

Mountainous seas nearly wrecked marathon voyage

Three years and nine months ago, Kerikeri yachtsman GERRY CLARK set sail in his home-built 10.4-metre yacht Totorore to survey bird life in the southern Indian Ocean. This month the 59-year-old sailor arrived home, fully aware he was lucky to be alive. Here he writes about the most terrifying leg of his mammoth journey — from Cape Town (where he picked up two new crew members) to Fremantle, where he limped in alone and under jury rig.

A BONE-JARRING crash with the noise of an explosion was followed by a sickening lurch as the Totorore heeled further and further over, until our little world was upside down.

A deluge of water poured over me accompanied by heavier objects which seemed to come from all directions to hit me as I was thrown about in the tunnel-like bunk of the quarter berth in which I had been trying to sleep.

"It gave me a terrified 'This is it!' feeling, and then suddenly the Totorore was again upright, the sound of clanking pots and pans ceased, and only the surge of much water in the cabin could be heard above the screaming of the wind outside.

I clutched on my bunk light and called out

up the side of the boat from a bunk on the port side, across the white deckhead above, and down to her own bunk on the starboard side, showing her flight path during the capsizing.

"Let me see," I said, holding her head. "No, no. I am all right. You attend to the boat," she urged me, with characteristic bravery, as she grabbed up a wet towel and pressed it on to her bleeding scalp.

Paul Scofield, a 20-year-old zoology student from Auckland, sat up, in his sleeping bag. There was now a horrible grinding and graunching noise from outside. "The mast is down," said Paul.

"That is rather serious," I replied. "Put the kettle on."

IT was about 3 am on December 30, 1985. We had left Cape Town in the Totorore, a 10.4-metre cutter-rigged yacht, on

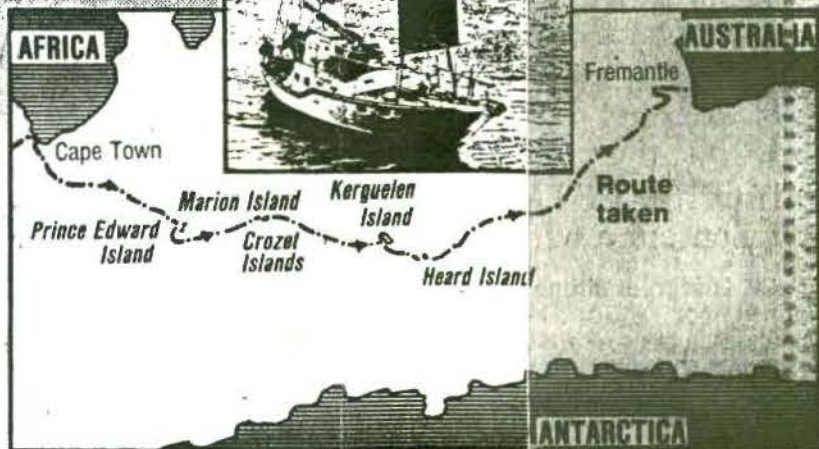
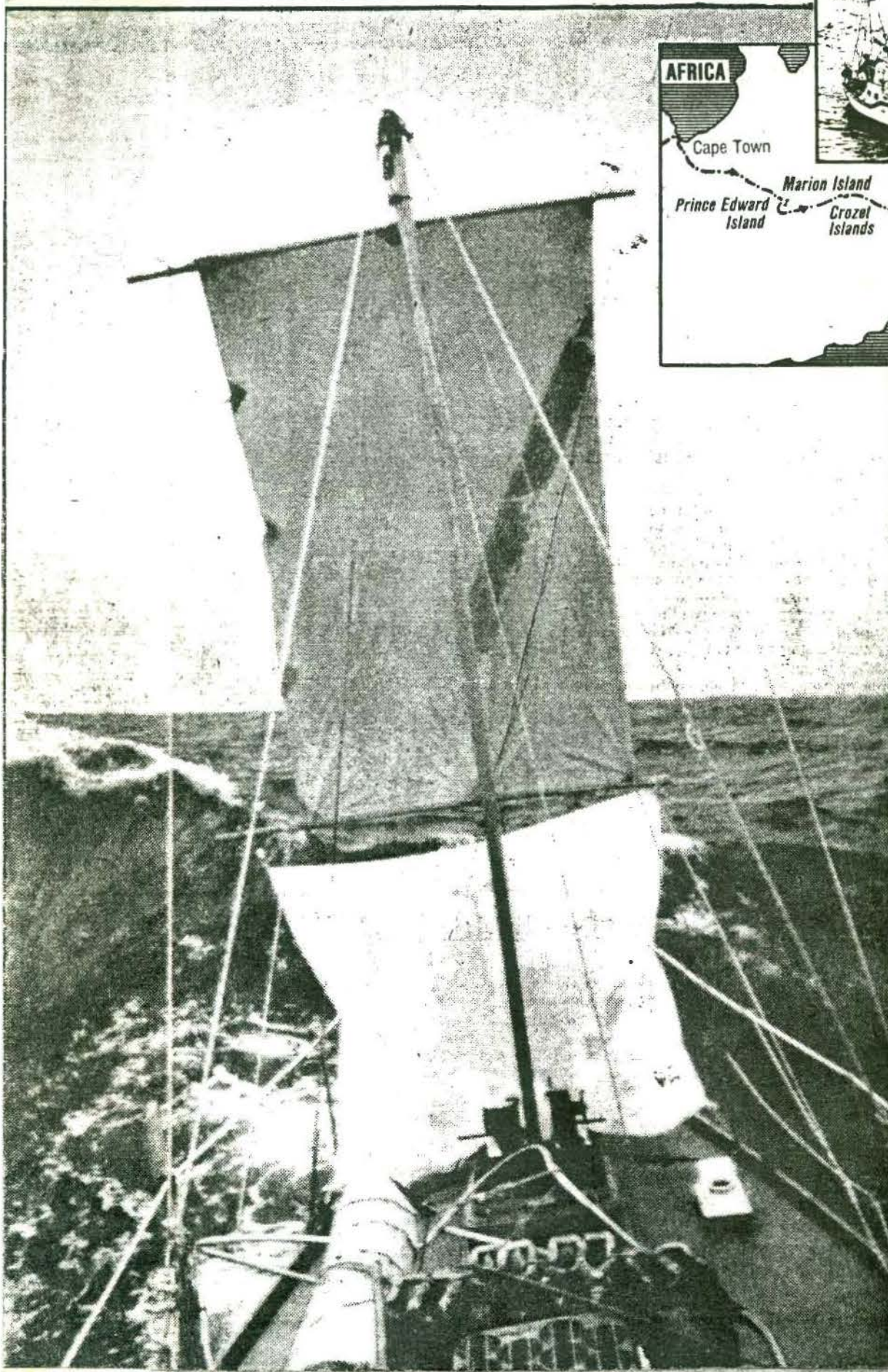
numbers of other done Zealand and overseas.

During this time I had crew members, two at a countries, and we had fi work in Southern Chile o Antarctic Peninsula, Fal Georgia and the South S had then gone to Cape T to our ice-damaged bow fuel, and change the cre

Assisted by Paul, I cu steel wire rigging still which was now in the dangerously about in the over the deck.

It was not an easy job the life-lines were down left to secure our safety wires which lay across ening off, then twanging

End Magazine



● Far left: Gerry Clark at Marion Island. Left: heading into huge seas with a tarpaulin and bedsheet jury rig.

The Kerguelen Islands are mountainous with several glaciers which come right down to the sea. I explored the fiords and bays and off-lying islands of the west and south coasts for over a week before visiting the French base at Port aux Français.

The bird life was fantastic. At the base I was received with warm hospitality, but the cove there is open to the west, and the winds which reach gale force on an average every day, blow straight in.

The sea frequently became rough and dangerous, so after two days I was glad to leave. The Totorore was full of extra stores, good French bread which I made last for five weeks, 10 large bottles of wine, and tanks and cans all full again with diesel fuel.

I set off for Heard Island, an Antarctic island mostly covered by ice, about 230 nautical miles to the south-east. The weather was fierce, and my wind-vane self-steering gear broke.

Because of the cold I could hand steer at the tiller for only a few hours at a time, so it took six days to reach rugged McDonald Island, only 20 nautical miles from Heard Island.

I spent a worried night in the precarious wind-swept anchorage, then continued to Heard Island and anchored in Atlas Cove. Ashore, I visited the old Australian base, abandoned in 1955 and now derelict. A sign on one hut read "Heard Hilton. Reception. Vacancy".

The hut was still habitable and was maintained occasionally by the Australians as a refuge, with food and bedding for any unfortunates who might be wrecked there.

DURING the night there was a strong gale, the wind coming in gusts with demonic fury. Four times I had to crawl forward on my hands and knees to renew the nylon spring on the anchor chain, and sometimes the wind lifted my body clear off the deck, so that if I had let go of the lifelines I would have flown overboard.

It was a frightening experience, and I dared not lie down all night. This sort of weather was apparently quite normal at Heard Island, so I sought a safer anchorage next to a large glacier in Corinthian Bay.

I stayed for 10 days, working on an extra bowsprit made from the spinnaker pole sticking up like a unicorn's horn, to take a tiny sail which I hoped would enable the Totorore to steer herself downwind.

I had only one more chance to go ashore, because of the bad weather with gales and snow, and then I was able to collect a wooden spar which I thought might be useful. Later, it was that piece of wood, 3.6m long and 7cm in diameter, which saved my life.

Wishing I could have stayed longer at this exciting place, I sailed on April 15, bound for Macquarie Island, 3000 nautical miles further east. My new self-steering device, on which I had worked so hard, functioned very well.

Four nights later, there came the worst storm I had ever encountered in my life. The winds were of hurricane force, and the seas were gigantic and steep. The Totorore was receiving a heavy bashing, and then one sea higher even than the others, struck her with devastating force and rolled her right over a full 360 degrees.

When she came up again she was heading in the opposite direction. My spinnaker pole and the pulpit were gone, and my lovely jury mast was buckled and bent. Much water had come into the cabin, forced under pressure past the battered hatch and through closed ventilators.

as a jury mast, set a 2-metre x 3-metre orange vinyl sail, made from a tarpaulin, and continue on our way.

When the wind was light we used a cotton bed sheet as a lower sail, and made good progress. One day we had an exceptionally good run of over 100 nautical miles. Sometimes the wind was not favourable, and we were blown back the way we had come, but generally the weather was good and life on board returned to normal.

Albatrosses wheeled around us in their dozens, and we caught a fine yellow-finned tuna on a trolling line. On our arrival at Marion Island on January 16 the nine-man team of South Africans who run the meteorological station met us on the beach with bottles of champagne and a warm welcome.

The South African Government generously accepted Paul and Christine as shipwrecked mariners to be returned to Cape Town by the next ship to visit the island, at the end of May.

We were able to radio messages home to our families, and the team of fine young men helped me to build a better jury mast, made of 50mm water pipe and to repair the lifeline stanchions and railing.

Marion Island is mountainous in the centre, with a permanent ice-cap, and a coastal plain with lava hills on which breed many different species of seabird.

It is a beautiful place, but very windy.

Gales of over 60 knots were frequent. There is no real sheltered anchorage so I had to continue to live on board the Totorore to keep shifting her to the other side of the island when the wind changed.

On one occasion a very sudden change trapped us in a cave from which it was difficult to escape, and the Totorore was cast on to the rocks. It was nothing short of a miracle that big seas washed us off again, and yacht and I were saved.

We were blown far away from the island, and it took two days to motor back again to pick up my sail from the shed where it was being repaired and having a killer whale painted on it. Christine had also made me another sail from an old tent.

I LEFT Marion Island in the Totorore on February 16, one month after our arrival, to start the long voyage to my home in New Zealand, a distance of over 8000 nautical miles.

I had an incident-free run to the Crozet Islands, where the French, who occupy a base on Possession Island, did not allow me to go ashore. After two nights at anchor, for a rest, I carried on to the beautiful and fascinating Kerguelen Islands about 700 nautical miles away.

The winds were favourable and I arrived after only 10 days.