

# roughing

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JUST BEFORE THE DISASTROUS 1998  
SYDNEY-TO-HOBART RACE, A GROUP  
OF SAILORS TOOK ON AN EQUALLY  
POWERFUL BASS STRAIT GALE—IN A  
REPLICA OF A TINY 18TH-CENTURY  
SLOOP. BY GABI MOCATTA.


**BERN CUTHBERTSON** has spent some 60 years at sea, a seasoned traveller of some of the roughest waters in the world. He's stood at the helm of a rolling boat for so long his knees wore out, so now he has two steel knees which, he says, work better than the original set. As we sit in his sun-filled home, perched high on a Hobart hillside, he talks about the wildest storm he encountered in his sailing life.

"It was incredible," he says. "At one point I thought we wouldn't make it, but I couldn't let on to the crew. There was the noise, the screaming of the wind; lightning and hail ... you can never, ever explain."

On this mellow autumn morning, the River Derwent is wide and calm below us, and further out, tendrils of land interlace with deepest blue sea. The scene is so peaceful, it's a million miles away from the chaos Cuthbertson is describing.

The year was 1998 but it might as well have been 1798. In a faithful reproduction of the 200-year-old sloop *Norfolk*, Cuthbertson and five crew members were sailing to Sydney to re-enact the 1798–99 voyage of Bass and Flinders that proved Tasmania an island.

Cuthbertson was no amateur at re-living history: in 1986, he sailed and rowed around Tasmania in the *Elizabeth*, an open, eight-metre long whaleboat to commemorate Tasmanian Captain James Kelly's 1815–16 circumnavigation. The next year, he re-enacted Bass's voyage from Westernport to Port Jackson. In 1997, the



Bern Cuthbertson and crew at sea on the *Norfolk*, in calmer waters.









Bern Cuthbertson, mariner.

## VOYAGE OF THE RECONSTRUCTED

**IN 1947, THOR HEYERDAHL** was looking for a way to convince his academic critics that his theories on prehistoric emigration were correct. Most of us would have turned to archaeology, cultural analysis, or screaming really loudly at conferences. Not Thor. He built a balsawood raft to a prehistoric design, named it *Kon-Tiki*, and sailed 8000 kilometres from Peru to the Philippines, proving that it could be done.

In 1969, Heyerdahl found himself in the same, er, boat, trying to prove that people could have made it long distances from the Mediterranean with pre-Columbian technology. So, using designs found in such modern texts as the Pyramids, he built a large reed boat from papyrus. He named it *Ra* and set out to sea. The first *Ra* made it 5000 kilometres from Morocco almost to Barbados before storm damage had Thor calling in the rescue crews. In 1970, *Ra II* made the complete 6100 kilometre voyage in 57 days. The granddaddy of experimental archaeology, Heyerdahl is also credited with inspiring a generation of young men to go to sea in ridiculous vessels.

In July this year, the *Islandingur*, a Viking longship, recreated Leif Erikson's crossing from Iceland to Newfoundland, North America, about 1000 years ago. The timber *Islandingur* was built as an authentic replica of a Viking ship found in a burial mound: powered by sail or oars, no cabins, 22.5 metres long, captained by one of Erikson's direct descendants. But there were a few essential differences: they carried packaged food, not livestock, and their ports of call were called celebratory visits, not raids. What in Odin's name were they thinking? —Donyale Harrison



Elizabeth bore Cuthbertson and his crew on a voyage south from Sydney to re-enact Bass's discovery of the strait.

"I was fascinated by history at school," explains Cuthbertson. "Something I particularly remember being taught was that Bass and Flinders first circumnavigated Tasmania in an eight-foot boat called *Tom Thumb*." Knowing Tasmanian waters as he did, Cuthbertson soon realised this was impossible and set out to do some research. He read about the *Norfolk* and began to think he'd like to do a reconstruction of his own.

Cuthbertson has owned 12 boats over his working life and has fished and sailed across the globe. But from the way he talks about the *Norfolk*, it's clear she occupies a special place in his affections. A "masterpiece" ... "a dream come true" is how he describes her. Built mostly of salvaged 2000-year-old Huon pine to plans for a 1770s decked longboat, the *Norfolk* is what Cuthbertson calls a "near replica".

"The original boat was of Norfolk Island pine," he recounts, "but our *Norfolk*'s 33-foot keel, 11-foot beam and her 16 ton displacement are the same as the original."

Cuthbertson commissioned boatbuilder Richard Davis who, together with volunteers who later became crew members, used original technologies and, where possible, materials throughout the construction. The boat is held together by 10,000 wooden nails; metal was used only for the rudder gudgeons and the chainplates that hold the mast in place. Oars serve in place of an engine in windless conditions. Even the charts used were those Flinders drew up on his voyage, and navigation was strictly by sextant. Creature comforts on board are few, the sole concessions to the 20th century being radio equipment, a spirit stove and a liferaft.

Although the original *Norfolk* was reportedly slow and ungainly, Cuthbertson's little gaff-rigged sloop with her curvaceous, honey-coloured bows and deep red sails performed faultlessly. "I thought it would be rough," he says, "but she sailed beyond my wildest dreams."



**A NEAR-FATAL STORM** The *Norfolk's* first ocean passage started inauspiciously. After an ignominious sandbank stranding not 24 hours out of Hobart, she ran into flat calm on Tasmania's east coast. Then there was a medical emergency when a crew member had to be evacuated, but the reduced crew continued north and into the strait.

Out in the Bass Strait, conditions deteriorated until the *Norfolk* was in the middle of a monster gale. Cuthbertson had to wonder if the *Norfolk* would stand up to it. "When I saw images of the fateful Sydney-to-Hobart race later that year, a shiver went down my spine. The conditions had been as bad, and we had been in a 10-metre wooden boat ... and out there alone."

"On the first day of the gale we got a knockdown," Cuthbertson recalls. "There was a 70 knot wind and the waves were 40 foot or more, as high as our mast. They were real breakers—like surfing waves—and they were broadside on. I had gone below for a moment when a big one hit."

The *Norfolk* was punched down sideways into the water. A third of the mast was submerged, disabling radio equipment, and sending two crew members flying overboard. Luckily, both were wearing harnesses and scrambled back on board.

"I was sitting below, looking at the charts," remembers Cuthbertson, "and was thrown right across the boat."

As the *Norfolk* tipped over, the hatches swung open and water cascaded in. "There was a mess of sleeping bags, cameras, clothes ... everything wet and water up to my knees ... It took me 10 minutes to untangle myself."

When the chaos had subsided, they hove to and settled into the wind with a close reefed mainsail. Each wave knocked the boat 10 or 12 metres sideways. "But we couldn't run with it," explains Cuthbertson. "She'd have pitchpoled: gone end over end."

For three days the *Norfolk* rode out the storm. "It was worst in the dark ... that eerie noise of the wind and the waves. It was hair-raising, but at least all of us were in one piece." But now without radio contact, back on land people started to worry. "My wife Janice had nearly 200 phonecalls over three days, but we had arranged that we would sometimes be out of contact, and so she knew not to worry unduly." There were five emergency radio beacons on board and we hadn't needed to set one off.

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CALL 13 13 44

After days of silence, a search was initiated. The *Norfolk* was in headlines across Australia, lost at sea. "Somewhere east of Australia," as Cuthbertson puts it, conditions began to improve. "We got a few glimpses of the sun as the storm died down, and were able to make the first sextant sight in four days. We could only calculate our latitude— east of Green Cape—but hadn't had a morning sight for the longitude."

That night, Cuthbertson and his crew heard a plane overhead. "I imagined it was an RAAF plane on practice from Nowra but then one of the fellows said: 'Jeez, it's down low!'" It was an Orion PC-3 search plane that had joined three private Cessnas in the search for the *Norfolk*. "I got the shock of my life," recalls Cuthbertson, who rushed to switch on the VHF radio that was undamaged and remained effective over some 120 kilometres. The pilot was heard saying: "If that's the *Norfolk* down there with no lights, could you shine the torch on your sails?"

"Are you looking for us?" Cuthbertson asked.

"Half of Australia's looking for you!" was the unexpected reply.

After enquiring about food and water supplies and asking if they knew their position (spot on course after four days of storms), the Orion returned to land with its happy news.

"It was certainly the worst weather I've ever been in, and I've spent my life at sea. I felt so sorry for the poor crew [some of whom were not experienced sailors]. They were thrown out of their bunks and had to hang on every moment. They hadn't been out in this kind of weather, and to be honest, neither had I."

**A LIFE AT SEA** After successful and highly publicised voyages around Tasmania from Sydney and then up to Queensland—all re-enactments of her original route—the *Norfolk* sailed up the Hawkesbury river to commemorate the time the original boat spent working there.

And while the 'new' *Norfolk* now gleams in her berth on the Hobart waterfront, the original *Norfolk* rests in a watery grave. In November 1800, she was taken by 15 convicts at the mouth of the Hawkesbury River, but got caught in a south-easterly gale and was wrecked. Cuthbertson's *Norfolk* may go, as he hopes, to George Town on the Tamar, where the original boat spent so much time. Or it may have to be put up for private sale. Cuthbertson funded the project mostly by himself and, as he says, "I have to get my pension back."

The Bass Strait gale notwithstanding, Cuthbertson has seen and done just about everything else it's possible to at sea. At just 10, he first took the tiller of his father's trading ketch, and a decade later he owned a boat of his own. He has also fished commercially for crayfish, abalone, tuna, trevalla, squid and prawns. His involvement with the Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race includes a spectacular sail in 1964 when, as sailing master, he led the *Astor* and her sea cadet crew to victory. He then delivered her to America, returning via England to buy a herring trawler which he sailed back across the Atlantic and Pacific with his young family.

There have been whales, waterspouts, emergency rescues, even diving for sunken treasure. "Being intercepted by a gunboat off the coast of Colombia in 1966 was one of the most chilling experiences," Cuthbertson says. "We had heard stories of sailors being taken ashore and imprisoned, so we weren't too happy about it."

Even at 76, Cuthbertson is not ready to rest. He may have hung up his wet weather gear for the moment, but that's only to write a book about his remarkable seafaring life, tentatively titled *In the wake of Bass and Flinders*. If people like me leave him alone, he jokes, it will be out by Christmas. He must have met many journalists in his time: a vast pile of scrapbooks filled with newspaper cuttings document a prominent life. This year's award of the Order of Australia only confirms his status.

"I don't know how it happened," he says in conclusion. "I never set out to do these things, but it's been marvellous. ... I must be a bit of an adventurer." Yes, just a bit, Bern. ●

*Journalist Gabi Mocatta is an admirer of the Norfolk and her skipper, calling both "Tasmanian institutions". This is Mocatta's first story for Panorama.*