



# Riders on the storm



Skipper Simon Hay and Elaine Caldwell encountered the worst storm to ravage the NSW coastline all year

Chichester's 1966 account of gale-force winds off New South Wales echo in Chris Bray's mind as he experiences 50-knot winds and angry seas during *Gipsy Moth IV's* leg from Sydney to Mooloolaba



**B**ullets of windborne water pelted loudly against my oilskin hood. Just ahead of me, illuminated by the spreader lights in the dark, skipper Simon Hay glanced back. 'OK, are you ready mate?' he shouted above the gale. 'This is NOT going to be fun.' We both knew what we had to do. Against every instinct, I clipped my lifeline to the jackstay and crawled out along the sidedeck.

'Incoming!' First mate Gordon Berry shouted the warning from the cockpit as a wave picked up our stern, surging us forward. Clinging to a shroud, I could feel it writhing in my hand like a tortured snake as we careered down the crumbling face of another giant wave. My heart was racing. Despite the fact that we only had one sail up – the No2 working jib – *Gipsy Moth IV* was hurtling down waves at almost 12 knots, much of her

deck buried under white water.

In strong winds, waves don't just get bigger, they get angrier, too. Despite being pitch black, I could see the glowing white-water of these ogres falling over each other in their hurry to dash themselves against us. Fifty-five knots of screaming wind blew the crests clean off, streaming them along the surface like spindrift. Towering as high as our first spreaders, 5m waves bore

down directly into the open cockpit as we rocketed our way towards Brisbane in the worst storm to ravage the New South Wales coastline all year. Chichester endured his worst weather in *GMIV* not far from these waters 40 years ago.

Simon and I continued to edge closer to the bow. Every time she plunged downwards, I felt myself becoming weightless as my knees lost contact with the deck, until we struck the next wave. Squinting through salt-blinded eyes at the headsail, our fears were confirmed. At least five hanks had pulled off the forestay. The sail was clinging on merely by the tack, head, and a few scattered points in between! We had to get it down – now.

Drenched at the helm, 17-year-old Nicole Starling expertly guided *GMIV* into a turn, so that when I released the halyard the headsail would fall on the deck, instead of being blown over the side. 'Now!' Simon's mouth formed the words and I released the halyard.

The battered headsail fell to the deck, bristling with bent and mangled hanks. We sprang on top, quickly subduing it with sail ties. Then the shrieking wind tried to snatch the bright orange storm jib from under me, which we were to put up in its place.

Under bare poles, Nicole grimly held our course, while Simon attached

the halyard and I tied on the sheets. 'OK, pull her up!' Driving spray stung my face as I pulled and the sail thrashed violently, whipping and cracking. 'One of the sheets has come off!' shouted Simon.

'We have to drop it ... Drop it! Drop it!' I've never seen a bowline thrash itself apart before. Simon retied it with an extra long tail before giving the signal. 'PULL!' Again the angry orange sail rose from the deck and flailed like a thing possessed. The sheet lashed around at everything, including me, as I clung on by the mast trying to winch the halyard up tight. 'Pull in the sheet!' Simon roared back to the cockpit, where there was a problem bringing it under control. I dived for shelter behind the mast.

Thirty minutes after leaving the cockpit, Simon and I returned grinning like idiots. 'Was that fun, or what?' Simon asked Nicole.

No one could dispute the fact that all six of us taking part in Leg 15 of *Gipsy Moth IV*'s second circumnavigation were having the time of our lives. It was not, however, quite what we were expecting. 'Just a little sail up to Queensland...' I was told. 'You know... write a few words... take some photos...'

As a child, I had sailed around the world with my family for five years, but I had never seen conditions like this. We'd always sailed conservatively – waiting for the weather – but on *GMIV* we were running

to a timetable that discouraged delays. 'At the end of the day', Simon said, 'this project is about getting young crew to overcome challenges and gain confidence in themselves. So long as it's safe, given the choice between this gale, or flapping our way slowly up the coast in light winds – I'd pick strong winds every time – ideally after a brief settling-in period of better weather.' And that's exactly what we'd had.

### SO LONG, SYDNEY!

Just two days earlier, on Sunday, 16 July, *GMIV* slipped from her berth in front of Sydney's National Maritime Museum in Darling Harbour, sailed under the Harbour Bridge and headed out to sea.

Our accompanying fleet of well-wishers thinned out, and eventually even the news helicopters abandoned us, leaving us alone at last. A lone humpback whale slowly puffing north from Antarctica caused a brief sensation, before darkness closed in around us. Divided into two teams, Gordon, Elaine and David went below, while Simon, Nicole and I began our first watch of the journey: four hours on, four hours off at night; six hours on, six hours off by day. 'Have you ever been sailing at night before?' Simon

## 'The angry orange storm sail rose from the deck and flailed like a thing possessed. I clung on by the mast...'

asked Nicole. 'Never!' she grinned. 'I've not even sailed outside the harbour before.' The excitement burning in her eyes started to sparkle through the veil of shyness and uncertainty.

The wind was a mere 7 to 8 knots northwesterly, and with such a short fetch the rolling swell remained a docile 2-3m as we sliced into them. However, this was still enough to turn Nicole and me green. We willed those first four hours past, until at last Elaine and David – both looking ill, came up



to change watch, followed by the perpetually jolly Gordon. I lay on a saloon bench, trying to ignore the rising feeling of dread within

me – being seasick was no longer a question of 'if' but 'when'. As Hugo Vihlen once commented: 'I don't know who named them swells.

There's nothing swell about them. They should have been named awfuls.' Back on watch, as I leant

over the leeward lifeline and the churning water tore past in front of my face, I shared my dinner with the fishes. Once the nausea passed, I slunk back to the cockpit to relieve Nicole of the helm. 'Steer her 030°,' Simon cheerily nodded at the bulkhead-mounted compass – just one of the new additions to *GMIV* after her refit in New Zealand. It was great to have this most famous of yachts back on track after her encounter with a reef in French Polynesia and the indignity of being carried across oceans as deck cargo. →



**Gipsy Moth IV leaves Sydney Harbour Bridge astern for her passage north to Brisbane**

By next morning the wind had slackened, and we fired up the engine to pick up the pace, charging the batteries and flushing the watermaker – something that needed to be done every few days.

'We want to put as much distance as possible between us and what's astern,' Simon said from below. 'There's a 35-knot southerly chasing us, with seas up to 4m,' he added, before turning back to the weather chart on the laptop.

If you're offshore, there's a strong current of 3-4 knots running down the East coast of Australia, hampering progress northwards. It's similar to the treacherous Agulhas current off South Africa, the second swiftest current in all the world's oceans (the Gulf Stream is the worst). It can be avoided by staying closer inshore, but that means running the gauntlet of a minefield of crab-traps, fishermen's floats and lines – so we opted to stay well offshore. In the southerly we'd have wind-against-current, translating into a nasty sea. 'It should hit us about midnight,' said Simon, shutting the laptop down. And so the waiting game began.

Peering around the deceptively flat ocean, Nicole spotted the dorsal fin of a shark slicing through the water, followed at an alarming distance by its tail fin. A shower of little bait fish boiled from the surface in front of him as he cruised along. Yes, definitely a good idea to stay offshore away from those crab-pots – I can't imagine any of us volunteering to leap over the side to cut us free.

As dusk gave way to darkness, the stars perforated the sky above, burning brilliantly for us away from the light pollution of civilisation. Already that night I'd spotted three shooting stars. 'Where is this so-called gale?' was the question on all our lips – there was no sign of the ominous nightmare chasing us from behind.

Four hours on, four hours off, and I was back on watch again, the moon's glowing orb rising above the horizon, as Nicole and



**A long way from Greenwich dry dock, GMIV enjoys a fly-past from two Australian Gipsy Moth biplanes. She sailed into Mooloolaba, New South Wales, after an eight-day passage from Sydney**

I watched its silver reflection dancing over the gently rolling ocean towards us. The odd wave slapped hard against the windward side, sending a shower of water pattering against the back of our oilskin hoods, momentarily jerking us back from the sleep-deprived void through which we drifted.

#### **STORM WATCH**

Next day from morning until noon we watched keenly for signs of the storm. Simon's eyes narrowed as he peered at a thin tongue of cloud spearing past us to starboard. Then, all at once, the rest of the

### **'You might as well try napping inside a washing machine, with the contents of the chart table and galley thrown inside'**

cloud rolled into view – a smothering ashen blanket galloping towards us. 'It's alright mate...' Simon sniggered cheerfully. 'It's midday now, we're off watch!' We couldn't help but laugh at the look on Gordon's face as he led his crew into the cockpit for the watch and we three dropped below decks.

Unfortunately, sleep was not an option. We braced ourselves as the dial on the wind speed anemometer was behaving more like the hand of a clock: 20 knots, 25, 30 knots. What were initially just whitecaps soon became full-on breaking waves, emptying into the cockpit. Suddenly, wave after wave ripped along the sidedeck into the cockpit, or broke over the stern. Our impressive seven knots of boat speed rose to eight then nine as we shot onwards, rolling from side to side. Below decks none of us got a wink of sleep. You might as well try napping inside a washing machine, as the contents of the chart table or a galley drawer was emptied into the mix.

Conditions steadily deteriorated. Simon relieved David at the helm, who resembled a drowned rat. As he retreated below,

an almighty wave followed him along the cockpit and spilled down below. 'Put the washboards in!' Simon called. The sheer force of the waves sometimes sprayed through the washboards as if a fire-hose was being held against the outside.

After a hearty pasta and Irish stew dinner prepared by Nicole in the tumultuous galley, Simon called David Green, the GMIV Global Project Manager, on the satellite phone.

'We're all ok, having a whale of a time out here,' Simon said. Sure. I could see the similarities. A whale: an air-breathing mammal, immersed in water for long periods of time. In truth, spirits were at an all time high and the unmistakable spark of adventure flashed in everyone's eyes. This was what it was all about.

As daylight ebbed away, those in the cockpit were left with nothing but the howl of the wind and the crumbling white waves around us. I couldn't see the really big ones →

**Author Chris Bray (24) found it mind-boggling that Chichester (65) managed GMIV solo**



coming, but there was no need to look back, a quick glance at Nicole's face was plenty of warning. If she was looking worried upwards and astern it meant trouble. A thundering roar in the darkness would reach a crescendo and an immense body of water would collapse into the cockpit. Spluttering, we'd regain control, wipe the water out of our eyes, count the number of people still harnessed on, and smile in relief. Thirty knots of wind; 35, 40. 'If we're registering 40 knots...' I yelled into Simon's ear '... and we're sailing downwind at 10 knots...'

'Yeah mate!' Simon's grin flashed in the darkness. 'She's blowing 50 knots!'

Nicole, especially, was in her element – she loved it and could now hold a course firmer than any of us in this gale. It was incredible to see how much her self-confidence and skill had risen in just the last three days. The shy girl I'd met when I first boarded in Sydney was gone. Sitting beside me now was an extremely capable and dependable ocean sailor. A particularly violent wave flushed the cockpit and Simon shone his torch forward to the headsail, quickly turned it off, and sat there in silence. 'That doesn't look quite right does it?' I ventured. 'The hanks aren't pulling off are they?'

After the foredeck drama that night, not much changed in the next 24 hours. The gale kept raging, we kept getting drenched and bruised but held ourselves together. I wish I could say the same for *GMIV*. Moving around down below involved carefully timed transfers from handrail to handrail, until eventually – as we found out – you ended up on your back with the handrail no longer attached to the deckhead. Meanwhile, Gordon fell through his pipecot berth in the forepeak and was later hurled through the cabin door, taking the hinge with him.

**'Nicole, the shy girl I met when I first boarded in Sydney, was gone. She was now a capable, dependable ocean sailor'**

As the storm settled it was time to head into Manly, a small town on the outskirts of Brisbane. A few brave boats escorted us to our marina berth. All six of us were exhausted and longed for a hot shower and a dry bed. It was mind-boggling to think Chichester sailed this yacht solo around the world for 226 days. We relished our stopover in Manly, culminating in a delicious dinner at the Royal



**Angry waves boiled around *Gipsy Moth* as she ploughed north – the danbuoy was snatched by the sea and the spray dodgers, emblazoned with sponsors' names, were ripped**

*GMIV*'s stern looked like a war zone, too. The danbuoy was snatched by the sea during the night and both horseshoe lifebuoys hung at tormented angles. The dodgers emblazoned with sponsors' names were ripped off the lifelines and flailed around. Mercifully, though, the hull and rig held together.

Queensland YC before continuing on to Mooloolaba the next morning

Despite relatively calm seas, from force of habit the crew still adopted what became known as the '*Gipsy Moth Posture*' – moving around in a pre-brace position, ready to fend-off walls or bulkheads that might suddenly

spring at us from all directions. With fair weather and no need for structured watches, the crew shared tasks and laughs and we enjoyed ourselves, too. While living within a boat length of each other, we'd

been isolated on opposite watches. Now, for the first time, I got to know Elaine and the other half of the crew. When the weather was ugly, Elaine, who sailed on *GMIV*'s first leg from Plymouth to Gibraltar, had told me: 'You'd think once would have been enough in Biscay.' Now, as our journey came to an end, she admitted, 'Actually, I wish we could sail further.' I couldn't agree more.

With less than two miles to Mooloolaba breakwater, two *Gipsy Moth* bi-planes made a fly-past, and the air filled with the sounds of fog horns. Simon skilfully slid us alongside our VIP berth and we leapt ashore, flicked the warps around the cleats and brought *GMIV* to a standstill. We'd made it. 'Welcome to Mooloolaba!' said the marina manager, who shook our hands heartily.

After eight days of unforgettable experiences, we would all soon fly home, leaving skipper Simon to meet his new crew for the next leg of this remarkable journey. For all of us, it had been an unforgettable voyage. Comfortable? No. But I believe the only reason comfort zones are defined is so we know what boundary to step outside when we want to feel truly alive. ▲

**High-fives or just holding on for the rough ride? *GMIV*'s crew for leg 15 – top, left to right: Elaine, Chris, Simon, Nicole. Below: David and Gordon**

