

Race History of Cape Naturaliste Return

At 11 am on the 11th of March 1955, His Excellency the Governor, Sir Charles Gairdner, fired the starting gun to send what was hoped to be an all-time record ocean fleet away on Western Australia's longest ocean race.

Sadly, eight days prior to the race, W {Billy} Green, a long-time member of Royal Perth Yacht Club and a founding Committee member of the Naturaliste, passed away. He was due to act as an observer on HMAS Fremantle. As a memorial, all participating yachts flew a black pennant as a mark of respect to this great yachtsman and Club Member. His ashes were scattered from his 28ft Bermudan sloop 'Rugged' as she rounded the turning mark at Bunker Bay. Rugged was skippered by Len Randall, a close friend.

There were 15 entries in the first race - 10 from Royal Perth and 5 from Royal Freshwater Bay: Panamuna skippered by WJ Lucas, Gelasma skippered by G Barratt-Hill, Thera skippered by J Fitzhardinge, Maid Marion skippered by N McKay, Santa Maria kippeder by A Mellows, Nova skippered by J Wiltshire, Nerrima skippered by L Bickley, Lynda skippered by S Craig, Yuna skippered by G Crewe, Argosy skippered by E Luck, Fan kippeder by W West, Rugged (Randall designed and 'backyard built') skippered by Len Randall, 'Alouette skippered by H Pepper, Midge skippered by J Arcus and Enchantress skippered by J Galloway.

The compulsory safety equipment to be carried was as follows: A lifebelt of approved pattern for each man on board, a fire extinguisher, an anchor and adequate warp, navigation lights or combined green and red lanterns, flares or material capable of being made into flares, compass, 3inch liquid and deviation card, and lifelines that can be rigged from bow to stern should the weather require it. Recommended items were a powerful torch, signalling apparatus and a lifebuoy with automatic light. It was not until a few years later when the list of compulsory items changed to include such items as: adequate food for four days sailing, a radio receiving set and a suitable first aid kit.

The 1965 race, ten years on saw the safety rules change substantially to include such items as: a minimum of one gallon of water per person per 100 miles of the course, bilge pumps, suitable storm canvas or alternative working sails and most importantly a serviceable two-way radio set.

The radio link was the HMAS Diamentina and GPV958 who would be conducting exercises in the areas.

On the morn of 11 March 1955, the fleet sailed out of Fremantle harbour and through the South Channel of Cape Perron and headed for Cape Naturaliste in a freshening 15-knot southwester, with the exception of Santa Maria who chose the coastal route.

"Midge retired before midnight with "Argosy reported to be in Thompson's Bay as was "Alouette . Pannamuna rounded Naturaliste at 0541hr the next morning with the rest of

the fleet 13hrs behind. Drama is encountered causing great concern with Race Control. 11 yachts have rounded Naturaliste with three in Thompson's Bay. Yuna was missing.

At 1600hrs on Saturday, the RAAF sent up a Wirraway to locate the Yacht. Only Pannamuna was sighted. At first light on Sunday a RAAF Dakota stationed at Pearce Air Base was requested to conduct a search again without result. The Royal Australian Navy, Harvey and Pinjarra Police were alerted while the ABC prepared the public for the worst. Finally, two Chipmunks from the Sunbury Aero Club sighted Yuna 5 miles . northwest of Mandurah sailing at 8 knots. Nova retired after rounding Naturaliste. While the search for Yuna was being conducted the RAN towed in Thera who had the misfortune of a broken mast one mile off Fairway Buoy.

Rugged, skippered by Len Randall with an elapsed time of 50hr 21min won the inaugural Cape Naturaliste and Return Ocean Race. Pannamuna had an elapsed time of 38 hr 41min 14sec and finished second; Fan was placed third. (Sic. Some interesting handicapping decisions there!)

The trophy Presentation and Dinner attended by 150 people including Lord Mayor James Murray as guest of honour.

In 1965 Coffee Boats were established where members and friends dispensed refreshments from anchored boats in Fremantle Harbour, to sailors as they passed through the finish line.

For further explanation I quote "No banquet was envisaged requiring knives, forks, spoons, napkins and Rinso-white cloth and the complete exclusion of table-reaching, swearing and belching but from information received, the hot fluids and small chow did much to heal the weals and change those old-fashioned looks at the skippers".

1966 saw the advent of spotter aircraft, usually a Mooney Super 21 sponsored by Winterbottom Holdings.

In 1975, now 20 years from the inaugural Race, Race instructions are now 13 foolscap pages {6 by A5 in 1955}, Trophies have trebled, and entrants over doubled.

Excerpt from an article written by Jon Readhead, Archivist for Royal Perth Yacht Club.