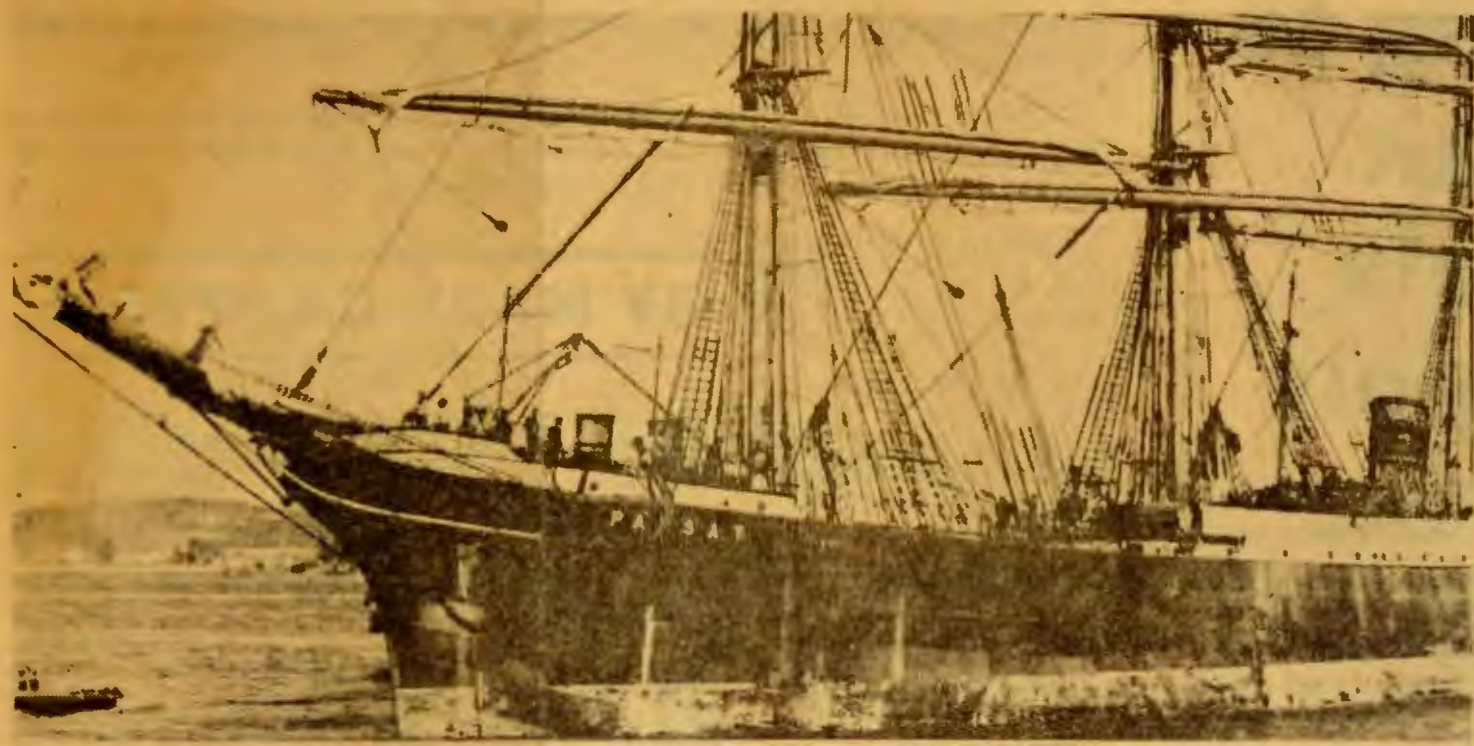


# The saga of the Passat

WAS THERE EVER a ship's captain who was not a racing man at heart? I doubt it. For as long as there have been ships — and stars for sailors to steer them by — so there have been ships' races — boat against boat, master against master, and when there was no rival to challenge or to be challenged by, then ships raced against their own previous times.

by Robin St. John



SEEN in Durban harbour after the ill-fated voyage from Kotka in 1947. This is the Passat a familiar sight in those immediate post-war

It was always thus — The tall China clippers raced half-way round the world and so keen was the rivalry between them that in the most famous race of all, that of 1866, five teaships raced home to America from China and three of them, the Taeping, the Ariel and the Serica, arrived in the Downs with only four hours separating them after a 99-day race.

And then there were the grain-ships. Passat and Pamir were both grain-ships in their day and both went down to the great Southern Sea and the Roaring Forties, round the Cape Horn and up across the Atlantic in a race against time and each other to bring their cargoes of grain from Australia to England.

Both these ships visited Durban and those who can remember back 20 years will recall with nostalgia the incongruous but exciting spectacle of these vessels with their tall masts, complex rigging and tightly-furled sails lying quietly alongside at the Point.

When the Pamir visited Durban after the war she belonged to the well-known Union Steamship Company of New Zealand and was doing a useful job of transport at a time when there was a job for every available ship.

The 2,800-ton Pamir was built in 1905 — built to compete with the steamers of the day and so she represented the highest technical development of the sailing ship.

She was very fast. On a voyage from New Zealand to London she was driven so effectively over the last 4,000 miles that she averaged seven knots. The whole voyage was accomplished in 80 days.

The Passat, also a four-masted barque, was a bigger ship — 3,137 tons and she, too, was Finnish and, if anything, faster than the Pamir as the last of the great grain races was to prove.

It is a story worth recalling. Winter was approaching and the two ships lay at anchor a mile apart at Port Victoria in Spencer Gulf, South Australia. They were loading hurriedly because they were already well behind the usual sailing time.

It was hoped that both would be ready to leave with the same wind but some of Passat's crew deserted at the last minute and the Pamir sailed four days ahead of her.

On June 1 Passat sailed in

the Gulf the wind turned against her and freshened so that the entire crew were kept busy all through the night as she tacked back and forth working her way slowly southwards.

Not an auspicious start. Clear of the Gulf at last the wind dropped but on the 16th day came a cry, "Sail to port," and there was great excitement aboard as everybody strained their eyes to confirm whether or not this was indeed the Pamir, 25 to 30 miles away.

But before they could be sure the ship disappeared in the mist.

The Passat found the Roaring Forties and strong winds and high seas kept the ship rolling with her decks constantly awash. The rigging became coated with ice and great chunks fell on the deck from the upper yards.

And so they went with mountainous seas and periodical storms to the Cape Horn — the most desolate and dangerous stretch of water in all the world.

## Coast

Then they were round it and they sailed northwards with the coast of South America somewhere on their beam. The days became warmer and the seas calmer. Now one man could handle the helm where before three had been necessary.

On July 29, after several days of calm just north of the latitude of Rio, they picked up the South-East Trades and now the sails filled and the rigging sang and a glorious wind drove them triumphantly along at six or seven knots.

The Trades gave them a good trip to the Line, which they crossed with plenty to do — chipping rust, painting masts and yards, and scraping and oiling the decks.

But where was the Pamir? But thoughts of the Pamir were quickly dismissed as they ran into the tail-end of a hurricane. For 15 hours they took in sail after sail and still they were swept 100 miles off course.

A few hundred miles from off Cape Verde Islands they found the North-West Trades and in a day they made 180 miles — but the winds only lasted five days.

They sailed on but hopes of reaching Falmouth in under 100 days dwindled. Headwinds drove them to within 700 miles

of North America before they picked up a westerly with which they fought their way back across the Atlantic.

Four hundred miles from England they again ran into trouble. Persistent easterly winds compelled the Passat to make a change of plan and head for Queenstown in Eire and on the 110th day they anchored thankfully in the lee of the Irish coast.

One hundred and ten days was far from the Passat's best time for the voyage and a long way behind the fastest passage by a sailing ship — a distinction held by the 1,468-ton Lightning which sailed the 13,880 miles between Melbourne and Liverpool in just over 64 days.

And the fastest outward passage from Britain to Australia was made by the Thermopylae in even less — 61 days, port to port, in 1868-9.

But on board the Passat spirits rose when they were told that the Pamir had not yet been sighted and so the Passat had won the last of the grain races.

## Voyage

A STORY even more worthwhile recording is the story of the Passat's 82-day voyage from the Baltic to South Africa in 1947, for this surely is one of the most dramatic episodes of the sea in recent years.

From the start the ship seemed to be dogged by disaster. While she was being manoeuvred out of the Finnish port of Kotka there was a misunderstanding between the pilot and the master of one of the two tugs towing the sailing ship and one of the tugs capsized and sank immediately. Nine of her crew were drowned.

On Christmas Eve, while the crew made merry, the third mate died a lonely drunken death on the floor of his cabin.

These omens were too much for the master and after 30 years at sea under sail he packed his ditty box and left the ship, making way for Capt. E. J. Hagestrand to command the Passat.

At the second attempt to sail the Passat ran aground and was badly holed. She was towed to Helsingfors and repairs effected and on New Year's Eve she finally left on the first stage of her voyage to South Africa.

Clear of land and racing across the North Sea with a fair wind it looked as if her troubles were over but soon a slight leak developed around the patch in her hull. Off the Scottish coast an inshore wind sprang up and she missed running aground on the barren Orkney Islands by only three miles.

When she was well into the Atlantic the wind freshened from the south-east and by January 6 had increased in velocity to nearly 75 miles an hour.

After a short lull on January 7, the wind blew again until it reached a peak velocity of 12 Beaufort — 100 miles an hour.

In short time the Passat lost 9,000ft. of sail and the leak in her patch had become serious. With water in her holds and the wind blowing at hurricane strength, the Passat rolled so badly it was impossible to keep her on course so her wheel was lashed to starboard and she hove to at the mercy of the mountainous seas.

For 15 days the ship's fate remained undecided — crew and passengers alike, women as well as men, fought the elements.

The crew concentrated on keeping the vessel on an approximate course while the others baled with anything that would hold water.

Fortunately there were no serious casualties though both the first and second officers sustained injuries when they were thrown against deck equipment.

On January 12 another vessel, the Samoa, was sighted but after a conference the master of the Passat decided to carry on unassisted for Cape Town under a spare set of sails . . . and in the event it proved a happy decision for the next 53 days were comparatively uneventful and the Passat came safely to port.