Battered schooner survives Tasman storm

Smashed by hurricane-force seas in the worst storm in the Tasman for 40 years; and without the use of either radio or engine, the 35-foot gaff-rigged schooner Tahoe arrived in Port Taranaki on Anzac Day 1959 en route from Sydney to Vancouver.

The story begins in late December 1958, when, as a young 19-year-old, Steve Old was in Sydney on three months leave without pay, from his job as a telephone technician in the New Plymouth Exchange, having sailed across from Auckland on the passenger steamer, Monowai.

As the end of my leave approached, I had to start thinking about getting back to NZ. The thought occurred to me that maybe there was a yacht sailing to NZ, and so I raised the subject with Peter Fletcher, who was well known in the sailing world for having built the original Daydream a 29ft hard chine plywood sloop, and sailed her across to Auckland, and then competed in the Auckland to Suva race.

He said there was a Canadian schooner at the CYCA named Tahoe which was leaving Australia in the near future to sail back to Canada, and was more than likely going via NZ.

I went down to the CYC to check it out. Tahoe lay at the end of the Club’s only marina. She was hanging off a bow anchor, with her stern tethered to the end of the marina. In those days there were only about six berths, and I remember the beautiful old ketch Archina moored there. Also Merv Davey’s partly built steel sloop, Tradewinds, without a deck, and half full of rainwater.

In those days Tahoe was rigged as a gaff schooner, and was owned by Reg Blake, the same Reg Blake who, along with his wife Ki, has the sandwich shop at the CYC. Tahoe is still in Rushcutters Bay, but now a Bermudan-rigged schooner. There is a half-model of Tahoe in his shop.

I introduced myself to the skipper who was to deliver Tahoe back to Canada, and discovered that she was sailing via NZ, and after a few beers and a chat at the Rushcutters Bay Hotel (now Cadrey’s Carpets) I was invited to join the crew as far as NZ, and furthermore, they would sail to my home town of New Plymouth.

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The skipper’s name was Don Beer, a 23-year-old panel-beater from Napier in NZ, and he had joined the boat
somewhere in the Pacific en route to Australia, as a member of Reg’s crew. Reg had spent two years cruising the Pacific on his way from Canada.

After a couple of weeks preparing Tahoe (including “tallowing” the standing rigging) we set sail on April 4, 1959 on a sunny day in a 10-15 knot westerly.

We had about seven great days sailing dead square, wing-and-wing until the wind began to shift towards the south, increase in strength, and the barometer dropping rapidly.

Late on the afternoon of the fifth day we all heard a very scared scream from the helmsman. The other three of us scrambled up on deck to see what the noise was about.

The helmsman was petrified speechless. He could only point forward.

There about 50 to 60 yards directly on our course was what appeared to be a moving reef. It was too late to take any evasive action, so all we could do was hang on and wait for the inevitable crunch. The “reef” suddenly started to sink, and as we sailed over the top, we saw that it was a school of very large and barnacle-encrusted whales. The moment we passed over them, they surfaced, that close to our stern that the Walker log line dragged over them. It seemed that the largest whale, which we estimated was 70-80 feet, was quite sick, and there were about six smaller whales bunched together underneath and they were bringing it up for some air.

Right: Three Kiwis and a Pom. Don Beer, skipper, 23, Mike Winter, 25, Steve Old, 19, and Englishman Percy Potter, 24, being wished bon voyage at the CYCA.

**Safety Tips**

A personal flotation device or PFD increases your chances of survival in the event of capsize or swamping. Please make sure you have a PFD for everyone on board.

Keep them in good condition and stow them in a handy location.

Remember they will only help when you put one on. So wear your PFD when conditions get rough or whenever you’re crossing a bar.
The crew on arrival at New Plymouth. Left to right Don Beer, Mike Winter, Steve Old and Percy Potter.

They literally lifted the sick whale completely out of the water, and it actually blocked out the sun for a few moments. A frightening, but unique experience.

After the breeze swung to the south, it really kicked in, along with the accompanying bad seas, and we were forced to reduce sail by about 50%—a lot of work on a gaff-rigged schooner that had no winches, and only block and tackle and belaying pins!

We kept going for another day and a half, but the seas got that rough we had no option but to heave-to, which under triple-reefed foresail, turned out to be quite snug, but occasionally uncomfortable when a wave would dump on us.

We had no engine, kerosene navigation lights, and the only instruments were the sextant, chronometer, Walker log, barometer, and a rather crude hand-held anemometer which roughly indicated wind strength by wind pressure lifting a small ball inside a graduated glass tube. It stopped at 80 knots, and for several days the ball would be hard against the top of the tube.

On the second night of being hove-to, around midnight, we were all asleep when we were woken by a huge crash. It

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• Patent pending
was pitch black inside Tahoe, and when I fully came to my senses after being thrown out of my bunk, I realised I was standing on the deck beams.

Even though we couldn’t see a thing, it was obvious we had done a ‘180’. It took about five minutes for the boat to right itself, and then we realised we were full of water. We all scrambled on deck, and there was enough light to see we had lost about 75% freeboard, and the boat was wallowing very sluggishly. Fortunately Tahoe was fitted with a very efficient old-fashioned stirrup pump, and one of us got to work on that. It was operated on deck, right beside the mainmast. We soon proved the theory that the most efficient bilge-pump in the world is a frightened man with a bucket!

All up we were hove-to for 10 days, but one day when the storm was at its worst, I went on deck to pump both the boat’s and my bilge, and there about a mile to weather of us was the Trans-Tasman passenger liner Wanganella about 30,000 tons, and she was hove-to as well. She stayed there for about six hours. We were later to learn that she had suffered major damage to her dining room, and that some of the crew and passengers had sustained injuries, including several broken limbs. We were also to find out later it had been the worst storm on record in the Tasman for 40 years.

Soon the wind began to ease off and swing back to the west, so off we went again under reduced sail. Quite quickly the wind dropped to about 15 knots and we rather foolishly set full sail, and wing-and-winged the main and foresail, and guyed their booms forward.

The seas were still very rough and Percy Potter from the Channel Islands, UK, was at the helm. He was not very experienced, and he was also petrified at the possibility of being washed overboard. Whenever he was on watch, he tied the end of the mainsheet around his waist. Inevitably the obvious happened, and we broached after being hit by a rogue wave. Another capsize, but this time in daylight. When the rest of us got on deck, there was chaos. The main boom had broken in two, the heavy canvas sails were flogging to pieces, and the gaffs were threatening to cause severe damage to the masts.

The boat was half full of water, we were wallowing and in danger of being rolled again, and no sign of our helmsman. Percy’s screams soon located him trailing about 30 feet astern on the end of the mainsheet!

Not long after we sorted out the mess, the wind and sea died right away, and we were becalmed in a very lumpy sea, and as we were drying everything out, there on the horizon was NZ. It took another four days of near-calms to get close
enough to get a fix, and another day before we raised Mt Egmont near New Plymouth.

From seaward, Mt Egmont forms a perfect cone, and the sun rising out of Egmont’s snow-covered crater was breathtaking.

That evening a local pleasure boat came out and towed us in to New Plymouth on Anzac Day 1959.

A few days after arriving in New Plymouth and getting back to normal, Tahoe was dragged up the beach on a cradle, and a skeg was fitted, the rudder enlarged and an engine installed.

Don and a scratch crew then sailed her to Whangarei, where she stayed for several years before being bought by a Melbourne yachtsman and sailed back to Australia. I didn’t know what happened to the rest of our crew. Everyone went their separate ways, and none of us kept in touch.

A chance meeting

Thirty four years later in October, 1993, I arrived in Rarotonga aboard 1970 Hobart winner Pacha on her delivery from the Caribbean. Rarotonga has a small and pleasant bar 50 yards from Avatiu Harbour, which was then named Tere’s.

Being the nearest bar to the harbour, it was the first bar I went to for a beer — as one does. After a couple of Fosters, I noticed a man wearing a shirt with Epiglass plastered all over it. He’d had a skinful, and was leaving. I asked the barman if he knew him.

“That’s Don Beer.”

Well, needless to say, I spent many a pleasant evening in Don’s company talking about the trip and drinking cold ones, and then later in the evenings, at his home, sipping home-brewed Cognac.

After leaving Tahoe in Whangarei, Don had joined the crew of a yacht, which was cruising to Tahiti where he intended to set up a panel-beating business. The boat stopped over in Rarotonga, and he decided to stay after landing a job with the Cook Islands Ministry of Works as a mechanic repairing Government vehicles, school buses, and doing the odd panel-beating job.

He fell in love with the place, married a local girl, and as tools for his work were hard to come by, started importing them from NZ and Australia. That led to him opening a hardware shop, which turned out to be so successful, he opened a second store.

He also has a game fishing boat on which he takes tourists out on fishing trips.

Today he is semi-retired, spends a lot of time watching Satellite TV, brewing his own liqueurs, (quite legal in the Cooks) while his eldest son, Don junior, looks after the businesses.

Every time I visit Rarotonga now, I stay with Don in a granny flat behind his house. My rent is a slab of VB from the Duty Free shop at the Airport!