

“I’M ALIVE!”

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John Quinn’s own story of survival at sea

In an ocean race full of drama on the high seas, no event in the Kodak 49th Sydney-Hobart Yacht Race will be remembered more vividly than the survival of John Quinn, owner/skipper of the 35-footer MEM, who was rescued from a gale-swept Tasman Sea alive and well nearly five hours after being washed overboard.

Quinn, a member of the Royal Prince Alfred Yacht Club in Sydney, survived through his own strength of character, through the positive “man overboard” procedures carried out by his crew, the search and rescue operations co-ordinated by the Radio Relay Vessel Young Endeavour, and as a result of those who immediately joined in the search, including the tanker Ampol Sarel and the dismantled yacht Atara.

John Quinn’s own story is based on an address he gave at a “Welcome Back” dinner at the Alfred’s.



SURVIVOR John Quinn arrives at Eden aboard the yacht Atara, looking remarkably fit after his ordeal. (Pic - AAP News Services)

MAY I start by saying how very happy I am to be here ... and I am only here because of luck and the very professional seamanship of the crews of the tanker *Ampol Sarel* and the yacht *Atara* ... These were John Quinn’s opening remarks to an address he gave to members of his yacht club, the Royal Prince Alfred Yacht Club in Sydney - just one month after his extraordinary survival and rescue in the Tasman Sea, nearly five hours after being washed overboard from his own yacht *MEM*.

The race started in a good nor’easter with a fair amount of east in it. The sou’wester came in at 20 knots at around 1700 hours when we were just south of Coalcliff.

The wind gradually increased and was gusting to above 30 knots by midnight. It was generally WSW, heading occasionally to the SW. *MEM* was sailing at around 8.5 knots with one reef in the main and No. 4.

Throughout the next day the wind gradually headed to SW and increased. We

lost our wind gear so the wind speeds are estimates or what I have been told by others. We had changed to the storm jib and put a second reef in the main by midday and *MEM* continued to average above eight knots. The seas had increased so she was pounding fairly heavily.

At the 1500 hour sked we were well positioned. The majority of the fleet were further east of the rhumbline than we were. Our team mate in the NSW “B” team, *Atara*, was also well placed in the IOR division.

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At around 1900 hours we were south of Merimbola and about 50 miles east of the rhumbline. The wind had increased to over 40 knots and we were beginning to get the Bass Strait seas. We dropped the main and prepared to set the trisail. However, we found *MEM* was still sailing on course under storm jib alone at above seven knots so we put the trisail below.

While we were changing sails a large rogue wave came from the beam instead of the bow and broke over us. I was tempted at the time to turn, drop all sails and run for shelter. However, we were the IMS boat in the NSW "B" team and looked good for a result so we didn't.

The sea was now so rough we could no longer steer from the side deck, so the helmsman was sitting on the cockpit floor. I took over the helm at 2200 hours and by now the wind was gusting at over 50 knots. In fact, *Atara's* crew told me later that they had gusts of over 70 knots. We were travelling at over seven knots -- on course slightly "started". The sea was now around four metres and little *MEM* was slamming fairly heavily. However, there was no way of slowing her more unless we turned around.

Around midnight we were 45 miles ESE of Gabo and that's when it happened. Another rogue wave hit us on the beam and broke over us. How large we don't know -- nobody saw it. It is clear that the top of the mast and the top spreaders went into the water and we suspect the lower leeward spreader as well. Peter Rothwell was tipped out of his bunk and walked along the cabin side and roof where the spinnakers ended up.

On deck three of us were catapulted and washed across the leeward side of the boat and into the water:

- John Marwood went around the mast and across the foredeck.
- Teki Dalton was washed out of the cockpit.
- And I had the force of the helm thrusting to leeward and was catapulted and washed over the rails. I felt the harness take up and then break. I had grabbed a line as I went, probably the spinnaker sheet but this was yanked out of my grip as the boat righted itself. What part of the harness broke? It was the bit around me which was built into the jacket. The tether and triangular piece were still attached to the boat.
- Jeff Starling was catapulted off the weather rail and was hanging suspended by the harness with his legs in the water while little *MEM* was on her side. The force and speed of her righting herself flicked him under the weather rail.

So four of us ended in the water. Of the five on deck only Simon Modziar stayed with the boat. He had been thrown over the coachhouse.

Since we got back to Sydney, Teki Dalton told me he thought she was going to do a full roll. I am reasonably sure *MEM* was well beyond her theoretical limit of positive stability of 112°.

So I was in the water as the boat drifted away pretty quickly. The people below started the motor very quickly but they had to get all the lines out of the water before using it. I saw someone jump to the stern to get the safety gear away, but the boat was 20 metres away before he got there. Added to that, I understand they had difficulty in getting the life buoy clear and can only assume that the line on the drogue washed out and got tangled. The Danbuoy, unbeknown to me, had apparently gone over earlier in the day.

Frankly, in those seas the boat was too far away for that stuff to be much use to me -- it would act only as a mark for the returning boat. The Dolphin torches were naturally washed out of the cockpit.

Gradually the lights of *MEM* disappeared and I was on my own.

"What was I wearing?"

I had on thermal underwear and socks. A mid layer of that Polarplus material -- Burke top and Musto pants. Then a Musto buoyancy vest which I use for warmth and Musto waterproofs over the lot, plus sea-boots and sailing mittens. The buoyancy vest undoubtedly saved my life.

There have been mixed reports about how long I was in the water. It was five hours. The log of *Ampol Sarel* shows they received the distress call from VIS at 12 minutes past midnight and I was rescued by sailing vessel *Atara* at 0454 hours.

Time was difficult to estimate from now on. I found that the buoyancy vest would not hold me high enough out of the water, so I had to dog paddle or tread water. I found a mix of the two was best with my back to the waves and swimming slightly on my stomach.

I ditched the sea boots almost immediately. Big boots are essential. If you can't get yours off easily, give them to your worst enemy immediately.

After a while I found the jacket was weighing me down so I took it off. I tried all the stuff about tying the arms and filling it with air and nearly drowned, so I let it go. On my head I had a cloth peaked cap.

So I had no reflective tape. However, I was again lucky. There was an enormous amount of phosphorescence in the water. For example, when *MEM* first righted herself I could see the boat and people as if it were daylight. Obviously, the water had come from the tropics recently: I kept getting blue bottles around my fingers and one got around my neck. It was about 18°C, which is warm for that area.

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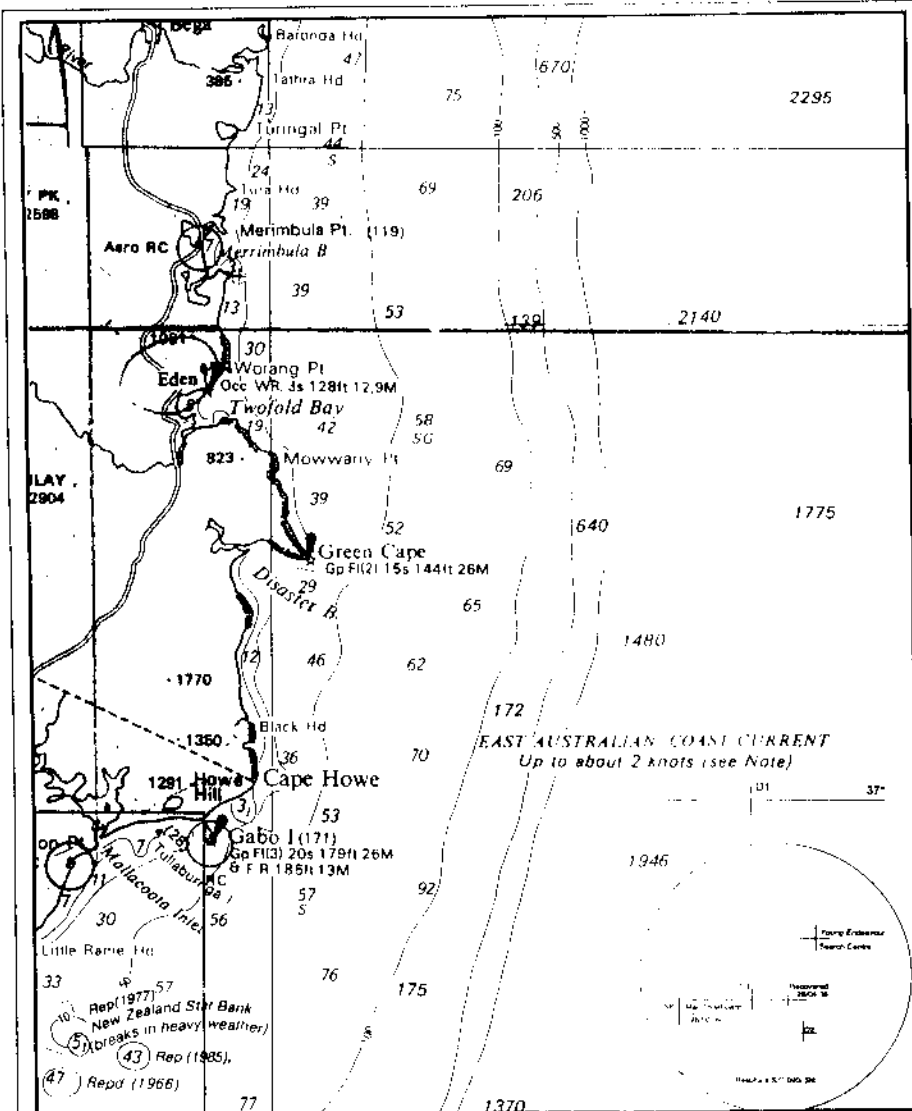
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THE Tasman Sea off Gabo Island where John Quinn went overboard and the search and rescue plot. According to the MRCC, D1,D2 and D3 refer 3 different datum variables from which a composite search of the area was plotted;

- D1 = Man in water, sea currents to North at 1.7 knots**
- D2 = Man in water, sea current to SE at 1.2 knot**
- D3 = Man in water, no sea current**

Every so often a large breaking wave would come along. The first time I rode with it, but got dumped and dragged down and swallowed a lot of water. After that I listened for them, turned around, swam into them and duck-dived into dark water.

This makes me wonder if I would have survived as long with a fully buoyant life jacket. I think I would prefer an inflatable that would allow me to control buoyancy to some extent.

After a while I saw a boat with lights coming from the direction that *MEM* disappeared. They came to within 200 metres then disappeared. I believe if I had a personal strobe they probably would have seen me. It would also be good if one could get small personal flares that are waterproof. Anyway, in the future I will have a personal strobe in a pocket of my jacket.

After a while I saw flares going off, which I assumed was *MEM*.

The time in the water actually went quite fast.

"I was getting tired"

Towards the end I got uncontrollable shivers. I am told that this means I had some time left before my body temperature got critical. This was confirmed by the crew on *Atara* - when they took my temperature when I was hauled on board.

But I was getting tired and the vest was beginning to lose buoyancy, so I was swallowing a fair amount of salt water - Not good!

Then I saw it! The most beautiful Christmas tree you have ever seen. A blousy big ship coming right for me - another boat, obviously a yacht, out to my port side but I couldn't see the other two who were also with her.

It was obvious I was going to pass down the

port side, so I swam as fast as I could towards her. Strange how energy comes back. I thought she was going to be too far away when a wave brought her stern closer to me. I yelled "Hey" a few times, then I heard a shout from the superstructure: "I can see you". They immediately told the yachts on VHF they had a spotlight on me.

Ampol Sarel slowed and turned, but I fell out of the spotlight. In a very short time I saw the port and starboard lights of *Atara* coming down on me. A line was thrown, I grabbed it and I was alongside with what seemed a million hands and arms grabbing at me. Then "splash", someone was in the water with me. *Atara* had no mast so they couldn't winch me out. They passed me down the side then dragged me over the stern.

I was half carried, half dragged down below - stripped, rubbed hard, thrown into a bunk and covered with space blankets - a pink balaclava stuck on my head like a tea-cosy. One bloke stripped to his jocks, jumped into the bunk and hung on to me.

Hot towels were put on the kidney area and I was given hot sweet tea, which made me chuck up the salt water. Then more hot sweet tea. They kept me awake for a couple of hours and continuously took my temperature until it was close to normal.

It was a terrific effort and top seamanship by the crew of *Atara*, who had their own problems, having lost their mast when a big wave crashed over them, hit the trisail and took out their rig.

It was a piece of great navigation and seamanship by the captain and crew of the *Ampol Sarel*, who took the position that I went over, estimated my drift and then were undistracted by the mass of activity that was apparently on the radio.

So let me summarise some of the survival issues that I think this demonstrates:

1. In severe conditions nobody should be on the rail. Two men only in the cockpit with harnesses on.
 2. We need life jackets that can be worn and we can work in. Personally, I have only seen two - an old ex-navy inflatable that fitted in a pouch on a belt worn around the waist. The second is actually an inflatable and a harness in one which does not have Australian Standard approval. I understand from "Hornblower" (John Hornby) that these are accepted if they have the stamp of another country. Life jackets in lockers are no bloody use!
 3. I would prefer an inflatable that allows me to control buoyancy because I am not sure that I would have survived with a fully buoyant jacket in those seas.
 4. Get big sea boots that come off easily.
 5. A personal strobe in pocket at all times.
 6. The brackets for the Danbuoy need to be stiffened. The weight of the buoy bouncing in the bracket causes it to deflect so the buoy falls out.
- So that's the basic stuff - now let's get stuck into the real stuff.

"I made two basic mistakes"

I was nearly killed, despite all my experience, because I made two basic mistakes of seamanship:

- First, when the initial rogue wave came on board I should have realised that we were running into conditions that were likely to be beyond the limit of *MEM*. As the seas increased I should have turned, dropped the jib and run with warps until we could shelter, probably behind Green Cape.

- Secondly, I should not have entered the Sydney-Hobart in a yacht as light as the J35. It is an ideal fun, club, regatta and coastal racing yacht. Terrific for the racing I do most of the year. But it is not safe for one Hobart in every seven!

Yet the J35 is quite a moderate boat and more seaworthy than the latest IMS boats. The reality is that in my view the new IMS boats and their IOR predecessors are not safe boats for racing in the Tasman in exposed waters such as Sydney to Hobart, Lord Howe, Melbourne to Hobart, Melbourne to Devonport, and Fremantle to Albany. In fact, there are some which wouldn't race to Coffs.

I'm talking this way because I love ocean racing, because the Hobart race is one of the best in the world and because the next guy will not be so lucky. People who know me, skippers who have been to offshore divisional meetings, know that I have been talking this way for a long time.

Let's look at some facts. The history of the worst races on record from 1956 are interesting.

In 1956 - 30 boats started and 28 finished (93%); 1963 - 44 boats started and 34 finished (77%); 1970 - 61 boats started and 47 finished (77%); 1977 - 131 boats started and 72 finished (55%); and then 1984 - 150 boats started and only 46 finished (31%); 1993 - 108 boats started and only 37 finished (34%).

Don't kid yourself '84 and '93 were no worse than the others. In fact, we were lucky that the fleet wasn't committed to Bass Strait as it was in 1970.

Off the north end of Flinders you are nearly 150 miles from Eden and 200 from Triabunna. There's no *Ampol Sarel* and not much help that can come from Flinders. In fact, if you're on the rhumbline you have to sail over 60 miles west to have any chance of shelter behind Flinders Island.

So what's changed since the 1970s? THE BOATS!

Let me give you a little more evidence of that from this year's race. As I said, of the 108 starters, only 34% finished. But if you take boats designed prior to 1980, the percentage finishing was 58% - and I am excluding from that boats I am uncertain about such as *Bright Morning Star*, *Iceberg*, *Mirrabooka*. If you look at the heavier

displacement boats of the older type, then the percentage finishing goes back towards 70%, which is consistent with prior years.

Now I know that someone's going to say that... This boat finished, or that boat finished. But that's like the cigarette companies pulling out the 100-year old lama who's been smoking since he was 15. They ignore all other evidence:

i) The boats are too light relative to their length and their beam or overall volume.

The displacement to length ratios have dropped dramatically over the years. The ocean racing boats of the 1970s such as *Mark Twain*, the Cole 43s and Currawongs had displacement to length ratios between 300 and 230. By the early 1980s with boats such as the Farr 40s, Davidson 40s and 36s, the ratio had dropped to around 190 and 180. Now the J35 is around 170, but boats such as *Axaxatin*, the Mumm 36s, and *Cuckoo's Nest* - the ratio is below 120.

Essentially the displacement to length ratio has more than halved since the 1970s. The boats' waterline length has got longer and the boats lighter. As a result we can't slow the boats down. In that gale *MEM* was sailing at over seven knots under storm jib. *Atara* was at 9-10 knots under trisail. Compare that with good old *Mark Twain*, which finished: her crew complained they had trouble keeping her below five knots.

So we put enormous loads on the new boats' structure and crew. In survival conditions the only option is to run before. The boats are almost impossible to slow so there is a big chance of broaching. On top of this the beam, and so total volume of the hull, has increased. We are sailing very fast ice-cream containers with fins attached which are easily laid over by a decent wave.

ii) The forward sections are flat - this is not so for a J35 - thank goodness! - but is typical of the modern IMS boats so the boats slam when they fall off waves, putting enormous loads on the structure, resulting in broken bulkheads, floors, frames and delamination.

The deeper entry U-shapes allow a more gradual take-up of buoyancy and less stress on structure and crew.

iii) The designs encourage crew swinging from vulnerable positions and it is allowed.

I remind you four of *MEM*'s crew were overboard.

iv) Cockpits are terrific for around the buoys but provide absolutely no protection or security in severe conditions - I can vouch for that.

v) Likewise the superstructure provides no protection.

vi) The attachment point of keels is too small - once again this does not apply to the J35. The smallest impact on those long thin fins results in them flinging. The leading edge comes

away from the hull - aft end drives through the hull and sometimes they fall off completely.

The reality is there are whales, sunfish and containers and there is a reasonable probability of hitting one. We hit a sunfish two years in a row on *Sunseeker* and rarely is there a Hobart race when one or two boats don't hit something. Our boats must be able to take it.

vii) Last, but not least, the rigs are too light. You can take a risk in round-the-buoys racing, but in the Tasman in a full gale a mast over the side can be a very dangerous situation.

I am sure that a number of you would be thinking that this is all very interesting, but does not affect you because you don't intend to do a Hobart race anyway. But it will affect you - for two reasons:

Firstly, your insurance premiums will go up as well as your excess.

Secondly, unless we do something to stop the carnage, the regulators will get involved and they won't stop at the Hobart race. You will find that you will require all sorts of licences and expensive equipment. We can only expect to be left alone if we are seen to be responsible.

Can we do anything? Yes, we can - through our associations, for which we boat owners pay via our clubs.

I believe that Australia should put in place a set of minimum standards for boats participating in races such as the Sydney-Hobart.

It would not be hard to develop a set of regulations that would eliminate the problems I have described.

Boats meeting these criteria could then be described as an "Australian Offshore Racing Yacht". The regulations should then be mandatory for Hobart and Lord Howe, etc. The clubs would then need to support the type by providing a separate pointscore or division for club, regatta and coastal races because they would not be competitive under the IMS rule against the lightweights.

There would be no shortage of boats because there are many boats that would already comply and as the type would also be a safe cruising boat it would have a wider appeal than the current IMS boat.

I am not suggesting that we go back to the 1970s, but somewhere between boats of that time and what we have today will be a fast, safe cruiser/racer.

What I am asking you to do is to tell our committee and club representatives on the Yachting Association of NSW that we want to see change. We cannot afford to wait for the International Rule to change. Other countries do not have the problem because they don't race in similar conditions and the vested interests are too great. A few dead Australians across the other side of the world doesn't mean much to them - but it means a lot to us!