

# 'The closest you can get to Columbus'

**DALE GRANGER**

THE inevitable question asked of any pilot accustomed to making the trip to South America in less than seven hours at a cruising speed of 500 knots and a height of 10 000 metres above the ocean is why on earth he would want to spend 20 days at sea sailing the Cape-to-Rio race at seven knots.

South African Air Force major John Balladon has a simple answer: "It gives (pilots) a chance to get away from the pressure and it's nice to know that out at sea we've got about five minutes to make a decision as opposed to flying where there's no latitude for hesitation.

"Besides, it's the closest one can get to Christopher Columbus — and the sunrises and sunsets are breathtaking. You get to appreciate them on the ocean."

Balladon, a Boeing 707 pilot whose job is to refuel Cheetah fighter planes in the air, is well versed in life-and-death decisions. In 1994 he was part of a crew flying a Shackleton to England for an air show when two engines on one wing failed.

They had to make an emergency landing in the North African desert. Although they came down at night in pitch darkness, they made a smooth landing on a benign stretch of sand. "By the grace of God we all survived," says Balladon.

On January 8, just after the start of the 3 600-mile Cape-to-Rio race, the lads back at the squadron have promised Balladon they will fly the last remaining Shackleton

over his yacht, the 40-foot SANDF catamaran, IPS Sheraton. He says he will have a "lump in his throat" at the sight of the aircraft, dating back to the early 1950s and now a museum piece.

It's the same aircraft he used to fly on maritime patrols back in the days when she was also used for rescues at sea which Balladon says, "gave you an idea of what you're supposed to do and not supposed to do on the ocean".

Balladon's passion for flying is matched only by his enthusiasm for sailing. In this race he's got some unfinished business to attend to with that nasty South Atlantic high. Back in 1993, he sailed the race on City of Bloemfontein, a

Roberts 45 which laboured for 30 days on the crossing. He delivered the yacht back to South Africa with only one other crewman in an exhausting schedule of endless hours of lonely solitude and two watches on deck — and without an autopilot.

"That race (1993) was so frustrating. We sat in a hole for five days with this huge spinnaker hanging limp and no wind to fill it, averaging less than 60 miles in 24 hours, which is enough to drive anybody around the bend. After

that you say you'll never sail the race again, but one forgets the nasty bits and now, six years later, I'm back again."

This time around Balladon has a crew of seven, including the boat-builder and owner, John Cluistra, the man who started South Africa's first sailing development programme in False Bay. The programme has transformed the sport.

It's unlikely Balladon would sail without an airman, particularly as four of his crew are from the navy. He has enlisted the services of his friend, Angus Stewart, a navigator on SAAF Boeings who started sailing dinghies this year.

Most of the crew are naval officers — Thean

Potgieter, Liam McDermott, Eugenia Rinquist, Kenneth Bowers. The seventh is Cape Town businessman, Keith Kuhnert.

"It's the first time I'm doing it on a catamaran and compared with the monohull we had last time, it's like going Supersonic. She's so much faster, comfortable and stable and quite capable of 22 knots.

"We've had her at 15 knots and in the right conditions I'm sure she could do 20 knots, depending on the size of the underpants if

those sailing her.

"We're hoping to finish in about 20 or 21 days as opposed to last time where we missed the cut off and then disqualified ourselves as we stopped a commercial ship, filled up with diesel and motored to Rio. We were under pressure to meet our wives who flew over and were staying onboard."

Any multihull sailor will tell you that once you've sailed a "cat", you'll never go back to a multihull.

Balladon is one of the converted, even though he has fond memories of his own monohull, the Van der Stadt 31, Cantalibre (song of freedom) which he sailed to victory in the 1993 Double Cape race.

No one has to remind Balladon that the most important decision of the race, when to cut the corner, is made in the first few days of the contest.

"The wild part of this race is the weather, predicting the right pattern and also getting a bit lucky," Balladon says.

"Right now we're keeping an eye on the synoptic chart and monitoring the high pressure to try and predict what it might do so we can make an informed decision based on our research."

Once that decision has been taken, the boat is committed to either sailing north, south, or as the crow flies.

Then she either surfs to Rio under a blossoming spinnaker or wallows in the despair of the doldrums, all depending on where that South Atlantic high chooses to move.

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**QUESTION:** Name one of the yachts mentioned in Dale Granger's Cape Times MTN Cape to Rio yachting column today.