

December 1990.
1028 words.

"Shanty" and the "Night Wind".
Marty Still

It's funny just how fast the wind and weather can change. Night before last, just a few hours after leaving Coffs Harbour, we were hove to in a 50 knot gale, all night.

Last night was spent a little more pleasantly beating into a 15-20 knot breeze well offshore. As the wind eased in the early morning, Shanty came to within 10 miles of the coast to try and get some advantage from the South going current and to do a bit of sight seeing.

1200 hours:

Right now we're becalmed and very busy watching the ships pass by and the Sun slowly cross to the Western sky, wondering what tonight will bring with 319 miles to go to Eden.

Late in the afternoon a Northerly started wafting in, rippling the water and fluttering the sails, right up the clacker, in no time it had increased to a healthy 12 knots. I don't believe this, a tail wind, it can't last.

As evening closed in, the sched' with Penta Comstat kept and 310 miles to go to Eden, wind 15-20 knot North East. It had been a long day and the crew, (me) felt a bit weary. Normally at this time, Shanty would head for the security of deep water, away from the shipping lanes so the crew can snooze in safety but tonight this weather looked too good to miss. Current and wind with us, unreal. There's plenty of shipping North of Sydney so rug up a bit, on with the perpetual coffee pot, tuck a reef in the main, put up a poled out number 4 head sail and we're ready for anything. Hopefully it will be a sail change free night.

2100 hours:

Romping along very nicely thanks very much! Wind to 25 knots. I'm trying to work out just what to do if the wind increases and I have to take in another reef or take down the head sail. This downwind sailing is a very gray area for me so I don't have many clues, oh well, cross that bridge when I come to it. All these preventers and guys and things, what a mess.

Lots of phosphorescence in the sea tonight, breaking waves hiss and glow an eerie green as the tops break and become mobile. Our wake is a constant light source as the Aries wind vane swings from side to side, disturbing the water as it faithfully steers "Shanty" Southward. As we pick up and surf, the bow wave sends flashes of light back to the cockpit to say, "Hey, look at me go". This is really hypnotic, who needs sleep anyway.

2200 hours:

The stars are being covered by cloud, there's lightening in the distance and the air is cooler, rain coming. Cup of coffee and oilskins I think.

2300 hours:

Rain showers, plenty of thunder and lightening and a ship not too far astern on the Port quarter. What a night, a fantastic light show in the sky and one in the sea. Wow! Snap out of it Marty, do something about that ship.

"Calling the ship 10 miles off Port Stephens heading South. This is the sailing vessel Shanty, over".
"Shanty, this is the bulk carrier Oriental Knight, channel 12 please"
"Oriental Knight, Shanty. I believe I am fine on your starboard bow, about five miles, can you see me, over".
"No Shanty, put your lights on".
"They are on, can you see me on radar"?
"Negative Shanty.
"Oriental Knight, Shanty. I'll put a spot light on you".
"Shanty, this is the Keelung, I have you on radar three miles ahead, we will pass you on our starboard side. Oriental Knight is 10 miles astern of us".
(Remind me to kiss the radar reflector next time I'm up the mast).
"Thanks Keelung, have a good night, sailing vessel Shanty, out".
Good thing VHF radio.

As the night goes the showers ease, some stars are showing through the cloud. Wind 20-25 knots, direction, right up the "Khyber Pass".

0200 hours:

Getting tired now. Self steering doing a great job, haven't touched the helm all night.

Hello, what's this? Someone has loosed a volley of torpedoes at me, coming in fast. "Good on ya Marty, just wander into a submarine practice zone, why don't ya". They're coming straight at me but dive before exploding against the hull, to emerge again at the bow. These dolphin class torpedoes have come for an early morning romp with me, swimming so fast they leave a sparkling under water trace 30 feet long. There are too many to count, weaving and darting and surfing on the bow wave. I'm laying on deck up forward with an arm stretched over the side trying to touch one of my lithe, early morning visitors but they are too canny to be in that. Moving so fast their whole being is glowing, giving them a ghostly appearance, as water rushes effortlessly past their bodies. Half an hour later they dive and do not return, leaving me alone with the night and waves once again. I guess some tasty mackerel may have enticed them away from their game, perhaps the Keelung would provide more challenging entertainment, nice of you to call by anyway.

At dawn the wind has eased to 10 knots. The sea glows no more. I shiver in the cool morning air, one piece of nautical magic has passed. I am really tired now but have a warm contented feeling inside and don't want to sleep.

1000 hours:

My night wind has gone, now there's none. Drifting slowly Southward with the current past Sydney, I couldn't help wondering how the Sydney siders spent their 'last night', in a pub, watching TV, whatever it was, I would not swap it for my night on the water.

1100 hours:

Columbus America passed one mile under my stern on a mirror sea, I could clearly hear the steady throb of her engine in the stillness.

1200 hours:

Right now we're becalmed and very busy watching the ships pass by and the Sun slowly cross to the Western sky, wondering what tonight will bring with 220 miles to go to Eden.