



Drifting and dreaming our way to nowhere. Sometimes it was very frustrating, but you could not deny the beauty. These were special moments. I imagined Bligh and his men in full colour, just metres away in their boat. The four years of planning and huge budget were far from my mind.

# ALL AT SEA

Part II of Don McIntyre's re-enactment of Capt William Bligh's 1789 journey from Tonga to Timor, through the eyes of crewman **DAVID WILKINSON**.

**W**e read about awe-inspiring feats of endurance and wonder what it would be like to live the experience. Last year, I was able to find out firsthand. It started innocently enough. Sitting on my sofa one evening, catching up with friends on Facebook, a message popped up: "Hey, follow these guys, they are re-enacting William Bligh's journey across the Pacific after the Mutiny." I clicked on the link. It was frightening.

I wondered if at 48 I had left the pursuit of adventure too late. I started rationalising. "It's probably too late... of course it is... look around you... be realistic..." Overweight, I had just recovered from major surgery and was hardly the ideal candidate for an epic 4000-mile journey across the Pacific. On the plus side, as part of my mid-life crisis, I had made considerable lifestyle changes, resulting in a much healthier and positive attitude to living. I did not feel invincible but I did feel optimistic so I wrote to Don

McIntyre, requesting my place onboard *Talisker Bounty Boat*.

## PUSHING PROCRASTINATION

Self-doubt meant I sat on the email for three days! In a moment of courage, I sent it and to my shock I received a reply, a crewmember had just withdrawn — timing is everything in life." I immediately left the office and rushed home to study the material provided. I continued studying until 4am the next morning by which time the fear of not going

THE TRIP FROM FIJI TO RESTORATION ISLAND IN AUSTRALIA'S GREAT BARRIER REEF TOOK 28 DAYS, THE LONGEST 28 DAYS OF MY LIFE. THE SKIPPER GOT KIDNEY STONES. WE ALL DREAMT OF FOOD



Above: Dave Pryce on the helm and Dave Wilkinson (foreground) stood watches together all the way. Two six-hour watches in the day and three four-hour shifts during the night. Our harnesses included personal epiirbs, flares, dye markers, whistle and a strobe. They were manually activated as we needed to swim and work without them inflated to right the boat, which we had practiced in Sydney. I thought it may happen but was happy it didn't.

entirely dwarfed the fear of drowning at sea. *I was in!* During my four weeks training in Sydney, the documentary cameraman asked each of us our previous adventures and achievements. Mike Perham referred to his achievement as "the youngest man to sail around the world, singlehanded".

Don McIntyre had "been there, done that". American Pete Steer, like me, was a non-adventurer, a mere mortal, however, he was fit and strong and ran considerable distances every day. I don't mind admitting, I felt like someone who was very much out of his depth. Regardless, my confidence had grown and I was feeling very positive, comfortable that I had my part to play.

Then there was a dramatic change in circumstances. Two weeks prior to our departure date, half of the crew, Mike Perham and Pete Stear withdrew. Pete stating the unacceptable level of risk! Mike quoted health concerns. I tried to remain calm, but felt vulnerable.

## STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

The new crew, 18-year-old Chris Wilde from the UK had never set foot on a boat! Quite literally, he had NEVER been on a boat. Now I was very concerned! David Pryce would also join us. I was told he is a very experienced sailor and long-term personal friend of Don's.

I confess, on occasions, to wondering if Don McIntyre was placing his own ambitions ahead of our safety. He had

sunk so much money and personal resources into the expedition, would he risk our lives unnecessarily?

I would talk through my concerns, and he would listen. Always calm, he never sold it to me. "There is real risk," he would say, "don't for one second think it will be easy, it won't be. You will be wet, uncomfortable and you will question why on earth you are there. Do it and you will discover things about yourself you never knew, AND who knows, you may have a great laugh along the way."

We arrived in Tonga on April 12. A week was spent preparing the boat on the beach, the crew getting to know each other. David Pryce had not yet arrived. Chris Wilde clearly lacked any experience but had a great attitude and a willingness to throw himself at any task.

David Pryce arrived a few days later and within minutes I was relieved. Clearly a very experienced sailor — competent, gracious and a breath of fresh air. His presence and Don's word gave me all the confidence needed.

## CAST ADRIFT

On the 29th, we set sail towards the volcanic island of Tofua, Bligh's first stop after being ejected from the *Bounty*. It had been mostly vacated 12 years prior due to volcanic activity. Only 30 inhabitants remained living off

the land and hunting wild boar. Tofua was spooky, deserted habitat with overgrown empty schools and buildings. With the continual bellowing of the volcano and the resultant smoke, it felt as if I was on a film set.

After those first 24 hours without food I was feeling uncomfortable and suffering a pounding headache. The scorching sun was already a challenge but our expedition had begun.

*Talisker Bounty Boat* had become our home. Routines and limited personal space were already being established. We were becoming a team. We arose early in the morning, waved goodbye to the support boat, and set sail towards Fiji.

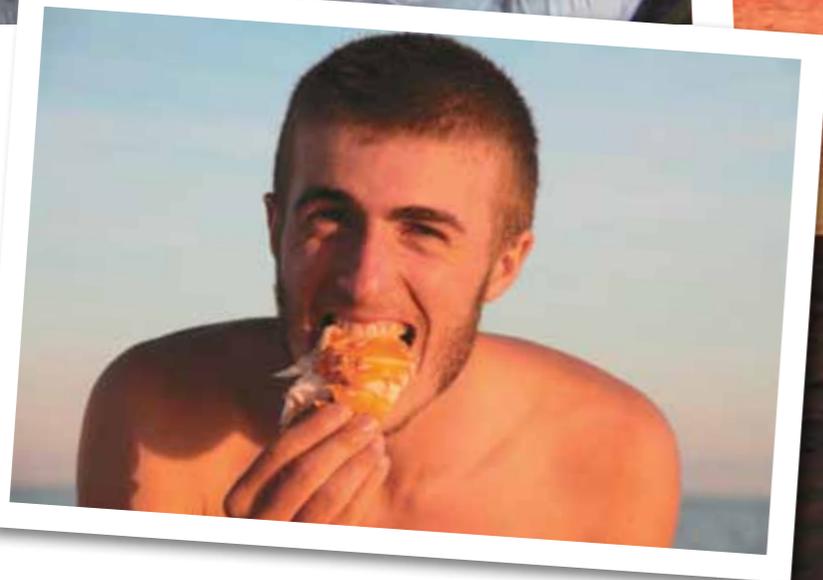
We had no detailed charts or modern navigation equipment. After each hour, David noted in the log, as he glanced over the seas, "Five knots," he said confidently, holding course. I laughed and suggested a bet. How funny to pretend we can hit the first of the Fijian islands 480 miles away by guessing our speed and following a course on the compass. We did, and I resolved to shut up, watch and learn.

## SCARY MOMENTS

Some days later, I was at the helm, steering. It was a moonless night. David was on watch with me. He looked ahead, commenting that he thought he could see the



Top: The first knockdown. Don holds the boat stern to the sea with camera in the air. The two Daves are sitting in water bucketing as fast as they can. The gunwales are just inches above the waterline. We are awash. Chris in under the camera beside Don bucketing, it is a race to get more out than comes in!  
Right: Chris a long way from England with the best crayfish dinner in the world!



silhouette of an island. It was blowing about 25 to 30kts from the aft quarter with a 3m sea. Suddenly he shouted, "Breaking water, 50 metres ahead!"

Breaking water? We were heading straight for a reef! I swung the boat around to weather as best I could, but we could only make parallel to the reef now and could not get away from it. It was not a good situation.

I was almost paralysed with fear, imagining breaking waves and broken timbers, pushing us onto the reef. We only just crawled away. It was a close call. Both Dave and Don considered our chances of survival very low if we had entered that surf.

Heading west the swell picked up to 3m to 4m, reaching 5m to 6m at times, with 35kts of wind. Surfing down these peaks felt

like a fairground attraction. The boat would make a load rattling sound as speeds of 15kts-plus vibrated the hull, each one met with a mixture of excitement and apprehension from the crew. In complete darkness it was easy to wonder if we were insane or courageous. Bailing out became a continual process and part of our on-watch routine.

### RIDING HIGH

Heading toward Fiji a big wave hit us sideways and we began to roll. One minute we were slamming through the water at full speed, the next was eerily still as we were knocked down. I grabbed my lifejacket, put as much weight as I could on the upper side of the boat to bring the weight to the righting side, then waited.

For a moment, everything stood

still. The hull remained at 70 degrees then slowly began to revert. Don shouted, "Grab the buckets." She was full of water.

My heart was pounding. I reminded myself of the drill practised in Sydney and to breathe. Our little world full of water was not stable and had virtually NO freeboard. We quickly set to it with buckets, bailing as fast as we could, while the skipper tried to hold a steady course, stern to the seas.

Once safe, Don sent me off watch. I retreated beneath the canvas to our sodden gear, tidying up a bit but the boat was heeling



A serene moment on the Great Barrier Reef. We camped here for 12 hours, then set-off at midnight to make dawn at Cape York Peninsula.

I WAS TIRED AND NOW IN SHOCK AFTER OUR ORDEAL. I TIED MYSELF TO THE HIGH SIDE WITH ROPE, HANGING LIKE A PIECE OF MEAT IN THE BUTCHERS SHOP

too much for me to sleep without rolling on top of David. I was tired and in shock after our ordeal. I tied myself to the high side with rope, hanging like a piece of meat in the butchers shop. I closed my eyes and passed into a deep sleep.

That night, we found shelter behind a small island and anchored off until morning. As the sun rose, we beached our boat

and started reorganising.

### BULLY FOR ME

It was during these days my mood diminished. I detached from my crewmembers and decided to pull out. I was finally broken by a tin of corned beef. Eating them had given me chronic stomach cramps.

It felt foolish to think I could have achieved such a challenge.

Missing my children terribly I told the skipper and crew of my desire to jump ship here and now. They were very supportive. No one tried to talk me out of it. Don told me to go spend some time and space alone, farther along the beach to reflect for an hour.

Alone, staring across the ocean I realised I had completely mismanaged my food intake. Not

liking the limited food available I simply stopped eating. Weak, tired, hungry and lonely, with 3400 miles to go, I was frightened. Digging deep, really deep, I found courage to continue — and thank goodness I did!

### ASTRAL TRAVELLER

At night I discovered the beauty of my imagination, staring at the stars. In utter awe at the beauty of the surrounding sky and vast ocean I would watch as shooting stars shot across the blackness, while the moon's reflection danced upon the ocean ahead. It was beautiful and I felt a part of nature.

One night dolphins surrounded our boat, swimming across our bow. The phosphorescence trailing them was an image that when recalled, will always invoke serenity in me.

### IRRATIONAL RATIONS

Our daily diet consisted of: Breakfast, two sea-survival biscuits; Lunch, a palm of raisins and nuts; Dinner, two more survival biscuits and for five of the seven days, a quarter of the dreaded tin of corned beef.

We were running short of water. We set out with only 120lt of the precious stuff, enough for two weeks and to date no meaningful rain to compensate. We were rationed to one litre per day to conserve it. I stopped eating the corned beef as the intense salt dehydrated me. I could literally feel the weight falling off me daily, which did please me. Soon, the water ration was down to half a litre per day!

### WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

Fortunately, we were hit by welcoming rain squalls and caught more than 200lt in the sails. Every available container was filled and we drank our fill. Only 3000 miles to go.

The trip from Fiji to Restoration Island in Australia's Great Barrier Reef took 28 days, the longest 28 days of my life.

The skipper got kidney stones. We all dreamt of food.

One pleasant afternoon, around four or five days off the Australian coast, Don looked over the side to see light blue, shallow water, about 20m deep, rather than the expected deep ocean. For a while, we all looked a little perplexed.



Top: Who needs paper anyway! Just get over the side and DO IT! We usually got a wash up to our armpits at the same time, as the boat rolls... all the way to Kupang! Above: Our world for 48 days, simple and pure. It had it's risks, but never once did Don think we may die. Bligh and his men always wondered if they would survive!

Then we spotted a sand cay directly ahead.

We dropped anchor behind a nasty reef, reflecting that if it had been dark we may have sailed right onto it! We went for a swim and walked around the cay in the most beautiful clear water I could have imagined. After a couple of hours relaxing, it was up-anchor and off again, heading west.

It was a relief when Australian Customs flew over, though I think they first thought we were illegal immigrants. We sailed through Bligh Passage after a tough few days then up to Restoration Island where he had rested for two days.

### FOOD FOR FUSS

We were greeted by a camera boat and media. What was all the fuss about, just give us food please! There was a welcoming party consisting of beer and a barbecue! Problem was, we were still on rations. Don has given

instructions to all that we were not allowed to eat or drink any of the party goods.

Instead, he cooked a chicken and veg stew on the beach to represent the bird stew that Bligh had prepared for his men. Gee, thanks skip! I was not at all happy...

We replenished our water as Bligh had done and after two nights set sail on the last 1400 miles of our journey to Timor.

While on the island, Don let me make a call to my children, which I did and was feeling much more at ease. Thoughts of leaving the boat had haunted me again!

I couldn't understand why the journey so far had seemed much harder for me than the others. Speaking with David, and looking back now, it was obvious. Focusing too much on the arrival at Timor, continually thinking about when I would be



Above: We dried excess fish but with little water it was hard to digest. The high-protein diet and dehydration triggered kidney stones. Don passed two in great pain on two separate days. A thousand miles from anywhere, Don said he felt like he was looking at the world through the eyes of a condemned man!

reunited with my daughters was not allowing me to experience the moment. I was the only crewmember with a young family and sometimes I would lay on the sodden sheep skin, aching, cold and wet and wonder what I was trying to prove?

This had to change, if I was to secure some pleasure from the trip. It did, and for the rest of the voyage I loved every minute of it, I finally saw the beauty of the Great Barrier Reef.

### MUTINY?

Within a few days it became apparent the crew were upset with me. I asked why? It became apparent my dithering about in the days leading up to Restoration Island had left a sense of mistrust with the crew. Was I committed to the expedition or simply wanting the task completed? I had stopped being a team player and internalised my own difficulties.

That evening we anchored off a sand cay in the Great Barrier Reef, built a small fire and cooked crayfish. This was the best meal I recall eating for the entire journey!

As the sun set and the sky became pink, I wondered how I would have felt had I not continued the journey. I took the opportunity to apologise to the crew and explained how I was trying to manage my own moods. They were very gracious, and after our meal we continued our sail in a lighter frame of mind. It had been a defining moment.

### OCEAN RULES

For the next 1400 miles we had constant winds and rarely changed the sail settings. The Arafura Sea was confused and just when we thought we had it sussed, the ocean would teach us a lesson with a gentle slap, knocking us down on four

occasions. Each time, we would bail out the resultant seawater from our little boat.

It surprises me how blasé we had become. On one occasion, I was asleep to be suddenly awoken by the skipper screaming, "Grab your lifejackets." We were upside down in the dark in confused seas. Even the mast was underwater. Once righted and armed with our faithful buckets we were bailing again.

We laughed a lot, our sanity debatable, but we survived! As we closed on Timor and Kupang, our moods lifted. Despite all the concerns, the discomfort, the fear, the downright misery, I have no regrets! I am grateful to Don for the journey, both physical and personal, and for the lessons learnt.

The book *CHASING BLIGH* by Don McIntyre is now on sale. For more information, visit [www.taliskerbountyboat.com](http://www.taliskerbountyboat.com)