MID-ATLANTIC RUNDOWN

BRIAN KING SPOKE TO TERRY AND TONY ENGLISH WHO SURVIVED BEING RUN-DOWN BY A SHIP BUT LOST THEIR YACHT.

BRITISH couple Tony and Terry English are about to set off on their first cruise since their 34 foot steel yacht was run down in the dark by a Lithuanian freighter last year.

For Tony, coming to terms with the ordeal has taken some time. For months he had nightmares about the dark hull of the ship bearing down on them in heavy South Atlantic seas — moments before his ankle and ribs were broken. Although their yacht had had a Collision Avoidance Radar Detector(CARD), a radar reflector, tricolour mast lights, bright cockpit lights and a vigilant skipper, it didn't help. Visibility was poor, the freighter was not using its radar and the yacht was sailing downwind in winds of up to 30 knots.

Tony (71), a retired engineer who has been sailing around the South African coastline for 17 years, was born into a Suffolk coast trawler fishing family. He moved to Africa in 1955 and took up yachting in order to spend more time with his late wife June. Together, they built *Bullion*, an Alan Buchanan design, and fitted her out with teak taken from old British rail carriages. Unfortunately June died before they could undertake any major cruises. Tony made his first trip to Madagascar and the Comores in *Bullion* in 1995, and has sailed frequently up and down the coast between Maputo and various ports along the eastern seaboard of South Africa.

In January last year Tony and girlfriend Terry (51) set off from Durban to Cape Town on the start of a four-year round the world cruise. From Cape Town gale force winds helped speed them across the 1669 miles to St Helena. The trip took just 15 days. They then set sail for Ascension Island, 700 miles away. About 100 miles from St Helena disaster struck. In his own words Tony describes what happened.

"We were in a happy mood as we set sail from St Helena on the second Atlantic leg of our round-the-world cruise. Our Autohelm had just been repaired after our gale-swept crossing from Cape Town, and we were on our way again.

"It was the morning of Saturday 5 April 1997. We were heading to Ascension island. As we cleared the lee of St Helena we picked up huge following seas with 25 to 30 knot winds. It was magic. *Bullion*, our 34 foot long-keel steel yacht, felt alive again. She was loaded up for a four-year voyage and was handling those seas with ease.

Top: *Bullion* pictured before she was lost. Above: The Vagabond 47, *Radiant Spirit* replaces *Bullion* for the next cruise.

Phographs: Tony English

"That night the heavy seas and fresh winds continued. I was on watch and at about 3 am it started drizzling. Visibility was poor. I did my usual scans about every ten minutes. At about 4.30 am Terry came out of the forward cabin to speak to me — unable to sleep because of the heavy weather.

"While we were talking I heard the engine of a ship. I raced up on deck. I could hear the ship but could not see it at first then there, coming out of the mist on our port side, was a big ship on a collision course. I shouted something to Terry. The only option would have been to turn to starboard, but that would have presented our stern to the ship, which would have been a worse disaster.

"Helpless, I grabbed the stainless steel rail surrounding the cockpit and braced myself. I watched the bow of the ship racing towards us, knowing full well that we were going to die. The cockpit light lit up the scene. I thought: "This is where my skull gets smashed in."

"There was a shuddering impact as the ship's bow hit *Bullion* just ahead of the front bulkhead. I heard my ankle snap. At the same instant the tiller bar broke free from its chain. It hit me in the ribs, breaking three of them.

"I glanced forward. The front half of the yacht was submerged. I thought *Bullion* had been cut in half and Terry had gone down with it. Then *Bullion*'s stern was pushed under.

"I have no recollection of how long we

were under the ship, or if I was drowning.

"The next thing I remember was *Bullion* popping up about three-quarters of the way down the ship's hull, and there was Terry, dripping wet but desperately hanging on to the heavy-duty stainless steel frame over the companionway. I can tell you I was so happy. We had lived through a miracle.

"Our elation was short-lived. *Bullion* was taking water through gashes in the hull. We were sinking.

"We tried sending out a Mayday with our position, but it was futile. The aerials for the SSB and VHF were broken, together with the mast.

"The ship, unaware of the collision, hadn't stopped. We looked at each other in dismay. Then I realised we still had our hand-held VHF radio. Terry sent out our Mayday call. Suddenly, the ship stopped. At the same time, *Bullion*'s CARD started emitting a warning signal, indicating the ship had turned its radar on.

"A rickety rope and wooden ladder was thrown down for us. Terry jumped first. I indicated I was injured, but no help was forthcoming. How I made it, I'll never know.

"We were aboard the *MV Plutonas*, a dirty Lithuanian freighter. We were directed towards the ship's hospital, which consisted of a filthy single bed. They had no painkillers, and no elastic bandages to support my ankle. I made do by drinking three-quarters of a bottle of vodka.

Terry and Tony English are about to set off once again into the south Atlantic but this time with a radar dome installed on the mizzen mast of their Vagabond 47, *Radiant Spirit*.

"Terry then asked the captain, Nickolai Podvysotsky, to retrieve our medical supplies from *Bullion*. He must have known the yacht was going to sink, because the crew also salvaged whatever was easy to strip. The ship took *Bullion* in tow, but two days later she sank."

"As we took stock of our situation, it was frightening. The ship was heading for Matadi up the Congo River in war-torn Zaire — supposedly carrying meat and other containers. A message the next day from the British Embassy confirmed our fears — warning us not to disembark in Zaire as our safety there could not be guaranteed.

"I was then put onto a stretcher and swung over the side by the ship's crane."

"Terry managed to contact her son Carl in South Africa using *Bullion*'s call sign (*Plutonas* was black-listed), but co-ordinating a rescue was a nightmare.

"The captain was reluctant to use the SSB radio and refused to rendezvous with nearby ships. Presumably this was on instructions from his company in Lithuania as he was in constant contact by telex.

"On the third day we received messages that three ships with doctors were standing by. They could not communicate with us though because as soon as we had finished our messages Captain Nickolai would switch the set off, saying that the set was overheating.

"It was frustrating. While I was on the bridge I never once saw them use their radar. It seemed they were trying to conserve their equipment wherever possible.

"On the fifth day the captain informed us we were being transferred the next morning to an oil rig situated off the west coast of Angola. We arrived at the co-ordinates at 2 am on Friday 11 April. An oil rig supply vessel tied up on *Plutonas*'s port side. I was then put onto a stretcher, swung over the side by the ship's crane and lowered onto the supply ship.

"From the oil rig we were airlifted by helicopter to Cabinda, an enclave on the north Angola coast. From Cabinda we flew to Luanda and then to Windhoek. Finally, we arrived in Durban, where my leg was operated on. A steel plate and six screws were inserted."

After months of nightmares and several months in plaster Tony (71) has recovered and is about to embark on another voyage, to the Carribean. He purchased a Vagabond 47, *Radiant Spirit*, and his marriage to Terry (51) last November aboard the new yacht has given him a new lease on life.

The only reminder of their Atlantic tragedy is a radar which has been fitted to *Radiant Spirit* for their upcoming trip. "I insisted," explains Terry. "Big ships, particularly from the Far East, are known not to watch."

The tragedy has confirmed the UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch's (MAIB) view that the quality of watchkeeping at sea has dropped. "It is unfortunate that general standards of watchkeeping seem to relax off the shipping lanes," said MAIB chief inspector Admiral John Lang.