

Port Macquarie to Melbourne: The return of Alma Doepel

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Master, Alma Doepel

During 2007 the Board of Sail & Adventure resolved to relocate the ship to Melbourne "at the earliest opportunity and by the safest and most cost-effective means". The Board noted that the fabric of the vessel was continuing to deteriorate at an alarming rate. This was partly due to her location at Port Macquarie (open berth with a continuous swell rolling in from the bar, tropical conditions which supported a particularly energetic variety of toredo worm (bigger than your thumb and with teeth a Rottweiler would envy) and a social environment which entailed keeping a 24 hour watch for locals intent upon all manner of mischief). The economic scenario showed that she was able to only attract a very small income from visitors or donors.

Notwithstanding local attempts to retain the vessel in Port Macquarie work progressed during the latter half of 2008 culminating with a week in dry-dock to secure the drop keels, re-fix "A" frames supporting the props and general filling of suspect seams and leaks. A coat of anti-foul was applied just before floating out in September. Sea trials were set for a three-day coastal run. Two hours across the bar and the ship was returned to her berth. She was in no way ready to travel south.

A second dry-docking in December saw her entire hull sheathed with mastic compound and canvas secured with timber battens every two metres and then more anti-foul.

Various moves within Port Macquarie entailed the writer acquiring unheard of frequent-flyer status along with a

dedicated group of Melbourne based supporters. Fortunately local engineers and supporters who were able to see the need for Alma to move south for survival ably kept the mechanical side of the ship in good order and Pat McDade, Tim Horton and Seumas McCleod from Melbourne acted as ship-keepers. With her canvas "nappy" in place and the wells drier than for years she lay alongside the fitting out wharf at Birdon's by 10th January 2009. A small mountain of junk was left ashore, the yards were struck to improve stability, and a crew of 15 arrived along with 2 portable generators, a raft of extra pumps, bedding and wet-weather gear.

Departure from the dockyard was at 0800 / 13th Jan 2009. A brief visit to the town pier at Port Macquarie to take water and stores was concluded with press and locals wishing us well. Departure was 1100.

Crossing the bar at slack water and picking up a substantial southerly set we motor sailed past the familiar headlands of the NSW coast. WX NE 15kts, low S'ly swell.



Alma leaves the Hastings River

Conditions remained favourable through the balance of 13th and 14th with Newcastle abeam late PM / 14th. An increase in sea state during the dogs had seen a fair amount of the Tasman coming aboard with some ingress to the engine room and accommodation spaces. This

was due to failure of the deck sealing at the houses. The accumulation of water was easily managed by the pumps but the amount of water entering the E/R space was of particular concern.

This concern was to be justified when at 2150 the main generator stopped. Replacement of the voltage regulator brought a brief return to operation but with an alarming spiking of the current. Shortly before midnight the generator stopped for the final time. The alternator was beyond repair.

Diversion was set immediately for Newcastle, a fortunate 23nm away to the WSW. With the help of the Harbour Master and Port Authority and with the need for a Pilot waived we enter Newcastle harbour at 0230 /15th and berthed alongside the old ADI wharf adjacent to the floating dock.

Daylight had a bemused wharf manager at the ship's side wondering what had literally landed at his front door. After explanation we received all the help and consideration we could have asked for and by 1700 we had departed the berth with a 3 tonne gen-set well secured abaft the main mast.



Frans supervises loading the generator

South from Newcastle we caught favourable winds again and with only a few hiccups from the gen-set (due to air getting into the fuel line) made a good 7

kt average past Sydney and Port Kembla.

Just after Noon on the following day a gentle NE'ly wind backed sharply to the SE and increased to 30kts. Over the space of half an hour this increased to 45 kts with a substantial swell. With a Tsunami warning for the coast we tucked our tail between our legs and headed back to Jervis Bay.



Capt John in his lair

At anchor close to HMAS Creswell we had 36 hours of listening to the wind howling overhead in the trees. A brief trip to the NW of Jervis Bay to collect stores was far from a pleasant experience.

Late afternoon on Saturday 17th offered a window in the weather so we headed out to find vastly improved conditions and a beam reach which got us to Eden by mid afternoon on Sunday. Fuel, water and stores were completed by 1700 and despite a few mumbles about the proximity of the Fisherman's Club we headed off and cleared the entrance by 1800. Captains Josephine Clark and Max Saunders deserve special mention for their help and hospitality.

The next leg past Gabo and onto the Prom was without doubt a case of the gods smiling on the virtuous. Consistent E to NE winds with only minimum swell. SE Pt abeam at a few minutes before midnight 19th Jan.

These conditions stayed with us until south of West Head in the AM / 20th when a stiff SW'ly came into play. Engines were stopped and all plain sail raised. The final leg of our passage was achieved under sail making a steady 9 kts.

Tidal streams precluded our entering the Heads until 1530 by which time the SW'ly increased to 35/40 kts. Still under full sail we passed Lonsdale at close to ten knots and slid quietly off the leads to sail past Portsea, Sorrento and Rye. A brief stop was made at Rye Pier to embark 2 persons and then straight up the Bay, anchoring on the flats at Williamstown at 2230.

We had made it!!



Alma off Sorrento (Photo- Andrew McKinnon)

Anchor was up next morning at 0830 and we motored upriver to pass under the Bolte Bridge at 1015 Wednesday 21st January 2009.



Captain John toasts the crew
We covered 854 nm on passage at an average speed of 6.96 kts.

A generous and sincere welcome was given by the City of Melbourne, VicUrban, and Lend-Lease. After all pleasantries were completed the ship was shifted to her new home at No. 2 Victoria Harbour. Captain Ralph McDonnell was at the dock to greet the ship and with some assistance was able to make the journey on board to No. 2 berth.



Welcome to Docklands

Now the hard part starts. Over the next two years Alma will be extensively refitted under MSV codes to return her to her sail training and commercial role. All help will be gratefully appreciated.