

PACIFIC SAILING WITH NICK LOWES

Sheelagh Lowes and Neva G Sullaway

(Flying Fish 2019/1 featured an obituary of long-term member Nick Lowes, written principally by his old friend and crewmate Martin Walford. Nick's wife Sheelagh and friend Neva Sullaway had additional tales which they wanted to tell, however, and a footnote informed readers: 'It is planned that both Neva's account of sailing with Nick, and Sheelagh's account of voyaging with him in the Pacific, will be published in Flying Fish 2019/2'.)

It seems logical to place them in chronological order, with Neva's story from 1976 followed by Sheelagh's from 1995.)

Neva's memories

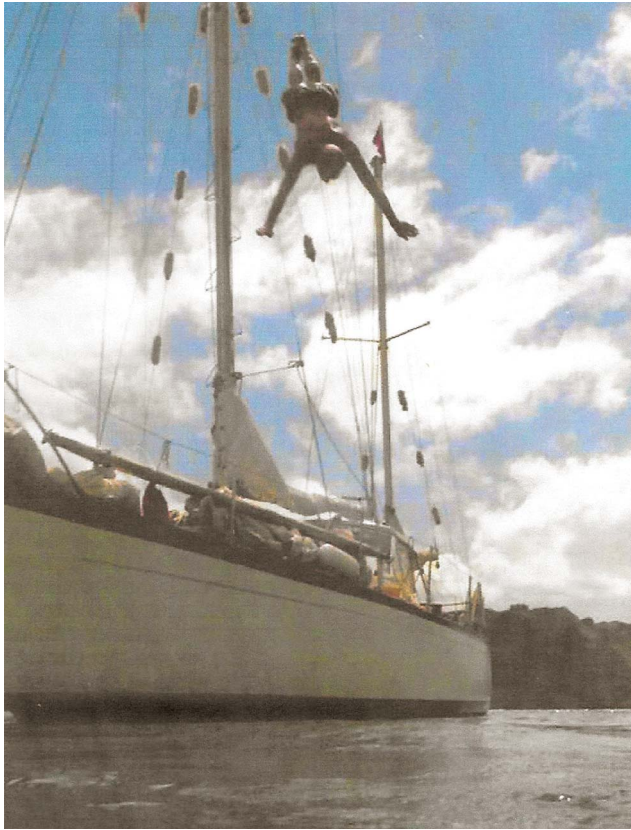
My life might have taken a totally different course if not for Nick, because in 1976 he saved me from prison in French Polynesia. A naïve Yank, I had hoped to sneak through French customs unnoticed even though I had a windsurfer, a surfboard, my dive gear and a huge backpack in tow – I had intended to live in Tahiti. Soon enough, the local *gendarmerie* caught on that I had little money and no return ticket but Nick, skipper of a Nicholson 38 called *Grockle*, spoke fluent French and, thankfully, was able to negotiate my release. I thereby became his crew, joining two Brits who had sailed with him from England.

I began my sailing apprenticeship under Nick and from him learned many skills I would come to depend on during subsequent voyages. He patiently taught me how to navigate by sextant and chronometer – I say 'patiently' because, unlike Nick, I was not quick at mathematical calculations, or content to sit for an hour or more in the heat-soaked saloon trying to make lines straight as waves slapped against our hull. But sailing through the South Pacific, the Cook and Tongan Islands and to Suva, Fiji, was a good proving ground.

Two indelible memories come to mind. First, finding Suvorov (or Suvarrow) Island, a low-lying atoll in mid-Pacific. We had been at sea for some time when Nick rose up from the companionway, drenched in sweat, and sent Andrew forward. He said simply: "Two points off the starboard bow". I was off-watch, but crawled out of my aft-cabin bunk to see what his directions meant. Sure enough, as perfectly as the clock ticked and the compass steadied our direction, the tops of a few wavy palm trees rose from the barren sea. Nick had shown me what navigational perfection looked like, and on Suvorov Island we met Tom Neale, a reclusive legend in his own time.

As we neared Fiji we sailed through the eye of a cyclone and out of the uproarious edge. It was a nerve-wracking 24 to 36 hours of silence, darkness and winds from all directions spinning the boat through 360° degrees. We held fast to our course and were eventually spat out on the other side. While fear and doubt assaulted the crew, Nick stood firm in his reassurances, firm in his calculations and firm in the strength of his boat.

The stories go on, as did our friendship through the years. We would be at opposite ends of the earth and then cross paths in Australia (in 1982, after he had completed a voyage as chief engineer aboard the *Golden Hinde*), and back in the US in 1996, where I had the great pleasure of helping arrange Nick and Sheelagh's wedding



Nick diving from Grockle's rigging in 1976. During his days at Harrow he'd been the best gymnast in the school

aboard the Maritime Museum of San Diego's 1863 barque *Star of India*. It was the perfect setting for two sailors heading off to a married life at sea.

I've written it before in a book and I will put it in writing again – aside from being a great sailor, reminiscent of the likes of Sir Francis Chichester and Bernard Moitessier (whom we had the privilege of meeting in Bora Bora), Nick was a man of great honesty and directness; a compassionate and empathetic man who never put himself above another. He was modest, intelligent and he shored up tremendous strength in a less than sturdy body. He had the

uncanny ability to be himself in all situations and to persevere. He never wavered.

My course in life changed, the winds changed, but I will never forget the skipper who saved me from a Tahitian jail and set me on a new course.

Sheelagh recalls

I first met Nick when I was 12 and he was 16 – at that time our families were very close. But then we lost contact until 1995, when he wrote to me from Sydney where he had been living for the previous 13 years. He wondered if I would like to come out to visit him and, if I was willing, sail back with him to the UK to visit family before returning to Australia.

Of course I said yes, but the fact that I had not seen him for so many years worried me, to the point of even sending a telegram saying: "Having second thoughts. Please ring me". But my brother said that if I did not go he would shoot me, so I didn't really have a choice! I had only done 'gentle' sailing with Nick on the River Dart and so was a complete novice, but at least had the advantage that I was never seasick!

Nick had purchased an Australian-built Compass 28 called *Short Time*, which needed a lot of work including restoration of the engine, which was to be our downfall in the end. This was carried out at Birkenhead Point on the Sydney harbour waterfront. While we were in Sydney we met John Maddox, then Rear Commodore Australia, who kindly took us to an OCC dinner and OCC barbecues. We have remained in touch ever since.

Work on the engine took longer than expected and we left Sydney much too late in the year for the favourable winds which we'd hoped would take us north to Queensland, from where we intended to sail direct to the French island of Wallis and be married. We eventually left Moolooba, near the Southern entrance to the Great Barrier Reef, in late May, and paid the price in the form of being pooped followed by a knockdown off Sandy Cape, a true baptism of fire for me.

After 65 days we reached Wallis Island, but our wedding was not to be as the priest needed letters from both our home parishes confirming that we had not been married before*. As we could not wait, we continued on our voyage eastwards. It was all a steep learning curve for me, but Nick was an excellent and experienced skipper having done many voyages with crew or solo. He was also a good teacher, and though I had to learn quickly it was reassuring to be in such good hands.

From Wallis Island we made a 45 day passage to Hawaii, followed by another 45 days from Honolulu to San Diego. Although the winds were light, we had only four days of sunshine during that time. The length of this leg was due to avoiding the Pacific High which, like everything else, seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Our American friends in Honolulu had forgotten to tell us that the hurricane season lasts from May to October, so we were stuck in San Diego for three months, unable to move either north or south.

During our stay in San Diego, our great friend and Nick's former crew member Neva Sullaway not only secured us a mooring at the San Diego Yacht Club, but also arranged for us to be married on board the Maritime Museum of San Diego's

* See Nick's article *Resume*, which appeared in *Flying Fish* 1997/1 and is available online at <https://oceancruisingclub.org/Flying-Fish-Archive>.



*Sheelagh and Nick aboard Short Time
in San Diego in 1996*



Nick and Sheelagh, following their wedding aboard the Star of India, with Neva and her daughter Genoa on the right

barque *Star of India*, with Nick's brother David (who happened to be on a business trip to America) as best man.

We then continued on our voyage towards England. After continuing problems with the engine – it seemed we had to find an engineer in every port! – and spending ten weeks at sea between Isla Coco and the Gulf of Panama, we gave up the unequal attempt to reach Panama from the west, although we did manage to get within ten miles of the Gulf itself. So we turned back west with the intention of sailing *Short Time* back to Australia via Tahiti, but once again things did not go according to plan.

It was early in the morning, still dark, and we were about ten miles off Suvarov in the Cook Islands when the wind suddenly dropped. We turned the 'iron horse' on, but for some reason no power was forthcoming, leaving us completely at the mercy of the strong currents. Together with the breakers these finally swept *Short Time* onto the reef. Both of us were thrown out, which was probably just as well, and made it safely ashore. The next four months were spent on Anchorage Island where Tom Neale lived, surviving on a diet of fish and coconuts!

We were eventually taken off in July when the harbour master of Rarotonga arrived aboard the *Golden Odyssey*, a large motor yacht belonging to a nephew of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. They had brought with them the caretaker and her family, who had been taken off for the hurricane season. Although we would have been happy to stay as unpaid caretakers it was not to be, so we left the same day. The crew, who were all from Glasgow, could not have been kinder to us, and at Rarotonga we were met by the Honorary Vice Consul, another Scot.

Nick is sorely missed, but he gave me the opportunity to make an epic voyage, as well as transmitting his love of sailing to me, for which I will always be grateful.

