

NO PLAIN SAILING

‘WE haven’t pulled out, we’re just delayed,’ is how Detective Senior Sergeant Andy Hughes (Detective Training) describes the untimely removal of his boat from the Australian Bi-Centennial Tall Ships Fleet.

That ‘untimely removal’ was a fire which caused \$60,000 damage to his former pearling lugger, the ‘Falla’ (as featured in the February issue of ‘Platypus’).

‘We certainly didn’t sail 3,000 miles in the teeth of gales to have a fire stop us when we were only 150 miles from Sydney,’ Andy told ‘Platypus’.

‘I’ve ordered new Tall Ships flags from the Bi-Centennial Authority and come August after the repairs have been finished, we’ll sail to Sydney flying the signal, ‘we made it!’,’ he said.



The damaged ‘Falla’. (Pictures courtesy of the ‘Southern Star’ newspaper, Moruya).

The ‘Falla’ had been in Bateman’s Bay on the New South Wales South Coast for engine repairs when the accident happened.

‘It was January 21 and we were to leave that morning on the high tide at nine a.m.,’ Andy said.

‘At 10 past five I was awoken by smoke and the crackling sound of flames. I ran on deck to see that a ferry, the ‘Merinda’, moored next to us was ablaze.

‘I got the mate, Steve Bridgewood, out of the wheelhouse and we got my wife, Vicki, and the four sail trainees we were carrying, off the boat.

‘We couldn’t get to the stern lines holding us to the blazing ferry because there was too much smoke and heat.

‘We got the fire hose off the dock but the ‘Merinda’ was too well ablaze for it to do any good and at that stage the

mooring ropes burnt through and the ‘Falla’ drifted away,’ he said.

The fiery embrace was very costly for the ‘Falla’. Damage included the loss of the wheel house, mizzen mast, part of the stern deck and part of the transom.

However the hull was not damaged and Andy is confident the old lugger can be made as good as new.

‘She was the oldest vessel to leave Fremantle for the Bi-Centennial cruise to Sydney and she certainly proved herself to be a tremendous sea boat,’ he said.

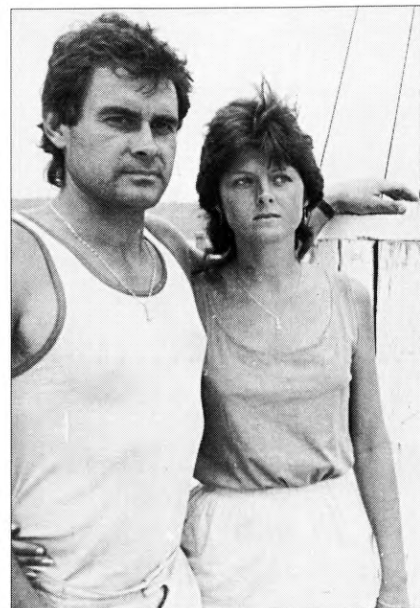
‘There were four gales during the 12 days it took us to get from Fremantle to Adelaide across the Great Australian Bight with head winds all the time.

‘Of the 26 boats that started only 11 made it to Adelaide. Some were dismantled and others withdrew because they found the conditions too rough.

‘I saw one 55 foot steel ketch which did make it. The paint on her bows was stripped back to the primer by the pounding of the seas, it was so rough,’ Andy said.

As part of the Bi-Centennial a total of nine young people sailed with the ‘Falla’ on various parts of the journey. Five came from Canberra, one from Sydney and three from Adelaide.

‘The kids all greatly enjoyed it,’ Andy said, ‘and we were all extremely appreciative of the reception we received along the way.



Andy and Vicki Hughes

‘We had to stop at Kangaroo Island for six days enroute when the engine overheated and to renew caulking in the bows opened up by the heavy seas. The locals wouldn’t let us pay for anything — including the repairs.

‘At Albany, the Lady Mayoress couldn’t do enough for us and it was like having the keys to the city.

‘Because we were unsponsored all the people we met really opened up to us.

‘The only problems we had were in Adelaide where somebody stole our Bicentennial flags and the ship’s name plate, and at the start of the trip at Fremantle when the ‘Falla’s’ dinghy was souvenired!’ Andy said.

So by about August the ‘Falla’ will be resuming her Bicentennial voyage.

As Able Seaman Hughes says: ‘we’ll just be a bit slower than the rest!’



The ‘Falla’ before the fire.