

Chapter 25 *AROUND THE WORLD IN EVER INCREASING CIRCLES*



MACHINEGUN ALLEY

FOUR J's CHALLENGE THE RED SEA

From letters 14 March 1985 Port Sudan and 2 May 1985 Port Suez

Last night at sunset, we arrived in Port Sudan halfway up the dreaded Red Sea. So far, so good. Our masts still stand, all sails are intact, and three-quarters of our fuel and water remain. That's far better than most in the fleet of a dozen yachts, where torn sails, equipment failures and excessive water/fuel consumption are a grave concern.

Blasted into this challenging sea of conflict by a "you can't turn back" southerly gale, both big seas and ships have scared the blazes out of us. Starting that first night, when we screamed through its narrow entrance called Bab el Mandeb, which means, get this, "The Gates of Hell." Next we survived another day of strong south winds that pushed us into a treeless moonscape of rocky, volcanic islands. Then unbelievably, at the point of no turning back, the wind swung in a 180-degree about-turn that clobbered us from directly ahead. And we've been battling headwinds ever since.

The land on either side is lifeless and flat, appearing just sand and rock, horrible and blah. Ships stream down the centre of this narrow sea, causing grey hairs for yacht skippers, and frightening nights for the crews. There are few navigational lights, no friendly ports, and both shores are fringed with dangerous reefs. And the wind is always from ahead, straight from our destination. Everything challenges our determination...

Gunship ~

Late one night lit only by a half-moon, when beating towards Eritrean shores a powerful beam of light searched us out as we made slow progress against a headwind.

Jude's Diary:

On watch at two this morning going up into the cockpit where everywhere is black because we're sailing without lights, hoping to avoid pirates. Just after standing on the seat to get a better look around, a startling blast of light zags back and forth about a half-mile astern. As it began to zero in, I knew straight away it couldn't be a regular ship and screeched for Jack to get up...

When it locked onto *Banyandah*, machine-gun fire rent the air like a string of exploding firecrackers turning the night into a light show of tracers. Jude scared, as we both were, wailed, "Please don't shoot us."

Fetching the gun, I yelled for the boys to wake up, thinking it would be best to let this mysterious gunship see a family with children on board.

I felt they'd not attack children. Then I lined us up along the hand railing, so we all stood openly on deck as the searchlight illuminated an easy target for any marksmen. Suddenly extinguished, there a few boat lengths away, we could see this no-nonsense gunship silhouetted in the scant moonlight. Next a loudhailer broke the night's silence.

"Drop your sails - come alongside." blared across the wind in an Eastern European voice.

What a crazy notion! So I waved my arms in an emphatic "NO!"

For an hour that unlit, unmarked ship pursued us like a cat playing with a mouse; searchlight flashing across our sails, sporadic gunfire cracking the night air as they attempted to stop us. But we defiantly pushed on...