

PAC Cup Race 2016

I was lucky enough to be invited to sail on Tiki Blue in the 2,000 nautical mile Pacific Cup race between San Francisco and Hawaii. The PAC race is held every two years and attracts entrants predominantly from the west coast of the USA. It is rightfully billed the “Fun Race to Hawaii”. This year’s race attracted some 68 entrants - ranging from Rio 100, a 100 foot super-maxi, to two Moore 24’s which are, you guessed it, only 24 foot long. One of them – MAS, won the race on handicap.

Tiki Blue is a comfortable, strong and surprisingly fast 42 foot cruising yacht owned by Gary Troxel, the Commodore of the PAC Yacht Club. This was Gary’s 5th PAC race on Tiki Blue and my first experience of ocean racing. The race was a blast. We were fortunate to get some of the best wind and wave conditions for many years which resulted in record runs for many of the contestants including a 10 day crossing for Tiki Blue and an overall ninth place on handicap.

At the pre-race briefing we hear about several tropical storms tracking from Mexico to Hawaii and in particular a storm named Darby. In reality we experience consistent 20 to 35 knot winds. Darby did pay a visit with an impressive lightning show and some local flooding on Oahu soon after our arrival into Hawaii.

The following are some of my recollections from the race:

- From her birth at the Richmond Yacht Club we motor Tiki Blue over to the start of our division race at the famous St Francis Yacht Club. Starting on port we soon tack onto starboard and head out under the Golden Gate Bridge and the entrance to San Francisco Bay. We are joined by a pod of humpback whales and pass some inquisitive seals basking on the buoys which mark the shipping channel – WOW San Francisco is an incredibly beautiful city - but even in mid-summer it’s a bit cold for a Queenslander – Foulies, (wet weather gear) are essential clothing for the first few days of the race.
- It’s a port reach for the next few days so all moveable, weighty items are stowed on the port side of the boat.
- We were supposed to get a full moon to light our way at night but we don’t see much of the moon or the

stars due to heavy cloud cover.

- Typical driving instructions are – “Your course is 225 degrees. Don’t steer below 230 degrees and only go above 220 if you can catch a wave and preferably three and GO FAST and DON’T CRASH JIBE.” Dead down wind is 230 degrees +/- . Even 1,000 miles from land the wind is surprisingly variable in both speed and direction and the driving instructions are hard to adhere to.
- Sailing at night proves challenging - especially when it is pitch black and there are large, barely visible seas. You soon learn about the “twister” waves which require significant manhandling of the wheel. I find that swearing at these waves also helps.
- Staying alert during night watch is difficult. Cups of coffee help. Then there is “Military Gum” which is supposed to keep you awake and focused. I probably should have read the fine print which recommends consuming no more than two pieces in any 12 hour period - but it is dark. After extracting the goodness from three pieces of gum at the start of my watch I can clearly see flocks of birds flying straight at me and a big bird perched on the boom vang! I can also see people in the cock-pit who weren’t there. The flying fish were probably real but no more military gum for me.
- It’s amazing how you can stay more or less horizontal long enough to sleep by hanging onto something solid with both hands and wedging your feet against other parts of the boat. Three hours is typically enough.
- Heating one of the five star meals on Tiki Blue’s gimbaled stove is also, sometimes challenging. On one occasion some magnificent, marinated steaks escaped the stove top and landed half way up the bathroom door on the opposite side of the cabin. Who the hell is driving this boat? – Hang on whilst I retrieve your dinner from the bilge.
- One of the objectives of driving is to keep the boat under the top of the mast and the spinnaker, which on Tiki Blue is a large, blue and yellow mast-head kite that only god is allowed to take down. At night you learn to feel the wind. If you feel the wind on your windward ear lobe then you are probably sailing too high. If you can feel it on your leeward ear lobe – LOOK OUT you are about to jibe. If you can feel it in

the small of your back – you are probably doing OK for the moment but don't relax and watch the compass.

- What was that noise? The boat is heeling at an alarming angle with blue water visible through the cabin top windows. Everyone on deck! I remain below and clamber up to the fore-hatch where the remains of a spinnaker are handed down to me. How many spinnakers have we got left? Get this one up.
- Surfing: Tiki Blue becomes a 42 foot, nine tonne Hawaiian longboard. We reckon the bigger waves are between 20 and 25 feet high. These combined with cross seas from both port and starboard produce some great surfing waves. As we get closer to Hawaii we also experience cross waves from Hurricane Darby. A quick tweak of the wheel and by magic you catch a wave with the attendant adrenaline rush as the boat accelerates at an incredible rate. Twelve knots, 15, 18 + knots WOW. My personal best was 19 knots. You can feel the boat vibrate with the turbulence. Plumes of water rise up from the bow and almost reach the stern. Our record of 24 knots is achieved by Captain Troxel,
- Planned Jibes. The navigator is watching our progress against other competitors and trying to work out the best time to jibe. Jibing requires everyone on deck. We go through what is about to happen and everyone's job. There are difficulties in translation – what the hell is a "fore-guy" and what the hell is an "after-guy"? The fore-guy and after-guy turn out to be ropes that control the spinnaker. During a jibe they need to be variously trimmed in, let out and re-trimmed. After 10 days I think I've finally got it. I can now grind a spinnaker in with the best of them. The skill is in timing and coordinating everyone's job so the spinnaker does not wrap around the forestay. We just manage it with the help of our specialist helmsman - well done team.
- Sailing into the Kaneohe Yacht Club is a surreal experience. A local volunteer boat guides us through the maze of coral reefs which lead to the clubhouse. The Kaneohe Yacht Club must be the most welcoming in the world. We are greeted by a large, vocal crowd of well-wishers who make us feel we have just won an Olympic Gold Medal. They rehydrate us with jugs of Mai Tai - a local staple of

chilled and largely undiluted rum. There are fresh pineapples, a hot shower and clean clothes – heaven.

There is even a swimming pool on the front lawn.

The biggest challenge is to stay upright as you slowly regain your land legs in the que at the bar.

- After 10 and ½ days the main cabin on Tiki Blue smells like over-ripe blue cheese. The first few days are spent cleaning the boat in readiness for her return trip to San Francisco.

In Hawaii I was able to swap burgees with the Commodore of the Kaneohe Yacht Club, Richard Perkins.

If you are ever lucky enough to enjoy the hospitality of KYC you might spot the SYC burgee amongst the collection which hangs over the bar.

I would like thank Gary Troxel for inviting me on Tiki Blue and Larry Nelson, Will Paxton and my brother Chris for a wonderful experience which I shall never forget.

Lindsay Gilbert, Commodore Sandgate Yacht Club



