

## How not to get off a sandbar

Ed Wheeler



Ed in 1971 and in 2103 (below)

The following episode happened in July 1971, when I was wending my way single-handed northward from Sydney towards the Great Barrier Reef in an old 26' gaff sloop which I christened *Calabar*, after the famous Lagan Canal barge. She had a stumpy little mast and no bowsprit but with her Cornish topsail set, had a reasonable sailing performance. There was no refrigeration, no self-steering of any kind and the engine was an old 2-cylinder Lister diesel with a huge flywheel. The starting procedure for this

beast was to put an egg-cup of lube oil into each cylinder, lift the compression lever and wind like hell on the handle, then drop the lever and off she went, usually. There was a battery but no means of charging it as the dynamo was defunct, so oil lamps aloft and aloft were the drill. She had a two burner gas cooker on gimbals. There was a healthy population of cockroaches. After waging half-hearted war against them, I gave up and quite enjoyed their company, although they did have a disconcerting habit of dropping onto my face from the deck beam above my bunk at night. There were no rats. I draw the line at rats. The dinghy was a horrid little 6' plywood pram, which had zero freeboard forward with one man aboard and about 3" all round with two up.

I planned to get through the sandbars and inside the Stradbroke Islands on Queensland's Gold Coast, and from there sail in smooth water all the way past Brisbane, sheltered by Moreton Island. When I arrived off the unmarked bar at Nerang Head, between The Spit and South Stradbroke Island, there were breakers ahead of me. However, a game fishing boat appeared and offered to guide me in, so I fired up the engine and followed them. As they were doing about 15 knots, I didn't see them for very long, but it did enable me to find a gap in the breakers and get inside. It was late in the evening, so I sought a



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spot to anchor. Unfortunately, I went the wrong side of a withy (in those days, channels were indicated by slim posts stuck in the ground, but with no topmarks). We took the ground at the top of the tide, so I hastily launched the horrid dinghy, laid out a kedge and hauled myself over on the peak halliard. I got off all right, anchored nearby, and next morning headed for Southport.

Now followed a public exhibition for the enjoyment and hilarity of the audience which always seems to materialise on such occasions. Just after the top of a big spring tide, I again went the wrong side of a withy and she went hard aground, slewing round broadside in the strong current.

I knew there was no chance of laying out a kedge in those conditions, so I tried heeling her with a bucket of water on the end of the boom. This did not avail, so I now carried out a manoeuvre of startling idiocy. I held the boom out with a vang and launched the dinghy, tying it off with a long painter to the shrouds. I then put the engine in gear and applied full throttle. My next move was to get into the dinghy and work my way out along the boom until I could apply my full weight to heeling the ship. The idea was that she would float and forge ahead into deep water, upon which I would swiftly re-board her and motor off triumphantly.

The initial phase of this plan worked perfectly and I grasped the end of the boom and pulled it down. At this point, it all went south. There was a bang and the dinghy disappeared from under me, leaving me hanging in the water from the boom. At the same time, the engine stopped. With great difficulty, I worked my way back along the boom and onto the deck and it became apparent what had happened: a bight of the painter had been taken under the boat by the tide and had got wrapped by the propeller, which wound it up like a winch, leaving only the stern transom of the dinghy showing, the bow transom hard up against the prop. Now I was aground with no engine and no dinghy and probably going to be badly neaped. To add to my woe, I realised that I was only a hundred yards from a pub where lots of people were having breakfast on the veranda and cheering on the free show. I went over the side with a facemask and the breadknife and somehow or other, between cutting and unwinding, freed both dinghy and propeller. Luckily a good Samaritan came along in the form of a day tripper launch which hauled me off, a sadder and a wiser man.



*Calabar, a 26' gaff sloop*