

Shipwrecked sailor fought off sharks to survive

LONE round-the-world yachtsman, Anthony Steward, yesterday described how his yacht capsized and how he fought off sharks and survived on a desert island for nine days on just coconut milk and paw-paws.

"I really thought I was going to die," said Steward, who is attempting to become the first man to circumnavigate the globe in an open boat.

The yachtsman, who is on the remote Farquhar island group in the Seychelles, said his problems began on Monday, July 13, when a sudden strong gust of wind capsized his boat, the 5.8m-long Challenger.

Water flooded the boat through open hatches.

After battling for 30 minutes in the water, Steward managed to right the Challenger, only to discover that the mast was bent and the self-steering aids damaged.

While trying to repair the boat, he had to contend with a strong wind of between 30 and 40 knots, and continual nose-dives by the Challenger, as a result of water filling the forward buoyancy tank.

The wind blew continuously for four days as Steward battled to prevent the boat from capsizing again.

"I did 240 nautical miles in just over four days without any sail up, so strong was the wind

and sea."

On Friday, July 17, Steward spotted a small island, and managed to steer towards it.

"I realised too late that there was a reef, and was washed on to it before I could do anything.

"The boat was taking a real beating, and I just lay in the cockpit for protection, and to rest while pondering my fate. I really thought I was going to die."

The Challenger was washed over the reef into slightly calmer waters, before hitting another reef which ripped off its keel and rudder.

"I got into the water to try and push the boat off, and was suddenly surrounded by sharks ... I just had to lunge at them with the marlin spike.

"I stabbed a huge 4 m shark a few times, but they just kept on coming.

"There was absolutely nothing I could do, and the boat was not offering much protection, so I decided to make for the island which was 700m away.

"That's the longest swim/walk/stagger I have ever had to endure. The sharks kept coming for me, and I kept stabbing them. They were like terriers, and followed me into really shallow water."

The Challenger was eventually washed ashore, where Steward managed to salvage some equipment.

Late on Sunday, Steward spotted a fishing boat that had sailed close to the island to seek protection from bad weather, and fired a flare.

"Luckily the fishing boat crew saw it, and sent a dinghy to rescue me."

Despite his ordeal, the yachtsman said he was determined to salvage the hull of the Challenger, repair the boat and then resume his attempt — after marrying his fiancée on August 29 in Port Elizabeth. — Sapa.