

# I won't waste my second lease of life, says Steward

Graham Spence

## NEVER SAY DIE

**T**HE saga of Ant Steward's shipwreck this week has few parallels of never-say-die survival in the annals of human heroism.

It almost equals that of Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton and the early century argonauts of the southern ocean — an epic that captured the public's imagination like none other at the time. They lived for 18 months on an iceberg in the Roaring 40s, and then sailed an open boat across 800 miles of icy, gale-swept ocean. How they survived defies logic.

Steward — in an even smaller boat — single-handedly fought off sharks after a five-day storm that would have killed most people. No doubt, old salts like Shackleton would have nodded with approval from their graves.

Steward was on the last leg of a first ever solo open-dinghy voyage around the world and had weathered fish poisoning, capsizes and almost being run down by a tanker.

The final nightmare happened on Monday July 13, when Steward was about to radio home to his fiancée, Sue Middleton, in Port Elizabeth. Ironically it was to tell her that all was well.

A squall appeared on the horizon at terrifying speed, and hit the boat. As his radio hatch was open, the five-metre craft NCS Challenger was swamped and turned turtle.

In raging seas Steward spent almost an hour overboard, stomping on the keel to get the boat upright. She eventually came up, sluggish in the extreme. The mast was bent at a "crazy" angle and he had to cut it away — seconds before he was capsized again.

For four days he steered the listless boat, taking only cat-naps. Then, "as my head started to go", he saw land.

"I knew from the chart it was Cerf Island, the southern point of the Seychelles, and it was surrounded by a reef. So I rigged a jury mast with my spinnaker pole, put up a jib and tacked south.

"The rig was not strong enough, and I was swept on to the reef. The waves were about three metres high — it was like surfing Banzai pipeline in Hawaii — and I hunkered down. Fortunately the third wave lifted me clear into the lagoon — ripping the boat's keel and rudder off — and I drifted towards shore. But I hadn't bargained on the second reef."

This time Steward's gallant vessel wedged firm on the jagged coral.

"I fended off from the rocks with my hands, but I knew it was no good. So I abandoned ship and decided to swim for shore, about 700m away."

Then the nightmare truly began. He saw "at least" five shark fins homing in on him. "Luckily I had a marlin spike that had been given to me by the Royal Navy. The biggest one — I don't know what it was but the others were black-tipped sharks — kept coming for me. It just wouldn't give up.

"I had my head underwater watching it and whenever it got too close I jabbed like a boxer at its nose, but you can't believe how slowly your hand moves underwater.

"The smaller sharks eventually backed off, but the bigger one just turned like a fighter pilot and then came back at me again and again. It was about one and a half metres long, enough to take my leg off with not too much of a problem. And it followed me until I was actually on the beach."

Shaken to the core, Steward slept on the beach "like I was dead" before discovering a dilapidated fisherman's hut which he made into a home.

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Ant Steward on board the NCS Challenger leaves American Samoa under jury rig in October last year.

"Fortunately there were some coconut trees and plenty of pawpaws to live off. When it rained on the third day, I had some water. But I never ventured far from the beach in case a ship arrived. I knew I was going to be there for some time — maybe for ever — and even started to build a jetty out to sea so that I could spear fish.

The miracle happened on day nine. A Seychelloise fishing boat that rarely visited the shark-infested area decided to work the island's outer reef. Steward saw them and fired a flare. The trawler's skipper, Frank Bibi, sent a dinghy out to fetch him.

"I almost broke down, and Frank just said, "we're here, man". I couldn't speak properly. I had looked at death so often I couldn't believe it was all over."

"I am being really well looked after. But I can tell you this: it's all still too big to grasp mentally. I am still too scared to think about what's happened. All I know is that I have been given a second lease of life, and I will never waste it."

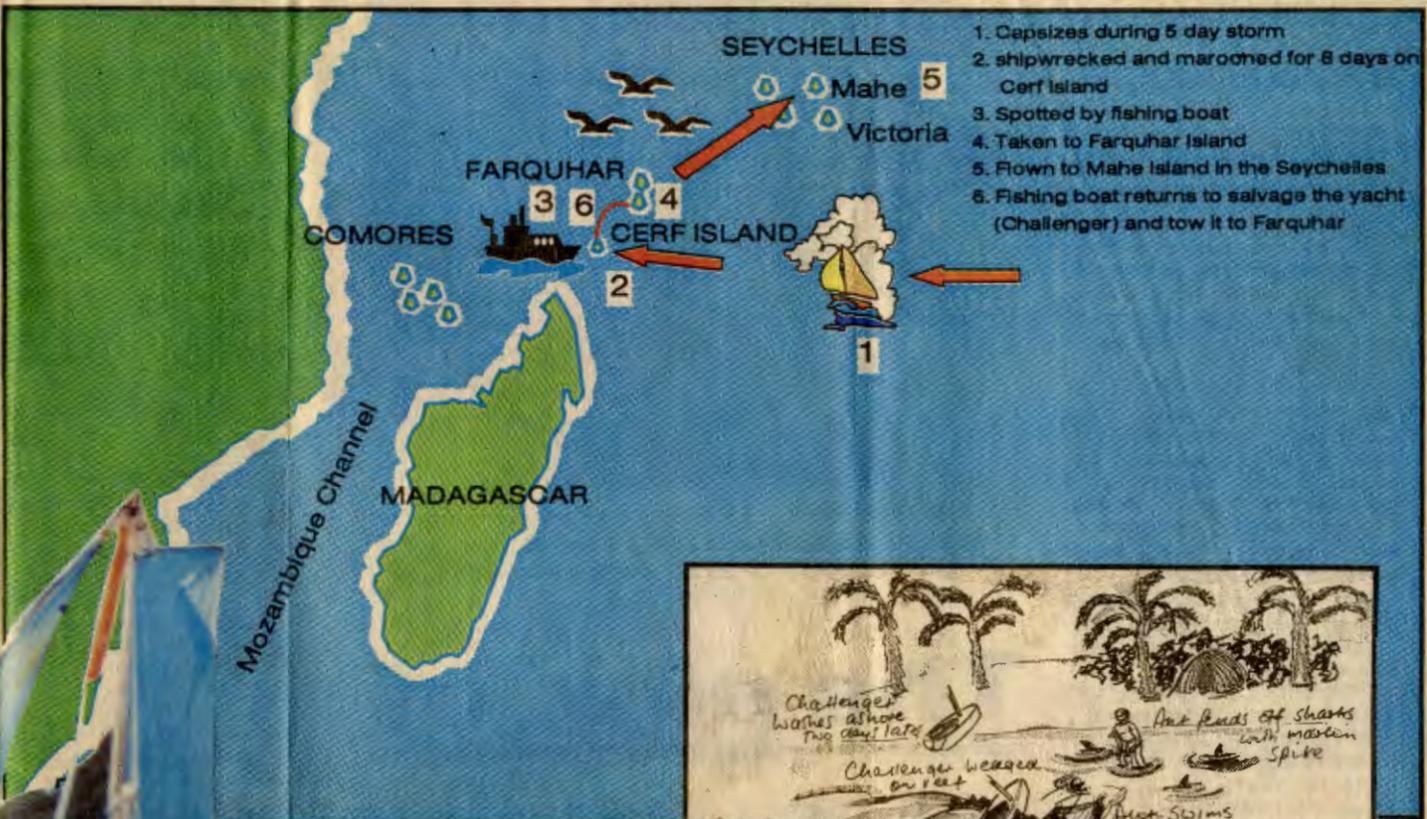
## Around-the-world dream isn't over

Graham Spence

**T**HE dream of Durban sailor Ant Steward, one of this century's last adventurers, is not over.

Steward, who was shipwrecked last month after one of the most dramatic survival epics ever, says he will complete his around-the-world solo voyage in an open dinghy — "come what may".

He will arrive back in South Africa this week, and from there he says he has three goals: to marry his girlfriend, Sue Middleton; hug his parents who have stood by him; and refurbish his "truly brave" boat to finish the trip. Then, he will sail from his Robinson Crusoe Seychelles island — the scene of his shipwreck — back to Cape Town to become



Ant Steward has a quick shower using a bucket.

the first person ever to sail alone around the world in an open dinghy.

For despite his ordeal, his boat, the six-metre NCS Challenger, has been salvaged and its hull is sound. Seychelloise fishermen, who have taken the South African adventurer to their hearts, rescued his boat from Cerf Island this week, and it will be shipped back to South Africa to be repaired. NCS marketing manager Mike Mulder says the fibreglass hull has withstood damages "even we" did not believe possible and they will foot the bill to get it shipshape. After being

wrecked twice, the boat needs a new keel, rudder, mast and rigging to be seaworthy again. The basic structure, miraculously, appears to be sound.

Even so, some may query the "purity" of Steward's voyage, with this pit stop. They say it is not the same as completing the voyage in the same boat as he set out in.

But for old salts, the Ant Steward saga is one of guts, grit and survival. Says Springbok yachtsman Richard Crocket, who has followed the voyage since its start: "Ant is a survivor and an inspiration for those of us who love the sea. When he finishes, it will be one of the last frontiers for solo yachtsmen that has been completed."