

“MAYDAY”

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A storm raged in the night. Huge waves, driven before a bitter south-westerly, rolled across the shallow waters of Bass Strait and thundered onto the bleak East Gippsland coast, dashing themselves on the rocks. Further on, where they met the East Australia current beyond Gabo Island, out in the open ocean, the turbulence was greater still.

The confluence of two such immense forces produced short breaking waves, as violent as the breakers on any beach, except that these were not head high. Towering 30 metres out of the blackness, their thousands of tonnes crashed down relentlessly.

At Gabo Island lighthouse, keeper John Lumb and his wife Nikki lay awake. It was a storm unusual even for this desolate stretch of coast. John had registered winds of 70 knots (120 kilometres per hour) throughout the night and they were worried. He knew too much about the many maritime tragedies that had occurred out there, the bones of vessels caught in the freak seas where the Tasman meets Bass Strait. He knew that no one could see their light in this storm. All they could hope was that whatever shipping was going past kept as far off the coast as possible. As for small boats . . . heaven help them.

In the very centre of this storm a Canadian yacht, the Cookie Cutter, rolled helplessly with each wave. Inside, the skipper, Lyle Chase, and his wife Carol braced themselves each time the boat rose, lifted higher and higher until it seemed about to become airborne, then tensed as it slid over and crashed down with a shudder into the trough of the wave.

The shriek of wind in the rigging had been with them now for the twenty hours. Their wind instrument had gone completely off the scale.

Even without sail, on autopilot, the yacht was surging through the water at a frightening speed. Lyle and Carol had long since fitted and locked the storm boards on the hatch, making the cabin practically watertight. To go on deck in such a storm was to invite death. The 11-metre Cookie Cutter was strongly built, but in seas like these she was being tested to the limit. With every wave that crashed down on her, they glanced up, praying that she would hold good.

At eleven o'clock, Lyle sat down on the cabin floor for a quick snack of bread and cheese. It had been too rough to cook for the past day. Carol was reading on the port settee, tucked in against the continuous motion of the boat. Lyle's snack was his favourite camembert. He relaxed a bit and started to eat.

Suddenly, out of the dark, a monster wave rolled towards them. Its vast mass picked up the yacht, all 10 tonnes of it, like a child's board in the surf. The Cookie Cutter rose, tipped - and simply fell off the wave, tumbling helplessly. In a matter of seconds, she had rolled right over!

Why would anyone be at sea in a small boat on such a night? For Lyle and Carol Chase, the answer was a race. After three years of leisurely cruising in the South Pacific, they had decided to enter the Melbourne-to-Osaka Yacht Race, due to start in a week's time. But they had been delayed in Sydney by Department of Immigration red tape and, keen to get down to Melbourne with plenty of time, had set off with a sense of urgency.

As they had sailed out of Sydney Heads the Thursday before, the weather had been fresh but manageable. All had gone well the first day and by Friday they were almost half way down the coast.

But as dusk fell on the Friday a bad storm had come through. For twelve hours, Cookie Cutter had ridden before it, all sails down, still doing 2 knots, driven only by the force of the wind on the hull. They put up the storm boards and set the autopilot to take the yacht away from the coast. The storm had raged all night and throughout the next day. Dark had come again, and with it, the capsized.

Inside the Cookie Cutter, the lights were still on. Incredibly, the motor (which had been charging the electrical system) was still running. But both bilge pump indicator lights were aglow, and the cabin was a scene of devastation. Food and personal belongings were strewn everywhere. Carol lay face downwards and Lyle was spreadeagled across the settee where Carol had been. There was blood all over his face, running down into his eyes. His chest and back felt as if they had been crushed. His right arm was useless and he couldn't move at all.

"Are you all right?" he gasped.

Carol dragged herself up and looked up at him.

"Yes," she said, crawling across to him. "What about you?"

"I'm hurt."

She pulled him onto the settee, fetched the medical kit and gave him three tablets of Demerol. Just breathing was agony, but there were more important things to worry about. Was the boat sinking? What was left above decks?

On the first point, the signs were comforting. Apart from a little water sloshing in the bilges, the yacht didn't seem to be leaking. The bilge pump lights had gone off again. So what of the sailing gear? What had happened on deck when she had rolled?

Lyle urged Carol to check. With her life line firmly secured, she opened the hatch and looked out.

There was nothing left. Where the heavy duty mast had risen high above the deck, held in place by reinforced stainless steel rigging, there was simply empty space. The life lines round the deck had vanished completely. All that was left was a tangle of wire and dangling sail.

And the seas were still crashing aboard, threatening to swamp the boat at any instant. Carol climbed back inside and locked the storm boards back in place. Lyle lay on the port bunk bleeding, his face contorted with pain. It was time to signal an emergency.

At the National Safety Council headquarters in West Sale, 150 kilometres to the west, 23-year-old pararescue jumper Chris Rieniets had been sound asleep. At 4am, his pager sounded. He crashed out of bed.

Outside it was pitch dark and the wind was howling. He pulled on his duty overalls and boots and headed for the Operations Room. A yacht had been reported in distress out in Bass Strait. A helicopter was to go out at first light. Chris, crewman Linton Beggs and the two pilots, Ray Dousset and Rod Brown were all there, getting their briefing.

When dawn came up over the sea, Cookie Cutter was still rolling helplessly in the waves. Somehow Lyle Chase had rigged a radio antenna inside the boat. The proper one had gone with everything else when the wave had taken them. Since midnight he had been transmitting the Mayday call on all the emergency frequencies. He could hear the radio traffic between Sydney and Melbourne, but no one could hear him.

What about amateur radio, he thought. Amongst his other interests Lyle had been a ham operator for many years. It was just conceivable that some solitary enthusiast was even now sitting down at his set somewhere on that invisible coast to the northwest.

“MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY. Cookie Cutter here. MAYDAY . . .”

There was no reply.

Chris Rieniets and the helicopter crew were out over Bass Strait by early light, searching at the co-ordinates relayed by the Sea Safety Centre in Canberra. It was a foul day. The sun was shining but, down below, the ocean was in uproar. Gusts of wind had been clocked at 100 knots (180 kilometres per hour). Ray, the pilot, had his hands full just keeping the twin-engined Bell 412 helicopter on course.

It was a frustrating search, with a position fix which would have been inaccurate minutes after it was sent, let alone an hour or so later. Visibility was perfect, yet they couldn't see a thing.

Ironically, no one knew a thing about the Cookie Cutter. Chris and the crew were out on an unrelated search and rescue exercise. After another hour or so of futile searching Rod, the copilot whose job it was to check radio and fuel, would be recommending that they return to base. A fixed-wing plane could take over the search while the helicopter went back to refuel. It was all turning into an anticlimax.

The sun had been up for some time. In between snatches of sleep, Lyle had kept trying to raise someone on his radio. As well as the commercial wavelengths, he was tuning in to any ham operators he could find. One heard the call faintly, but the interference was too great and the signal had dropped out before Lyle could get a message across. He was beginning to despair.

At Paynesville, on the Gippsland coast, Des Hayward, a retired army man, had just eaten breakfast. Shortly after nine o'clock he went into his study and turned on the short-wave set to catch up on the news with his amateur radio operator friends. They were getting into the swing of an unhurried chat when, abruptly, a faint voice came out of nowhere:

“MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY . . . This is Cookie Cutter . . . can anyone hear me? . . . MAYDAY . . .”

Des sat bolt upright. He listened for a couple more seconds, and then pressed the transmit button on his set.

“Cookie Cutter, Cookie Cutter . . . I hear you . . . Des Hayward here. Cookie Cutter, do you read me? Over.”

“My God, Carol, someone can hear me!”

“Cookie Cutter to Des Hayward. Do you hear me? Over.”

“I hear you, Cookie Cutter . . . What is your position? Over.”

In the helicopter, the NSCA team were heading for home when the radio burst into life. There was a change of plan. The Sea Safety Centre in Canberra had just phoned through to say that there was a yacht in distress: an 10 metre sloop by the name of Cookie Cutter. Its skipper had suffered an accident — suspected spinal injuries — and the boat was disabled. Course north-east. Position . . .

It took a very long time to find the Cookie Cutter. Chris Rieniets reports:

“We flew around there for a couple of hours trying to find them. The sea was unbelievable. We were flying at only about 1000 feet and even then we had a lot of difficulty finding them. It was a white-topped boat and it was just white capping [everywhere].”

An hour passed. Suddenly, there was a call from Rod Brown.

“There! Down there! Ten o'clock. What's that?”

The helicopter banked steeply. Sure enough, it was the white and red hull of a yacht, wallowing heavily, with clouds of spray bursting over it. A hull was all that remained of the yacht. Above the line of the cabin there was nothing at all. Mast, rigging, life lines, radio gear, ropes — all had gone. A shattered length of aluminium hung over the starboard side and what had been sails dragged in the water. It was a wreck but it was still floating. They dropped down and squinted at the name in red along the hull . . . Cookie Cutter.

Down in the yacht, Carol was yelling with excitement. She had opened the hatch again and now even Lyle could hear something above the noise of the wind. It was the unmistakable clatter of a helicopter.

Lyle turned back to his marine radio. He switched over to VHF and tuned as quickly as he could.

“Cookie Cutter here. Do you read me?”

The answer came through as clear as a bell.

“Cookie Cutter, this is the NSCA rescue chopper. We are directly above you. Do you copy? Over.”

The first plan was to drop Chris Rieniets aboard. He kitted up at lightning speed: yellow 6-mm wetsuit, gloves, helmet, goggles, flippers and knife.

The door slid back. Chris and Linton put together the Stokes litter stretcher and attached it to the hook. Linton swung out the winch arm, snapped the karabiner onto Chris’s safety harness and seconds later Chris was out above the sea, is swinging around, with one hand on the wire and the other holding the stretcher.

Down he went, spinning in the ferocious winds, and the heaving deck of the yacht came up to meet him. Thirty metres above him, Ray jockeyed the controls of the Bell 412, holding it by great skill in the one spot. Meanwhile Linton played the wire, inching Chris closer and closer to the boat.

It was hopeless. The stretcher bucked and swung in the gale-force winds and the deck of the yacht pitched sickeningly, one moment only metres away, the next sliding way out of reach. It was impossible for Chris to manhandle the stretcher onto the boat.

He signalled to Linton and was hauled up. They unclipped the stretcher and stowed it. Then Chris was back on the wire, solo this time, and dropping down once more towards the boat.

“We went down a few times. At one stage I was about three foot from the deck of the yacht, but then it just disappeared, thirty feet below us. It was pitching and rolling. I looked up and thought, let’s get the hell out of here.”

A failure of nerve? Hardly. After three attempts they could see it was a suicide mission. The dangers were only too plain. On a calm day such a drop would have been child’s play to an experienced “down-the-wire man”.

But in the middle of a storm, it was a lethal game, with 10 tonnes of boat on one side and 80 kilograms of man on the other. One slight misjudgement and Chris would have crashed into the hard fibreglass deck of the boat and broken an arm, both legs or his back - any one of them fatal in this situation. Or he could have fouled what was left of the boat’s rigging and been bodily ripped from the winch wire with enough force to tear off a limb.

He could also have missed the lurching boat entirely, dropped into the sea alongside and either been crushed by the hull as it rolled over on him or caught in his own winch wire, garrotted by the stainless steel cord that led up to the helicopter.

They flew up to consider their options.

“What now? We can’t winch onto the yacht. But we’ve got to do something.”

“Damn it. Just drop me in the water. I’ll climb onto it.”

“You’re mad. You’ll kill yourself! Besides, it’s against procedures. I can’t drop you off the wire.”

“I can do it.”

“A ladder. Have they got a boarding ladder? Rod, ask them.”

The question went through. Yes, there was a rope boarding ladder.

“Tell them to put it over the stern. You reckon you can get on that way?”

“No worries. Let’s get on with it.”

Down below, the two figures appeared in the yacht’s cockpit. The woman opened a locker and pulled something out. The man struggled out of the hatch and pulled himself towards the stern. Minutes passed.

“The ladder’s attached, they say.”

“I don’t like it, Chris. Once you’re off the wire, if you miss the boat, you’re gone. We’d never find you. It’s mad.”

“Listen, the bloke’s crook. It’s my decision. Stop bellyaching and drop me in the water. Go on!”

Chris landed about 8 metres upwind of the yacht.

“I swam across to the back of it. I got to the stern of the yacht. It was lifting four feet out of the water and at times I’d get sucked in underneath. It slammed on the back of my head a couple of times. It was only because I had a helmet on that it didn’t do any real damage. The lady had tied up the ladder but it wasn’t properly fastened. I grabbed the ladder and it just ripped straight off. That was that.”

It certainly was. He was now alone in the icy wastes of Bass Strait with only his strength between him and a lonely death. The people on the yacht were unable to help him. The helicopter crew would never retrieve him in such conditions. There was a full metre of smooth rolling hull between him and the stumps of metal left on the deck. Even to go near it was to invite a belting.

He couldn't just hang on and tread water. Even in his thick diver's wetsuit, hypothermia would get him within hours. He knew all about it in theory. There'd be controllable shivering, as the icy water temperature slowly penetrated the rubber of his wetsuit. He'd begin to get sleepy as the blood withdrew towards his heart and vital organs. The shivering would give way to a sort of fatal dreaminess. Eventually he'd forget to swim and his body would drop beneath the waves. They'd find him days later, or what was left of him, on some remote beach, if they found him at all.

Chris swam round to the windward side of the yacht. The waves were breaking against the hull, arcing high in the air and falling on the other side. He swam up and down looking for handholds. The mast wreckage and some sailcloth was dangling amidships, but it offered nothing to grip. Worse, the jagged ends of aluminium and broken wire were razor sharp. They would have cut straight through his gloves as he caught at them. Besides, that was the worst part of the hull for height. The bow was worse, with an overhang like a cliff, alternately rising and then driving down into the water.

Then on the stern he saw what was left of the cockpit railing. Part of it was still intact on the starboard side. It was his only chance.

Timing himself as exactly as a diver, he came up with the next wave and hurled himself into the air. He crashed against the side of the boat, flailing upwards. The force of the collision stunned him, but one hand, somehow, had caught the railing.

He was exhausted suddenly, and hung there for minutes on end collecting his strength. The boat rolled and shook him, but he kept his grip.

The helicopter clattered above, the crew watching him. On the deck of the yacht, Carol and Lyle watched helplessly too.

It was now or never. With a herculean effort, he dragged himself upwards on the bar, hung a leg over the side, teetered for a moment on the edge, and then rolled into the cockpit.

"G'day," he gasped. "I'm Chris. How are you?"

He had made it. Now it was time to do what he'd come for.

"I had a look at him, the normal medical procedure. He was tired, weak, a lot of pain in his back, pinpoint pupils, a lacerated skull . . . I was a bit worried that he might have had a cerebral haemorrhage, but then he said that he'd been taking tablets, so that was the reason for that. There was also the danger that with the knock to his back he might have a damaged kidney or liver. I stabilised him, put him on a bed and monitored his pulse and heart rate to make sure he wasn't haemorrhaging."

The crew above considered their options. Winching Lyle off Cookie Cutter was out of the question. The only way they could get him ashore was in the boat. But it wasn't going anywhere with a broken mast and torn sails hanging off it into the sea. For Chris, however,

the solution was obvious: he'd simply have to cut away the wreckage and motor the boat in to the coast.

“That was the biggest job, clearing the rigging. You've got to remember it was pitching and there was nothing to hang on to . . . all the railings were gone. The mast was hanging off the side, and it had a fair bit of tension on it, with the water weight. I got a pair of pliers and a screwdriver and went to work. Every so often I looked up and saw a big roller coming, and I just hung on and hoped to hell I didn't get washed off. It probably took about two and half hours to clear it all away.”

For someone who'd risked as much as this young man had done already, the rest of the task was easy. Under instruction from the skipper, he started the engine of the boat. The helicopter had gone off to refuel and reappeared just as they got under way.

They set a course for Mallacoota. By this time a large ship had appeared, called in to help in the emergency. It steamed alongside them to shield them from the wind.

The Cookie Cutter limped slowly towards the shore. Mallacoota proved useless, however, because the bar gave only a metre of clearance at high tide, and the Cookie Cutter drew nearly double that. So they turned and made for Gabo Island.

The sun dropped down but land had appeared and by seven o'clock, guided by a local in the helicopter, they threaded their way up the channel and pulled in alongside the jetty at the island. John and Nikki Lumb were there, together with the assistant keeper, some Fisheries Department workers, a couple of local fishermen who'd followed the whole drama on their radios and the helicopter crew, who had landed nearby.

Lyle was loaded onto the stretcher at last, put into the NSCA helicopter and airlifted to Sale Hospital. Carol was taken back to the Lumbs' house, fed and put to bed.

The aftermath? Lyle's injuries turned out to be superficial. He had crashed off the cabin roof during the disastrous roll, but had no broken bones or ruptured organs. Two days later he discharged himself from hospital and flew back to Gabo Island to rejoin the yacht. With assistance, the Chases motored back up the coast to Sydney and later refitted the Cookie Cutter to continue their round-the-world cruise.

Chris Rieniets put in another year with the NSCA before retiring and going into business in another branch of safety, manufacturing and selling smoke alarms.

About a year afterwards, dressed in his best suit, he walked down the red carpet at Government House, Melbourne, to receive the Royal Humane Society's prestigious Silver Medal for his extraordinary bravery.