. Most of the rim is awash at high tide and thus very difficult to spot; there is a risk that even if you visually pick up the treed islets, you may be looking right across the atoll and there could be reef very close ahead. The island belongs to the Cook Islands but is only sporadically inhabited; there are no lights or markers so a night entry was out of the question.

At one-thirty a.m., when we calculated we were fifteen miles off, we hove to: this is as close as you want to get on a black night when you're relying on Celestial Navigation in current-prone waters. I found I couldn't sleep, even with Jenny on watch, constantly straining for the sound of breakers, so we both stayed up until dawn. Then we put the sails up again and set off in what we estimated was the correct direction; one problem with heaving to is that you do not actually stay motionless, so we had to guesstimate how much we had drifted in the night. At seventeen minutes past nine in the morning I sighted a faint smudge: the palms on Anchorage Island, which adjoins the one and only entrance pass. We later calculated we were seven and a half miles away at this point, which I think is about as far off as you can reasonably hope to see a seventy foot palm on a two foot high island.

As we negotiated the S-shaped entrance pass we saw that there was one boat riding at anchor, a big New Zealand ketch called Karaka. An aluminum launch buzzed out to meet us from the beach. This held the resident population of Suvarov, Roland and Andrew, Customs and Immigration Officers. For years Suvarov was inhabited by only one person, who was a legend in his own lifetime amongst the cruising fraternity: a fellow called Tom Neal, who lived here as a hermit, wrote a very popular book called 'An Island to Oneself' and welcomed cruising boats. After he died of cancer in Rarotonga, the place reverted to its former emptiness but yachts continued to come. Unfortunately there were abuses. One boat, for nearly a year, ran a clandestine heart-of-palm harvesting operation and cut down fully half the trees on the atoll, another decided to 'go back to nature' and survived by shooting the utterly tame seabirds that nest here in great numbers. The last straw came when some yachtsmen who, like everyone else, had read Tom Neal's book, set themselves up here permanently and drove off, with guns, a small contingent of Cook Islanders who came to investigate; the Cook Islanders later returned in force to evict the squatters. Now there are usually two or three officials stationed here to keep an eye on the boats, the wildlife, and generally act as a presence. This is not a designated Port of Entry as yet, and the rules specify that in such cases you can only stay three days, to effect necessary repairs and so on. However, Roland was sympathetic and, as long as his radio was kept working by passing yachts, he would let us stay any reasonable amount of time. The story with the radio was that, as long as Rarotonga got daily reports from Suvarov, then they would know that everything was fine; if there were no transmissions, they'd be forced to send a plane over to investigate, at which time it would become obvious that there were yachts here that were doing a



little more than essential repairs.

The anchorage is one of those ones you always dream about. Forty feet of still, clear water over white sand and coral - you could see every detail on the bottom by moonlight; the palm trees on Anchorage Island rustling in the breeze; miles and miles of beach-combing and reef walking; a feeling of great isolation. Ignoring Anchorage Island, which fills only five degrees of the three hundred and sixty degree horizon, you might think you were anchored in the wide open Pacific on a calm day, for the encircling reef is betrayed by breakers only when it's blowing hard. There's a big rusty wreck three or four miles away which is a give-away, but with your eyes half closed you might imagine it was a ship sailing past (rather slowly...).

On shore are the Government Offices, a palm shack with the Cook Island flag flying at the end of a bendy stripped-down palm frond. The flag has a blue field, with the Union Jack in one corner, and sixteen white stars, one for each of the islands that make up this country. With each new country you are supposed to hoist a courtesy flag but until now we had not been able to find out what the Cooks' flag was; out came the bag of coloured spinnaker scraps and Jenny set to work.

'Tom's Place' is set back in the trees, a couple of shacks around a clearing. Someone has left a crude stone bust of Tom Neal here, wearing a real straw hat, and below it is the inscription: 'On this island Tom Neal lived his dream'. Roland and Andrew were very friendly and always had a pot of tea on for visitors. We spent many hours talking about the atoll and the other remote places they had lived, mainly as pearl fishermen: Penrhyn, Manihiki, Palmerston and Puka Puka. Puka Puka, which is a long strand of beach aligned North to South with a tail off to the West, is also known as Danger Island because of the strong West-going currents that flow onto it and the lack of a good anchorage. For many years an American called Robert Dean Frisbee lived his dream here, as a South Sea Island Trader, and wrote an interesting book about his experiences, 'The Book Of Puka Puka'. Roland told us that Frisbee had also lived for a while on Suvarov and survived a tremendous hurricane here; he took us to see the remains of the tree-house that Frisbee had built in order to escape the gigantic waves that had washed right over Anchorage Island. There were also the remains of a concrete water tank, but this now had another purpose, as we were soon to discover.

As the days passed, a few more boats rolled in: Sealeg, with John and Ros, last seen in the US; Alu Baba from Sweden and, of course, there was still Karaka. We got together with Roland and Andrew and proposed a party on the beach. They immediately insisted on preparing the main dish, which was to be coconut crab. These are, essentially, huge hermit crabs without their 'houses', though superficially you might conclude they were large land lobsters. There is some controversy over what they actually live on. Some of the experts say that they don't eat coconuts at all, though legend has it that they are smart enough to get into coconuts with their powerful claws and even to drop coconuts deliberately. In our experience, dropping a coconut is of little help in opening it. At all events, they are hunted by leaving scraps of coconut around, then going after them at night with a flashlight. You need to exercise some care in the actual capture of your victim, for a big specimen could take your finger off. With Roland as our guide we

captured five or six and the old water tank serves as an excellent place to keep them alive: they can't climb its vertical walls.

We boiled the big crabs in pots over coconut-husk fires on the beach and they were delicious: like lobsters, with white meat in their tails and claws. I should add that the crabs are plentiful and in no way endangered. As hosts, Roland and Andrew refused to eat until we'd had our fill, which we found a bit embarrassing as the feast was supposed to be for them as much as for us. They were very popular with the two young teenagers on Karaka and virtually adopted them for the duration of Karaka's stay: the kids slept on shore, went fishing with them, helped them with their little jetty-building project and even learned to speak the language.

Snorkeling was of course a daily activity. There are abundant sharks here but Roland assured us they were harmless 'at the moment'; they were mainly six-foot blacktips that went around in packs of three or four. The first time I saw one gliding past a few feet beneath my mask my heart rate instantly doubled and I could almost hear the music from 'Jaws', but we soon got used to them. The one cardinal rule is not to spear fish while they are around, as the blood not only attracts them but excites them to a point at which they'll eat anything that moves. One afternoon John and Ros caught a shark while fishing from their stern; they left it hanging there for the time being, half in and half out of the water. We then all went snorkeling for an hour, maybe two hundred yards from the boats, met up afterwards for a drink on Sealeg and found that the freshly-caught shark ended exactly at the waterline: his comrades had devoured the rest of him while we swam!

Out on the reef, too, there's a lot to do. We donned our running shoes, calculated the tide times, and set off for a walk with the camera. There were nesting Noddies, Brown Boobies, Sooty Terns, giant Frigatebirds and, most beautiful of all but well-hidden in scrub thickets, red-tailed Tropicbirds. These have very distinctive long trailing red tail feathers which are, unfortunately, highly prized as fishing lures. Although part of Roland's mandate was as 'Conservation Officer' he was occasionally to be seen lugging a squawking sack, another Tropicbird shortly to be de-tailed. We presumed this renders them incapable of flying and thus kills them.

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