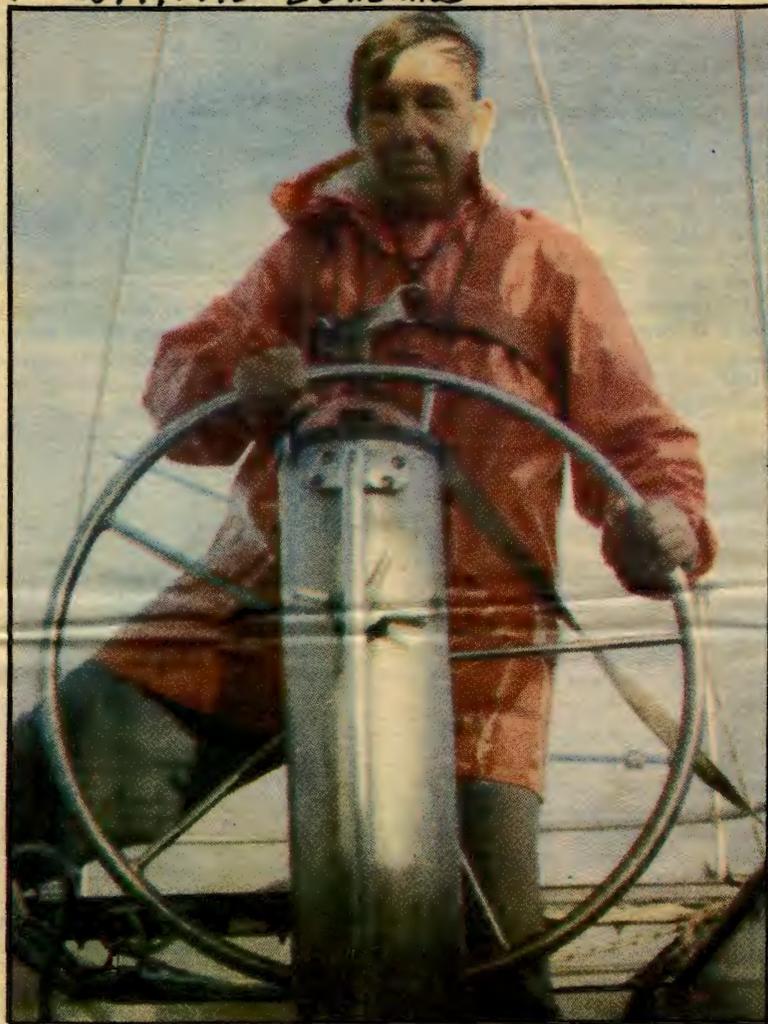


ROUGHING IT TO RIO

28/7/1993 ED HERALD



Kim van Tonder at the helm of East London yacht *Miscky*. Kim crewed on the yacht in this year's Cape-to-Rio race.

“NEVER again,” was Port Elizabeth sailor Annette (Kim) van Tonder’s firm avowal when she returned from a gruelling three months at sea in the 6 500km Cape-to-Rio yacht race. But now after two months as a landlubber, memories of the cannon’s boom starting this internationally famous race from Cape Town, are once more a thrilling thought to the 38-year-old nursing sister.

And she’s ready to take to the seas again if the offer arises.

“Life is once more on an even keel,” she laughed.

Before she left on the East London yacht *Miscky* — a 43-foot keeler ferrous cement vessel — on January 9, Kim’s (her nickname) weekends off-duty were spent at the seaside, sailing or picnicking at Schoenies with friends.

But she couldn’t face the sea straight after the event and on her first free weekend home she headed for the mountains.

While the discomfort and trials of the 32-day Atlantic crossing to Rio — they were disqualified by two days — was an adventure, the harrowing ordeal of the 58-day return trip still brings a chill to her bones.

The other crew member didn’t arrive in time for their departure from Rio and she and skipper Ken Webb sailed the vessel through seven gales,

Stormy ordeal in Atlantic nearly jibs Kim’s spirit

By JULIA SMITH

Kim being the only “hand on deck”.

She recalls some moments of the race.

Being the only woman in a crew of nine, she had at first conducted her ablutions discreetly below deck. She used a bucket of seawater in the toilet. “But it was so hot”.

All too soon she discovered the enjoyment of the freedom of life at sea.

“After a while you just took your ‘bath’ on deck and told the crew to turn the other way,” said Kim.

Spirits weren’t always high among the crew though. A week of no wind had everyone in the doldrums. “Time wasted meant we would finish the race that much later.

“Taking full advantage of the conditions, we jumped overboard. The braver ones took their dip beside the boat, but I’m not an able swimmer, so I floated behind in a harness.”

Not being able to get any privacy was an adjustment for Kim.

“I live on my own at home and had to get used to never being by myself ... having to take a nap despite the noise.

“But I was desperately lonely on the way back. There were just the two of us so we had three-hour shifts. Every moment off duty was grabbed for sleep. Often I’d just have got to sleep when I was called up to help. It was exhausting.

“I was lonely too. We barely had time to discuss the weather.

“That’s when I appreciated the bird life. I started ‘talking’ to them. And obviously used to the company of fishing boats, they responded.”

Although Kim took over the kitchen and sewing torn sails on the way back — “I literally sewed my way back home” — everyone was expected to

do everything during the race.

“Duties were done in twos. You spent two hours on watch and seven hours on the wheel. While one crew member was on the wheel, the other was on the look-out for ships and on hand to make any adjustments to the sails.”

Sailing, she said, can be quite boring after a while so mealtimes were a highlight of the day.

“Every ninth day we had to do the cooking. But to make sure the cook didn’t use too many dishes, your cleaning and

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washing chores were rostered the day before it was your turn to be chef.

“Meals were fairly inventive,” said Kim unconvincingly. “One that is especially memorable was the day we had soup.

“The cook used the salt water container for the liquid by mistake. It was ghastly. No-one could eat it.

“Then there was the guy who knew he had to supply two meals for us — lunch and supper — and became most unpopular when he tried to experiment by giving us just one meal at 3pm.

“Once the steering cable broke and the whole boat tipped. We had no sails up and as luck would have it, it just happened to be my cleaning-up day.

There was soya mince slopped all over.

Possibly an omen of what was to come on the homeward journey happened the night before they left Rio. They’d already postponed their departure several times waiting for the man who was to help them crew.

Knowing the voyage ahead would consist of meals from tins — their deep freeze was broken — they decided to treat themselves to a last meal in a restaurant.

They returned to discover the yacht had broken loose from its moorings. Two holes above the waterline were the only evidence of damage. But shortly after they set sail they discovered a bent rudder.

This made steering difficult and tough and soon their hands were sore and blistered.

Then the gales came. There was no point in trying to weather them on deck. “So we just closed the hatches, took down the sails and went below until the worst had passed.

“Once they were over we took a reading of how far off-course we’d sailed, often discovering we’d gone backwards. It was so depressing. And I was so cold.

“I wore every item of clothing I had with me just to keep warm.

“Having daily radio contact was a comfort though — just to know there were people who knew where you were.”

The first sign of life for the exhausted pair was near Cape Agulhas, seven days from their destination, East London.

“A Japanese trawler came by. Ken indicated to them he was out of cigarettes. Using a rope they sent us two cold beers, apples and oranges. Fresh produce at last — it was like Christmas.

“Back home in PE I appreciate the small things I’d taken for granted — being able to get fresh bread from the corner cafe, cooking again on equipment which stands still and fresh water on tap.

“But that’s the fun of it I suppose. Having to rough it.”