

Up the Potomac in a Kangaroo

By Al Koval

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Sometime last year I got the crazy notion that as a member of the Potomac River Albacore Fleet it might be an interesting experience to sail my 15-foot Albacore KANGAROO" single-handed up the Potomac River. Hurricane Agnes and a knee operation put a stopper on the idea. But it persisted, and on June 11th I found myself putting out from the dock on what was to be a 133-mile trip from Smith Point (where the Potomac meets the Chesapeake) to Washington, D.C.

In provisioning the boat, I did pack a sleeping bag. However, I intended to use it only as a last resort (no pun intended); my project was to sail the river, not Lewis-and Clark-it ashore. Rather, I planned to sleep and eat two meals a day in lodgings ashore, and to limit my seagoing food to sandwiches, beef jerky strips, peanut butter crackers, and fruit to sustain me between breakfast and supper. I stowed a styrofoam cooler forward, wedged between the centerboard trunk and the seat tank. It became my icebox, stocked with ice cubes from various stops along the way; it kept several cans of beer and coke cold. I also had a half-gallon jug of water slung with a shock cord under the thwart. A sailbag filled with extra shirts, trousers, a jacket, toothbrush, and socks was secured under the after deck.

My compass was mounted on the mast gate. A small portable radio was secured to a shroud chain plate and my charts (three sheets) were taped to the thwart. A tool kit, extra fittings and lines, anchor, life jacket and paddle completed the outfitting.

My wife Joyce and I drove down to Smith Point on Monday morning, found the Marina on Tabs Creek, rigged the boat and slipped her into the water. Just before Joyce left to drive back to Annandale with the trailer, I asked her to do one last thing. "Talk me out of it." When she refused to cooperate, I went ahead with the venture.

Smith Point was chosen because it is further from Washington by about 10 miles than its sister point, Point Lookout, on the Maryland shore. These two points demark the mouth of the - Potomac; from then on it is the Chesapeake Bay

FIRST DAY

For the first hour or so I was as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs, but after that it was pure pleasure. 11:48 AM - Left the dock and, ~after rounding Smith Point, spent 5-1/2 hours on a port tack under beautiful, hot, sunny skies. Magnificent scenery. Clean water under the keel. 7:00 PM - Put into Bransom's Cove around Coles Point having averaged 4 knots over a 28.9 nautical mile course in 7 and 1/4 hours of sailing. Spent the night at a cabin in a trailer park off Ragged Point.

SECOND DAY

Wind blew 20 knots all day so I decided not to sail. Went fishing in the morning on a power boat with a Baptist Minister who was vacationing a Coles Point. Spent the afternoon dozing under a cedar tree overlooking the cove. Had dinner and slept the night in a farmhouse, with 71year-old fisherman I met at the cove.

THIRD DAY

Underway at 7 in the morning in a fresh breeze, and sailed up to Colonial Beach for one-hour layover at the Yacht Club. Underway again at 2 PM in light airs. Watched shells splashing into the water a mile off. (The Dahlgren Naval Laboratory conducting gun fire tests.) Flat calm and threatening thunderstorms cause me to paddle to Bluff Point above Colonial Beach. 5:15 - Tied up to private dock,

and got lift from local resident to Colonial Beach motel. Averaged only 2.4 knots today over a 21.8 nautical mile course in 9 hours of sailing.

FOURTH DAY

11:14 - Underway after 2 hour delay waiting for a Force Five wind to drop a bit. Delayed gunfire tests at Dahlgren while exasperated sailor in Patrol Boat watched me tack out of range in light airs. 2:00 PM - Passed under Highway 301 bridge and ran into 18 knot winds (with gusts to 25 at least) that lasted nearly 3 hours, during which I prayed a lot. Short stopover at Belvedere Beach. Sailed into Potomac Creek at sundown. Scenery from bridge to Potomac Creek was breath-taking! Today's sail was 22.6 nautical miles in 8-1/4 hours of sailing. Spent night at home. Since only 40 miles away, Joyce drove down to pick me up.

FIFTH DAY

10:30 - Left in light airs, headed for just above Quantico Marine Base. 4:30 - Fifteen knots winds hit, and I had beautiful hiked-out sailing to Gunston Cove for 2 hours. Stopped enroute to take distress call from power boat with bent propeller. 7 PM - Sailed wing-and- wing into Pohick Creek and tied up to dock. Called Coast Guard and reported power boat's position. Spent the night at home, which was only 15 miles away. Today's course was 26.3 nautical miles in 9 hours of sailing.

SIXTH DAY

10:53 - Departed Pohick Creek logging 4.3 knots in 12 f knot winds. 18 to 25 knot winds struck as I left the cove and, after 20 minutes of hair-raising planing, my courage ran out. I beached at Fort Belvoir. Waiting six hours while whitecaps rolled up the river. Shared beer and sandwiches with a sailor while we installed bow chocks on his new power boat. 4:30 - Underway again as wind dropped to Force 4. Made 6.9 knots on one 3 mile leg with jib wrapped around forestay and my heart wrapped my spine. From Mount Vernon to Washington Sailing Marina, wind 12 to 15 on port beam. 7 PM - Arrived at dock -after 15.3 nautical miles for the day. 5.8 knots averaged from Fort Belvoir to Flasher buoy off Marina.

Summarizing the trip: One of the most memorable events of my life. Magnificent scenery - a beautiful experience. More confident in my single-handed sailing ability. Met some wonderful people. Passed historical sites once frequented by Pocahontas, Captain John Smith, John Wilkes Booth, General Robert E. Lee, and Presidents Washington and Monroe. The trip was 115 nautical (133 statute) miles in length and took 36-1/2 hours to sail, during which I averaged 3.1 knots.

What would I like to attempt next? Well - Annapolis to Norfolk looks intriguingly However, if I could convince a few more Albacore owners that they would enjoy the river trip as much as I did - wouldn't it be great to sail a small fleet in company - maybe down-river next time I'm ready - Racing round the buoys is fun, but a long distance trip is unforgettable. Try it - You'll like it