

Ian Tew in INDEPENDENT FREEDOM

Ian Tew sadly died in late 2002 and had not supplied any photographs to illustrate his account

Sailing in Grandfather's Wake

Apart from my wish to sail round the world there was an objective, to follow in the wake of my Grandfather and complete his circumnavigation which was halted by the Second World War.

The Yacht

Independent Freedom was a 13-ton Bermudan schooner 39 feet overall 32 feet on the waterline built by Freedom yachts in 1991. The carbon fibre masts were unstayed which made running down- wind chafeless and efficient with the fully battened sails. The Collins wing keel was five feet wide and gave considerable directional stability running down wind, and a good lift above four knots upwind. The pilot house arrangement gave a very comfortable living space. She carried plenty of fuel and water.

The crew was me and my friend M, the mate, who wishes to remain anonymous.

The route

Southwards from New York to the Delaware river, through the Delaware Chesapeake canal, down the Bay to Norfolk and south through the IntraCoastal waterway to Fort Lauderdale, Bahamas, Cuba, Cayman Islands thence the trade wind route via the Panama and Suez Canals. Once the circumnavigation was completed in the Bahamas we sailed home via Bermuda and the Azores

The voyage highlights

Once we took over the yacht in New York on October 10 1997 we were in a hurry to get south as quickly as possible. My Grandfather had been caught out in a North Atlantic storm as had my elder brother and I had no wish to be the third member of my family to face such weather. So it was rush to reach Fort Lauderdale but after our refit there we were much more leisurely. My brother Edward (RLymYC) and family came out for Christmas in the Bahamas which was fun.

Cuba was an eye opener. I did not tell anyone we were going there, we just went. A gun boat shadowed us along the south coast, the lights at Guantanamo Bay bright. We were welcomed at the Santiago marina and enjoyed our time. Sailing amongst the cays of the south coast was a unique experience. We saw no other yachts for almost three weeks and for ten days did not see another human being either. It was the complete silence at the anchorages, the emptiness of the wilderness, the lack of any form of life that I found fascinating.

We nearly lost the yacht and our lives at Rabihorcado Cay when a sudden storm blew up and made the anchorage a lee shore. In almost nil visibility due to driving rain, in the midst of severe thunder and lightning, wind gusting in excess of force 9, the yacht pitching her bow under breaking waves, the reef close astern. The mate managed to heave up the anchor and somehow I felt our way round on the eco sounder into the lee the other side of the cay.

Passing through the Panama Canal and later the Suez Canal although totally different were unique experiences for me in a yacht. We found the Pacific not so peaceful at its name implies and the passage from Rangiroa to Tahiti was a dead beat in a full gale. We were delayed in that tropical but expensive paradise for three months while I had a new engine shipped in from Auckland. Following my Grandfather's track gave an added interest all the way to New Zealand. Edward and his wife Philippa joined us for a cruise amongst the Tongan islands. The hard beat down the west coast of North Island proved a challenge as there were no safe ports to make in the prevailing conditions. Sailing in "Caplin", the yacht my Grandfather sailed to New Zealand from Bridgewater, saw my main objective achieved.

We had a rough but fair wind passage from New Caledonia to Bundaberg and we were reefed all the way through the Great Barrier Reef and onto Darwin albeit with fair winds. Ashmore reef with its baby graves of refugees was a poignant reminder of a worldwide problem. The East Timor tragedy was in full swing with West Timor full of refugees, so we decided to cruise the islands and clear into Indonesia at Bali, which for me proved the most interesting part of our voyage. The engine was in major use to Singapore where "Independent Freedom" was lifted out of the water at Keppel Marina for antifouling. I had mixed feelings visiting places I knew, having worked in Singapore for ten years.

My niece Camilla joined us in Phuket for a very fast passage to Galle where we were warned the entrance to the harbour was mined. Djibouti had not changed from the time I spent there with salvage tugs. The passage up the Red Sea was enlivened when we had a near escape from a boat with armed soldiers trying to arrest us off the Coast of Saudi. It was a hard slog up the Gulf of Suez.

Once into the Mediterranean it was almost back to normal cruising We met up with "Mary Helen" at Puerto Calereo with my mother (RLymYC) aged 88, my Grandfather's eldest daughter welcoming us together with my elder recently retired brother Donald (RLymYC). "Mary Helen" is a year older than "Caplin" and only 23 feet on the water line, rigged as a gaff cutter.

On leaving the Canaries the mainsail and foresail tore at the luff. We reefed and diverted to the Cape Verde Islands for repairs which proved elusive when we reached Porto Grande. A few hours after leaving, the engine packed up so we were without power to Antigua where I sailed into Jolly Harbour and went alongside in the marina with the dinghy towing on the hip. "Mary Helen" arrived in English Harbour the next day.

Theron, we sailed in loose company through the Caribbean and in the Bahamas "Independent Freedom's" circumnavigation was completed. It was a mainly uneventful sail home to the UK.