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CHASING STILLNESS

BY NEIL CARTER • CM440 – RED THREAD HULL #33

Her shoulder is into it now, and I can feel through the soles of my feet that our CM440 is perfectly balanced. The soft vibration of *Red Thread* driving through the waves moves up through my legs and to my hands on the helm, where I stand alone in the encompassing darkness of night, 5NM east of the Tasmanian coastline. We're riding the continental shelf, and my depth instruments flicker occasionally to 480 feet and then cease reading altogether. The shelf drops to more than 1,600 feet here, and if we stay our current course we'll arrive in Antarctica in 10 to 12 days. I hear the soft "babbling brook" of turbulent water moving around her skeg-hung rudder and bubbling up across her wide transom. The sound tells me we're moving at over six knots, closer to seven based on the pitch. I've missed moments like this and didn't quite realize how hungry my soul was for us to return to sea.





Dawn breaks over the rocky islands of the infamous Bass Strait.

If we step back a moment, to early December 2019, Jessie and I were madly preparing Red Thread for this trip to Tasmania, Australia's southerly island state.

She had demanded her fair share of TLC after we arrived in Melbourne in January of 2017, after crossing the Pacific. We'd slowly and surely gotten her to a place where she was ready for another, if brief, adventure. In the intervening years, we'd managed to get permanent residency; welcome a baby boy, Sawyer, into our little family; and determine unequivocally that Melbourne's Port Phillip Bay was not our bag of chips. We longed for three-dimensional landscapes where cliffs plunge into dark green sea and a labyrinth of coves beckon for us to explore them and set anchor in solitude to the bird song of dusk over a cup of whatever alcoholic beverage we had to hand. We were committed to doing absolutely everything within our power to make it to Tasmania, where we'd heard these experiences awaited.

Our maintenance log tells a harrowing story for our finances. Our

wallets quiver in fear even still. A new 96-gallon fuel tank flown from the United States; sail repairs; extensive engine service; a laundry list of new, replacement, and spare parts that would make any Tolkein fan reminisce of their first attempt in reading *The Silmarillion*, essentially a litany of events that dries your eyes and makes your head throb. And that doesn't even include the cost of importing her into Australia (see *Mainsheet Fall 2019* issue). I'll spare you, but as we're no strangers to long-distance sailing preparation, it was about what we'd expected, give or take a few boat bucks.

We'd set a semi-flexible date to depart Melbourne and had given ourselves about a week's worth of leeway to wait for a weather window to cross the infamous Bass Strait, a 135NM expanse of water that separates Australia and Tasmania. The Bass Strait stretches 270NM east to west along Tasmania's northern coast, and it is there the Pacific and Indian Oceans converge, forcing their mighty waters through the shallow strait, which only averages 200 feet in depth. We'd had some last-minute crew

changes and were setting sail with a pair of inexperienced, landlubberly, but up-for-any-adventure hands who could assist with cuddling our 10-month-old, when Jessie and I were both needed for sail configuration changes or emergencies. Sally is the genuine article: calm, never complains, happy to help out, flexible, and doesn't get riled up or scared very easily (at least not outwardly!). I can teach just about anyone to sail, but I can't make you a pleasant human in close quarters.

After neurotic weather watching, and the inevitable late night of final projects, our window arrived on December 15th. We set off just after sunrise and made a rhumb line for Port Phillip Heads some 30NM south, motoring into light headwinds and choppy seas. Upon entering the Bass Strait, we were greeted by the forecasted large rolling swell and variable light winds that required us to motor until early afternoon. All of the crew—sans Captain—were seasick, including our baby boy. There was a serious discussion of turning into Western Port and seeking refuge. However, after a feed, a nap, and fresh wind filling in 90 minutes later than

expected, the state of the crew (the little one, in particular) began to turnaround. The motion of a boat under sail, riding naturally with the conditions, is vastly superior to the rolling, yawing, and diesel drone when under power. Red Thread was in her element.

The crew recovering, I stood watch late into the night. Though it was summer, I was head-to-toe in synthetics and fleece, shrink wrapped over the top with my full foul weather gear, life jacket, and tether. The wind carried sea spume and icy cold rain that hit my exposed face laterally like a tattooist's needle. I was shivering, alone, exhausted, over caffeinated, and anxious. It was absolutely marvellous. As the night wore on, I hand-steered to make the most of the wind and to keep Red Thread safely off the lee shores of the Glennie Island Group and to safely traverse a shipping channel south of Wilson's Promontory. The stars were glittering diamonds above our mast, with the southern cross prominent and sparkling, indicating a high atmosphere jet stream. At 0330, I roused Jessie to take over. I was spent,

and sunrises at sea are her soul food. She will happily admit that she's greedy and takes them all!

We heard almost nothing about Flinders Island, one of two larger islands at either end of the Bass Strait (the other being King Island) from Melburnian sailors. It left us uncertain as to what we would discover upon arrival. Thirty-six hours after leaving Melbourne, a welcome wagon of dolphins crisscrossed our bow on the way to a mooring ball managed by Marine and Safety Tasmania in the lee of Prime Seal Island, 5NM west of Flinders Island. We had successfully transited the Bass Strait and enjoyed a very mediocre rosé to mark the occasion!

To say Flinders Island is a well-kept secret, a barely known sailor's delight, is an understatement. We visited four anchorages over seven days while we waited for our next weather window, during which we occupied ourselves with hikes the Strzeleki National Park, hiring a car to drive the island, and making a memorable stop at the Furneaux Distillery for lunch, where a

fine bottle of whisky was added to the good captain's reserves. This is a place not to be missed and the adventurously minded could easily spend a month moving around this stunning island full of charming people, if willing to watch the weather and move at Mother Nature's command. Conditions change swiftly and fiercely here. Watch the tides in Lady Barron if you go. Our dinghy had the misfortune of floating under their small pier and our trusty outboard took a dunking. Small misfortunes make the sweetness of an adventure more delicious in the retelling.

After waiting out a biblical storm that swept through the southerly ocean—a force 9-10 that stretched over 1,000NM from Antarctica to the southern coast of Tasmania—we set off for an overnight sail to Wineglass Bay. An uneventful start (other than to say it's worth being cautious traversing the shallow eastern pass from Lady Barron) turned into one of the most wonderous night sails we've had. A gentle NE breeze had us on a broad reach across Banks Strait, backing slowly over the course



Our crew ventures ashore to stretch our legs beneath the Strzeleki Peaks on Flinders Island, while *Red Thread* rests peacefully, the only boat in the Trousers Point anchorage.

of the afternoon and into the evening. Configured wing-on-wing, we continued south into the night. The forecast called for a southerly by mid-morning, so speed and course were major factors to ensure we arrived safely. This is the nature of coastal sailing...either you go far offshore to avoid land and shallow water effects on conditions, or you run-and-gun your way at every window to narrowly arrive in safe harbor before a foul change puts you in a hurt locker.

And this brings us back to where we started this sailing yarn. Throughout that night, I employed every racing tactic I learned as crew aboard a J-105 in Seattle, Washington. I spent the night perfecting every trim, harnessing every puff of breeze and leveraging every particle of knowledge I knew about Red Thread to eek each tenth of a knot out of her given the idyllic conditions. She was so well-balanced that my sleeping crew had no idea we were averaging 7 knots in 15 to 20 knots of wind. I could sense her secret whispers through my hands and feet, and I trimmed her, balanced her, and whispered back to

her all night in beautiful harmony. At two o'clock in the morning, with no moon and a light haze in the clouds that obscured most stars, a puff of breath that wasn't the wind caught my hyper-focused attention. Then a second. And a third. I looked astern to discover three lime-green torpedos alighting from behind to skate along Red Thread's starboard side toward her bow. The magic of bioluminescence just miles off Tasmania's eastern coast illuminated the dark ocean, as we rode the continental shelf, and a pod of dolphins joined our spritely ride. More joined in on the fun and began diving beneath Red Thread's bow and setting off our shallow depth alarm so frequently that, well away from any hazards, I turned it off for a short time to remove the distraction. I woke the adult crew, as only a masochist wakens a slumbering infant, and together we shivered in the cold and revelled in the moment in inspiration that only seafarers can truly know.

These moments are when the millstone of my analytical mind grinds to a halt and I finally find peace. My

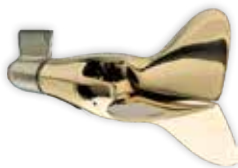


Jessie cuddles our tiny seafarer, lost in the moment and grateful to be back on the ocean.

lungs fill with the salt air until my ribs crack, and I feel a tingle in my shoulders from breathing in life. I'm not a spiritual man, but these are the moments I feel closest to whatever God is. Every fiber, every essence of my being, is alert. I am alive. I have a partner I couldn't have dreamt up alongside me for this adventure. I have a son whose soul I can fill with awe-inspiring moments like these. And I have freedom in these 44 feet of fiberglass. Truly, I am alive.



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