

CHANGES

With reports this month from **Polaris** on surviving the return of Cyclone Alan; from **Tandalao** on a novice's small boat voyage to Hawaii; from **Dreamer** on getting boatwork done on the Queensland Coast; from **Teacher's Pet** on lessons learned after six months of cruising; from **Thursday's Child** on numerous delays trying to get through the Canal; from **Panacea** on getting boatwork done in Fiji; from **Sybarite** on cruising from the East Coast to San Diego; and **Cruise Notes**.

Polaris — Islander 53

Don McGreevy

Cyclone Alan

(Mill Valley)

I've spent years reading various accounts — many in *Latitude* — of being caught in hurricanes or cyclones. I assumed that I'd never experience a hurricane first-hand because they obviously happened to others who were unfortunate enough to be sailing somewhere during hurricane season. My assumption recently proved to be very wrong.

During the third week of April, I found myself sailing from Papeete to Bora Bora with John Connolly, director of Modern Sailing Academy in Sausalito. I was part of a crew of students/adventure sailors aboard the Academy's custom Islander 53 *Polaris*. While French Polynesia historically hasn't been hit by many cyclones, and while it was late in the cyclone season, we nonetheless had been monitoring the barometer and weather reports

When cyclone 'Alan' returned for an unexpected second hit, hundreds of homes were destroyed in Raiatea, Tahaa, Bora Bora and Huahine.



from Hawaii on WWV.

On April 23, we were advised of a low pressure system building to the northwest of us. So when we entered Bora Bora's lagoon that evening, we decided to anchor in front of the Bora Bora YC — but not too close. We found a spot well away from other boats in — you don't have much choice in French Polynesia — 90 feet of water. We set two CQRs — a 65-pounder and a 75-pounder — about 75 feet apart. They were secured to the mud bottom with about 250 feet of chain each.

The following day we learned that the depression had built to winds in excess of 64 knots and therefore had become Cyclone Alan. This wasn't supposed to happen to me. By late on Friday the 24th, we experienced winds that registered more than 60 knots on our anemometer. Everything went well, however, and we thought to ourselves, "Sixty knots plus? Big deal."

We were able to get weather updates from Meteo France because the Bora Bora YC broadcast them over the VHF. Al, our French-speaking crewmember, did the translating. By Saturday morning, we'd come to the conclusion — by listening to WWV and talking to local people — that the cyclone had moved to the southeast of us and was dissipating.

By that time our major concern wasn't the wind, but the huge swells from the southwest that came through Teavanui Pass and into the anchorage. We were looking pretty good, however, except for the two charter Beneteaus that had anchored too close to us. We asked one of them to move and he was nice enough to comply.

The people at the Bora Bora YC not only run one of the best restaurants on the islands, but they're also extremely helpful and friendly. Having replaced a suspect alternator, it was now early evening and our crew was thinking about taking the dink to the yacht club for another fine meal.

"John, you'd better look at this!" one of the crew said, interrupting our thoughts of food. The captain came on



deck to see the dinghy, tied behind the boat, completely out of the water doing a 'vertical dance'. After quite a struggle in the increasingly strong wind, we managed to lash the dinghy firmly to the foredeck. Then all hell broke loose.

Our 53-foot boat was hit by such a powerful gust of wind that it put her rail under — despite the well-furled sails. Everything — tools, books, charts, food, plates and glasses — flew onto the cabin sole. When a bottle of olive oil hit the sole, the lid came off. Soon the sole was a slippery mess. And outside, the wind continued to howl even stronger. In just 20 minutes we'd gone from light breezes to 'Oh my God!' strength winds.

We'd been taken totally by surprise. After the 'all clear' signal earlier in the day, nobody had bothered to check the weather reports. We should have known better, as Alan had apparently strengthened and doubled back in our direction. In any event, we spent the next three hours trying to keep the bow of our boat pointed into the wind so as to decrease the strain on the anchors. We motored on the hook

IN LATITUDES

CHANGES

SPREAD: FIRST LIGHT. INSETS: DON MCCREEDY

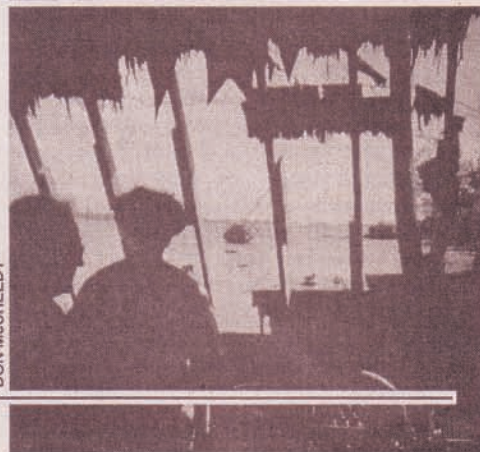
we hung on to *Polaris* for dear life on the dark but starry night, we wondered if the people in cars were on some mercy mission — or just going over to a friend's house for a beer and companionship. As far as we knew, this cyclone wasn't even as strong as the one last November, the one whose huge swell had wrecked the yacht club's dock and destroyed parts of several resorts.

Just after 2300 — having had three hours of very strong wind — everything began to settle down again. As it turned out, Alan left as quickly as he'd arrived. We waited for more than an hour to see if the cyclone would rebuild, thinking that maybe we were just in the eye of the storm. Fortunately, it was all over. We were curious about damage to other boats or on land, but it was too dark to see to shore or beyond the boats right next to us. So we got some much-needed rest having no idea about the damage reborn Alan had inflicted on Bora Bora and other boats in the harbor.

The next morning we dinghied ashore to learn that the yacht club had sustained only minor damage to its roof — but that four of 17 boats in the anchorage had broken away from their moorings. Two of the sailboats had hit a *motu* and gone ashore on a sandy beach. The crew of one of those boats had been so comforted by the weather reports that they'd turned in early without setting an anchor watch. They awoke to find themselves being blown ashore by hurricane force winds! Luckily no one was hurt and the damage to the boat was moderate and repairable.

The third boat left its mooring and went ashore close to the yacht club. When we returned just over a week later, she'd been pulled off the coral and was back in the anchorage. The fourth boat was a Raiatea-

The folks who run the Bora Bora YC — really a restaurant — are terrific. The 'club' was battered by the return of 'Alan', but survived.



DON MCCREEDY

based charter yacht with just the delivery skipper and his family aboard. When she lost her mooring, the skipper quickly motored her around a nearby point and into a protected bay.

While ashore, we also learned that winds of more than 200 kilometers had been reported. So, it's safe to assume that those of us aboard *Polaris* had been in winds in excess of 100 knots. Sadly, parts of Raiatea, Huahine, Tahaa, Maupiti and Bora Bora were severely damaged, and over 20 people lost their lives. Hearing of the deaths and destruction greatly tempered the exuberance we felt at having weathered such a blow.

It was disheartening to see all the damage done to structures and boats. The ferry that shuttled passengers to the airport at Bora Bora, for example, sank at the dock. Later we sailed to Huahine, where we saw a school that lost its entire roof and church steeples blown to the ground. Scores of homes had literally been blown away, and the corrugated steel roof panels covered adjacent hillsides. In addition, many trees were blown down and stripped of foliage. A number of boats on the hard at Raiatea were blown over like so many dominoes.

I would humbly like to make some observations that might prevent other sailors from being caught in the same situation. First of all, sail in the correct season. South Pacific cyclones are most prevalent between late December and late March — but they have occurred as early as November and as late as May. Although cyclones are not thought to be common as far east as Papeete (149°W), it's true that Bora Bora (151° 30'W) — even further east — did experience one last November.

Secondly, prepare your boat for heavy weather before leaving. I now realized that we'd actually been preparing *Polaris* in Sausalito the previous summer when we fitted her out. There's nothing like having a knowledgeable and experienced skipper aboard a well-prepared boat when the wind really comes up.

Two things you shouldn't completely trust are weather reports and moorings. Real time weather is whatever is happening where you are. So keep a close eye on your barometer, observe what's happening around you, and use your own weather sense. As for moorings, how can you know what the rusty bits of chain are connected to at the bottom? And who knows how strong the chains are? If you have to use rope rodes or rope lines to moorings, protect them from chafe. Most

of us know this stuff already, but don't really take it to heart until we're caught in a very nasty storm.

I would like to close by thanking Capt. John and the crew of John, Al, Joe, Mike and Alex for weathering the storm so well. And a tip of the hat to Guy, Jerry, Moeana and Jean Michael at Bora Bora YC for being so hospitable.

— don 5/5/98