



## WOOLLACOTT ASSOCIATION

### MARCO POLO - FEATURE BOAT

With a couple of 10 to 11 year old mates I roam the side streets of Takapuna looking for a suitable sheet of corrugated iron to make a tin canoe. The state of the fruit on the local fruit trees is also noted. A tin canoe is born, sealed with melted tar from the edge of one of the few tar sealed roads, and I have my first boat. Two years later I'm on the lookout for a 12' 6 Z Class yacht. A boatbuilder acquaintance of my father says, Get him to build one, it will do him good.

I struggle through this project but get great pleasure from its completion. By the time I start the 3 year job of creating Marco Polo, I have crewed on a couple of Woollacott yachts and my desire is to follow in the wake of those who sail and race across the Tasman Sea. I am just 21 when Marco Polo is launched; the year is 1953. She is on a borrowed mooring just off the Devonport Yacht Club and I get a phone call late one night from Devonport members that she is pounding alongside the retaining wall to the west of the Club. My nice new squabs have been put between her and the stone wall and the Club members have made a great effort in the gale force conditions to protect her. My gratitude cannot be expressed. She is hauled out, the topsides repaired, a new deadwood fitted aft of the lead keel and new timber scarfed into the damaged rudder. Now it's time to make her masts, booms and bowsprit. Fully rigged she is back on another mooring in the Devonport area, this time almost directly out from the Masonic Hotel. With Tig Loe, who has decided that being a farm cadet is not really what he wants to do, we think a couple of days away will help us get to know Marco Polo better. The usual south westerly is squalling down the harbour.



Most boats are hauled out for the winter and the mooring area is virtually empty. Now this ketch rig which I had requested in the design is new to us. Hoist the mizzen then the working jib, hurl the mooring buoy over the side and Marco Polo, guided by the sheeted mizzen, tears away on the wrong tack. Our only choice is to bear away, gathering more speed and gybe, BUT, now directly in front of us is the large wooden slab-sided motor-sailer Sundowner. She has a row of neat round portholes just below her rail and, as disaster is about to happen, I aim to try and pierce one of these with the projecting tip of Marco's bowsprit. No, of course this doesn't happen; we make a nice new porthole, slightly

lower, and proceed to shunt Sundowner around her mooring. We can hear the cheers from the Masonic Hotel patrons who are now standing outside. What, waiting for more drama? Free of Sundowner, we get a glimpse into her main cabin as the wind and the tide bear us away. All does end well. We anchor in the slight shelter behind North Head, walk to the Club, find out the address of the owner of Sundowner and walk to his home in Devonport. We feel very silly and incompetent and we have not really treated this man's boat very well. No, that's okay, don't worry about it. She has rot along those topsides and now I'll have to do something about it. Can we help, can we pay? No, I guess you have done me a service 'cos now I really will have to get onto it. What a lovely man, that Pud Dixon; what a relief. And so on 18th July 1954 Marco Polo set sail across the Tasman and around the world, to return in October 1957. Tony Armit



## MARCO POLO - CIRCUMNAVIGATES THE WORLD

In 1958 the Devonport Yacht Club hosted the presentation of the Slocum Society's internationally acclaimed Vos Award to Club member Tony Armit for his epic voyage around the world in the 28ft Woollacott ketch Marco Polo. The Vos Award, named in honour of Captain T.C. Vos, the first man to sail around the world without a crew member, is made for the most notable two man trans-oceanic passage made during the past year. In 1957 Tony Armit and Tig Loe successfully completed a three year circumnavigation and so became the first New Zealanders in a wholly New Zealand designed and built yacht to complete this formidable undertaking and receive this prestigious award. Considering that this voyage commenced fifty years ago in 1954, without all the benefits of modern gear and equipment and to-day's navigational aids, it was a remarkable achievement of seamanship, determination and endurance. Tony Armit was only 18 when he approached Devonport's Bert Woollacott to design a 28 footer capable of sailing around the world. The result was the ketch Marco Polo which Tony built over a three year period with assistance from a wide range of helpful yachting enthusiasts. After leaving Auckland in July 1954 Marco Polo encountered a series of gales in the Tasman and eventually made Norfolk Island. Here they took on Australian artist Trevor Nixon before leaving for Lord Howe Island and Australia. The route then followed a time-honoured one for a small sailing vessel, up through the inside of the Great Barrier Reef, through the Torres Strait and on across the top of Australia. Using the trade winds to cross the Indian Ocean, they eventually reached Durban where an extensive refit was undertaken. In passage from Durban to Port Elizabeth, Marco Polo was overtaken by a severe storm, not uncommon in this area, and was capsized but, miraculously, was not dismantled. In a somewhat distressed condition, Marco Polo and her crew were able to reach Port Elizabeth for urgent repairs. After this ordeal, Marco Polo eventually set off again to round Cape of Good Hope and sailed across the South Atlantic and on up to Florida. In the United States, Tony and Tig were able to find work and saved enough to refit their vessel for the return voyage to New Zealand via the Panama Canal and the Pacific Ocean. This short treatment of a remarkable voyage of adventure fifty years ago by a Devonport Yacht Club member is totally inadequate to do justice to the magnitude and achievement of the undertaking. It does however say much also for the sturdy designs emanating from Bert Woollacott. Some twenty years later, in February 1977, Tony Armit in his new steel sloop Donata Polo [named after Marco Polo's wife], faced the starter's gun fired by Prince Philip in the inaugural Two Man Round the North Island

Race and successfully completed the race. Subsequently Tony and crew mate Anna Barlow wandered the world's oceans for four and a half years in Donata Polo, returning to these shores in 1989. This voyage did produce some hair-raising moments too, a typhoon in the Cook Islands and a near shipwreck on a reef in Tonga which they struck at midnight. In the event the crew managed to summon help from the Nuku'alofa police and marine departments, whose members walked barefooted across the coral to their aid. They dragged forty fathoms of anchor chain across the reef and subsequently spent four days winching the vessel free, sustaining surprisingly very little damage. A mysterious fire aboard threatened to ruin the crew's plans while in Jamaica and, on a humorous note, an infestation of South African weevils emerging from a packet of spaghetti almost overwhelmed the yacht in the Amazon.



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