



## REFLECTIONS 150 YEARS

### Nick Cassim

**Nick Cassim:** My parents were Greek-speaking. My dad came here in 1910 as a boy of 10. The youngest of 11 from the island of Kythera. His father was a priest, and he couldn't afford to keep his kids. He had a brother out here and Dad was on this ship for six weeks, couldn't speak English, by himself. There was a little sign around his neck with his name on it and that's how he got here.

When I left school in 1947, I became articled to a Greek-speaking solicitor, a fellow called Arthur T. George, who was more of a businessman than a lawyer, and I was walking around as an articled clerk on seven and six pence a week.

I got very friendly with Bill Psaltis. I go back with Bill, God knows, how long. Billy was then sailing, and he had an 8-metre called *Waree*, now down in Melbourne called *Acrospire (III)*. She'd been restored, a lot of money spent on her. It needed to be restored too, it leaked like a sieve. Anyway, I got very keen on it, sailing with him. And Ted Hartley was an accountant. He got me involved with the Bohemian side of Sydney.

Have you always lived in Sydney?

**David Salter:** Yeah.

**NC:** Do you ever remember a downstairs coffee shop near the Australia Hotel called the Lincoln? That's where all the Bohemians were. Everybody went there. We all wanted to be poets. And I really wanted to be, of all things, a journalist and a playwright. I wrote plays. What I'm leading to is, Ted lived in a flat. One day he said, "I'm moving out of the flat and I've got this old VJ. Would you like it?" I said, "Okay". Could have looked a gift horse in the mouth.

So he gave me this old VJ. It was quite an interesting VJ at that. I don't know if you know the history of the VJ, but it was designed by a guy called Sil Rohu, who had a gun shop in Elizabeth Street, for the Vaucluse Sailing Club. But this one wasn't a plywood one, it was planked and painted inside with pitch and it had a wooden spar.

Anyhow, a friend of mine, Harry Thomas, a solicitor who worked for me for a short time, thought he might like sailing. So without knowing anything about sailing, we took it down to the Middle Harbour Yacht Club. We got in the thing and off we went. It was a very bright day and we got about halfway into the stream and the next thing you know, the thing sank. That was my introduction to sailing.

So anyhow, we had to get rid of it...it was only good for firewood. But I looked up in the paper and I found another VJ for sale, 25 quid I think it was. And believe it or not, it leaked like a sieve as well. And we were actually out off Grotto Point on a very quiet day, and the whole thing just – very late in the afternoon – just got level with the water. It looked like a long swim home. But fortunately, we got towed in by a very kindly power boat.

So a VJ was no good with two burly blokes. So I then ended up buying another boat, an 18-footer, designed by Alan Payne. Very similar to a VS, except it had a thin bulb keel with lead on it.

She was owned by Bill Psaltis and George Girdis. You know, three Greek guys. There's me, became Commodore of the Amateurs. George was Commodore of the CYC, and Bill was Commodore (there) twice. Anyway, they used to own this boat together. It was called *Neraida*. In Greek *Nereida*, which means a sea spirit. I bought that and I was moored right opposite the club. And I sailed that for about two years.

One adventure I had with her. The last race of the season was called the Nominated Skippers Day – they don't have it anymore – where the owner wasn't on the tiller. You had to put one of the other guys on the tiller. And all of the bloody crew I had were surfies from the Maroubra surf. So they weren't afraid of a bit of white water.

So it was blowing a reasonably fresh Sou'easter. We're coming up, you know, ripping along. I put a trapeze on it. At what we now call the Lady Bay buoy we're right at the mark and she pickles. Right. Boats everywhere. And there was a very nice guy, I remember he was Tony something or other, and he pulled out of the race to help us.

So he couldn't tow the boat anywhere. So he took us down into Middle Harbour. So there I was, with my boat floating somewhere up near the Heads and no boat. We're on the beach of Middle Harbour and a bloke came past in a Navy workboat. I offered him five quid if he'd take us out and look for the boat.

So we get out there and I get it towards Grotto Point. And I look over the side and there was a shark as big as the boat nearly. He was heading in the same direction as we were. Anyway, I sort of figured with the wind and the tide the way it is, it might have been over near Old Mans Hat. And I was bloody well right. We could see the white sails on the water. The guy offered to tow us back to Middle Harbour. Somebody had to jump in the water, tie the rope on. Nobody wanted to do it because they'd all seen the bloody shark [*laughter*]. It was my boat. So I figured, oh, well, nobody's ever been taken off here. So I jumped off and tied the rope on the mast, and this bloke towed me in.

Anyway, it got to the stage where it was too small for me, sort of thing, because I had family and that. So I ended up buying a Hayes-built boat, a sister ship to *Hoana*.

Now, I've got to tell you about Charlie Hayes. He used to build boats down on Middle Harbour. He used to carve them by hand. There used to be a lake or a lagoon or

something down in Middle Harbour. And he used to walk around towing them and watching the ripples. And he'd take a bit off and put a bit on. He finally got a design.

And he built quite a number of them in various lengths, scaled them up and scaled them down. So *Hoana* was one, and my boat was called *Janet* originally. But I ended up calling it *Ondine*, because *Ondine* is another name for a sea spirit (having the previous boat, *Neraida*, being a sea spirit). She was 40 years old when I bought her. Previous owner, Swaddling, sailing down from Long Reef and he fell off and drowned. But then she was sold to the guy who owns White Elevators. He owned it for quite a number of years.

And I was lucky enough to get it. It was a nice little boat. It had no headroom. When I bought it, it didn't have a bowsprit. And we used to be in the second division. And we were on 30-plus. So I looked at the papers, and she was designed as a cutter. So we put a bowsprit on it, and we put a great big yankee on it. From minus 35, we went up to scratch! And that was *Ondine*.

I'll tell you another story, but this is a personal story... nothing to do with sailing. But I was going out on a Wednesday afternoon race, and I had a bunch of businessmen, taking them out. And Bill had *Lass O'Luss* on the end of the CYC marina and he says, "I've got a bottle of champagne on the race". Now, he had five businessmen as well. Believe it or not, we won by a boat length. So we went back to the CYC, and they sent over the champagne. One of my guys...the businessmen...they were charmed, they loved it. He said, we ought to send one back.

So he sent one back. And then one of the other guys said, well, we ought to send one back. And 11.30 or 12 o'clock comes around. No dinner. How many bottles of champagne was drunk, I don't know. But that was the days when if they tested you... drinking ... you had to count to a hundred and walk the line. And I lived at Clontarf at the time.

Anyway, I got home, and I had a really steep drive, a garage at the top. Anyway, I promptly fell asleep. My wife Julia comes down about four o'clock in the morning and gives me the rounds of the kitchen and said, 'Come on, come on, you!' So I thought, oh hell, I could smell some burning. So, oh God, don't forget I had the bloody brakes on. So I eased the brakes off slightly.

Anyway, I get up into the house and get into my jammies. And I hear crash, bang, boom, thump. I looked down, there's the bloody car at the bottom of the drive, half turned over. Anyhow, all the neighbours came out and I hadn't met them all, right [*laughter*]. Five o'clock in the morning, well, something like that [*laughter*]. Anyway, that's a side story.

The old *Ondine* didn't have headroom, and I was getting a bit tired of no headroom and the kids were getting bigger. So we decided to sell it. This is where my story starts now. In front of the CYC was *Lolita* with a broken stump of a wooden mast. Everybody had looked at this and we'd heard about the story about how she'd done the roll, and what have you. And nobody wanted it, and I actually looked at it with a view to buying it.

But you know, the story was that she'd been wrecked, she went over, and...anyway the skipper was a bloke called Bob Young, who it turns out was an ex-RAAF pilot plus a navigator. And he used to be at the club telling the story of what happened, every night.

**DS:** So you were convinced that *Lolita* was sound?

**NC:** Yeah, I went and had a look at her. She wasn't screwed. She's nail clenched. A lot of old shippies say that's the best method. Nail clenching. And the other thing about her was that she was built at a time when there was a fair bit of Huon Pine around. And she's built in 35-foot lengths. No butt joints at all. So when you hit a wave, she goes 'boing' and keeps on going, right. Still doesn't leak.

So we bought the boat. The next thing you know, I wanted to be the first Amateur commodore to win the Hobart race. At that time, there was an engineer who had a workshop next to the CYC. I won't mention his name. I can't do it without spitting chips and biting my tongue. And I said, 'Look, the boat's 30 years old. I want a new rudder assembly' because I could feel that. And he slipped it, and he worked on the rudder.

So I go in the Hobart race and on the second night out, we're off Green Point, just about ready to jump into the Strait. I was down below, and the helmsman said, 'Skipper, I've got no steerage'. 'What?' And I go up, jiggle the helm, like this...

**DS:** Nothing?

**NC:** Nothing. So we had to pull out, and we had a very hard Southerly blowing. We managed, we ran up the coast, steering with sails only. The breeze slowly went round to the East, Nor'east, until we got off Ulladulla. So we managed to steer our way into Ulladulla, threw an anchor out at the back of the breaks. Now there was no Co-Op there at the time, just a long sloping beach. And there we were about 11 o'clock at night.

Now I had a bloke on the board at the time called John Gallant. Now John was an interesting bloke. He was born in Newfoundland, a Canadian, and grown up in the Bluenose schooners up on the Grand Banks. And he was a bailer boy out in the dories. Bailing and hooking. He also had been in the Merchant Navy. He was a seaman to his fingertips, he really was.

He says, 'Oh, the tide's coming in'. I said, 'Oh yeah, so what?' 'Well', he said, 'You know, you could careen in this boat'. Well, I knew what careening was, but I'd never done it. Anyway, to make a long story short, he talked me into it.

So we swam a guy out, we managed to get the anchor out, and we swam ashore. And as the tide came in, we hauled her in. Now when it was high tide, we had to turn the boat around, so the rudder assembly was only about this far underneath the water.

Now there was another guy on board, Dougie Cowan, he was a fitter and turner. So we got the blokes working on the rudder assembly, and we managed to pull it apart, and guess

what? That unspeakable so-and-so forgot to put the key in the keyway. There was no key in the bloody thing. And all it was working on originally was friction. So by the time that wore out....

I searched all over the boat, and we found this big bolt. So we filed and filed, and we filed and filed, and we made a key. And we put it in. In the morning, it was a bright sunny day, there was a tourist bus, all surrounded by tourists, offering us chocolate, sandwiches. No, we're still racing, no outside assistance. So we hauled ourselves off and started off in the race again.

Now, what happened, we got down off the tip of Tassie, and another hard Sou'wester came in. And unfortunately this bolt was monel. It's fairly soft, and it just started to go again. So I had to take the sensible course, and we pulled out of the race.

Then we come to the Kelly Cup.

**DS:** Yes!

**NC:** Now, in old days, they weren't extremist as they are today. If the starting boat could hold an anchor, they started the race. On this occasion, on the Kelly Cup in 1960, '67, it had been blowing, just like it's been blowing recently. Three bags full, really, really hard wind, over 30, 40, 50 knots. Only two boats fronted up – myself and a fellow called David Wearn, who owned *Waitere*. Now, in the morning, I had gone to Whitworths, and I bought a new headsail sheet.

*Waitere* used to belong to Harry Lloyd, who was then chairman of the Stock Exchange, but also an ex-Commodore of the Amateurs. But anyway, *Waitere* was out with David Wearn, and she had a bowsprit, which becomes a feature in the story.

We had all these Maroubra boys on board. We didn't care, and I was not that experienced. And we had to do a run up to Chowder Bay, and it was blowing every bit of 30 or 40 knots.

Guess what? Who was silly enough to put a kite up? Oh...that was a ride and a half!

Anyway, we got ahead of him then, and unfortunately, because we couldn't get the kite down, we went past the mark, and he got ahead of us. So finally, we got ahead of him again, and the next buoy was a mark they put down there right off Cremorne Point. We didn't put any kite up this time, but we had to do a gybe around and go back the other way.

When we finally got down to the mark, it had drifted in towards the shore and it wouldn't have been any more distance than from here to the front door, and we had to gybe around that bloody mark in 40 knots.

"Faarrk", I thought if anything goes wrong, you know. Anyhow, away we went. Boom! Finally, we got around. Anyway, we're having a duel with this bloke, so I'm ahead of this guy.

Everything's going great. Then we ended up down near the Squadron, around the mark off Kurraba (Point), and then we had a beat back to the finish at Clark Island. And I'm ahead, I'm ahead by literally 50 to 80 metres, ready to win the race.

There's the line in front of us! Ahh, and the headsail sheet broke...the new sheet I'd bought! That was the days of the cotton rope, but this was a nylon rope. I thought, you know, we're going to be double the strength.

Anyway, we tried to reeve the windward sheet, the lazy windward sheet, through the block. But by the time we did that, he actually beat us by the length of his bowsprit. Two seconds. Phew! That's how I got beaten for the bloody Kelly Cup.

**DS:** But you did win it. In 2014.

**NC:** Yeah!