

Cockleshell hero pushes on to Panama Canal

Narrow escape in tanker wave

GRAHAM LIZAMORE
Weekend Argus
Reporter

ANTHONY STEWARD sits in the cockpit of the cockleshell yacht studying his nautical almanac, eye-stinging beads of sweat drip down his neck and bare chest.

The sun, like a giant metro-nome, moves across the sky as the yacht rolls rhythmically on a silent sea.

Steward moves continuously. He cannot sit too long because the boils which erupted from weeks of exposure to salt water have not healed. Sometimes he thinks he hears the sound of a ship's engines, he looks up expectantly, utters an expletive, then continues absorbing information on the celestial sign posts marking his voyage.

For five months he has lived on 5,8 m NCS Challenger, a yacht no larger than a small saloon car. The yacht is filled with foam and there is no cabin, nor anywhere the young South African can hide from the sun, the wind and the skin-scouring sea.

He lives in a space no bigger than a bath, or even a man-sized coffin...

Fine tuning

When it's dark or when he's exhausted, he squeezes into his narrow space and falls asleep seated. The slightest change in the wind or sea, or the flapping wing of a bird, wakes him.

Like the iridescent dorados in the shade of the motionless yacht, his senses have to be finely tuned to survive his hostile environment.

Sometimes on calm days the sea has fun with the brightly coloured fibreglass flotsam and the man sleeping in it. It gently and silently builds up and almost good humouredly crashes on to him.

Soaked to the skin Steward wakes, his heart pounding, then he laughs. The sea, his loving though unforgiving mistress, is simply warning him to be vigilant.

For several months he has not cooked a meal at sea. His gas burner started leaking and a fire at sea would mean death.

Steward is now in the Panamanian town of Cristobal, at the start of the Panama Canal, the great gateway between two powerful oceans — the Atlantic and the Pacific. He has crossed one. The Pacific and the Indian Ocean remain.

NCS Open Boat Challenge 1991



Since February when Steward left Cape Town on his epic 27 000-mile voyage to be the first person to sail around the world in an open boat, he has resolutely and without fuss sailed his little cockleshell almost 8 000 miles to Panama.

There is no sophisticated communications system on board, so the daily trials which would fascinate his countrymen remain with him until he reaches a port.

Often it's impossible to get through to South Africa and when he does, this large, good natured but very humble man shares his experiences.

Sometimes it's with his girlfriend Karin Olson, an American completing post doctoral geochemistry research at UCT, his parents in Durban or simply the few journalists who have followed his voyage.

Last week Steward arrived in Cristobal from St Croix Island in the Caribbean — one of the most demanding and frightening passages so far.

When the plucky yachtsman spoke to me from Cristobal on Saturday, he had not yet cleared customs and was desperately tired, exhausted, and almost incoherent with fatigue.

Steward, 27, said he enjoyed five days of perfect sailing conditions when he left St Croix.

But his hopes of an uneventful voyage were dashed when he was hit by 40 knot winds as he tried to cross the powerful Brazilian current to Panama.

For three sunless days he fought for his life about a 100 miles off the Colombian coast as the 5,8 m NCS Challenger

capsized again and again in a raging, turbulent seas.

"I stopped counting after 10 capsizes and every time the mast went under the water I just held on for dear life," he said.

"It was like being hit by a brick wall and then surfing totally out of control down a mineshaft, although I had no sails up. The seas were horrendous. It was like surfing a beachbreak."

Steward said he owed his life to a Magellan hand-held navigating system that an American firm had given him in Newport.

"There was simply no way that I could have navigated with a sextant for three days during that storm. I am very lucky to be alive."

But after three days the seas calmed and Steward fell into an exhausted sleep in his cockpit.

Although there was no wind and the seas were flat, in his deep sleep Steward did not know he was on a collision course with a fast moving super tanker.

Two-and-a-half hours later — about 30 miles from Panama — tons of water from the bow wave of the vessel swept over him.

Steward, who has lived through storms, fish poisoning and being washed overboard since he left Cape Town in February had survived another very close brush with death.

"Thank God the bow wave pushed me away or my yacht would have been smashed."

Steward desperately used his



BRUSH WITH DEATH ... Anthony Steward "shaking and laughing".

hands to fend NCS Challenger off the hull, terrified that he would be sucked into the propellers.

"Afterwards I just sat there there shaking and laughing — I couldn't believe my luck."

From then on his only difficulty was looking for wind to take him into Cristobal.

The latest word from the iron-willed yachtsman is that because NCS Challenger has no engine he is trying to arrange a "piggy-back" ride with a ship through the canal.

He will sail across the South Pacific to the Marquesas Islands, about 4 000 miles from Panama.

Steward would then have completed half the 27 000-mile voyage, said to be the "last of

the firsts" in sailing history.

But if this is not enough, the former Durban University law student said he will leave the yacht in the Marquesas and return to South Africa to enter the Crystic Beachcomber race from Mauritius to Durban in September.

He disclosed for the first time that a Durban businessman had offered to fly him back to South Africa in time to co-skipper a yacht in the race.

He would take a break for a couple of months and return to the Marquesas after the hurricane season in April.

Then he would continue what he set out to do — to become the first solo sailor to sail around the world in an open boat.