

An evening with Sir James Hardy

by Richard Lawson

Photos by Gaila Merrington

The end of the Australian summer holiday was a very special time for the RSYs Cruising Division. Two days prior to Australia Day was our scheduled monthly forum for January, and we were most fortunate to have as our guests Sir James and Lady Hardy.



The evening was also special for the Division in that it was a two course sit down dinner in the Carabella Room, where we heard Sir James reflect on his Admiral's Cup experiences. These reflections extended over many Admiral's Cup challenges and included participating on yachts such as Alan Bond's *Apollo II*, his own *Niamba/Runaway* (1977) and Graeme Lambert's *Impetuous* (1979).

A coincidence of the evening was a "mini *Impetuous* gathering" that occurred as four members of the *Impetuous* crew of that time, were present. Those crew members were Graeme Lambert, Richard Chapman, James Merrington and Sir James (one of the yacht's principal helmsmen.)



We were regaled with memories of many well recognised people including Syd Fischer, Alan Bond, Ben Lexcen, Hugh Treharne, Gordon Reynolds (team captain for the 1967 victory), the Packer brothers and many others. Some time was spent talking about the influence Ben Lexcen had on ocean racing yacht design with his break through designs of *Apollo*, *Apollo 11*, and *Ginko*.

Inevitably the conversation moved to the '1979 Challenge Year', which resulted in an outstanding success for the Australian team of *Ragamuffin* (Syd Fischer), *Impetuous* (Graeme Lambert) and *Police Car* (Peter Cantwell). Unfortunately, the '79 Challenge is most remembered for the disaster that was the Fastnet Race. This race resulted in the loss of 20 lives, lost or drowned, when an incredible storm hit the fleet while approaching the Fastnet Rock in the Irish Sea.

Sir James was able to recount his own personal experiences and feelings throughout that race, and in particular his memory of the storm which lasted for approximately 30 hours. He recalled the storm's arrival while steering *Impetuous* during the evening watch and when the storm hit at about 10 pm:

- The navigation of Phil Eadie throughout the period as he guided the yacht to round the Fastnet Rock in windspeeds exceeding 60 kts and with an incredible building seaway.
- The steering of the yacht by Hugh Treharne during the early hours of the morning whilst they approached and rounded the Rock.

- Hugh having to tack the yacht from port to starboard as a “big hooker” on starboard approached, out of the mist, and forcing them to decide to tack below or not! Would they clear the rock?
- The spume which was all over the deck of *Impetuous* making it impossible to see any part of the yacht for hours on end.
- Bearing away around the Rock and then having to steer the yacht down enormous waves which were at least four boat lengths to the bottom of the trough (*Impetuous* at 41 feet)

His account was absolutely spellbinding and not one person in the room was able to move or comment, due to the tension of this amazing story.

The Australian team went on to win the Fastnet Race and the overall Regatta for 1979, thanks to the wonderful teamwork and skill of all three yachts. The Fastnet Race results saw *Impetuous* take 3rd, *Police Car* 4th and *Ragamuffin* 13th.

Sir James recalled how, in the very heavy conditions, one of the larger yachts was unable to sail toward the finish in Plymouth and was last seen on a course toward Spain! He also noted that one of the opposition was reported to say, “The funny Aussies on *Impetuous* flying a spinnaker towards the finish when no other boat was prepared to do so!” What an impression that skill and sportsmanship must have left in the opposition’s mind.



Another brief story was regarding Harold Cudmore and yacht designer Ron Holland who were aboard the Irish yacht *Golden Apple of the Sun*. Unfortunately they broke a rudder, badly damaged the yacht and were forced to leave the yacht via the life raft and helicopter, but not before Harold left a message to say “Gone to lunch, will be back soon.”

Sir James closed his address by reading from the UK's Daily Telegraph editorial which reviewed the Fastnet Race shortly after the finish. Comment was made on the loss of life, the lessons that needed to be learnt and how new and important safety standards were required. At the same time, the Editorial pleaded for the "risk in sport" to be retained as these challenges are required for the human spirit to grow and develop.

It was a most poignant and fitting end to a unique evening for the RSYS Cruising Division. The Division is fortunate and grateful to have had fellow Squadron Member Sir James share time with us.