

4 Braeside Cres
SANDY BAY 7005

Ph BH 03 62 30 2250 AH 03 62 25 4269
Email mark.ballard@police.tas.gov.au
fax 6230 2810
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The Chairman,
1998 Sydney to Hobart Race Review Committee

Dear Sir

1998 Sydney to Hobart

Thank you for your letter dated 8th January seeking our views.

The enclosed questionnaire has been completed, and in addition, the attached comments have been prepared by Cmdr Henry Finnis RAN who was one of my crew. His comments are appropriate as he participated in the 1979 Fastnet race and also spent some six months on station commanding a frigate in Bass Straight waters. He has also had many months experience in command of a wide range of vessels in differing conditions and is a Yachtmaster instructor.

One point to note is that we were unable to carry a handheld VHF on the boat as we had three units "fry" their internal circuitry in Sydney because of illegal transmissions on the VHF spectrum. This problem was reported on our arrival in Sydney some 2 weeks before the race and continued right up to the race day. The problem was raised with both the Coastguard, the Navy (who supplied the handhelds) and also the Aust Communications Authority - we found it amazing that this illegal activity could not be stopped. It appears that the illegal transmissions were associated with the attacks on Iraq and the jamming was caused by "Mullah" type music and chanting being broadcast across all the VHF spectrum. It was only apparent in Sydney and disappeared some 30 miles out.

One area that particularly assisted us was that we were very conscientious in preparing a range of pre-packaged meals that could be easily heated without time being spent in the galley - we also carried a large amount of energy foods and drinks that could be easily accessed.

The attached log was completed up to the time the navigator became seasick, after which we only reported in at sked times. Being a first time competitor and despite already having a safety check in Hobart, I expected that a cursory check would have been made in Sydney of our state of readiness - would suggest that in future this should be done and the briefing should also include some comment on Bass Straight conditions.

Yours faithfully,

Mark Ballard

Comments from Cmdr Henry Finnis:-

Weather

Predicted weather at 24/12 brief included the general possibility of the formation of an East Coast Low (which eventuated) but gave little indication that the predicted frontal activity would be as severe as that experienced. It could be argued that the actual adverse weather experienced could not reasonably have been forecast at that stage. Subsequent weather updates indicated the distinct possibility of deteriorating conditions.

On the evening of 26/12 conditions experienced with the arrival of the southerly frontal system associated with the depression entering Bass Strait were relatively severe.

Conditions deteriorated quickly with the onset of thunderstorms off the NSW South Coast, followed by a strong South Westerly stream and an associated short and steep sea with increasing swell. By early morning on 27/12 moderate to rough conditions off the South NSW coast (approx 30nm off) had built and reports from yachts entering Bass Strait suggested severe conditions were building rapidly.

By midday 27/12 reports from leading yachts were indicating wind speeds exceeding 60 kts and a high sea running. By this point the skipper (Mark Ballard) had decided that, in the interests of crew safety and that of TARTAN, it would be prudent to shelter in Eden to ride out the storm. I agreed entirely with the decision, it being the seamanlike decision in the circumstances.

TARTAN entered Eden later that day, remaining there until AM 29/12. On departure Eden AM 29/12 conditions had improved dramatically, in fact there was little or no wind off the NSW South coast. The wind and sea gradually increased during the passage across Bass Strait during the period AM 29/12 to PM 30/12 and by the time TARTAN was approaching Flinders Island West South Westerly winds of up to 35 kts and seas of up to 4 mtrs were being experienced.

The crew performed well (now reduced to seven having landed one crewmember at Eden). Conditions in Southern Bass Strait while lively, were not excessive, and TARTAN performed well. By early AM 31/12 TARTAN was 38 nm off St Helens in an area of complete calm with no wind under the influence of a significant high pressure system stretching from WA to the Tasman. It was finally decided to retire AM 31/12 on the basis that there was a prospect of little or no wind for an extended period and due to the fact that TARTAN was not in any position to improve her position (last yacht in the race).

Safety

TARTAN was well equipped and there was never any doubt of crew safety. In future, consideration should be given to using personal EPIRBs as an additional safety precaution. The decision to shelter was a deliberately conservative one and should be commended in the circumstances. The ramifications of continuing

to race into abnormally severe conditions at that point became quickly evident on the morning and during the day of 27/12.

It is noteworthy, however, that more damage appears to have been sustained by yachts attempting to turn back to Eden from Bass Strait than by those who, when faced with the conditions in Bass Strait, continued South. A difficult decision at the time, which is easy to criticise in hindsight.

It seems some yachts, for whatever reason, chose to use liferafts more suited to inshore passages. Bass Strait should be considered very much offshore and experience shows that this is a potentially dangerous stretch of water which must be treated with considerable respect. Conditions in Bass Strait rapidly deteriorate with the onset of frontal activity and associated low pressure systems, and sea conditions can become extreme in a very short space of time.