

Chapter 19

Over the Top

July 2002
The very Northeast corner of Australia

At Cape Melville we anchor in five-foot seas that keep the bow and stern soaked as Iwalani bounces up and down like a terrier tethered to a leash. The grass-covered bottom is great for dugong but not great for anchoring. We plow our way backwards for one half mile until the anchor is polished to a brilliant shine. Thankfully we are in a wide-open bay with plenty of leeway, no other people for miles.

An adult dugong appears off the stern, floating upright in the steep waves. Smaller than a manatee, it turns its old man face to look at our stern. We turn to look too. In the process of moving backwards in such boisterous seas, considerable strain is being put on the tiller arm for our autopilot. We back into a steep wave, the stern submerges, the autopilot overextends, a strange gasping sound comes out of its tubular body and then it snaps in two. After I shriek, Phil makes a quick move grabbing the pieces before they disappear forever in the murky water.



Phil repairs the autopilot

The result is a day going nowhere while making repairs. Using plastic epoxies, spice bottle caps for molds, stainless steel wire and a bit of good luck, Phil operates on the arm that keeps us from having to man Iwalani's monstrous tiller. His rebuilt autopilot looks pretty good, actually, and seems to work even better than the original. The dugong, however, never makes a return appearance.

"You look awful," I remark to Phil when he comes up from napping during my afternoon watch. We stopped the night before at Morris Islet, an even worse anchorage than behind Cape Melville. Morris Islet is a tiny island like the kind in shipwreck cartoons with a single palm tree and one kapok tree and not much protection from either the trade winds or the nighttime land breeze. Phil was up and down all night like a nest-building wren, worried we were dragging anchor.

We decide to sail through the night to the Escape River, as the anchorages have become more stressful than just moving forward. The trade winds are blowing a steady twenty knots, which makes Iwalani happy and keeps us heading northward, but provides for little sleep when we stop, especially when the trades drop off at night and are replaced with the "land bullets," the wind that appears from the hot Australian interior, always from the opposite direction.

Phil says nothing as he leans up against the bulwark on the leeward side to

pee.

“Pretty gloomy weather,” I comment. “Are you OK?”

He still says nothing.

“What’s eating you?”

“How’s the autopilot behaving?” he finally asks.

“Fine. It makes more noise than it used to, but, actually, I like that. It reminds me that it is still there, working away. What is bugging you?”

“The Torres Straight.”

“What’s the matter with the Torres Straight?”

“Well, for one, it is the graveyard of a thousand ships. Imagine taking the entire swirling volume of the Pacific Ocean and funneling it through a bottle neck no bigger than a few miles across. Add to that, the worry of pirates waiting to pillage any boat that runs aground on the numerous reefs. That’s what’s bugging me.”

“We’ll do fine. The Great Barrier Reef has been more stressful than I thought it would be. Like for instance, right now—smell that?”

Phil stands like a hunting dog, nose pointing to windward. “Yup. Old Spice.”

“I’ll go look on the radar and see where they are.”

“Don’t bother. They are coming up over the horizon pretty damn fast. It’s a container ship.”

“I’ll go grab some clothes.”

Within a few minutes the ship squeezes between us and the outer reef. Two white uniformed crewmembers wave to us from the bridge, disappointed we have put our bathing suits on.

“You’d think the Australians would make those ships go outside the reef. Look at that rust bucket. Can you see what its hailing port is?” I ask Phil.

“Monrovia,” Phil replies while handing me the binoculars.

“That ship looks like it would break apart in seconds if it ran aground.”

“There should be a speed limit at least. These ships never obey the buoys, always taking the shortest route between reefs and islands if necessary,” Phil says.

“It’s Indian territory up here, that’s for sure. Maybe we should not continue on tonight. I looked at C-Map earlier, and we can stop at a place called Portland Roads. It looks like a better anchorage than we’ve seen for some time.”

“I thought we agreed to keep going?”

“I’m changing my mind,” I admit.

“You can’t do that!”

“Why not? Since it’s my day to be captain, we’re stopping. All three of us need some sleep.”

“Look at the chart—steep hilly terrain, that means more wind bullets. If we keep going, in just one day we’ll be over the top.”

“Nope, we’re stopping.” We arrive at Portland Roads with a half hour left of daylight. A small enclave of houses is visible, the first we have seen in days, many fishing boats, and a handful of yachts. I pick out the best spot to anchor, away from the yachts and nearer the fishing boats.

Our usual method of anchoring is for me to stand in the bow and give Phil

hand signals, indicating when to stop, back and hold, or which direction to head. We get to the area I had indicated, and Phil begins backing before I have time to get the anchor over.

I walk back to the cockpit and say quietly, “Hey, you began backing before I was ready.”

“Sorry,” Phil confesses. “Where do you want to drop it?”

“Further forward than where we just were.”

“If the wind shifts, we’ll swing into the fishing boat.”

“By the time I put out 120 feet of scope we’ll be well behind it; besides, it’s on an anchor not a mooring. The fishing boat will swing too.”

We motor ahead to the chosen spot. I let the anchor out and then indicate for Phil to back up while we set it. Nothing happens. We aren’t going in reverse. Iwalani’s bow is soon caught by a gust of wind and since it is her nature to swing away from the wind, we begin turning around. The anchor isn’t holding.

I push on the windlass button to pull it back up.

“What the hell are you doing?” Phil yells at me.

“Getting the anchor back on board.”

“What the hell for?”

“Because we need to do it all over again,” I hiss between clenched teeth.

I don’t have the hose hooked up to the salt-water wash down pump and the anchor chain is covered in foul smelling mud, which soon covers the deck, like frosting on a chocolate donut. Phil slams Iwalani into forward gear and makes a wide circle around the anchored boats, while I try to look invisible on the foredeck.

I walk back to the cockpit covering the side deck with my muddy bare feet.

“Can I ask what you are doing?” Phil asks me.

“Maybe I should ask the same thing,” I say.

“I’ve been anchoring my whole life,” Phil begins.

“Ya well, and you still don’t have it right,” I stab.

“F!@# You!”

“No, F!@! YOU!”

We stand staring at each other while Iwalani continues to make wide circles around the other anchored boats. I consider taking a handful of mud off my feet and smearing it on Phil’s face. Phil is entertaining thoughts of tying me to a line and dragging me behind the boat. We both stare at one another for what feels like an eternity. Being angry with Phil is about as productive as taking a heavy anvil and dropping it on my right foot, then picking it up and doing the same thing to my left foot. No matter how hard I tried to stay angry with him, it never lasts longer than about two and a half minutes.

“Let’s try it again. This time I’ll drive. You be the bow guy,” I suggest.

I slowly motor Iwalani to the original spot. Phil lets the anchor out, and I slowly back down on it. It doesn’t hold. Phil walks purposefully back to the cockpit. “May I make a suggestion?” he asks.

“Sure, what?” I say looking anywhere but at my husband.

“I suggest we anchor over there,” he says pointing to a spot closer to shore, well away from everybody. “This obviously isn’t working.”

I motor over to where he indicates and within a few minutes we have the

anchor down and don't drag after using all of Iwalani's sixty three horsepower to back down on it. I go down below to check the chart. It seems like an OK spot so I bite my lip, feed my cat, and take a shower.

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"Is this great or what?" Phil yells up to me a few days later. He is down below dancing naked and singing to U2, "It's a Beautiful Day." We have just written the new compass heading in our logbook: 256°. We have made it over the top and are now sailing in a westerly direction, the first time in a long time.

After getting a good night's sleep at Portland Roads, we sailed straight through the night and made it through the Albany pass, a narrow channel that runs along the inside of the Australian coast. Rather than heading further north and stopping at Thursday Island, we decide to stop at Possession Island and stretch our legs, hoping to meet up with Northern Light. We have timed the currents perfectly. The sun is shining, the wind is steady and plenty of electricity is coming out of the wind generator and getting deposited into the battery bank account.

I am not exactly sure what we will encounter in these parts, so have donned a pair of Phil's briefs and decide to spend my off watch reading in the lee side of the cockpit. I do a quick look around for Phil who is still euphoric down below, cooking French toast for breakfast. Seeing no other ships or hazards, except a large Australian customs boat a few miles away in the lee of an island, I settle back to enjoy reading in the warm morning sun.

"Do you want one piece or two?" Phil sings up to me.

"One. Thanks."

"How come you're wearing my underwear?" he adds in tune.

"Mine are all dirty."

"Time for me to do the laundry. I'll make water after breakfast."

I realize I am not going to get much reading done so lie my book down on my belly.

"G' day!"

'Huh? Who said that? I am definitely hearing things,' I think to myself.

"G'DAY!" I look up.

Perched on the high side of the bulwark is a smiling man's head wearing an Akubra hat. It takes a second or two for me to realize that I am not hallucinating and the head is connected to a neck, which is connected to a man, who is standing in an outboard, while hanging onto the windward side of our boat.

My book falls into the cockpit as I make a lunge for the companionway.

"Yikes!" is all I can scream.

"What's wrong?" Phil asks holding the spatula in mid air, like a tennis player ready to serve.

"There's a man up there! It's your watch; you deal with it."

I take off Phil's underwear and throw them over to him.

"No thanks. I've got my bathing suit," he says turning the stereo off.

I stop shaking long enough to find a shirt and some shorts and join Phil in the cockpit. A semi rigid inflatable with six Australian customs men is following us at a discreet distance in Iwalani's wake. When they see that we are both decent they come back alongside.

“Have you been to Thursday Island?” one of them asks while holding onto a clipboard.

“No. We sailed through the night, and just came out of the Albany Passage,” Phil responds.

Are you going to Thursday Island?” the man at the motor asks.

“Uh, no.”

“Where was your last port of call?”

“The last place we anchored was Portland Roads,” I answer.

“Have you cleared into Australia?”

“Yes, many months ago, in Coff’s Harbour.”

“Right then. G’ day to you both.”

I can tell they are trying hard to keep a straight face. Phil is still holding the spatula, and my clothes are all inside out.

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Australian Icons

Clockwise from right: Sydney Opera house, eastern grey kangaroo, red kangaroo, Uluru rock, Emu, koala.

