

Report 17

As we alluded to at the end of our last report, there is a lot of nothing in the ocean along the coast of Papua New Guinea. In over 800-miles we saw only three FADs, three ships, two fishing boats, a big log and two schools of feeding dolphins. We know, however, that there are squid in abundance. One evening, Louise-Ann came up to the pilothouse asking, “What is all the black stuff I just cleaned up in the starboard shower”. True, I had taken a shower some time earlier, but black stuff...? Well, it turns out that we had been inked, not by one, but by at least seven squid all at the same time. Some of the ink had entered the porthole, which is over 6-feet up the side of the boat!

Passagemaking is rather easy in a trawler. In good or bad weather our days are filled with keeping watch, sleeping, making and eating meals, reading (a lot), and doing minor maintenance around the boat. The difference between a good passage and a bad one is entirely dependent upon the weather and to some degree the condition of our equipment. Two of the three axis, roll and yaw are compensated for, leaving only pitch.

Roll. Since we have hydraulic stabilizers, roll is not significant, except in bad seas. For the technically curious, the Naiad roll stabilizer system comprises a controller and two underwater fins at the turn of the bilge (one on each side), roughly in the middle of the boat. The fins are on a shaft and move clockwise or counter clockwise (in opposition to the roll from the waves), keeping the boat upright. The whole system is hydraulic. A hydraulic pump on the main engine produces about 1200 pounds of oil pressure. Part of this is sent through a very fine orifice to spin a gyroscope at a very fast rate. The gyro knows where level is, and when the boat rolls it sends an error signal (some oil pressure) down a hose to a proportioning valve on each fin. This valve modulates a much bigger oil flow that is connected to hydraulic rams (one on each fin). The rams move the fins. It's astonishingly simple, operates very well and is usually trouble free. But, ever since we had it overhauled in Singapore the system has been giving us trouble. Recently it died altogether. We will try to get basic repairs in Madang (PNG), which is our next planned stop. We'll get the whole system looked at when we (finally) get to New Zealand, as AKAMA will be way overdue for a haul-out and major planned maintenance.

Yaw. Otto (our faithful autopilot) steers the boat keeping the yawing to only a few degrees either side of our rhum line. The autopilot has its own electronic compass. We enter the course we wish to steer, and for the most part, Otto takes over from there. The only correction we need to make is to watch for the boat being set off course by wind or current, in which case we adjust the heading to suit. If it were not that we don't trust electronic gadgets, we could push a button and the GPS would talk to the autopilot, making the course corrections automatically. We do have a little random “hunting motion” at the bow, which is a quick but small yaw, caused by the stabilizers; this is not a problem. It takes quite a bad sea to put Otto off course or to result in excessive yawing.

Pitch. We certainly do pitch, as we climb up each wave and then surf down the other side, or as waves pass beneath us. This can be a reasonably pleasant up and down motion. However, in bad seas the bow and stern pump up and down a lot. Generally, we

make a nest of pillows on the pilothouse settee, which fortunately is about on the centre of motion for pitch, and we hang on. Incidentally, we just found out that in the dialect used by the people of the Ninego Islands, AKAMA means to hang on.

Everyone asks us about pirates; for the most part, they are not a problem. However, we had a bit of scare on 29 January. A large vessel was heading directly towards us at great speed. Then, when it was about a mile away, it suddenly turned off and watched us for a little while. Then it went away. The only other yacht near us, HARMONY-88, about 25-miles away, was having some similar concerns of their own. Two big boats not only approached them but came alongside and asked them to stop (they refused). In the end it turned out that the boats in question were Philippine squid boats and the crews were simply curious...there are nearly no yachts, sail or power, out here, so, we're a curiosity.

On the morning of 31 January, one week to the hour from the time we left Helen Reef, we arrived at Longan Island in the Ninigo Island Group of Papua New Guinea. This was our longest passage yet, about 850-miles non-stop. All but the last day was easy, as the WX was fair. But, we got no sleep the last day as a storm came up and tossed us about a bit.

Ninigos is sure not to be on your map, but it is just west of the Admiralty Islands, which should be mentioned. Getting into the lagoon was a white-knuckle experience, as we were a bit too early in the day to properly read the water for shoals. Also, our electronic charts are significantly off (not uncommon in this area), and just plain wrong here and there (also not uncommon). We entered through a narrow pass in the northwest of the reef and immediately noticed how much calmer the waters were, due to the protection of the reef. We anchored (01 d 13.565 m South by 144 d 17.714 m East). However, after we were anchored in the lagoon, we had a storm with winds gusting over 30-knots, which tossed us about; so we still could not sleep.

The Ninigos is a large coral atoll with numerous islands in the lagoon, most populated with only a family or two. The fringing reef has still more islands and several of the larger ones have villages. The people that live here are subsistence farmers (sweet potato, local greens, coconut, beans, and local citrus) and fishermen (they eat what they catch, and collect and dry sea cucumber for sale to the Chinese). Life is exceptionally simple. They have no electricity (we did not see even portable generators), no running water (they catch rain), no sewage system (the privies are "grass huts" over the water at the end of the docks), no TV/radio stations (a few have portable short wave receivers), and no cars, motorcycles, paved roads or traffic lights. Yet, they seem happier than most city people we know.

People here go everywhere by outrigger canoe, most with sails. The forefathers of the people living here went to sea in dugout canoes, travelling hundreds of miles, without benefit of equipment. We talked to one of the villagers about this and he lamented that the ability to even build an ocean canoe, let alone sail one between islands, was all but lost. Then in the year 2000, they decided to correct this situation. They found some old people that still had the skills, and they now teach the children how to build a canoe; we

saw several in progress. Until this happened, they were dependent on boats with outboards to get around the islands. The outboards continually broke down and the cost of fuel was prohibitive.

We visited the delightful village on Pihun Island. Throughout the community we were amazed at how well the people used the local materials; we saw nearly no imported goods. The village was spotless and the grounds were raked clean. Like most places, however, they are dependent upon the Government, which often does not meet the needs of its citizens. They had outgrown their school and asked the Government for funds to build a 2-room extension; apparently they were refused. So, rather than whinge about it, they cleared some bush, sawed up some timber, built a frame and then constructed the walls in the traditional fashion, using sago palm leaves, thatch and bamboo. They are currently building all the desks from local materials. The result is probably more practical than a timber building that the Government would have funded.

We've traded with the people, us giving T-shirts and cigarettes and the locals supplying fruit, vegetables and fish. We received several beautiful painted crayfish, beans, sweet potatoes, local citrus fruits, and so on. Since they have nothing, everything we have they want. We asked them to burn our garbage for us, knowing full well that they would pick through it. Sure enough, an old peanut butter jar became a storage container and a talcum powder container became a child's toy. We had the remnants of an old sail that we did not want, which they eagerly snapped up. Even a worn out sail is better than the scraps of blue poly tarps and old bed sheets that they patch together to use for a sail.

Paradise is not without its problems. It seems that there is a small group of locals that live apart from the others, possibly divided by some feud or by religion (most here are Seventh Day Adventists). The splinter group lives on an island close to the entrance to the lagoon. When a boat appears, they swoop over, making first contact, and try to get the cruisers to stay at their island. Of course, the rest of the population thinks this is poor manners and the two groups bad-mouth each other. We met both groups and apart from the carping about each other, they were both delightful.

In our next report we will tell you about the Hermit Islands, to which we are bound as we conclude this report.

Best wishes to all,
M & LA