

OFFSHORE

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Winter Series scene
on the Harbour

The last voyage of Cutty Sark

... a spellbinding record of rescue at sea
for those who would go down to the
sea in small ships ...

from John H. Alsop
as told to David Colfelt

On Saturday, May 25th a storm took the coast of New South Wales by surprise striking with a vengeance far beyond the imagination of the weather reports.

Late that afternoon and evening as increasing winds ripped up trees even in protected suburbs, and the seas on Sydney harbour had already begun the savage demolition of Manly, the wireless carried tense reports of two small boats known to be at sea between Newcastle and Broken Bay. They were Cutty Sark and Nimbus Too, the latter owned and skippered by CYC member Paul Moline.

The crew of Cutty Sark — skipper/owner John H. Alsop, his son, Tony and old sailing friend Jack Evans — were all experienced seamen. They were taken off Cutty Sark by the destroyer escort HMAS Swan at about 2300 hours Saturday night.

Nimbus Too was never heard from again; the bodies of Paul Moline and his son were washed up on the shore at Toowoona Bay a day or so later. Both boats were returning from Lake Macquarie to Broken Bay that Saturday, after having participated in the Squadron Cruise three weeks before.

How many other boats and lives were lost in that storm will never be known, but mere probability suggests a greater number than we have read about. It is also quite probable, from reconstructing known facts, that Cutty Sark could have successfully ridden out the holocaust. As fate had it, her crew were spared an uncomfortable night at sea, and she broke up some time later near Newcastle (a piece of waterline wreckage was positively identified by Alsop). The following text includes the log of Cutty Sark dictated from memory by John Alsop.

CUTTY SARK WITH A CREW OF THREE LEAVES LAKE MACQUARIE WITH NIMBUS TOO — CLEAR SKIES, "VERY PLEASANT SAILING CONDITIONS".

Saturday Morning, 25th May, Wangi.

0645 Cast off marina for dropover blinker buoy, where we had arranged to meet *Nimbus Too* and the pilot, Charlie Hollis. Called *Nimbus Too* by radio and advised we would be at the rendezvous on time. *Nimbus Too* had left Belmont and we sighted her shortly after this.

0730 The pilot led us down the channel with *Nimbus Too* astern.

0800 Passed through Swansea bridge.

0825 Had crossed the bar and left the pilot. Hoisted sail carrying full mainsail and large genoa we proceeded to sea.

Wind light westerley, 10 knots. Sea smooth with long lazy southerly swell. Once clear of Moon Island we set course 190°. The sky was clear except for the usual cloud bank low on the Eastern horizon, normally present at sunrise. Earlier some black cloud from the south had been visible but this had been blown out to sea and had disappeared. The wind held steady at 10 knots. Our speed through the water was about 6 knots. Very pleasant sailing conditions.

With Catherine Hill Bay abeam, we called up Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol, Gosford Base, and reported that we were proceeding from Lake Macquarie to Broken Bay. There was considerable radio interference from charter fishermen at the time and I am not certain that we received a clear acknowledgement.

Off Wybung Head the wind freshened slightly to about 12 knots, which we had anticipated as this would be normal with a mid-morning westerly. As the top limit for the large genoa is about 15 knots, we decided to set the working headsail rather than wait until the breeze freshened further which we expected. *Nimbus Too*, who was then astern of us about ¼ mile, passed us and then decided to put on a similar headsail herself. We were in continual radio contact with *Nimbus Too* at this stage.

Nimbus Too set a very small jib, which was obviously far too small, and we passed her again. She decided to put an intermediate jib up and we drew still further ahead and, at this stage, were probably ½ mile ahead. At this point Bird Island was abeam. We decided to restrict radio communication to hourly calls on the ¼ past the hour.

THE POLICE RADIO WARNS OF WINDS UP TO 30 KNOTS; SAILING CONDITIONS WERE BEAUTIFUL, DEAD SMOOTH SEA AND LONG LAZY SWELL.

South of Norah Head, Newcastle Police Radio came on the air with a strong wind warning for the Sydney area to the effect that winds up to 30 knots could be expected within the next 12 hours. As there was still no indication to the south or west other than a very low cloud line just above the south horizon, which appeared to indicate rain, both boats decided to carry on. A 30 knot wind would be a normal good sailing breeze for *Cutty Sark* without needing to reef under the rig we were carrying.

The wind continued from the west at about 12 to 15 knots and the sailing conditions were beautiful — dead smooth sea with long lazy southerly swell. We heard reports from fishermen further down the south coast, south of Jervis Bay, that it

was blowing fairly hard there and also some reports around the Sydney area that there was a fresh breeze with heavy rain. Later the fishermen between Broken Bay and Sydney reported that the wind was dying away but that the rain was heavy and they complained of the roll.

THEY RUN INTO RAIN; CUTTY SARK LOSES SIGHT OF NIMBUS TOO IN HEAVY RAIN

Just south of Terrigal, we could see rain to the south. The wind at this stage had shifted slightly south of west but still held at about 15 knots. With *Avoca* abeam we ran into rain. The coast however was visible through it. *Nimbus Too* was about 1 to 1½ miles astern and just visible through the rain. Just south of First Point, I altered course slightly to the west to about 200°. The rain was increasing and we did not see *Nimbus Too* again. The wind shifted back to the west, still about 15 knots. Time about 1430 hours.

HEAVY RAIN OBSCURES THE COASTLINE; THEY DECIDE TO PUT TO SEA

At about 1500 hours I altered course to 240° to lay Barrenjoey. The rain increased in intensity, reducing visibility to about 1 mile. Shortly after this we got a glimpse of the outline of land on our starboard bow. All on board believed it was the land south of Barrenjoey. We tacked to head for it. I soon realized that it was not the land south of Barrenjoey but Third Point and the land west of Third Point. We were, therefore, approaching Maitland Reef.

I immediately decided to stand out to sea and headed seawards on a course 090°. At this point the wind suddenly switched to the South East. It started to freshen, blowing about 35 knots. It rapidly increased to 40 and then 45 knots. We maintained 090°, logging about 6½ to 7 knots.

A "MAY DAY" FROM NIMBUS TOO

At about 1515, Jack Evans, who was standing by the radio heard a "May Day" from *Nimbus Too*, advising she had a man overboard. This call was immediately acknowledged by the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol. No further signal was received from *Nimbus Too*.

A particularly severe squall hit us and blew out the mainsail. Rather than try to get the boom into the crutch, we lashed it to the port guard rail and port doghouse hand rail, and carried on to seaward under jib only. As the wind was still freshening, we had the motor running and I decided to stow the jib in the pulpit. The head of the stowed sail was about level with the top pulpit rail.

CUTTY SARK TELLS VCP SHE IS PUTTING TO SEA: SHE RIDES COMFORTABLY, MAKING SEAWARD.

At about 1600 hours I decided to call the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol to advise them of our position and that we were standing out to sea. Although we were in no particular difficulty *South Pacific* replied to our call and said that they would come out to pick us up. It would take them approximately 10 to 15 minutes to prepare for sea. We carried on, still heading East, hove to. The stowed jib and remaining tatters of the mainsail on the boom gave us about 1 knot still on the 090° course. At this stage it was impossible to estimate leeway. All hands went below, as the vessel was looking after herself quite comfortably and did not require steering. She was not shipping anything but spray. The rain still persisted. We turned on the bilge pump and emptied the bilge as a small quantity of water had been taken through the hawse pipes and leaked through the forehatch during the fairly hard sailing in the early part of the blow. I estimated we had 2



John Alsop reconstructs the final voyage.

hours fuel in the main fuel tank and a further 2 hours in reserve in a drum in the after locker.

VCP BOAT CANNOT GET BEYOND BARRENJOEY BECAUSE OF HIGH SEAS

South Pacific later advised that she was unable to get beyond Barrenjoey as the seas were breaking completely over her. The wind was rising steadily, at this stage over 60 knots, and the seas were building up. *Cutty Sark* was still riding very comfortably, although the whole crew was wet and both Tony and Jack Evans were cold. We heard *South Pacific* call the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol, Newport Base, asking them to contact Marine Ops at Canberra immediately.

South Pacific later advised us that *HMAS Swan* had been ordered to sea. *South Pacific* called us to fix a time for a call from *HMAS Swan* for a R.D.F. fix. Once at sea, *HMAS Swan* took over all radio communication with us and declared a radio silence for the East Coast.

DESTROYER SWAN GETS R.D.F. FIX ON CUTTY SARK AND RADIOS POSITION.

At 2110 *HMAS Swan* called us for a long signal for a R.D.F. fix. This we gave and some little time later she called for a second long signal for a second fix. Within 10 minutes *HMAS Swan* radioed our position in degrees, minutes and seconds of latitude and longitude.

All stations concerned operated on a frequency of 2524 KC. throughout the entire proceeding.

All hands changed into dry clothing. Jack Evans and Tony got into their bunks with blankets and got warm while I kept watch. As *HMAS Swan* proceeded up the coast she kept in continual communication with us. I started the engine to charge batteries and decided to use the remainder of our fuel for this purpose. Radio communication was excellent throughout the whole time.

FUEL EXHAUSTED, CUTTY SARK STILL MAKING SEAWARD, DESTROYER SWAN SIGHTED

When the fuel was ultimately exhausted and the engine stopped, we turned off all lights to conserve power and sat in the

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cabin in relative comfort awaiting *HMAS Swan*. At one stage
the weather to the north cleared and I was able to get a bear-
ing on Norah Head light and, a few minutes later, a bearing
on Tuggerah Entrance township lights, which were radioed
back to *HMAS Swan*. Half an hour later I took a second bear-
ing on Norah Head, our course still being east, and established
that we were making to seaward. Two hours later Norah
Head was still on our port quarter, which indicated that we
would clear Norah Head by a very safe margin.

HMAS Swan suggested that we cease radio communication
unless any emergency arose until we sighted their lights on the
horizon. We turned off the radio to conserve power. Tony
later saw *HMAS Swan's* lights on the horizon and several
minutes later I picked them up as well. She was then quite
visible, brilliantly lit. I called *HMAS Swan* on the radio and
told them that their lights were visible and gave them a com-
pass bearing on us, which was 180°. They acknowledged. We
had switched on our masthead and spreader lights as well as
navigation lights, and within a few minutes they radioed that
they had us in sight.

**50 FT. SEAS MAKE RESCUE EXTREMELY HAZAR-
DOUS**

Within five to ten minutes *HMAS Swan* was alongside laying
cross wind on our weather side to give us a lee. With the huge
seas running this did not prove to be a very satisfactory ma-
noeuvre. The two vessels crashed together, beam on, a first, a
second, then a third time. *HMAS Swan* passed lines to us but
they were too big and there was nothing on *Cutty Sark* to
secure them to. Lighter lines were subsequently thrown,
which we could make fast. We used the sheet winches in the
cockpit as the most secure heavy fittings. Shortly after these
lines were secured, the vessels surged apart and the port
winch snapped its holding bolts and was catapulted into the
sea with terrific force. Considerable difficulty was experienced
in keeping lines secured.

A scrambling net was over the side of *HMAS Swan's* quarter-
deck and we were told to jump. At this point *Cutty Sark* fell
away from the ship some fifty yards and turned with her bow
facing *HMAS Swan's* side. She rose on a very high sea, put
her head down, and planed at about 10 knots down the side
of the sea, hitting *HMAS Swan's* side with her stem post head
on, giving up a sickening crunch. The shock was terrific. I was
sitting in the cockpit and was catapulted through the com-
panionway straight down on top of the cabin table, finishing
up at the forward end of the cabin. I was completely unhurt
probably saved by the padding of my life jacket. I scrambled
back on deck. I expected that this shock would at least have
started some seams, but apparently not, as *Cutty Sark* showed
no sign of leakage right to the time she was abandoned. Later
I learned she had put a dent in *HMAS Swan's* plate.

**DESTROYER DISMASTS CUTTY SARK; SHE RISES AND
FALLS ON THE HUGE SEAS LIKE A HIGH SPEED LIFT**

After another collision, some of *HMAS Swan's* upper works
caught in our rigging and pulled the mast out. This went over
the starboard side, fortunately missing everybody. Looking
back, I believe the rig did not carry away but that the ship
sprung sufficiently to lift the mast out of its deck step. The
mast did not break, nor was the cable taking the electrical
supply to the spreader and masthead lights broken. I remem-
ber seeing these glowing, still alight under the water. The
heel of the mast remained close to the mast step, apparently
held by the standing rigging.

HMAS Swan was rolling violently and in the seas that were
running, then estimated to be between 50 and 60 ft. *Cutty*



Cutty Sark

Sark, in relation to *HMAS Swan*, was going up and down like a high speed lift. At one minute our deck was level with her upper deck; the next minute *HMAS Swan's* bilge keels were visible. They were still calling for us to jump for the net. Tony jumped and missed and fell into the sea, just as the two boats started to approach for another collision. Fortunately *Cutty Sark* stopped about 6 ft. away from *HMAS Swan* and backed off again.

Two divers, who were already down on the net, grabbed Tony and hoisted him up just as *Cutty Sark* crashed again, beam on, just where the three men had been a second before.

OIL ON TROUBLED WATERS; VALIANT DIVERS SWIM TO CUTTY SARK; HAZARDOUS JOURNEY TO DECK OF DESTROYER

HMAS Swan now eased the lines and allowed *Cutty Sark* to drift around her stern and out on the weather side. *HMAS Swan* had pumped a quantity of fuel oil on to the sea, which smoothed the surface down very considerably. At this time the wind was recorded at 75 knots, and the back draught from the ship's side held *Cutty Sark* stern on to the ship at a distance of 60 to 70 feet, where she lay quite comfortably, without any tendency to charge.

Tony, then on deck of the *HMAS Swan*, told them that nei-

ther Jack Evans nor myself was capable of jumping for the net. Several minutes later, a diver, in wet suit and flippers, arrived alongside and we helped him on to *Cutty Sark*. Jack Evans had injured his back, so the divers took him first. They passed a line around his waist. He slipped over the side and was hauled over to the ship. They got Jack up the net and on deck.

Then two divers came back to collect me. They secured a line around my waist and calmly said "Slip over the side". I slipped over the starboard quarter and was surprised to find that the water was quite warm. As I was hove over to the ship I first saw the waterline disappear into the sky and the bilge keel appear. Momentarily the process reversed, the waterline descending, disappearing followed by the scrambling net. When the ship started to rise again, I clung on and started to climb the net.

As *HMAS Swan* rolled in these huge seas I became partly immersed several times, less and less as I climbed up the net. About three quarters of the way up I had no strength left to climb further. At this stage I realized that one of the divers, a big, powerful man, was behind me with his arms around my shoulders and his feet in the net outside mine so that I would not fall backwards. A number of other divers were on the net either side of me, pushing and shoving as well as giving encouragement. In a few moments I was safely on board. The divers, Able Seaman, Robert Lindsley; Able Seaman, Dallys Ruhl and Petty Officer, David Krietling, did a magnificent job.

CREW OF CUTTY SARK GIVEN HOSPITALITY OF THE SHIP; SEARCH FOR NIMBUS TOO CONTINUES

Immediately on deck we were taken to the sick bay, stripped, rubbed down, put into dry clothes and put to bed with a large mug of hot soup and told to sleep. A quarter of an hour later the Captain came in to see me and he told me that they had tried to take *Cutty Sark* in tow. They had sent the divers back on board to secure tow lines, but with the seas that were running the lines parted like cotton and they had to abandon any attempt. The Captain had hoped to tow her to safety.

The Captain said that he felt that the search for *Nimbus Too* should be continued as soon as possible, and I agreed. He told me to try to get some sleep as he would like to talk to me, as a yachtsman, about the probable actions *Nimbus Too* may have taken in the circumstances. This would help determine the best search area to tackle first.

The search continued during the night, zig zagging between Newcastle and where we had been picked up, in an unsuccessful endeavour to locate *Nimbus Too*.

THE ABANDONED CUTTY SARK SIGHTED AGAIN AT 0300 SUNDAY MORNING; WINDS RECORDED AT 90 KNOTS; CUTTY SARK STILL RIDING HIGH, HEADING SEAWARD

Next morning the Captain invited me to the operations room to discuss further search plans. At this time he told me that they had passed *Cutty Sark* at 0300. The wind velocity recorded at that time was 90 knots. The watch keeper said at one time the pointer on the anemometer had gone right off the scale, which read only to 100 knots. He said that *Cutty Sark* was still riding with her waterline showing quite plainly, so she obviously had not taken in water and was still heading seaward. She was not seen again.

I really cannot speak too highly of the Captain, Commander A.R. Cummins, his officers and crew, their extreme compe-



Cutty Sark — Alsop later installed a wheel.

tence and the hospitality they gave us during the next 24 hours that we remained on board. The team spirit and efficiency of everyone on the ship was remarkable. The bravery of the divers speaks for itself.

What observations can be made and what lessons learned from the story of Cutty Sark? *Offshore* talked with John Alsop, a yachtsman with 65 years of sailing experience and former Commodore of the Royal Prince Alfred Yacht Club, about his experience. There is little doubt in his mind that he, his ship and crew could have ridden out the storm successfully.

OFFSHORE: You've said you think you would have been O.K. without any help. What makes you think so?

ALSOP: Cutty Sark was riding comfortably and making 1½ knots seaward even though we were carrying no sails at the time and no engine because we had run the main fuel tank dry. I still had a heavy cotton/canvas stormsail we hadn't set yet. We had all the equipment necessary to get the reserve fuel into the tank — by hanging the can from the boom and rigging up a siphon we had for just that purpose. Even so, we know that Cutty Sark was sighted at 0300, her waterline still plainly visible, and she wasn't apparently taking water. And judging from where she finally came ashore — somewhere very near Newcastle we had an excellent chance of making it through the night.

Obviously at the time, with the wind where it was, the entire coast of N.S.W. became a lee shore, and with help at hand the risk to the crew of riding it out would have been unacceptable. Actually, the Captain of *HMAS Swan* told me later he would have taken us off even if we hadn't come off voluntarily.

OFFSHORE: What, in retrospect, are the main reasons you did survive, or as you feel, would have survived without help.

ALSOP: All the crew knew what they were doing. We had an immensely strong boat. We had all the equipment needed. *Cutty Sark* was Class IV Ocean Racing Certified, but we had all the gear for Class III.

OFFSHORE: Could you give us a little more detail?

ALSOP: For example, we had a good radio, a Radafon 75 watt 5 channel set, *properly installed*. That's important because many radios are *the minimum* to keep the price down. Mine was mounted midships; with a 6204 MHZ whip antenna, a loading coil for each frequency, which made it extremely efficient. I also had an RF output meter on the set so I could tell, for example, when humidity was causing a drift in output, and I could retune accordingly. It was the radio that enabled us to maintain contact, let *HMAS Swan* get a fix, tell *HMAS Swan* when she was near us, etc.

Cutty Sark had three anchors, two with chain cables; all navigation equipment including wind speed and direction, boat speed, log, close haul/deviation from course; echo sounder; two batteries; 40 amp generator on her Ford 10 engine; two bilge pumps, one electric and one spare manual; three sets of sails; at least five days food and water for at least two weeks without rationing.

OFFSHORE: You said Cutty was immensely strong, and from the pounding she took as described in your log, she must have been.

ALSOP: She was. *Cutty Sark* was built 45 years ago up the Parramatta River. She was an Albert Strange design, a 30

ft. originally gaff-rigged auxiliary cutter. She has been described by *The Complete Yachtsman* as "the ideal cruising yacht for the North Sea". She was rigged as a masthead sloop. I modified her about ten years ago, put on a new deck, completely re-did the interior.

They built her keel out of a 12in x 12in spotted gum. She had full length planking, the first four strakes were 1.1/8in spotted gum, which as you know is very resistant to salt water, the remainder were New Zealand Kauri. Her ribs were spotted gum, 2in x 1in at 8in centres; around the mast they were 3in x 1in actually touching one another for three feet. The floor frames were grown ti-tree, 3in at 2ft centres. She had four stringers inside the ribs, three of them 4in x 2in and one 6in x 2 1/2in. The stem post was 10in x 5in. You remember she actually made a dent in the *HMAS Swan*!



Plaque of HMAS Swan crest — gift to Alsop.

OFFSHORE: How did she behave in those 50 ft. seas you've described?

ALSOP: I told you she was riding extremely comfortably. Tony and Jack were lying in their bunks with no bunkboards.

Cutty had 2 1/2 tonnes of lead in her keel and one tonne of trimming ballast, and that and the "deep v" shape of the hull helped to make her extremely stable. Quite frankly, for sea-going I think I prefer the older designs — "deep v", the full length keel which meant she would virtually steer herself, the solid construction — to the modern ocean racer designs. I'm a cruising man, though.

Cutty didn't really start to move until we had 15 knots of wind.

OFFSHORE: What do you think happened to *Nimbus Too*?

ALSOP: I really wouldn't like to say. We heard a "May Day" saying she had lost a man overboard. *Nimbus Too* had her radio antenna mounted on top of her mast. I suspect when she lost the man over, she did the only thing you can do — jibe. She may have been rolled when she did, because we never heard from them again.

OFFSHORE: You mentioned you'd owned *Cutty Sark* for twenty-five years, and you must really feel a sense of loss. What will you do about another boat?

ALSOP: I prefer the older designs for my purposes. I had Cutty practically fitted out to take a Pacific Cruise — Fiji New Zealand, etc. I guess I'll look around for something of a similar type.

I've given quite a lot of thought since it happened to what every yachtsman should know and be prepared for in rough weather. I don't want to teach anyone to suck eggs, but I'd be happy to come talk to your C.Y.C. members about it if you like.

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