*I hope some members of the Dinah Beach Cruising Yacht Association can recall the following events as related by a long serving member. Should they have further details about this interesting episode in Darwin’s waterfront history, I’d be interested to hear – you can contact me via the DBCYA Club Manager*.

**The Born Again Sailor**by Anon

I’d been pottering around the deck all morning, “Bristol Fashion” being my yardstick when it comes to boats, and in the early afternoon my attention was drawn towards a new arrival coming through the lock gate and into the marina.

I was moored in what was Darwin’s first marina, affectionately known to the locals as the ‘Duck Pond’. Darwin City had been wiped out by Cyclone Tracy in 1974, and it wasn’t until the late 80s, after the city had been pretty much rebuilt, that a facility to service its fishing fleet was realised. The Duck Pond has been a huge asset to the city ever since and it is something of an engineering masterpiece given Darwin’s 8 metre tides and the mangrove shoreline on which this marina was built. Access had to be through a lock and the system has not been without some engineering problems but, by and large, it is a wonderful facility for Darwin’s fishing industry, and particularly the prawn fishing fleet.

The new arrival must have had some sort of engine trouble, for he was towed to his berth opposite me by the harbour master’s workboat. Despite his weathered look, he seemed quite cheerful, perhaps relieved to be finally arriving safely in port. As is the neighbourly thing to do in the Duck Pond, I dropped what I was doing and assisted in securing his lines to the dock. The berths there are quite large for the usual visiting cruising yachts, more suited to the large steel trawlers that frequent them.

With his lines secured and his boat stern to, he joined me on the dock and we began to chat. After introductions the usual yachtie banter ensued - recent ports, next ports, the weather, et cetera. His yacht looked as weathered as he did. His sunburnt face and windswept hair belied a youthful face prematurely creased by salt and sleeplessness. His recent voyage to Darwin, up the west coast and across “the Top”, had been something of a saga. He was a novice sailor and I can still remember some of my early voyages, some sagas amongst them, but they paled in comparison to the new chap’s voyage from Geraldton.

His name was Peter and he was quick to point out that he was a born-again Christian. A year earlier, having always wanted to sail but never having had an opportunity, he joined a church and had come to believe in the power of prayer. He began to pray for a yacht. I’m not sure whether prayers are usually private but in this instance his were overheard by a retired yachtie who happened to have an old boat surplus to requirements. And that is when I looked over and made a more comprehensive inspection of “ANGEL”.

She was an old Morris Griffith design. A “Sea Witch” I suspected, but one that had been severely modified at some point in her history by someone whose knowledge of boats I doubted. A very ugly aft cabin had been added, her foredecks modified and now, her centre cockpit had been shortened. Peeling paint, her main sail untidily furled along the boom, a hanked-on headsail in a heap on the foredeck, broken safety lines between bent staunchions and scattered ropes about her deck hinted of a novice’s harrowing voyage. I know a boat can look a bit messy after a voyage but Angel looked ravaged. He told me that they’d had to pray a lot. The weather had caused the crew substantial misery but somehow, their prayers were answered in the form of the Royal Australian Navy, who just happened upon them some 30 miles out and ultimately towed them into port. Their motor had broken down and for four days on end they had almost managed to sail into Darwin before the outgoing tide swept them away again.

That initial conversation with Peter was quite remarkable when I thought about it later. It had only lasted 15 or 20 minutes, but what an amazing amount of information he had imparted. After Angel had virtually fallen from the skies and while he was in the process of preparing her for a long sea voyage, he had continued to pray, the new prayer being for a wife. He had been wanting to marry, but not just anybody; his wife had to be a virgin. As I pondered his matrimonial chances with the field so diminished, amazingly, as if on cue, a head popped up from the hatch in the aft cabin and low and behold, there was Mary. They had met within their church group and I figured that the courtship could not have been lengthy, since all this had taken place, including the rebuilding of their yacht and their 3000 mile voyage to Darwin, in just on a year.

He continued on in something of an evangelical vein. I learned that he always gave ten percent of anything he earned to the church. It was about that time that I realised I’d left the lid off my tin of varnish. I think I cut him short a bit when I said quickly “I gotta go”.

He and I met as neighbours over the next few weeks while I prepared my boat for my next cruise and then set off. A year or so went by, I returned to my home port and as coincidence would have it, I was visiting a boat yard a few miles out of Darwin when I ran into Peter again.

He was working on another boat with which, coincidently, I was quite familiar. She was a 45 foot Bruce Roberts designed steel chined ketch that had been built by a boss of mine back in the early 70s, in Perth, 2000 miles away. After building and luxuriously fitting out what he named the “Jabiru”, my old boss had soon tired of sailing and had sold her. I was surprised to see her arrive in Darwin a decade later and for most of the last 15 or so years, she had suffered a multitude of owners, none of whom knew how to redeem her rusting hull, and for most of those years, she had lain on her beam ends, deteriorating in that same boat yard. Peter had discovered her and decided to resurrect her. He was particularly interested in the history that I could impart of his new yacht. When I mentioned her original name was “JABIRU”, he informed me that he had renamed her “ANGEL II”.

From the outset I was a tad sceptical of their chances of restoring this forgotten hulk. Her steel plates around the chines were severely rusted, her teak deck had delaminated from the steel underneath. It is never a good idea to laminate steel with teak in the Tropics. Her once elegant bright work had not been maintained in all the time she had been there and I was saddened to see a boat that I had known to be so beautifully appointed, so deteriorated to the point where I felt no amount of remediation would return her to sea worthiness. In short, I thought he was ‘flogging a dead horse’, but I didn’t say that of course.

My born-again friend had taken to her with a real enthusiasm. I didn’t go below deck but the hull, decks and rigging all needed substantial repair and replating and the costs involved to restore her to a seagoing condition were, in my opinion, more than the vessel would be worth. He wasn’t deterred though and I left him, shaking my head at the futility of his project. I was an experienced sailor and boat builder. As I speculated over the costs of the rebuild, I wondered at the quality of his work. Having known her predecessor and hence, being familiar with Peter’s standards of “sea worthiness”, I worried over just how seaworthy ANGEL II might be when he’d finished. The Royal Australian Navy would not be happy if he was to require their services again.

Each year around August Darwin hosts a yacht race, the Darwin to Ambon Yacht Classic (organised by Dinah Beach Cruising Yacht Association and now called the Spice Islands Darwin Ambon Yacht Race). Ambon is a provincial capital in Eastern Indonesia, about 600 miles almost due north of Darwin. The “Darwin to Ambon”, noted for its popularity with cruising sailors as well as the racing fraternity, can attract quite large fleets. For many years, entering the race provided a streamlined way for international yachts wanting to cruise Indonesia as a stepping-stone to other Asian cruising grounds. The race entry fee included the Indonesian Cruising Permit (CAIT) demanded of yachts entering Indonesian waters. This permit could be difficult to obtain sometimes by individual sailors but race organisers simplified the process.

Indicative of it’s popularity, the 1995 race boasted over a hundred and twenty starters, largely Darwin yachts with a smattering of international race yachts that happened to be in the area. They were not quite of the ‘Sydney-Hobart’ ilk with canter-levering keels or sophisticated Kevlar sails, but at times some quite fancy racing yachts did compete.

Around about this time, the organisers would have been quite chuffed to receive an entry application from a visiting American yacht, curiously named “ACT IV”. Her owner it was rumoured had made his pile from theatre investment in the States, hence the unusual name. This boat was not a maxi racing hull, though she was of a similar dimension, for her fit out above and presumably below decks was too heavy for her to be competitive in this class. She was in fact a very comfortable super classic world cruising yacht who happened to be in the area on a global circumnavigation.

At 70 feet, her sleek GRP hull, navy blue in colour, oozed character and opulence. Her flush teak decks which boasted a multitude of hatches and stylish dorades and fittings, surrounded her single mast that reached for the sky, over 120 feet away. The antennae that crowded this massive spar were state of the art with such variety that even I had no idea exactly what each was responsible for. Her American owners joined her whenever they could but in their absence a highly trained and experienced professional crew would deliver her to wherever she was required. No doubt their duties would include all the maintenance and a polish ‘Bristol Fashion’ demands for she presented as a very well preserved and maintained vessel.

Her arrival in Darwin was just such a voyage, her owners being absent, and her crew timing their arrival so as to enable the scheduling of some serious maintenance work. Not so serious that she would be required to be slipped. Although they had the facilities at Darwin Shipbuilding Industries to haul her out, she spent the duration of her pre-race preparations alongside D.S.I’s. wharf where she was moored to a convenient pontoon. The wharf there is adjacent to Darwin’s public fisherman’s wharf and in fact, shares the same facility in an “L” shaped configuration, just a short distance to the Duck Pond. There were many admiring viewers from the public fishing wharf, able to look down on this magnificent vessel when Darwin’s 8m tides were low.

I am unsure of the nature of all the work that ACT IV required, but included on the list was some maintenance involving her propellers. It’s interesting to note that this vessel was twin screwed. For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with this term, it means that she had two engines and two shafts with propellers. I’m not sure what maintenance these propellers required. It may have been simply that they needed polishing, or perhaps re-pitching or maybe even to be treated with a special formulation to inhibit marine growth. Whatever the reasons, they had to be removed to a workshop and for this to be done whilst the vessel was still afloat, a diving team would be required to remove them.

Whether they employed a professional dive company or whether the crew themselves were sufficiently skilled in this type of underwater work, I am unsure. However, the propellers were duly removed, dispatched to a workshop and the work completed. When they were returned, the divers reattached them to their shafts.

Let me digress here a little for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with ships’ propulsion systems. There are various methods to propel a power-driven vessel, the most conventional being by propellers which come in all sorts of sizes and configurations, depending on the nature of the vessel to which they are fitted. However, within all these varying configurations, all propellers are either right hand or left hand drives; that is to say, in the process of driving the vessel forward, the direction of their rotation, either clockwise or anticlockwise, viewed from astern, is essential to their performance and capabilities. A right hand propeller rotating clockwise will move the vessel forward, and will alternatively drive the vessel astern when it rotates anti-clockwise. A left-handed propeller performs in the opposite direction of rotation.

However, such rotation has a tendency to affect the steering performance of the boat. A right-handed propeller, as it turns clockwise to drive ahead, tends to pull the stern of the vessel to starboard or to the right hand side. Such tendency in turn tends to steer the vessel to port, the left hand side of the vessel. Such tendencies generally require an alert helmsman who is required to constantly adjust his rudder to counter this effect. Alternatively, a left-hand propeller will tend to steer a vessel’s course to starboard. “Transverse Thrust” is the name given to this tendency.

There are various ways to counter the problem of Transverse Thrust so that a vessel steers straight. The yacht designer L. Francis Herreschof, way back in the 1930s, incorporated an off-centre propeller in some of his designs, effectively solving this problem. He designed the Herreschof 28 with its propeller shaft exiting from the starboard quarter at 23 degrees off centre to counter the transverse thrust of the right hand propeller that he specified to be fitted. Another system that negates the steering problems of Transverse Thrust is the installation of two motors with two separate propellers, each of which rotate in an opposite direction or counter rotate. It is the transmission system attached to an engine that dictates the direction of shaft rotation so that in a vessel which is twin screw, invariably the starboard motor has a left-handed prop and the port motor is right-handed.

The engineer aboard ACT IV no doubt would have been aware of the phenomenon of Transverse Thrust. For all marine engineers, this is a fundamental principle of marine propulsion. However, somewhere in the chain of command between engineer, skipper or divers, there was a breakdown in communication, the legacy of which resulted in the propellers being switched from their correct propeller shafts. When the propellers were refitted, the original starboard propeller was fitted to the port shaft and the port propeller ended up on the starboard side.

To a layman, this mistake doesn’t seem all that monumental but in reality this is an accident waiting to happen, particularly with an inexperienced helmsman. Essentially, what this means is that when the helmsman engages his engines either ahead or astern, the opposite response occurs. Rather like in a car. In such a situation, if the driver is not aware of this anomaly in his transmission, when he goes to reverse, say out of a parking lot, it would be quite a shock as he peers behind while his car moves forward. Of course, in a vehicle, the moment it starts to move, there are brakes that can be applied to prevent an accident. Aboard a boat, there is no such option except to change direction, either forward or astern to prevent a collision.

The Darwin-Ambon Yacht Race was scheduled, as usual, to be started at 10 o’clock on a Saturday morning. It was a big deal in Darwin back then. Half the citizens came out to watch. The Royal Australian Navy provided one of its ships whose gun, when fired, marked the beginning of the race. Usually, there was quite a fleet of spectator craft to bid ‘Bon Voyage” to the competing boats and thousands line the nearby cliffs and beaches with the best vantagepoints.

The day dawns early for the crews with last minute stores to take aboard, farewells to family and friends, and a popular venue for the crowds to view all this action before the race starts is Fisherman’s Wharf, from which several of the competitors depart. There’s an air of excitement amongst the crowd as they view the feverish last-minute preparations. Yachts and fishing boats are berthed four and five deep along the 200m of Fisherman’s wharf, the fishermen being quite generous with their facility on this occasion. There would have been a lot of attention too directed at the very smart looking ACT IV, just over at Darwin Shipbuilding wharf. She was very conspicuous, being the largest vessel in the fleet by far, and her crew, all suitably attired in their matching ACT IV T-shirts, colour-coordinated with their ship. It’s an exciting time for everyone, crews and spectators in the lead up to such a classic.

Also lining the wharf that morning in their newly spruced up yacht, as coincidence would have it, were our old born-again friends, Peter and Mary. They had spent the best part of the year restoring their new boat and despite her previous desperate condition ANGEL II was looking quite smart with the new paint work covering what had been a very rusty hull and deck. The spars of her ketch rig had been newly painted too, her rigging repaired or replaced and overall she didn’t look out of place amongst the fleet that surrounded her. No one would have recognised the old JABIRU. It was evident that once again, their prayers had been answered.

They weren’t there to compete in the race though. They just happened to be there, preparing for their next evangelical voyage. Even so they would have been enjoying the excitement and the public interest in the fleet. They had been there for several days now as they finalised their preparations and to be joined by the race fleet and the admiring public would have been a pleasant change in their routine. Since they had been there so early, they had the pick of the berthing arrangements, and as they were gradually joined by an ever-increasing racing fleet, they had moved the ANGEL to be the closest boat in shore, the first boat in fact at the apex where Fisherman’s Wharf joins Darwin Shipbuilding’s Wharf.

Just after 0800 hours, Peter had left his boat and climbed a ladder to join the throng of spectators that mingled on the wharf deck, 8m above. The tide was making but now, two hours before the start, it was still quite low. A short distance away, almost dead abeam on ANGEL’s starboard, there was feverish activity aboard ACT IV. Peter had been admiring that boat ever since his arrival. The American owner had recently flown in and was looking forward to the race. His crew was looking busy particularly now since “the Boss” was aboard. No doubt, he would have discussed with the skipper and engineer what works had been carried out in preparation for the voyage. He may have been aware that the propellers had been serviced but in the frenzy and excitement of all the preparations, no doubt his attention would have been elsewhere. His American guests had all arrived which would have distracted him somewhat but it’s quite remarkable that at this late stage, no sea trials had been undertaken to ascertain the performance and/or improvement of all the maintenance works that had been carried out. Certainly, no one had bothered to check whether the propellers showed any improvement.

I had been down to Fisherman’s Wharf several times since ACT IV had arrived and also gazed admiringly down at her well-appointed deck and rig. I’d been down there earlier that morning too, as an inquisitive and interested sailor, envious not to be participating in the race. As an ex-ferry-boat skipper and being familiar with her position with her starboard to the pontoon at the wharf, I envisaged the process of her deberthing. She was hemmed in somewhat in that corner with a large trawler directly astern and the smaller ANGEL II about 30 feet ahead, but given her propulsion system with twin screws particularly and possibly a bow thruster, I didn’t consider the manoeuvre all that difficult. Had I been the one at the controls I might have given her some slow ahead on the port motor, touching the starboard motor slow astern occasionally. If she had a bow thruster as I presumed, it’s possible then to move such a ship sideways if the helmsman knows his business. Ideally, I would have been inclined to get her stern off, clear of the trawler behind before putting both engines astern and reversing out. In the absence of a thruster, this could be done using a forward springer. This, I know, didn’t happen because I heard later that all lines had been let go together.

It’s difficult to know exactly what did happen in the ensuing mellee. Certainly, the American owner had decided that he would deberth her himself and had asked his professional skipper to stand aside. It may have been him who called for all lines to be let go and then perhaps, at that stage, he engaged the starboard motor slow astern to kick the stern out to port. Now, given the faulty transmission, ACT IV would have moved slowly ahead!!......... Perhaps the owner had heard of Darwin’s notorious tides and currents. It’s possible that he mistook this forward motion as current-related. To counter this, it’s not unreasonable to think that he would have increased his revolutions astern on the starboard motor. If he then mistakenly believed that it was a strong current that was accelerating ACT IV forward towards the luckless ANGEL, it’s easy then to understand why he would thrust both motors full astern. It’s somewhere between possible and probable that panic had set in at this stage. What we do know is that ACT IV pounced forward like the thoroughbred she was, and poor ANGEL II with her unprotected flank took the full thrust of 40 tonnes and 500 horses. She didn’t have a chance.

Whatever the mechanics or the actions of the helmsman, the result was disastrous, and almost cost lives. Accelerating forward under full power, in a moment ACT IV had rammed the ANGEL II dead amidships on her starboard beam. The impact catapulted the ANGEL into two pylons, one forward, one aft on her port side. She then heeled heavily to port where both her masts collided with wharf decking above. This impact caused all shrouds on her port side to snap. Now, without that support, both main and mizzen masts collapsed together on to the foredeck of ACT IV, narrowly missing members of the foredeck crew who demonstrated amazing agility by jumping into the water to avoid being crushed either by spars or rigging wires.

Almost simultaneously, Mary, who at the time was on Angel’s aft deck hanging out the washing, also decided to jump ship. As Angels deck heeled suddenly to port, then to starboard, she leapt for her life over the starboard quarter rail into the water. It’s interesting to note at this stage too, that more of Peter and Mary’s prayers had been answered, in that Mary was quite obviously about 6 months pregnant. “CONGRATULATIONS Peter and Mary”. Hallelujah!

All the major players, from the owner, his skipper and engineer, Peter and Mary, to the crew of ACT IV and the Dockside workers; everyone was completely stunned. The crowd too, as the ripple effect on the crowded wharf above moved from one end to the other. Some had heard the crash and as they turned their heads, the sight of the two masts, firstly swaying to port and then crashing down to starboard, sent them all scurrying to the wharf edge to peer down aghast as they witnessed the carnage. Heads were bobbing in the water and one in particular, Mary, was particularly apparent because of her shrieking.

Angel II was still afloat but lay listed to starboard, the weight of her spars and rigging sagging her that way, though they were partially supported by the raised foredeck of ACT IV. Her triatic stay, had caught on the larger boat’s furled headsail. The scene looked rather like 2 boats in the midst of some shocking sex act. Other heads bobbing in the water, the foredeck crew who had jumped for their lives, though shocked were slowly making their way back to their pontoon. Mary was furthest from the pontoon and so opted to swim to the closer steep ladders that Fisherman’s Wharf provides for boat crews. These ladders can sometimes be submerged up to 8m below the wharf deck given Darwin‘s extreme tides, with the lower rungs often encrusted by a sharp oyster rock and marine crustaceans which makes access particularly hazardous. It is not uncommon for the unwary user, when negotiating these ladders at low tide, to be seriously lacerated and abraised. Mary emerged eventually, sobbing and sopping, her long blond hair bedraggled, her wet clothes clinging to her pregnant body and her bare feet, legs, arms and hands severely bloodied and lacerated by the sharp oyster rock.

Peter was there to meet her. He had been praying for several minutes since the drama began that his wife and unborn child would be safe. He had only been metres away when the gasps from the crowd, the shouting from the crews below and the crunching explosion as his beloved ANGEL II was rammed alerted him to the unfolding drama. The sight of his mast tops above the heads of the wharf crowd, violently crashing, firstly against the wharf deck and then disappearing from sight the other way, jerked the sense of fear of impending disaster as his mind raced to the welfare of his beloved. So marked the beginning of yet another prayer as he violently separated a way through the crowd to the wharf edge. His dismay was palpable as he witnessed the carnage below.

Words can’t describe his relief on seeing and hearing Mary’s shrieks as she floundered in the water. He raced along the wharf edge, violently parting a passage through the crowd towards the head of the service ladder, all the time shouting encouragement, urging her to swim and assuring her that he was coming to help. They both arrived at the ladder together, he above and she floundering in the shaded gloom beneath the wharf, feeling for a solid rung on the submerged part of the ladder. She was still shrieking, perhaps from the trauma or maybe the prospect of negotiating the sharp oyster rock, when she finally found a foot hold and began that arduous assent. Shrieks became sobs and intermingled with his continued encouragement. There was only room for one on that stairway, so despite the compulsion to race down and assist, he was forced to wait and watch as she slowly ascended. It seemed like an eternity before she finally emerged from the darkened under wharf, a hell that she had never known before and into the sunlight and his arms and the cheering of the crowd. She had been delivered. Hallelujah!

It’s difficult to know whether they were pleased or not with their situation. It’s always that way in events of accident. Should one be pleased that they have survived or pissed off that they suffered it in the first place. I think generally, people are relieved that they’ve survived what could have been a life-threatening situation but any jubilation is soon replaced by “Why Me”. As they looked down upon their dream, wallowing in the shadows of the wharf, their thoughts most certainly turned to the despair of not knowing what comes next.

As they clung to one another in the midst of that crowd, they would have been unaware of events nearby. The ACT IV, her motors now shut down, had been manhandled back to her pontoon by crew and dock workers. The spars and rigging of the hapless ANGEL, once draped over Act IV’s handsome foredeck, had been untangled and dropped and now hung from ANGEL’s starboard rail while the owner, together with his skipper and engineer, once assured that all involved were present and accounted for, began the process of analysis of what had happened. The engineer would have known from the start and had he been near the wheel, rather than just the owner, he might have warned him in time to avert the disaster. It’s probable though, that he was elsewhere, likewise, the skipper who may or may not have understood the cause of the problem. Whether any of them, at that early stage, realised the error, it might have been an interesting conversation. I am unaware of whether voices were raised or that there were any repercussions or admonishments, but it’s interesting to note the presence of mind of the owner. Despite the chaos and drama, he is still focused, determined to compete in the race, the start of which is becoming more urgent as the minutes tick by.

Indicative of this presence of mind, the owner arms himself with the tool for all occasions, and with his cheque book in hand, proceeds to join the throng mingled above. It’s a fair climb and then, because of a perimeter fence, a long walk around, through the privacy of the Darwin Shipbuilding yards, then down a long side street to meet the crowd at the head of the fishing wharf. No doubt he used the intervening moments to compose a response to the owners of the boat that his has just destroyed. His arrival at the edge of the crowd is immediately realised, his long white flannels, the double-breasted gold buttoned blazer and the captains peaked cap are conspicuous amongst the T-shirts, shorts and thongs favoured by Darwinites. He immediately assumes an authoritative air but careful of the protocols such moments demand. Minutes are ticking by to the explosion of the Royal Australian Navy’s start gun. He doesn’t want to provoke a lynching party here.

He is suitably concerned for Mary’s welfare as he overlooks the carnage his boat has caused. No doubt this brief inspection allows him time to calculate a monetary value to that damage. He is in the desperate position of on the one hand, wanting to get the hell out of there and go chase the starter’s gun, but on the other hand, he realises the obligation of being suitably sympathetic and humble and apologetic to these poor people. He explains his situation to Peter and Mary, perhaps tries to explain the whys and the wherefores of the accident and he tries to convey the urgency of the moment. After several minutes of apologetic and sympathetic rhetoric, he announces that although he is unaware of the value of the damage he has caused, he is prepared to write a cheque for US $100,000 that despite his haste to evaluate, feels confident should be more than enough to cover the cost of repair or replacement of the ANGEL II and help cover the cost of their anguish and despair, as if such estimate is easy to quantify.

Well!......What to do?....... Peter and Mary are dumbstruck, not to mention the crowd that were in hearing distance of the American’s offer. If they weren’t in shock before the American arrived, they certainly are now as they look questioningly at one another! As the offer is repeated progressively, from those at the front that overheard it, to those at the back of the crowd, hushed whispering can be heard and lots of SHHHHH! SHHHHSHUSHHH! as everyone waits to know whether the offer is accepted.

For a long moment, Peter and Mary are both dazed and amazed as they whisper in consultation, each aware that this is a one-off offer. No doubt their whispers include a prayer for guidance from Him. I know what I would have done in the circumstance but then again, I had insider knowledge. I had known the ANGEL II since her inception. I had seen her many times over the years. I had seen her rusted and destitute. I knew her previous owner and how desperate he was to sell her and I had a rough idea of the money she could have been bought for. I’d seen, on a couple of occasions the work of her restoration. In all, her value could not have amounted to more than AUD$5000 or $6000. The prospect that her replacement value could be so estimated at what must be at least twenty times that on the current exchange rate was nothing more than astounding. Even the crowd around them had somehow evaluated their loss, and it was evident that the consensus feeling was that this was indeed a very generous offer. A never to be repeated offer that surely must be a Divine Intervention.

Eventually, Peter and Mary emerged from their huddle and Peter announced that he would accept the offer. There was applause all round. The American beamed, anxious to write the check and be off. Despite the errant transmission aboard ACT IV, he was now sure that although he’d be a little late for the start, at least he would be able to compete. In a blazing morning sun for which Darwin is famous, he asked Peter if he would turn around so that he could write the check using his back. Peter, with a huge grin, readily agreed and while he and Mary hugged, the American proceeded with this familiar ritual.

There were smiles all round. In the course of the cheque writing, there were cheers and hurrahs throughout the crowd as those at the back were appraised of the offer and its process and progress. But suddenly, the moment was shattered by a man who emerged from the perimeter of the crowd, waving what looked to be a business card above his head. As he forged his way through to the centre there was a murmur among the throng. For some time, from the perimeter of the throng, he’d been calling above the clamour for the process to be stopped. As he squeezed amongst the people, endeavouring to join the trio in the middle, there were curious looks and whispers. Everyone wanted to know who this party pooper was? What’s he on about? The American at this point, having filled out all the details and about to sign, looked up askance, reluctant to share proceedings with the newcomer. Peter too, straightened and turned to the interloper. Eventually, the newcomer staggered from the crowd to join the major players in the small clearing that had been made for them.

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” he shouted above the throng. “I am from TIO, I am from TIO” he continued. It was obvious that the American had no idea what was going on and I think he was a little piqued by his ignorance. However, it was obvious to everyone else who the newcomer was; TIO being a well known acronym in Territory households. Everyone, bar the American, knew who he represented. The American looked from Peter to Mary to the newcomer and to the crowd, the blank stare on his face asking the obvious question?

As the American looked back at the interloper, the newcomer read the question on his face without him needing to ask it. As he handed him his business card, he explained that he represented the Territory Insurance Office. He further explained that he was involved in the Claims Department of that mighty company and that as such, he would be called upon to adjudicate in any insurance claim that might arise from this incident. He further mentioned that the process that he’d interrupted, that is, the cheque writing and acceptance that the parties had agreed to was unethical and even illegal and that procedure from here should be that both parties exchange names and addresses and allow the good insurance companies involved to process the claim in the approved fashion.

There was an audible groan throughout the crowd. Both the American and Peter and Mary looked at each other, confounded and disappointed. As word filtered back to those on the fringes, some booed, while others yelled that the newcomer should “Piss Off” and let the parties get on with it. It is doubtful that the TIO man was accustomed to public speaking but he stood his ground and held his hands up high and explained to all that all insurance claims had to observe a particular protocol and that this simple writing of a check, without any consultation of experts in the field such as insurance assessors and in this case marine engineers, was not legally binding and would be called to question when the relevant insurance companies negotiated the matter. He then gave Peter another of his business cards and to assist in the process, wrote down the relevant details of both parties.

As the crowd dispersed, grumbling to one another, it was obvious that everyone was disappointed. When I heard about it later, I shook my head in disgust and disappointment for Peter. To have virtually had US$100,000 (which with exchange rates at the time was almost AUD$160,000) almost in his grasp, and then to have it whisked away would have been a huge disappointment and I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness for his sake.

The American went off and competed in the Ambon race and a couple of days later, a crane came and what remained of ANGEL II was winched to the top of the wharf, loaded onto a truck and I am unsure what became of her then. I did see her before she was lifted. She was still afloat, such is the nature of steel boats, but her crumpled hull with its starboard side so stove in had me suspecting that if her keel was not broken, then in some way, it had been bent. Whatever that scenario, I knew that she would never sail again and it’s sad to see a boat meet such an end.

A generous insurance assessor might have hazarded her worth at no more than AUD$10,000 but is there such a thing as a generous insurance assessor? I felt sad for Peter and Mary once again and wondered whether the strain and disappointment of a dream lost would see them ever sail again. Peter was there that day, come down to remove the last of their possessions and I used the opportunity to commiserate with him. I had only heard on the grapevine what had happened, so I was interested to hear from him and to gauge his reaction. He confirmed all that I’d heard and to his credit was philosophical about it all. He was pleased if only for the fact that Mary was safe and at that stage, her pregnancy seemed unaffected. He was unsure about their future but they would try and get another boat. They had little money but had applied for some insurance compensation. They themselves had not been insured, as is often the case with yachties, but a friend was helping them with their claim and as if as an after thought, he mentioned that they’d prayed a lot! I responded half jokingly that I thought that under the circumstances, The Good Lord would probably waive his 10%. He grinned but affirmed that never would he withhold a payment to The Lord. It seems the insurance company involved was American and the claim was sure to take time, since all proceedings would take place elsewhere.

We parted then and I didn’t see him again for a long time. I think he left town but interestingly, a couple of years later, when the whole affair was almost forgotten, I heard on the grapevine that the case had been settled. I was cruising then, a long way off and the details were obscure but I heard the payout had been generous. American litigation is very sensitive to pregnant women and unborn babies it would seem.

Shortly after that last meeting, I began what’s become a serious cruise. I say serious because I’m still at it, and it’s been some time now since that episode in my life. The years have rolled on and from time to time, I still wondered what became of Peter and Mary, whether in fact they did get another boat. I would have been surprised if they hadn’t somehow managed to put the funds together and prayed enough for another crack at it. I’m now over 20 years into that cruise. For some, it takes time to get to where you want to go. My mother once said of my transient lifestyle, “you can spend your whole life seeking something, only to find it just down the road where you started from”. She may be right of course. She was pretty much right for most of her life but I won’t really know until I get back there and until then, I guess I’ll keep on looking, because, when I think about it, the fun is in the looking.

My cruising has taken me to many parts the world. It’s getting to the point now when it’s easier to consider what places I’ve got left to visit rather than remember those where I’ve already been. Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean, the Americas and parts of Europe. I’ve sailed most of the oceans and many of the seas. I’ve still got the South Pacific to cover but I hope to knock that off in the next few years.

I was down on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula recently. The usual faces were still there amongst the ‘cruising’ fraternity. I’d been that way many times before, the Malacca Straits being an important sea route when transiting between East Asia and the Sub-continent. I’ve got some favourite stopovers along the way and happened to be in a marina there which I had often visited before. I must’ve had something important to do there but I don’t remember what. I had been there for several days. They have a lovely bar area there which overlooks the entire marina and a good venue for sunset drinks. I’d spent the morning pottering around the decks, Bristol Fashion still being my yardstick when my attention was drawn to a new arrival entering through the marina’s breakwater. As my British mates would say, “she was a nice bit of kit”. Maybe 70 feet, ketch rigged, sleek and fast with flush teak decks, a deckhouse amidships and a good cockpit area further aft.

I had just finished a few drinks and was preparing to leave but poised a moment to watch her berth where the super yachts tie up. It looked like a family boat with three or four kids of varying age, assisting with the berthing. Eventually, I continued my way and proceeded down steps to the wharf and pontoon towards my yacht berthed way out. I had to pass the newcomer just as they were securing their lines. There were a couple of dock workers there to assist and I waited just forward of her bows while they completed the process. I didn’t mind waiting; it gave me the opportunity to admire her fine lines from up close. Her aluminium hull was true and smooth, indicative of true and accomplished craftsmen, who put her together. When they’d finished with their lines, I proceeded to walk her length, making sure to make a full appraisal as I passed. As I came abreast of her stern, I turned to check her name and home Port, usually written on a ship’s transom. It’s a habit of mine these days. It was then that I noticed the Australian flag flying from her aft flagstaff and her home Port of Geraldton. The setting sun light obliterated her name by its reflection and I had to bend and squint before I made out the lettering … A N G E L III.

WOooooooooooOOOW, I thought as the memory came flooding back. I wondered whether this could be an amazing coincidence as I stood there transfixed. As half of me was considering the coincidence option, my thought pattern focused on a figure coming down the transom steps, blue blazer, white flannel trousers and a peaked captains cap. More than 20 years had elapsed since I’d seen that face. It hadn’t changed much and it was easy to identify Peter after all that time.

I must’ve aged somewhat more so than him for there was absolutely no flicker of recognition on his beaming face. I recognised the smile but I wasn’t surprised that he didn’t recognise mine. Cruising life has its down side I’m afraid and the sun and the wind and the salt plays havoc with a man’s youthful looks. Combined with a bad attitude to maintaining appearances which for men means unkempt facial hair, I’d come to accept that even my closest friends had a hard time recognising me these days, after being away at sea for a few years.

I smiled and nodded a greeting as he stepped neatly from the transom deck and on to the pontoon. Dock. His approach was familiar but I didn’t say anything. He introduced himself as if I didn’t know and the usual yachtie banter began, last ports, next port and the weather. As I listened, wondering whether I should tweak his memory, a familiar pattern began to emerge. First was the born-again Christian admission and then the power of prayer and before long, I realised that I had allowed him to go on too long. The opportunity for revelation had passed. I could not now, remind him of who I was, nor did I want to. Though there was a moment or two when I thought I must reveal myself, the longer I left it, the more impossible it became and so I listened to his life’s story as a born-again Christian. I must say that I did take some pleasure in my anonymity but most of all, the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity about the aftermath of the ANGEL II was foremost on my mind.

It was almost like he was following a script. After the Born Again lines, mention of the power of prayers and ANGEL I was mentioned. He omitted place names as he went, sticking mainly to the facts. The “Virgin” wife was mentioned as was ANGEL II. Here he digressed to an unheard format and it seemed that ANGEL II had met with an unfortunate accident and was lost. “No fault of his” he was quick to point out and I was pleased he attributed no blame in that unfortunate accident. He’d almost lost his wife and eldest son in that process but fortunately, he’d prayed a lot and he kept emphasising the power of prayer. The Good Lord had answered his prayers often, he said, and that was why, he never swayed from giving 10% of everything he earned to the Church. Eventually, he mentioned a prayer, requesting for a new boat and ANGEL III had miraculously materialised, after he came into enough money to build her.

Though I was still curious to know details of the funds that had secured his latest boat, it was inappropriate to ask. I could plainly see that what must have been the insurance payout, had indeed, been generous and beyond all expectations, such is the American litigation industry. ANGEL III was certainly a ”nice bit of kit” and as I bid my farewells the whole family had joined us on that dock: all four children, the eldest son, in about his early 20’s I thought, and Mary, who looked quizzically at me. I thought I heard her ask her husband if they’d “met that man before”.

As I tottered off down that dock, I felt amused and smiled. Slowly shaking my head and lost in thought. LUCK or BLESSED……………………….Which was best?