



AUROS

ANARE CLUB JOURNAL

Vol 9 No. 1

September 1989



INTERMISSION

VOYAGE 1 OF THE ICEBIRD

Steve Warren's journal describes that helicopter-wrecking voyage Hobart, Tuesday 18 October 1988

Icebird prepared to sail south for a strange disorienting land where the sun's daily rhythm is round and round in the sky instead of up and down, and the longitude lines converge instead of running parallel.

For our departure from Tasmania on Thursday the weather map was exciting: no fewer than seven low-pressure cells between Australia and Antarctica. Sure enough, as soon as we emerged from the estuary of the River Derwent we hit the big waves. And we felt it – icebreakers have no keel and roll easily. I was seasick for a day and a half; so were many others. But we did recover, in spite of the continuing storm. I think the way you get over seasickness is that you learn to ignore the walls and floors. We normally believe they are vertical and horizontal, and use them as reference lines, but when you forget about their orientation, they can't bewilder you.

Saturday morning when I went out onto the porch at 6a.m., I was surprised to see

the sun rising behind us. Why are we going northwest? We haven't made much progress, we're only at latitude 47 South! What had happened was, the waves were so big the captain had turned the boat into the wind and was just treading water at one-and-a-half knots. The winds, now raging at 40-45 knots, had been up to a furious 50 knots during the night, as we were sloshed back and forth in our beds, alternately banging head and feet on the walls.

I stayed out on the porch for nearly an hour, enjoying the ride, the wind, and the early morning sun. The ship was rolling about 30 degrees to each side. For more fun, the bow would occasionally plunge into the sea then bounce high, spewing enough spray to create pretty rainbows. I had to be careful to protect my camera from the salt. It reminded me of riding my 18-foot canoe through the big rapids in the canyons of the Colorado, the size of the waves relative to the ship being about the

same. Seeing the waves coming, I learned how to predict the boat's next roll or pitch. As far as I could tell, we were successfully riding out the storm.

Later on at lunch I was sitting across the table from Ian. Two helicopter pilots rushed through the lunchroom in coats and high boots, while we were eating. "Trouble," Ian muttered, between sips of his soup. Following the pilots were Martin Betts (the voyage leader) and the captain. "Big trouble!" Ian muttered. One of the bolder fellows from the construction gang, a mountain of a man, stood up and jokingly proclaimed to the lunchroom: "In half an hour Martin Betts will announce that all four helicopters are destroyed and we're returning to Hobart." Laughter. Half an hour later, Martin announced to the lunchroom: "Three helicopters are destroyed and the fourth seriously damaged. We're returning to Hobart to get replacements." Silence! Apparently a clamp on one of the



Photos by Selwyn Peacock

tie-down straps had failed; one helicopter came loose and crashed helplessly about in the hold, demolishing the other three.

The heavy waves continued all the next day on the return to Hobart. By Saturday evening most everyone had their "sea-legs" and was able to enjoy the ride. The key was to join the rhythm of the sea-swell. No need to walk down the hall; you wait for the right moment and then just slide down. And to open the door: just turn the latch, wait for the right moment and the door falls open. Then don't struggle to pull it closed; just wait patiently for the reverse roll and it slams itself shut. Down at the bar Paul takes a swig from his beer-bottle and sets it down in front of him. It slides to the other end of the bar; his mate takes a swig, sets it down, and it slides back to its owner.

Rich and I are sharing a cabin with our host, Ian, and his assistant Peter. Since we're on the highest level, it's like riding on the end of a pendulum. Two visitors to our cabin that evening, Doug Tivigg and Rod Ledingham, talked about the early days of exploration: Heard Island in 1948 and Mawson Station in 1958. Ian and Rod were sitting on the floor drinking whisky, sliding back and forth across the carpet. Doctor Klaas had warned us that alcohol intensifies seasickness, but it didn't seem to bother these veterans. Rich hung a screwdriver from a thread over his bunk and marked on the wall with a felt pen whenever it set a new record. The biggest rolls were 37 degrees. [But even this was nothing to our storm-seasoned explorers - Ian was on the

Nella Dan when she rolled 58 degrees.]

Our bunks, that is for Rich and myself, are oriented starboard-to-port, so we get bumped head-and-toe with the rolls, but Ian and Peter who sleep bow-to-stern, are in more danger of rolling out of bed. That's why, at about 3a.m., a loud bang woke me up. Peter had flown out of bed crashing against the opposite wall and lay curled up on the floor moaning. He crawled back into bed; the next morning he didn't remember it had happened.

We docked at Hobart Sunday evening; Monday morning the crew opened the hold. None of us were prepared for the shocking sight. Two of the helicopters were crumpled into balls as if they had been taken to the car-wrecking yard and mashed in the compression machine. Rich's comment: "And I thought I was seasick!" The crane lifted them out and dropped them in the dumpster - three million dollars of trash.

Although sad for the helicopters, our research may actually have benefited from this accident. Three days of ship experience offered some ideas to improve our experiments...if only we could build a special support system for our instruments. So on Monday Rich and I went straight to the machine shop.

Apparently, three other helicopters were available; they're being flown in from other parts of Australia and outfitted with navigational aids. Barring new surprises, we'll be off again as early as Thursday.