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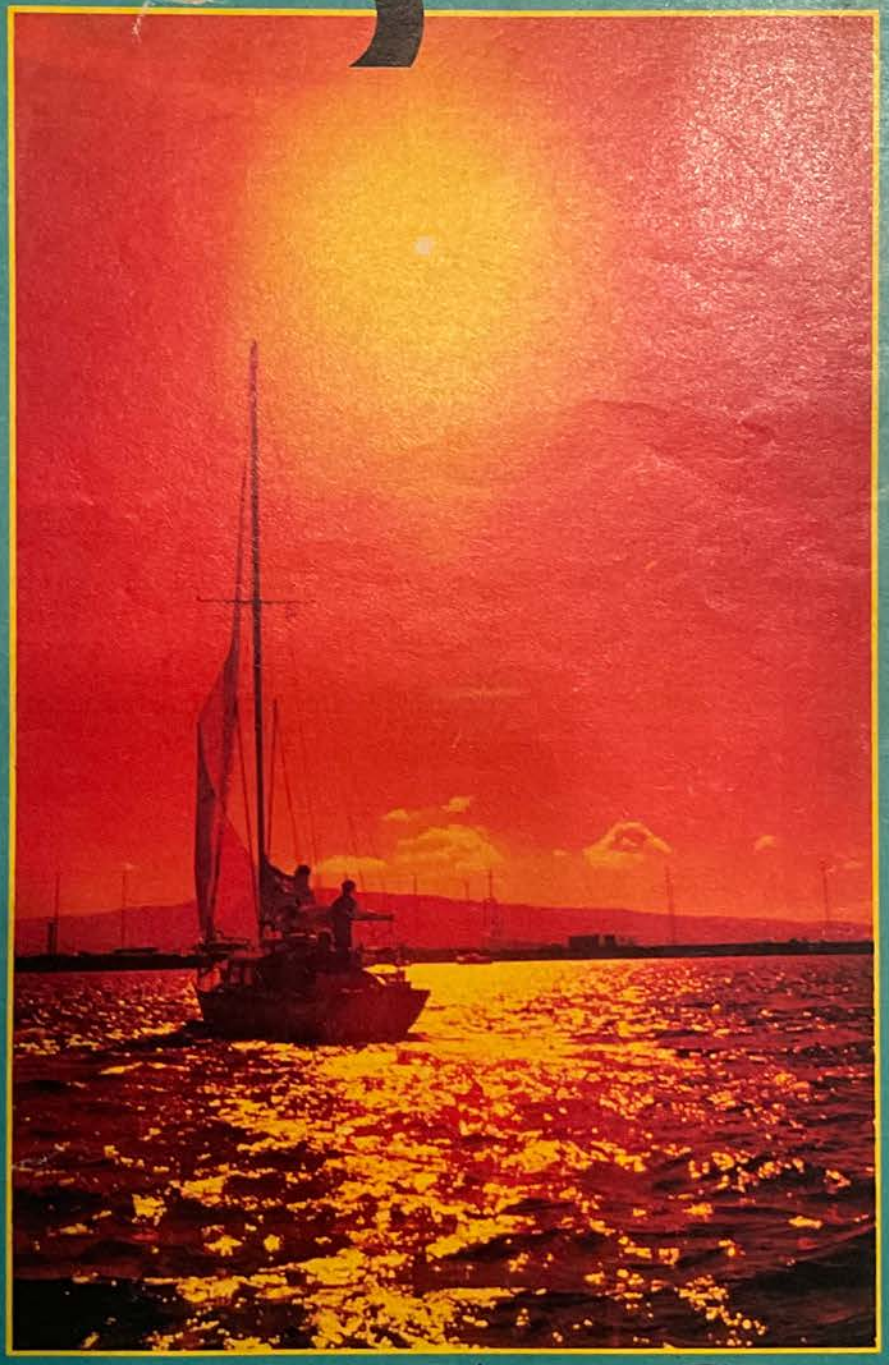


800 LEAGUES TO HAWAII

800 LEAGUES

PCS BY POB IN TWENTY-FOUR DAYS

By Marijane Nelson

Photos by *Puff*'s crew

I was starting to get the feeling that our new assignment to Hawaii was a mixed blessing, as Terry's mutterings filtered out from behind the pages of the Honolulu classifieds: "My God! Two-bedroom condominiums with 1200 square feet ... starting at $65,250. . . ."

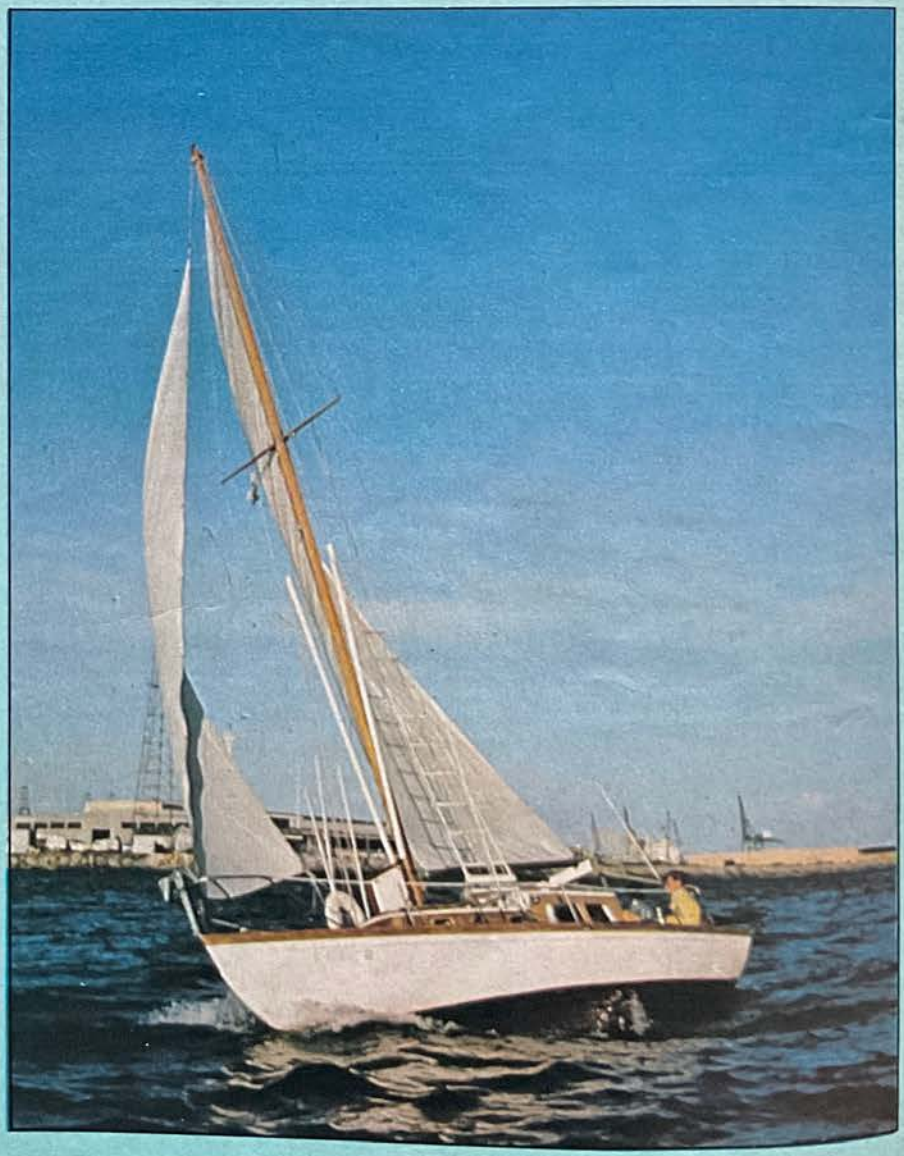
"For *that* kind of money, we could have this sailboat!" I pushed a tempting ad from the latest boating magazine under Terry's nose.

Now, we're rational folks. For most people, to move onto a boat and set sail means tremendous upheaval. One must quit his job, sell his home, shed a thousand possessions collected over the years, break with family, friends, and most things held dear. That takes courage!

But the Air Force had solved those problems. Terry joked: "The Air Force in effect has said, 'Captain Nelson, you *are* going to Hawaii. You're going to sell your house, store your furniture, ship your car and go — and we have a good job just waiting for you.' I don't see why they'd object if I sailed over."

It was a perfect opportunity to try a very different lifestyle, without the monumental decisions we'd face after retirement. We were faced with only one major obstacle: inexperience. The three of us — Terry and I and our eleven-year-old son Sean — had signed up for the basic sailing course offered at Long Beach Naval Station only the past year, and the trip to Hawaii would be premature. But we wanted to try it — *if* we could find a skipper to make the trip with us.

We had one friend who was experienced in ocean cruising, and whose opinion we valued. Dave Howard, who had done extensive sailing and built his own trimaran while we were at Eglin AFB, had retired from the Air Force and taken a job flying seaplanes in the Virgin Islands. We wrote Dave, asking his advice.



Marijane Nelson is a freelance writer when not a pilot (she wrote "The Friendly Skies of Aero Clubs," Jan. 2, 1974), sailor and AF wife. She plans to sail Puff *from Hawaii to Samoa and the Fiji Islands next month with son Sean.*

S TO HAWAII

Dave's response was immediate, and couldn't have surprised — or pleased — us more: "Consider your crew complete. Hire or solicit no one else"'

In the following months, a barrage of letters passed between Norton AFB and St. Thomas, USVI, as Dave guided us in our search for a boat, outlined the equipment we would need, and discussed provisions for the trip.

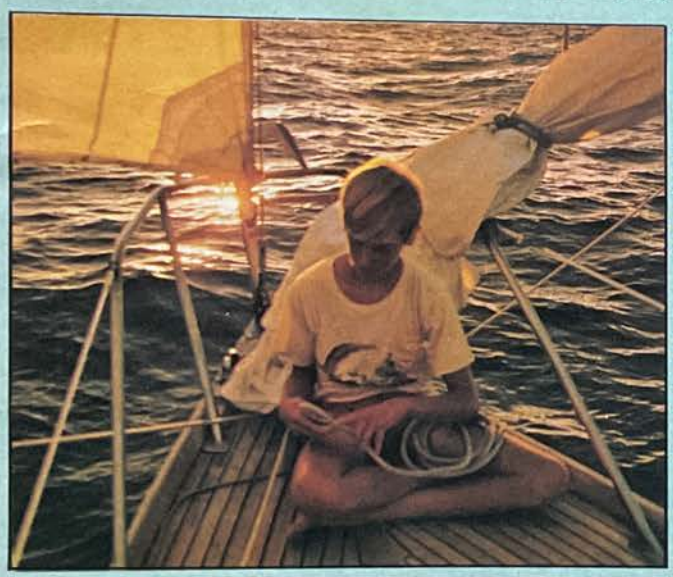
This was a drastic change from our usual search for a home: no central heat and air, no wall-to-wall carpet, no dishwasher or family room in the boats we saw at West Coast marinas. But the tiny accommodations were neat and efficient — and billowing white sails held the promise of travel and adventure.

We had narrowed our choice to a 35-foot sloop with a center cockpit, or a 32-foot double-ender that charmed us to the verge of bankruptcy, when Terry had a chance to fly to Hickam to check into his new job. He promised to investigate marinas and try to reserve a slip where we could live aboard our boat.

His report was discouraging. "The only harbors that permit living aboard are Ala Wai and Keehi," Terry told us. "The harbormaster at Ala Wai predicts a two-year wait. Keehi is an industrial area, right off the departure end of Honolulu International. Even there, they estimate a wait of a year and a half."

And that should have been the end of that.

But we kept remembering a lovely little 26-foot sloop we'd chanced upon at Newport one rainy afternoon. Built by the Cheoy Lee shipyard of Hong Kong, *Puff* was the only sailboat we'd looked at which had really appealed to us; she had that indefinable "character" that we never could explain to the brokers, plus the more practical attributes that we could:



LEFT: *Puff*, the Nelson's 26-foot sloop, streaks through the water on a trial run in Long Beach Harbor.
ABOVE: Son Sean, miserably seasick for much of the voyage, rallies long enough to practice making a bowline knot.

ABOVE: Twenty-four days after their voyage began, *Puff* and her weary crew near Pearl Harbor, with Koko Head in the background. The author's husband, AF Capt. Terry Nelson, and their friend Dave Howard join Sean at the stern.

fiberglass hull, diesel engine, full keel, sturdy construction. Her teak deck and cabin were beautiful, and the dragons in the hand-carved frieze across the main salon were probably the reason for her name, although the whimsical "Puff" seemed to suit her even before one went below, because of her perky size and appearance.

The owners, Ed and Susan Dykstra, were living aboard and writing about their experiences touring Europe in a VW bus. We were impressed with how comfortable they seemed aboard *Puff*, and with their tasteful living arrangements. "First class Spartan," Terry declared, when I commented on how perfect it seemed. But we had a son who was almost 12 and the three of us living on a 26-foot boat with *Puff*'s narrow, seven-foot beam just didn't seem feasible.

"Maybe *Puff* is too small for us to live aboard," Terry reasoned, "but she'd take us to Hawaii. We could cruise the islands and get to know them as few people ever do!" We impatiently placed a call to St. Thomas to get Dave's opinion.

The next day, Ed and Susan took us out for the sea trial, and we made arrangements to have *Puff* hauled out for a marine survey on the following weekend.

Puff looked even smaller out of the water. When Hedley Jones — our surveyor — arrived and began his inspection of *Puff*'s hull, deck, rigging and equipment, we stood nearby with the Dykstras — all of us looking on like anxious parents.

Terry explained our plans for *Puff* as Mr. Jones filled out the report of his survey. Setting aside his pen, he looked up at the three of us. "She's sea-worthy, perfectly capable of making the passage," he said in his Welsh brogue, "but a boat that small is going to give you quite a ride. How sea-worthy are *you*?"

We had our doubts, especially where Sean was concerned, and we decided to put it to him as straight as possible. Painting a bleak picture of the possible hazards and discomforts, we asked him to decide if he wanted to accompany us or stay with his grandparents — as they had urged — and catch a flight to meet us in Hawaii. Sean chose to go with us. Our sailing had been a family venture, and so it would continue.

While Terry attended to such tasks as pressure-testing the fuel tank, installing a new bilge pump and covering the area above the stove with asbestos, I tackled the job of figuring out where to stow provisions in our sparse quarters and carefully made a grocery list (no Stop & Shop between Long Beach and Honolulu if we ran low on peanut butter). I had to plan varied and nutritious menus for the four of us for a month all from products that required no refrigeration. There was an insulated icebox under one of the cockpit seats, but we figured the ice would last only a week at most, and I decided to do without, using the precious space for storage instead. The freeze-dried foods so popular with campers seemed impractical for our situation: they would require too much of our limited water supply.

Doris Nelson came to my rescue. Doris and her husband, Chuck, kept their 32-footer, *Drista*, at the Long Beach facility. After Chuck retired from the Air Force at Norton, they had sailed *Drista* to Hawaii and back, and they were able to answer many of the questions that perplexed us. "You don't need freeze-drieds," Doris advised, showing me the stores in *Drista*'s lockers. "Just go to the commissary and pick out some packaged meals that you can fix by adding a

RIGHT: Marijane Nelson tries to figure out where to store a month's provisions for a crew of four on a 26-foot boat. The hungry crew never objected to a steady diet of canned food and prepackaged meals.

can of dried beef, tuna, or such. Chow mein is delicious on rice — take *lots* of rice! We're still using this regular margarine after almost a year without refrigeration. Well-scrubbed eggs will keep indefinitely if they're coated with petroleum jelly. Store bread will last a surprisingly long time, and the English muffins were good for the entire trip."

Things began to take shape. Every weekend found us at the boat, adjusting to life aboard. Just picking up the language is confusing. Left and right became port and starboard, the cabin floor was the "sole," the window a "port," the marine toilet was a "head," and we soon learned to duck if someone hollered "Jibe!"

Dave flew in the month before our departure to take stock of the situation. We inventoried the sails, carefully checking their condition. He had brought along materials to make safety harnesses for each of us, harnesses which could be clipped to a lifeline or rigging, to preclude an inadvertent man-overboard drill.

That afternoon we sailed *Puff* out of the harbor with Dave, checking the compass heading as the sun set in a clear spring sky. Intoxicated by the beauty of the sea at night, I steered *Puff* along a shimmering path of moonglow. Caught up in the busy time of preparation, we had forgotten *Puff*'s true purpose. "A boat is a joy if it is a boat — for going and sailing," Dave had said.

While Terry cleaned his desk and cleared the base, I separated our belongings into three categories: the few things that we'd take with us on *Puff*, a shipment destined for Hickam AFB, and the bulk of our household goods to be put into storage. Sorting through our books, I came across a Conrad novel that Dave had given us four years before, while we were at Eglin. A poem by Emily Dickinson, scrawled in Dave's handwriting on a tattered slip of paper, was inside:

"Exultation is the going
Of an inland soul to sea,
Past the houses — past the headlands
Into deep Eternity.
Bred as we, among the mountains,
Can the sailor understand
The divine intoxication
Of the first league out from land?"

■■■

Departure day was a busy, happy scene at the Navy Long Beach Yacht Club. We had no time to join in. Since daybreak, we had been working to complete our preparations.

"Hawaii, eh?" came the startled response from a passerby who'd stopped to help me load on still another box of groceries. "I'd like to be sailing to Hawaii — but not on a boat that small!" His wife, peering into *Puff*'s cabin, said: "Isn't it cramped?"

"No, just compact!" came the cheerful reply from Sean, who had just turned 12 and was eager to get underway on his first ocean crossing.

Sean was removing the paper wrappings from cans and marking the contents with a water-proof marker, chuckling to himself as he invented codes (such as "FUD PUD" for fudge pudding). I was confident that the wrappers would be clogging the bilge, hopeful that Sean would remember his coding so we'd know what the contents were later on. As we loaded our stores, I made a careful inventory of each item and listed its location from my diagram of *Puff*'s lockers and storage areas. Terry came staggering down the dock, under a load of freshly filled jerry jugs to supplement our 25-gallon water tank and seven-gallon fuel tank, and handed them to Dave, who secured the jugs to stanchions on deck.

We were anxious to get underway.

LEFT: Twelve-year-old Sean and Dave Howard make a sail change during the 2400-mile journey to Hawaii.

We'd lost several days waiting for the arrival of our liferaft and the self-steering windvane, items we considered of great importance for the trip. We hoped there would be no need to try out the liferaft, but we were counting on the vane to relieve us from many weary hours at the helm. We hoped.

After hectic months of preparation, suddenly it was done. I was scared. Surely we weren't ready to leave yet! "Can't we just wait until the Nelsons come back from Catalina?" I asked hopefully. But we couldn't wait, for an hour's delay at the start might mean a difference of days at the end. The engine coughed to life, lines were cast away, and the familiar sounds and sights of the sailing facility fell behind us.

Next stop, Hawaii! I thought of the 2400 miles of open sea that lay ahead, and looked at the others, wondering what they were thinking.

"How much longer 'til dinner?" piped Sean.

The traffic returning from Catalina was like a nautical version of the L.A. freeway, and we kept a sharp lookout for other boats until we were clear of the coastal traffic and shipping lane. As darkness closed in around us, Dave stressed the importance of having someone always on watch, even when we were past the dangers associated with coastal cruising.

I was so excited at finally being on our way that I was sure I wouldn't be able to sleep, but when Dave shook me awake at 0200, I was most reluctant to leave the warmth of my bunk. Outside it was cold and black, and I struggled to stay awake.

Daybreak was lighting the cold, gray sea when Terry and Sean came on watch at 0600. I gratefully crawled back into my bunk, and was just dozing off when Sean's delighted shrieks brought me clambering back into the cockpit. It was a magic scene. The ocean was alive with sound and motion as seals, porpoises, birds and fish greeted the new day.

All of us were wide awake now — and hungry! I cautiously eyed the gimballed stove; cooking on it on the lolling sea was going to take a bit more skill than my practice sessions on our patio or tied up dockside. Dave insisted on taking over the task, and soon had turned out grilled cheese sandwiches and had hot tomato soup simmering on the stove. Then a gimball bracket came unlatched, depositing (for the first of many times) hot soup over us and the galley. I soon learned to take the mop-up operations in stride.

That afternoon Dave took our departure position off San Nicolas Island: the last land we would see until we reached Hawaii. The breeze began to pick up, and we shut down the engine and set the large Genoa jib with the mainsail. Our untried steering vane was keeping us right on course.

Later, the wind increased to 20 knots and *Puff* lurched violently through the night. I watched horrified as Dave dangled from the boom, putting a reef in the mainsail.

No one clamored for breakfast the next morning; the whole crew was seasick. Even Marezine tablets refused to stay down. Large waves splashed into the cockpit, and life was wet and miserable.

Our dreams of an easy downwind sail to Hawaii — basking in warm winds under a blue sky — were soon dispelled. The cold overcast kept us imprisoned in foulweather gear and rubber boots for two solid weeks following our departure, and Sean's seasickness continued to plague him. We fashioned an area forward for him (dubbed the "rat's nest") with bags stuffed with soft contents, and tried to keep him dry and comfortable, but by the time we realized that Sean wasn't going to acquire his sea legs, as we had done after the first week, the winds and currents made it more practical to continue than to try and return him to the mainland.

Gradually, the rest of us adjusted to shipboard routine. I was a mass of black and blue before I learned to find a handhold or a place to wedge myself before making a move. We all became easily fatigued; when we came off watch, we would gratefully drop into a bunk and fall asleep.

On our 17th day, I awoke to the slatting of limp sails and watched the sun rise over a glassy sea. How strange it felt to stand upright with *Puff* motionless. To celebrate, I put the grill atop the burners and fixed Lingonberry pancakes and sausage for breakfast. Dave and Terry decided it would be best to motor through the calm, but before starting the engine, Dave declared a swimming party. We took down the sails and dived into 18,000 feet of water!

Figuring our stomachs could tolerate a spicy diet in the easy motion, I announced it would be Mexican Night at the Club. We munched on corn chips and bean dip as we watched the sun set, then dined on tamales topped with chili con carne, leftover cheese, chopped onion and creamed corn. (I seldom heard any objections to the canned dinners — and there weren't many leftovers.)

The next day we were still becalmed, the silence broken only by the sound of our errant engine. The salt water had corroded through the exhaust line, and it was smoking and leaking. Terry and Dave worked to repair it, the muffled sound of salty "seaman" language floating up from the engine hatch where only their legs protruded. After six hours they emerged, hot and oily. With no environmentalists around to protest, they dived into the ocean.

Sean, who wants to be reincarnated as a seal, was reluctant to join us in the water. I persuaded him to come in, assuring him there were no sharks this far out at sea. We were all back on deck, drying off, when Sean yelled: "Look at the fish." Five mahi-mahi, larger than Sean, came up on our starboard side and circled *Puff* until we started the engine and left them. "They didn't look like sociable swimming companions," Sean grumbled.

The sounds of the sea could be quite terrifying. On our best day we made 142 miles, but I was too petrified to sleep that night, as *Puff* roared through the water like a freight train. Sean and I didn't share the bravado of our combat vets as we huddled together, braced against the violent motion. After one especially resounding crash, Dave looked at Terry, raised his coffee mug in salute and said simply, "Incoming."

Typically, we were too involved with getting the job done to let fear get the upper hand. Everyone was conscientious about wearing his safety harness when leaving the cockpit to work on the pitching deck, and exercised caution at all times. I was only mildly disapproving the day we made a madcap chase through mountainous waves to retrieve a glass Japanese fishing float Sean spotted. I cringed as we went broadside to the swell to bring *Puff* about, but Sean (who hadn't shown interest in anything for days) was clinging to the coachroof, excitedly shouting directions. When Terry finally maneuvered *Puff* close enough for Dave to bring the thing in, it was covered with

creepy-crawly sea creatures. I watched from a distance as they cleaned the glass ball off, protesting only when Dave ate one of the gooseneck barnacles sticking to the float — and offered to share the delicacy.

The five-pound tuna we caught was much more to my liking. None of us were fishermen, but equipped with a 40-pound nylon line and a couple of lures provided by Dave's 12-year-old son, John, we'd decided to experiment. After the success of our first catch, we spent the rest of the trip anticipating our next fish dinner!

The everyday "routine" on *Puff* was never monotonous. Cooking on the alcohol stove was a challenge, and I felt a real sense of accomplishment at my new-found ability to prepare a meal as we rolled and tossed at sea. Everyone pitched in to clean up after eating: the first person washing the dishes in a bucket, the second rinsing them over the side, the third drying and then handing them down to the fourth member of the team to be stowed away. We'd alternate positions in the assembly line so no one was stuck with the blame for items lost overboard in the rinsing process.

Fresh water was used only for drinking and cooking. We took saltwater showers with a canvas bucket, and also used that plentiful commodity for brushing teeth and laundering clothes. The big drawback to the latter is that anything washed in salt water never really dries. *Puff* looked like a Chinese laundry boat with clothes, shoes, bedding and towels streaming from her halyards, ratlines and boom as we tried in vain to dry things out!

While we still maintained our watch system, once we were south of the shipping lanes the duty was not so rigid, especially on wet, cold nights. Rather than stay in the cockpit, we'd make periodic checks from the companionway. The cabin sole was converted to an extra bed by tossing down a foam cushion and sleeping bag, the most comfortable place to sleep, in spite of occasionally getting stepped on or awakening to find your bed saturated with bilgewater. We generally kept the hatch open at night, and I loved to wake up to see the stars dancing wildly overhead.

The stars — never had they seemed so close or so brilliant! The Milky Way was an astrological spectacular in a black velvet sky. Dave pointed out the constellations, and taught us to pick out a star to steer by at night. Watching the stars helped me stay awake on night watch, and I sometimes had to suppress a shout of delight as a falling star shot across the heavens.

Although our life at sea wasn't comfortable, we adjusted to it. We liked the quiet and our closeness to nature; it seemed like we were part of the sea and the wind. We learned to identify the sea birds that came to visit — the Bosun bird, albatross and petrel were like friends. It was an existence without pretense, and we learned to appreciate simplicity, discovering that we didn't need much in the way of material possessions to be happy. Being self-sufficient gave us a new pride in accomplishing things on our own.

Sean's recovery filled me with delight! He was scrambling about *Puff* like a monkey, standing his own watch and helping with sail changes. I looked up from my book one afternoon to see him pop down through the companionway wearing a Mark IV cushion strapped over his shoulders like a parachute. "Bail out'" he yelled. "We can see the Molokai lighthouse!"

We raced through Kaiwi Channel,

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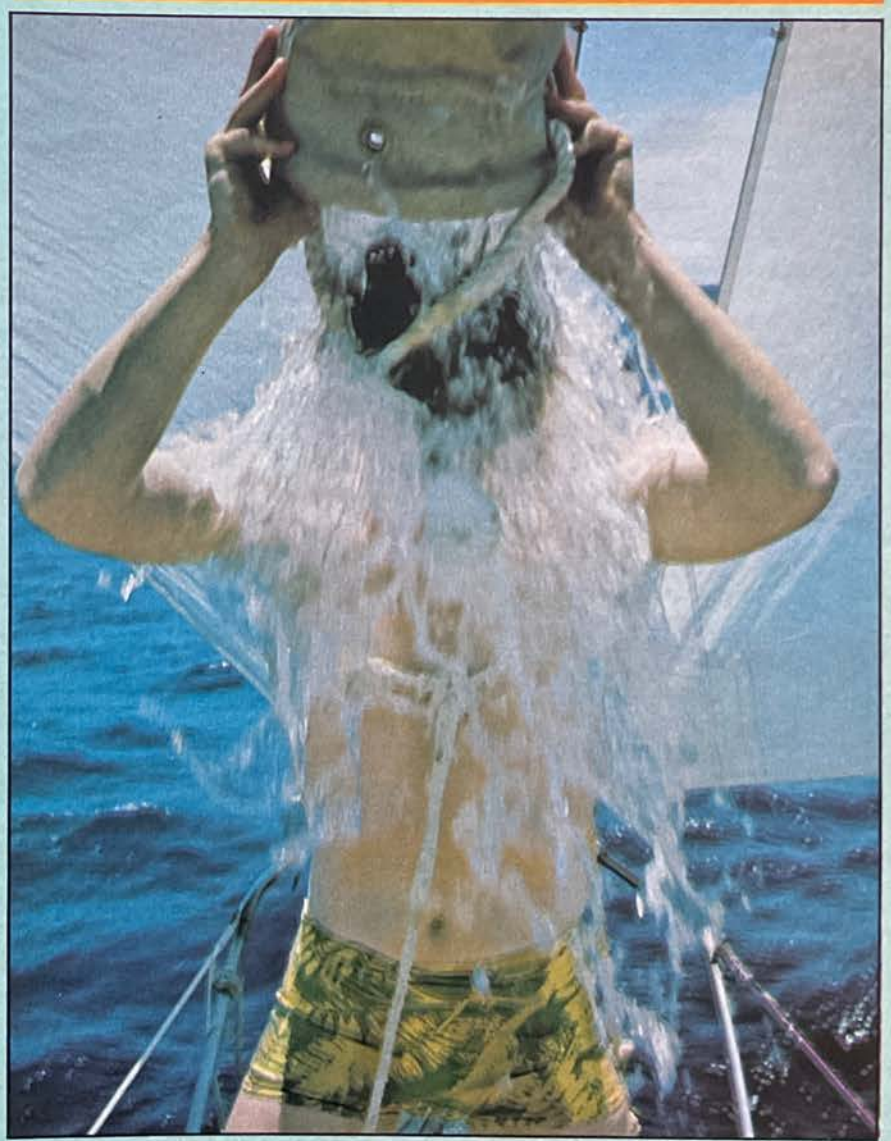
" . . . it seemed like we were part of the sea and the wind."



ABOVE: Terry Nelson takes a shower, *Puff*-style, in salt water from a canvas bucket. Sea water was also used for shampoos and laundry.

800 leagues

From page 15

which separates Oahu and Molokai, hurrying to get both *Puff* and ourselves cleaned up. Everyone culled out favorite provisions to snack on as we viewed the well-known landmarks of Koko Head and Diamond Head. Dave did a mock hula and sang his best imitation of Hilo Hattie. Sean tried to win support for his proposal that we head for the closest ice cream parlour as soon as we got ashore. Looking at our motley crew, I wondered if we wouldn't be sent directly to the Quarantine Station.

It was dark by the time we arrived at Bishop Point in Pearl Harbor. Captain Foster, the harbormaster at Hickam, had told us to tie up there until we could get assistance through the new channel being dredged into Hickam Harbor.

We were just tying up at the dock when we saw *Tamerlane*, Hickam's 16-foot ketch, standing off, and realized we were in her place. I scrambled up the pilings and ran to a nearby quonset hut where lights were shining. The gentleman inside, who was teaching a first aid class, came to help when I explained that we didn't know where to move our boat. "Where did you come in from?" he asked, as we walked to the pier. "Long Beach," I replied, and he burst out laughing. "That explains why you're staggering!" he said. "We all thought you were drunk!" I was so intent on getting help that I'd forgotten it was my first time on land in 24 days.

" . . . being in a house seemed strange to us and we decided to go back to *Puff*."

Ed Ross, Terry's sponsor, came down with his son Greg to pick us up and take us to their home on base to get our mail and have coffee. Ed's wife, Mary Beth, invited us to stay for the night, but being in a house seemed strange to us and we decided to go back to *Puff*. The stars through the hatchway seemed strange, too, without the wild motion imparted to them by the sea, but they were there, beckoning. And I knew then, as I dozed off to sleep, that our voyage wasn't really over. It was just a beginning. □