

PEOPLE

Voyage adventures recalled by old salt

COLIN MORRISON speaks to adventurer Geoff Steer - a local old salt extraordinaire, now in his nineties - who set out 44 years ago in his trusty little wooden yacht 'Sovica' with sextant, lead line and local crew.



Colin Morrison: Geoff, before we talk about your sailing exploits, how and when did you come to Albany?

Geoff Steer: After qualifying as an Optometrist at UWA I worked for various firms around Perth. However, I didn't like being told what or how to do things, so I came to Albany in 1960 to run my life as I wanted.

CM: What are the yachts you have owned?

GS: I asked my Grandfather, Oscar, if he would help me build a VJ sailing yacht. It was called Osca. When we moved to Albany I built a 12-foot Quickcat catamaran which became Osca II. Then over the years, and with much help from local boat builders, I built a lovely double-ended Randell design which became Acorethes. (Osca III).

CM: How did you eventually come to own the yacht which became well known as Sovica?

GS: Circumstances became such that Denis Robinson left his lovely Swanson 31-foot design, Swarbrick-built yacht to the Princess Royal Sailing Club. It came into my hands and we renamed her Sovica (Oscar IV).

CM: I know you sailed successfully out of Albany with Sovica but what triggered your voyage around Australia in 1981?

GS: I read an account of how a couple of young adventurers sailed from

Sydney around Cape Horn to America in a Carman-class yacht like Sovica. This showed that such a yacht could take you anywhere - so the dreaming began.

CM: So could you describe this 'Sailing around Australia' adventure?

GS: Well, on February 5, 1981, Sovica left Albany heading east. On December 1981 she returned to Albany from the West.

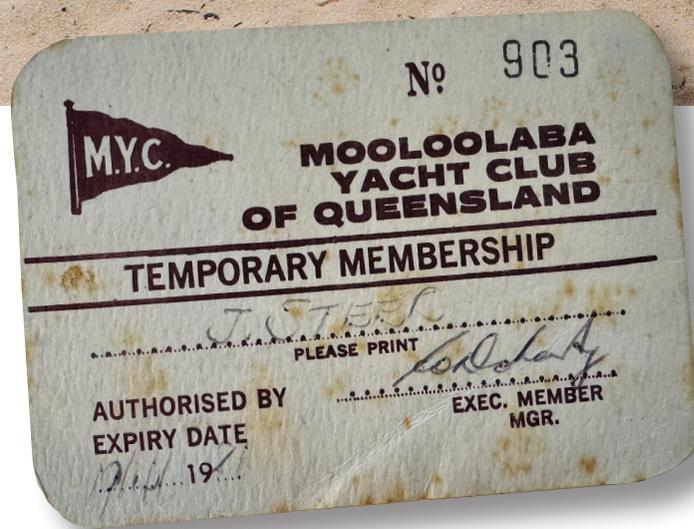
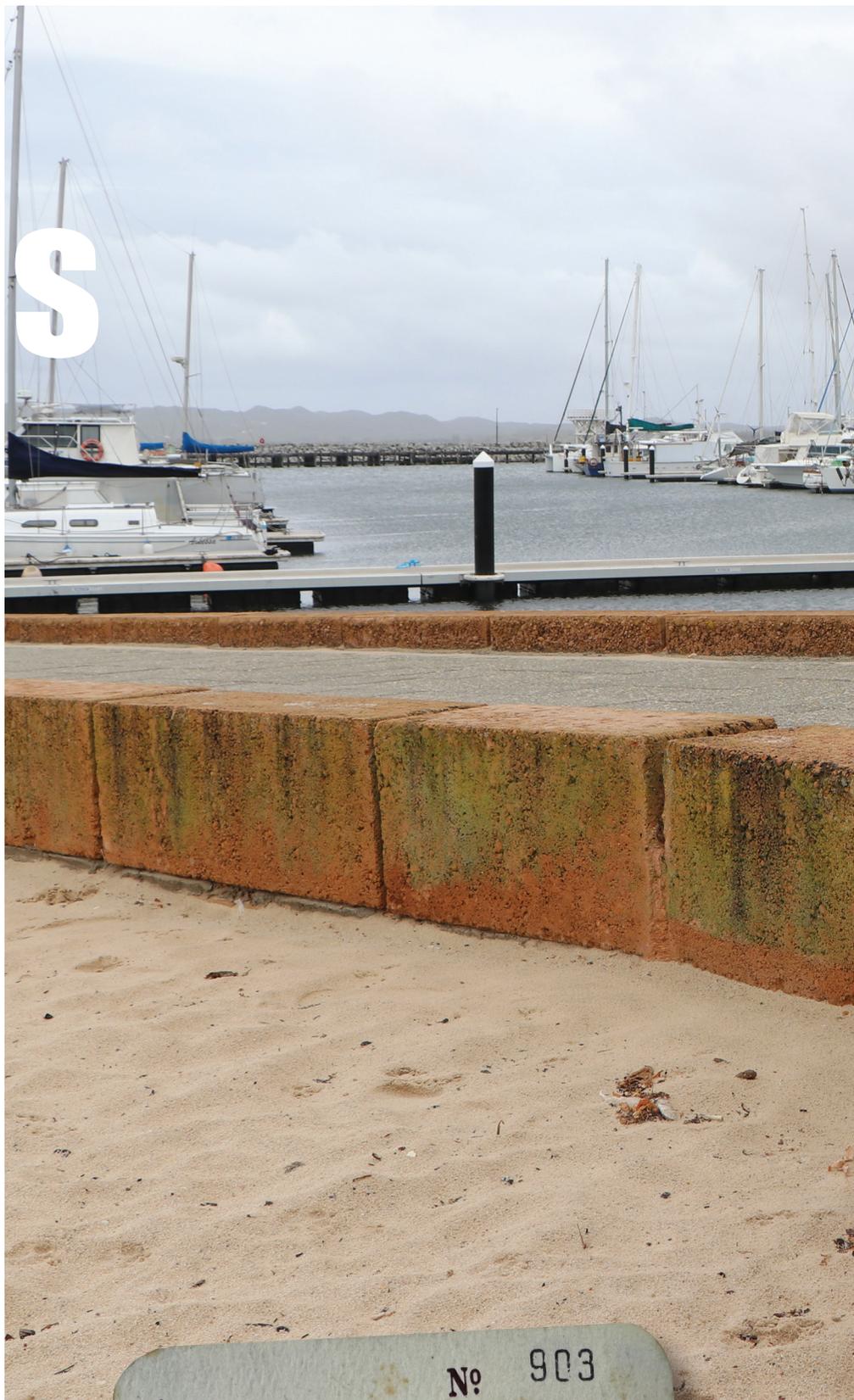
CM: Who did you have on board?

GS: Sovica was crewed at various times by Russell Hawkins, Ross Fenwick, Rod Adams, Ian Tarbotton, John Brown, Bob Lawrence, Ron Fisher, Keith Abercromby, Sam Elliott and Milton Price.

CM: Tell us about the first leg.

GS: Leg 1 was Albany to Sydney. We spent the first night in Two Peoples Bay before heading to Esperance, then on to Middle Island which is 130km east of Esperance and 9km south of Cape Arid National Park, the nearest mainland. It was our last anchorage before Portland in South Australia. Thursday 19th February, two weeks from Albany, we fixed our position and sighted Cape Nelson light, our intended landfall near Portland, shortly after dark. After a couple of days we then had to tackle the 'dreaded' Bass Strait.

CM: That would have been a daunting challenge. How did it pan out?



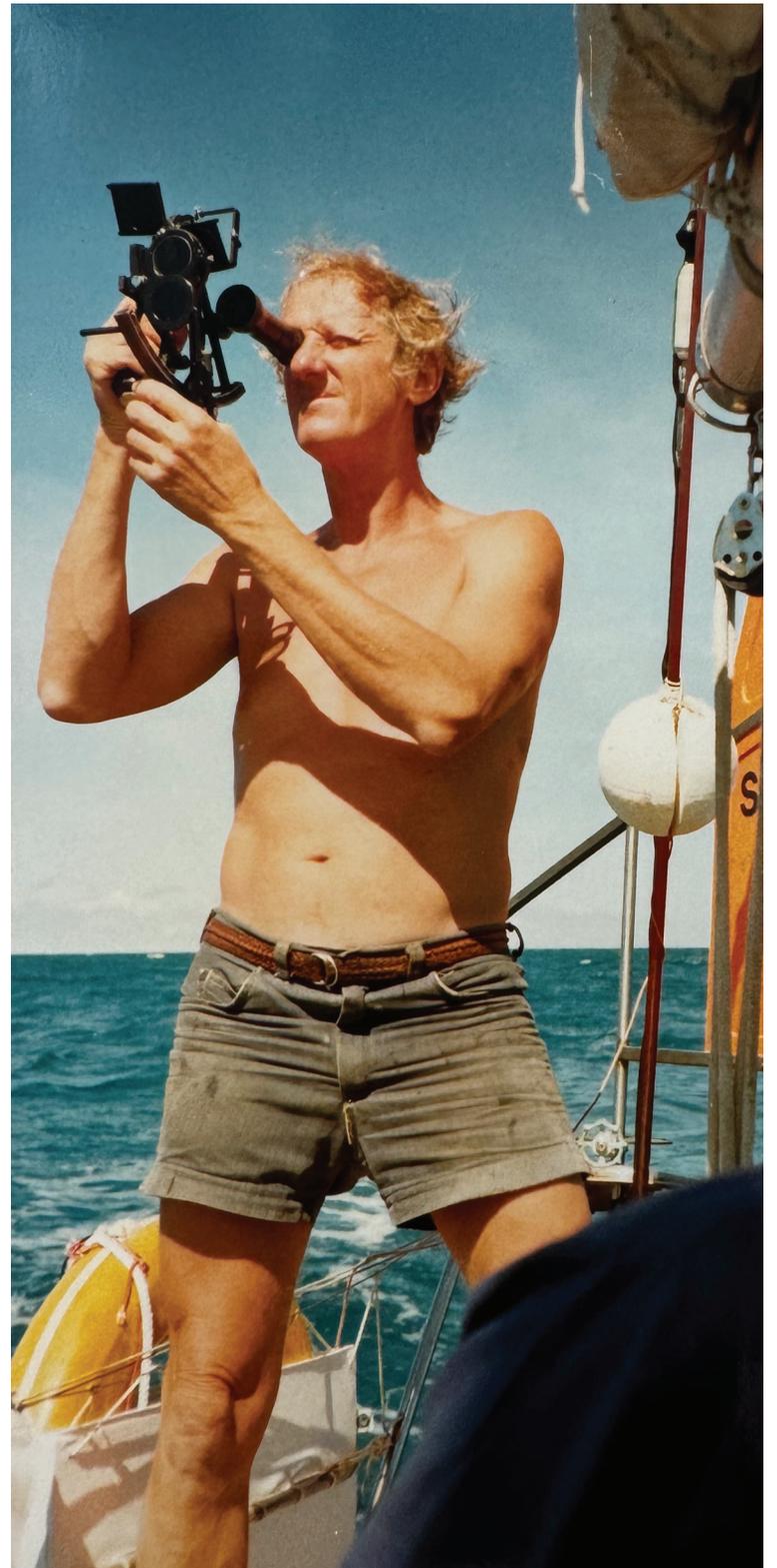
■ Various sailing clubs from around Australia afforded the Albany crew some some much-welcomed hospitality during the circumnavigation.

GS: After three days of nice weather we were through the Strait, around Wilson's Promontory and anchored in Refuge Cove. The next part of the trip was an uncomfortable ride to

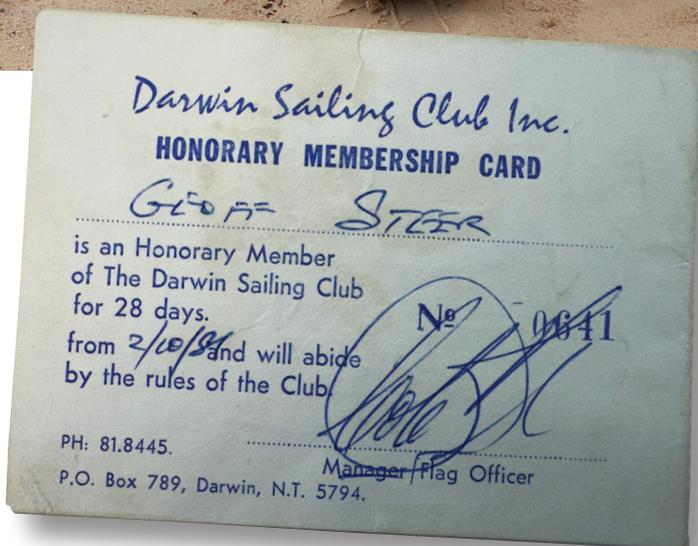
Eden on the NSW coast with north-easterly winds and rough, short seas. Eventually Gabo Island and Cape Howe were astern and four days from Refuge Bay, we were anchored in



■ Geoff Steer remains an active participant in boat-building activities at the Albany Boat Shed.



■ Geoff relied on some old-school navigation techniques during the challenging journey. Below, Peter and Hawks enjoying a leisurely sail around Sydney Harbour.



Twofold Bay. Then it was on to Port Jackson and Sydney. We made Rushcutters Bay where the Cruising Yacht Club provided us with a very convenient spot to tie up and made us honorary members.

CM: You must have been relieved to get that challenging section of ocean behind you?

GS: Yes. We were 29 days from

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Albany, had covered in excess of 1850 nautical miles and felt great satisfaction at having achieved this first leg of the Trip.

CM: What was the second leg?

GS: Leg 2 was Sydney to Cairns. After two weeks of delightful cruising on Sydney Harbour and Pittwater, it was time to prepare Sovica for the next leg of the trip. I recall an amusing incident from this time: Upon returning to the yacht from visiting the zoo, I discovered a mutinous note attached. This read: "Gone to Melbourne on 'Police Car' Tary & Hawks". Police Car was a top racing yacht at the time. Our first stop was Maloolaba Harbour and Yacht Club. Upon leaving we set a course to sail outside Fraser Island and made our way to Lady Musgrave Island. Next was an overnight passage to Great Keppel, our first tropical island. We worked our way up the coast to Airlie Beach and stayed for a week and re-provisioned the boat.

CM: Did the yacht require much maintenance along the way?

GS: Well, our next stop was Bowen, as Sovica was taking water and badly needed cleaning and anti-fouling. After slipping we left for Earlando Resort for a quick stop but the hospitality and friendliness turned it into a longer day. It was here that Rod Adams had the misfortune of falling out of a coconut tree and thus providing the Resort with the day's amusement. The elusive coconuts at the top of the tree were free for those willing to climb and retrieve. However at the top, Rod reached out and missed, sliding down the tree using his face as a brake. He was left bloodied but he survived to fight another day.

CM: Where to next?

GS: We set off for Cairns. Good anchorages are plentiful on this coast and overnight passages were necessary only to make up time. Cairns waterfront is very busy but luckily we found an unused pile berth and settled in comfortably across the harbour from the very hospitable Cairns Yacht Club. We were there for 10 days.

CM: What was your plan for the third leg?

GS: Leg 3 was Cairns to Darwin.



■ Geoff felt very much at home in Sovica during the circumnavigation. He and his crewmembers visited some memorable places, including Crocodile Creek.

Leaving Cairns, we passed many places with historic names by explorers like Cook: Cape Tribulation, Endeavour River, Cooktown and Lizard Island. From the peak of Cook he sighted a passage through the reef to the open sea. Upon arrival at Thursday Island we thought the anchorage looked most unappealing, so we motored Sovica to the lee of Horn Island and commuted by ferry to Thursday Island. After a magnificent counter lunch of crayfish mornay (\$3) and a visit to the laundry, we once more felt quite civilised.

CM: It must have been tough having to leave there?

GS: Well, after a day of re-provisioning and sightseeing around Thursday Island we were ready for the Gulf crossing. The Gulf was a very lonely bit of water – dry with little sea life, bird life or shipping. We were keen to get back to coast hopping. Our landfall was Truant Island and we anchored in Gove Harbour, making it in three days and four hours from an anchor to

anchor. A couple of days were needed here – showers, laundry, refueling and re-provisioning ready for the next voyage across the top of Arnhem Land to Darwin.

CM: Did this stage of the journey present some different challenges compared to the Southern Ocean?

GS: Very little of this area is surveyed and we moved very cautiously, often with a lead line. Our rough timetable kept us on the move every day and we could not really afford the time to coast-hop all the way to Darwin. After a 200 nautical mile passage we made landfall on South Goulburn Island. Port Essington was our next stop. The weather remained settled all around this Arnhem Land Coast – very hot days with good south-east winds which faded in the afternoon and died completely at night. It was absolutely delightful cruising weather. Next was Popham Bay now only two days sailing from Darwin. Then around Cape Don towards Howard Channel which separates Melville Island from the

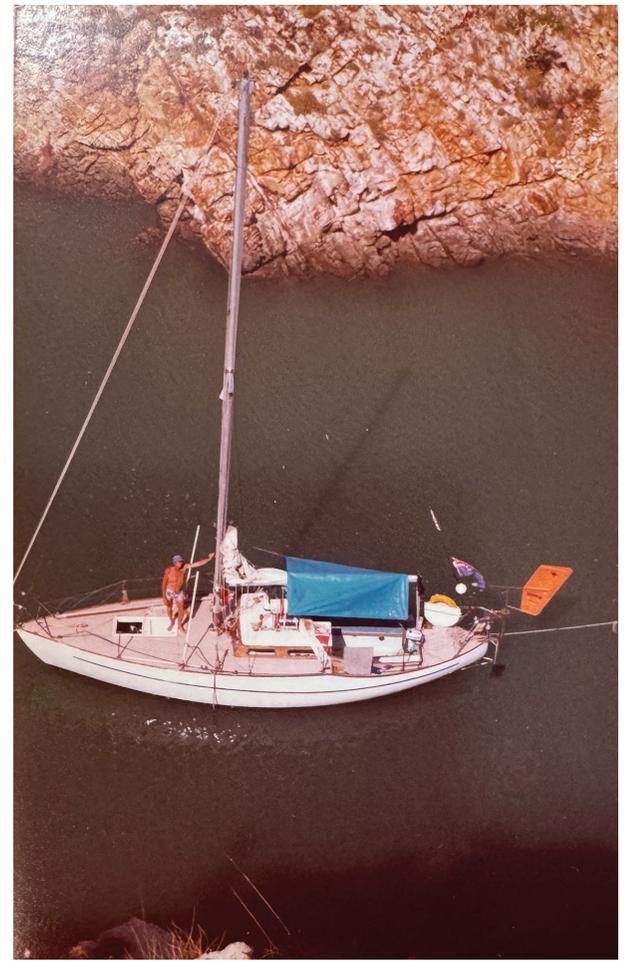
mainland. Once through this channel the approach to Darwin harbour was quite straight forward.

CM: Had you earned a break by this stage?

GS: Sovica was to be left in Darwin for a couple of months, so I arranged with the Darwin Sailing Club to anchor off their Clubhouse in Fanny Bay with a boat yard to act as caretaker. I left her with much misgiving, as over the months of sailing and living aboard a boat gets to mean a lot more to you than just a boat.

CM: When did the homeward journey get underway?

GS: On October 2, Rod Adams, Keith Abercromby, Ron Fisher and I arrived in Darwin to commence the voyage home. I had arranged for Sovica to be slipped so when we arrived she looked clean and smart. We left Darwin in a brisk south-easterly for the 250 miles crossing to Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. We decided to explore King George River. We took a while to cross the bar



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■ Milton Price, Geoff Steer and Ron Adams made a triumphant return to Albany in late November 1981.

and then motored the five miles to the head of the river. The scenery was spectacular, the weather perfect and oysters abundant. Next was sailing across Admiralty Gulf to anchor in Krait Bay. These were long hot days of sailing, passing through cruising grounds in which you could spend

weeks. But we had to keep moving to be ahead of the cyclone season and get to some civilisation before our fuel and water ran out. We then made Kuri Bay, our first civilisation since leaving Darwin. We were able to telegram home, shower, wash clothes and refill our fuel and water tanks.

CM: Where to next?

GS: Our next destination was Cockatoo Island where we entered a unique tidal creek on the mainland. Late the next afternoon as we were approaching the anchorage at Cockatoo Island we ran on to the edge of the skirting reef and stuck fast on a falling tide.

Despite everything we could think of to do, Sovica would not budge and heeled slowly as the tide receded. The deck was nearly vertical before the tide turned and gradually restored us to our normal trim and floated us off. We sailed on to Broome where we spent a couple of days. Broome really marked the end of our northern waters cruise. From Broome we expected predominantly headwinds and set a course to Dampier. We anchored for two days at the Monte Bello Islands on the way, then proceeded to Exmouth Gulf and on to Carnarvon. Very strong easterly winds gave us a good sail to Geraldton. In my log I entered “#5 jib and 3 reefs in the main, rough lumpy sea, cold”. Thompson’s Bay at Rottnest was our last anchorage before setting out on the final leg home.

CM: The south-west corner of WA also holds a sense of trepidation for sailors, so how did you find it?

GS: We encountered strong westerlies, rough seas, heavy rain and poor visibility upon rounding the Leeuwin. Hawks, listening by chance at home in Albany, heard us call up on the radio as we rounded Bald Head and by the time we reached Princess Royal Sailing Club we had a marvelous welcoming committee to see us finish.

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A WONDERFUL accomplishment done and dusted. This adventure whetted Geoff’s appetite for more adventure and several years later he and Sovica embarked on a trip to Cyprus in the Mediterranean. After island hopping with various local crew he decided rather than sail home he would put Sovica on a ship and fly in comfort. **S**

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