

# Two records for open-boat sailor — now for the Pacific

## Graham Spence

THE speeding supertanker was so close that Durban yachtsman Anthony Steward literally had to fend it off with his hands — and that's just one of the numerous adventures in his epic open-boat Atlantic crossing.

It was only the fact that his tiny five-metre yacht NCS Challenger was swamped by the massive vessel's three-metre bow wave and woke him up that he is alive today.

The 28-year-old adventurer plans to be the first man to sail around the world in an open boat, and already has broken two records: the first person to sail across the stormy Atlantic in an open boat; and the longest non-stop open-boat voyage, the 2 000-nautical-mile crossing from Fernando de Noronha off Brazil to Barbados. His voyage has been dubbed by Guinness Book of Records researchers as the "Last of the Firsts" — virtually every other sea record has been broken.

And it has been an adventure all the way in what must be a nautical epic reminiscent of Sir Francis Drake and Columbus. He has already been capsized so often he has lost count.

The tanker incident happened last month five sailing days off Panama. Speaking for the first time from the Panama Canal this week, an exhausted Mr Steward described his "nightmare".

"It was pitch black and I was asleep when suddenly a wall of water crashed into the boat. I heard engines growling, and realised immediately it was a ship — and a huge one. In fact, I was surfing in the massive wake as if I was off Durban beach in a westerly. I had no spinnaker pole, so I had to shove myself off the black metal hull with my hands, otherwise I would have been sucked into the propellers. After



Anthony Steward setting off from Cape Town — a paddleski is almost as long as his boat.

Picture: Richard Crockett

that I collapsed, laughing hysterically."

Mr Steward had been asleep at the time because he had been handsteering the tiny craft non-stop for the past four days in a 60-knot gale and fast running seas.

"All I could eat was a chocolate bar and drink a coke. I was sailing under bare poles but the wind was so strong that I was surfing like a cork. Every now and again a big wave would capsize me, but the

boat has excellent righting capacity. It was scary — and exhilarating."

But even so, Mr Steward's voyage has been a saga from the word go. He had to leave before finishing building the craft otherwise he would have been

caught by the hurricane season, and did not have time to install a gimbaled stove. Consequently, the small gas primus he has is more like a "time-bomb" than a cooker, and he has been living mainly on vitamin pills and biscuits. And trouble struck soon — a week out of Cape Town he was capsized in a storm and all food was washed overboard.

"I caught a small tuna, and within a couple of hours was violently ill with food poisoning. After 24 hours of vomiting I finally gave myself an anti-nausea injection which semi-stabilised me. When I finally arrived at St Helena I had lost 12 kilograms."

From there he sailed to Ascension Island, Fernando de Noronha and finally an unscheduled stop in Barbados as he had run out of food and water. The immigration officials were hostile because of his South African passport, but he was granted a few days stay to replenish, before making off to St Martin.

There he found the complete opposite — a tremendous welcome, as there are about 2 000 South Africans living on the Dutch-owned Caribbean island.

"I was then flown by NCS Resins to New York for the finish of the BOC Alone Around the World Race, and it was great to see John Martin and Bertie Reed again. The Americans at the New York Yacht Club — one of the holy grails of yachting — were fantastic.

"The biggest surprise was when a guy from Magellan Navigation Instruments said 'you deserve one of these' and gave me a R10 000 Global Positioning System, the most advance satellite navigation there is."

This week Mr Steward will set his third record, the smallest international boat to cross the Panama Canal, and from there it will be a race to the Pacific Islands before the monsoon season.