

Down Bay 2000: Delmarva Circumnavigation – Part III

– Marc Cruder

Having cleared the Chesapeake Bay, braved the wilds of the Delaware Bay and the open ocean in Part II, this installment describes the second third of our trip. Looking for less arduous sailing, we started down the inland waterway behind the Delmarva's barrier islands, left Maryland waters, navigated Virginia's Inside Passage (VIP), and made our way around the tip of the peninsula, back to a welcoming and familiar Chesapeake Bay. So grab your charts and find that sipping rum again. Here's how it went.

The Core Group remained...

Marc Cruder with first mate Matthew sailing *Sylph* – Wittholz/Hermann 17.

Bill Hoover sailing *Gull* – Mystic 20.

Pete Peterson sailing *C'est Moi* – Mystic 20.

John Brown with first mate and helmsman Liz and Danny sailing *Mufasa* – Atlantic City 24.

Catboat We Met Along the Way:

Tom Smith, Cape Charles, VA, on *Torby* – Herreshoff 18.

Saturday, 6/17: Day Eight - Destination: Chincoteague, VA

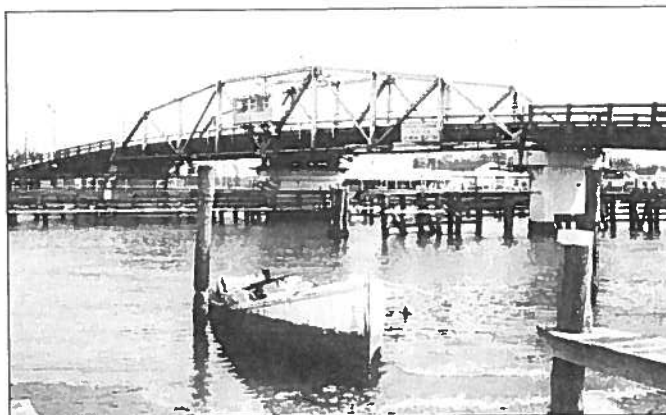
Weather: Sunny and clear, wind SW at 15+ kt.

Having spent the night ashore with the family, I came back to the boat at about 0745 to find all intact, apparently in large part due to the efforts of John Brown (*sea story below*). We sighted *Gull* and *Mufasa* on the hook in the vicinity of green No. 3. I needed gas and ice, so I went over to the marina where *C'est Moi* had spent the night, rounded up Catboat Pete, contacted *Gull* on the VHF and headed out for the green No. 3, where we all departed together southbound in Sinepaxuent Bay at about 0900. We followed the buoys under power, with minimum seas, but wind hard on the nose.

At about 1000, *Gull* and I set sail with one reef in, tacking but keeping pace with those only under power. By 1035 we had cleared the narrow channel and fully entered Sinepaxuent Bay. We were getting wet from wind driven spray, which made us don our foul weather gear. Passed into Virginia waters abeam Buoy No. 39 at about 1200, and pressed on under power and sail. Our course varied and finally got us onto a fairly steady heading, so I took the time to enjoy a can of sardines. In the middle of my lunch routine, the boom suddenly carried forward as the gooseneck fitting broke. This was not a good time for me, but I got things under control and proceeded under power alone.

At about 1535, we arrived at the green No. 3, which marks the entrance to Chincoteague Creek and a swing bridge we would have to negotiate. During the day, *Mufasa* had powered ahead and was probably waiting for us on the south side of the bridge. Now in the lee of Chincoteague Island, I dried out a

little as I waited for the Mystic 20s behind me. By 1630 the three of us were within sight of the swing bridge. We knew we weren't in Kansas anymore when a local waterfront owner yelled across: "We don't see many blow boats around here." Undaunted and smiling back, I called the bridge on channel 13 and the tender informed me "I'll swing 'er right now." As we continued to approach, I saw the gates on the road go down, heard bells ring, but saw no movement. Finally the tender (who has to walk from the shore to the middle of the bridge to get to the control room) came up on the radio with "Sorry Cap'n, but you'll have to tie up some place...she's stuck; I'll have to call somebody."



The "stuck" Chincoteague, VA, swing bridge.

So we all tied up to a new pier on the Chincoteague side, in front of a mountain of oyster shells, behind Don's Restaurant and Chattie's Lounge. I decided to walk across the bridge and meet the tender, to see what kind of time line he had on this situation. I met with Richard Gillespie, who was originally from Seaford, Long Island, and had dredged for scallops off catboats as a kid. He recognized that we were from a long way off and had let *Mufasa* through at 1611 according to his log. Things were not as bad as I thought. Mr. Gillespie's relief would be there by 1800. He was supposedly a younger fellow who could climb down on the bridge and "unstuck the mechanism." I signed our boats into the tender's log and agreed to monitor channel 13 from Chattie's Lounge.

I walked back across the bridge and led the charge to fight the dreaded scurvy at Chattie's. As we were finishing our first round, I thought I'd call the bridge to see how things were going. Sure enough, I got a younger voice on the other end that said: "If you get out in the creek, I can swing 'er now." We mobilized, got out in the creek and passed through the "swung" bridge at 1830. Tied up to the dock at the Chincoteague Inn was *Mufasa* with crew and the family. CCBA was to dinner ashore. I left *Sylph* at the dock for the night, while others went in search of suitable anchorage. The weather was turning; nobody was really interested in Assateague except us, so we agreed

to catch up with the other catboats tomorrow. The town dock is always accessible for them to come ashore and see the town.

Cruise Notes:

1. Ocean City is not an anchorage-friendly harbor, with extreme tide ranges and current from the inlet that is strong and pervasive, unless you double back north under the bridge into Isle of Wight Bay.

2. Abeam Buoy No. 39, you leave Maryland and enter Virginia waters, where the red/green buoy convention reverses itself.

3. Anchoring at Chincoteague is tricky, as it's unmarked and the water is shallow, but there is plenty of room if you find the right spot. The dock at the Chincoteague Inn will accommodate a limited number of small boats at \$20/night.

4. I severely underestimated the difficulty of powering into wind-driven shallow waters. If I had to make the decision again, I might have headed north for a better anchorage and waited on the weather.

Best Sea Story: From *Gull's* log at Ocean City: In the middle of the night, John awaked me to the fact that the tide had gone down about 4 ft. *Gull* was hanging from the pier by her quarter cleat at a 20 deg. angle and the dinghy was hanging at 45 deg. "Boy do I hate being tied to those seawalls."



Tied up to the oyster dock waiting for the Chincoteague, VA, swing bridge. Note the mounds of oyster shells.

Sunday, 6/18: Day Nine - Destination: Ashore Chincoteague/Assateague, VA

Weather: Rain/thunderstorms clearing to sunny and hot.

I spent an interesting night ashore. New high school graduates were partying it up in excess all over town. With heavy thunder and lightning all night, I couldn't sleep much, even after a shower. I couldn't stop thinking about the boom repair. Finally I remembered I had another gooseneck fitting at home from a spare boom. With half the problem solved I went over to Coast Guard Station Chincoteague and was given a berth for the boat while repairs were being made. I also heard about the exploits of the rest of the group trying to find a place to anchor (*sea story below*). I moved *Sylph* over to the Coast Guard dock and unrigged. The game plan was to spend the day at Assateague, go home with the family, fix the boom and drive back, leaving the car with the Coast Guard for future pick up.

So I went to the beach with the family as the weather continued to clear. We sighted the wild ponies, flew trick kites on the beach and swam in the ocean. We also checked out the local maritime museum and learned about barrier islands. Upon returning from Assateague I found the other catboaters wandering around town. Later I arranged for showers at the Coast Guard station. All took advantage of the showers, as I packed up my boom and headed home with the family.

Cruise Notes:

1. Assateague Island is worth the visit...beach, bike and walking trails, lighthouse and maritime museum, not to mention the ponies!

2. Chincoteague Inn was great dining, but at tourist prices.

3. Get your anchorage picked out in daylight. Nothing is marked or lit at night.

4. Don't be conspicuous in front of the Coast Guard station; everyone is watching.

Best Sea Story: From *Gull's* Log: On the way out to the anchorage, Pete went hard aground. By the time I had pulled him off, it was dark. I led the way out to the anchorage using the buoys and compass. Coast Guard soon overhauled us in big inflatable for no port running light. I banged it and it came on. Next they got Pete for no lights, no marks and no registration. They followed us out to anchorage and gave Pete two tickets. John also had no marks, but said he was documented and that was OK. After that the Coast Guard hung around for an hour and asked about Marc.

Monday 6/19: Day Ten - Destination: Lay Day for Repairs

Weather: Torrential Rain.

One day was probably one too many for the group at Chincoteague, since it's only a small town trying to make itself tourist friendly for the once a year pony swim event. Aside from some local craft, marine bird carvings and local artwork,



Lay day for repairs at Coast Guard Station Chincoteague, Marc and Matthew Cruder.

it's just you and nature. The other catboaters did, however, find a better deal on local seafood at Captain Fish's, as well as ice and fuel at Captain Bob's.

In the meantime I went home and got up early to work on my boom end. To make a long story short, I ground out the rivets holding the damaged fitting in place and installed the new/used fitting from my spare boom with stainless machine screws. The job was complete by 0900, so I did some last minute shopping for incidentals. Finally, I left with Matthew at about 1300, arriving in Chincoteague at about 1630. Upon stopping for gas downwind of a chicken farm, Matthew asked what the smell was. I don't think he'll ever forget it. We made it to the Coast Guard Station at about 1700, and re-rigged. We met up with the rest of the group and went to dinner at the famed Captain Fish's.

After a hearty seafood dinner, at which John Brown tried everything on the appetizer menu, we all departed to our vessels. The plan was to get underway in the morning.

Cruise Notes:

1. Captain Fish's is the best deal in town if you are looking for the local ambiance. Prices were good. Plenty of Chincoteague oysters, clams and crabs.

2. This area has an unusually high salinity level. For those of us now used to brackish water, it was a surprise to see how quickly salt built up on everything from outboards to deck shoes. They say it's what makes the oysters taste so good. At a dozen for less than \$10, it was hard not to bring 'em on.

Best Sea Story: None. Everyone was either soggy or drying out between the raindrops and ready for the next leg.

Tuesday, 6/20: Day Eleven - Destination: Wachapreague, VA

Weather: Clear and sunny with winds from the north-east, eventually shifting south.

We got away under sail from Chincoteague with a following wind at about 0915. We passed the end of the island and started into the VIP at Wallops Island. The tide was flooding and the wind slacking at about 1100, so on went the outboard to maintain speed. We were under the Cat Creek fixed bridge at about 1300 and clearly sighted all boats behind me.

As we followed its winding way, we learned the marsh area was very much like the waterway of southern New Jersey. Most of us still had our sails up and we were just enjoying the sun and easy navigating of this narrow waterway, until we were

snapped into reality by *Gull* running hard aground between the red No. 24 and red No. 26. It seems the good captain's autopilot went astray, taking him outside the narrow channel. Coincidentally, the morale boat from the Coast Guard station was just catching up to us. He tried to render assistance, but couldn't get close enough to get a line to *Gull*. So we all went back to help, but *Gull* managed to get free without us. With this awakening, all sail came down, as the tide was also starting to ebb.

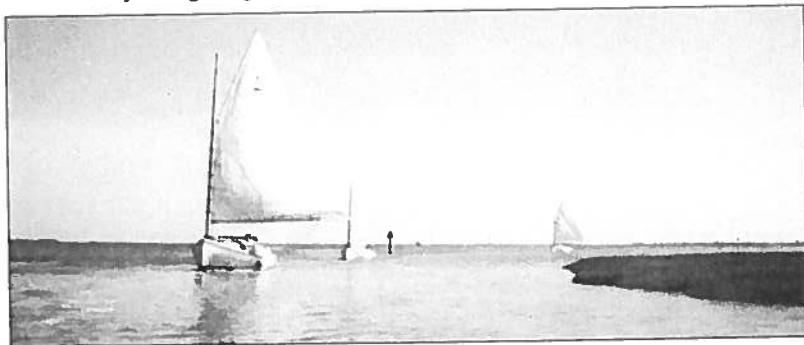
At 1330 we were back in the groove and passed Gargathy Inlet, which is nothing more than a little cut in the sand that opens to the ocean. It may sound strange, but the sand there is white and the water clear, giving this particular stretch an almost tropical appearance. This was one of the spots talked about by DeGast. Also, when Schindler was here he went ashore for lunch. Upon his return, he found his vessel high and dry, costing him a night. We, on the other hand, just took in the view, since we were racing the clock on an ebbing tide.

All was well until about 1500 when one of the Mystic 20s went aground again. The other went to help, and then we had two stuck. *Sylph* ambled past in the narrow channel, only lightly sniffing the bottom, but then drifted aground. *Mufasa* held up on green Can No. 75, as it was the only place he knew there was water. Things would get worse before they got better. The afternoon from then on was a series of groundings with the whole show almost stopping dead in the vicinity of Buoy No. 117 at about 1700. For awhile, I never thought we'd get south of this mark until the next tide. We were within two buoys of Wachapreague, but were having a time of it. The channel here can't be more than two boat lengths wide at low tide and lacks a firm bottom. The locals told us that if you jump out, you'll sink in the mud to above your knees, and it's so soft, you won't be able to get back in your boat. For awhile, and ironically since he was the biggest boat, *Mufasa* had the most luck staying off the bottom. With tug-boat-like power she was doing the most work of pulling everyone off. Once she was stuck, kedging or running out an anchor by dinghy was all we had left.

The prize in this arena goes to Pete Legnos, designer of the Mystic 20. In the same way these vessels have such good seakeeping and particularly tracking characteristics, they were the best at sticking in the mud. All you needed to see was the characteristic "suddenly stern up" attitude to know they were aground. *Gull*, then *C'est Moi*, then *C'est Moi* again.

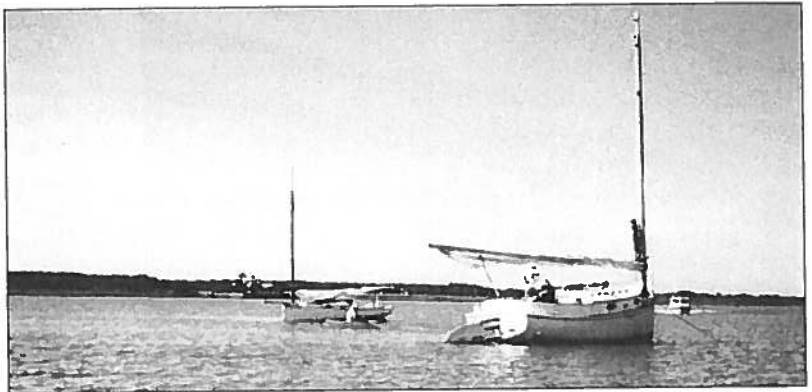
NOTE: The Law of the Sea dictates a mariner render assistance to vessels in distress, but it is not clear how many times you are required to do that for the same vessel!

Frustration was running high as I finally cleared the south side of Buoy No. 117, now known as "the buoy of death." I went as far as Buoy No. 119 and anchored to collect my thoughts. It was about 1830 when I looked back to see *Mufasa* run aground while pulling *C'est Moi* off again. Remembering the "Law of the Sea," I couldn't abandon them, but I sure wasn't going right back to help immediately. As I sat there, eventually it looked like all



Catboats navigating the Virginia Inside Passage. *Mufasa* followed by Mystic 20s.

were free and moving again. As I was picking up the hook, a local waterman told us, "Do like that boat done and keep 'er wide when going around the next buoy" which was the red No. 120 into Wachapreague. Just as things were looking good, I turned back to see *C'est Moi* aground again, with Tug *Mufasa* assisting. It was starting to get dark. I was within striking distance of our next stop, but I couldn't leave them. So I put the helm over and went back to take station just north of the dreaded No. 117 "buoy of death." The worst case would be, that we'd have to wait on the tide into the evening, but at least we'd all be together. Salvage efforts went on for awhile, and Pete was finally off with all moving south again. Didn't realize *Gull* was having other problems (*sea story below*). We finally got underway and pulled up to the Coast Guard Station at Wachapreague at about 1930. The chief of the station was kind enough to let me tie up. The others were at the town gas dock. It was a long day. I certainly wasn't in a festive mood. Matthew and I cooked dinner aboard and went to sleep.



Catboats in the mud at "the buoy of death."

Wednesday, 6/21: Day Twelve – Oyster, VA

Weather: Clear and sunny with winds from the south at 15-20 kt.

We slept off the previous day's frustration and hoped for a better day today. I had a long talk with Boatswain Mate Chief Haynie about this day's leg of the voyage. He had numerous tips and local knowledge, including a discussion of PVC markers that you will not find on any chart or Coastal Pilot. Winds were heavy from the south, but our path was inside the barrier islands, with no reported shallow spots. According to the chief, we had been through the worst at low tide already.

I walked down to the gas dock at about 0800 and passed on local knowledge to the group. Then I went back to bring *Sylph* to the dock for gas and ice. Last line was at about 0845 as we headed south for Oyster, VA, under power only. We proceeded along, making good time, with *Sylph* in the lead until about 1200, when we hit Great Machipongo Channel. Here was a wide expanse of bay with a narrow channel running through it. This was our second experience where things were going fine until we opened out to a large bay. The wind and seas on the head were increasing. Navigation was a little tricky, but thanks to good visibility and our notes from Chief Haynie, there were no miscues.

At about 1400 we were abeam red No. 198, which marks the end of Great Machipongo Channel and the beginning of Ramshorn Channel, which was our final approach to Oyster, VA. The wind, however, continued to increase to 20 kt.+, and the tide was turning to ebb. I experienced some of the steepest wind driven seas I have ever put the boat through in my nine years of sailing her on the bay. In the vicinity of red No. 228, most of the group's forward progress was almost halted and we were in danger of being blown onto a lee shore of oyster shells. It took all 6 hp of my outboard to pull me through. I felt lucky because I had no more power!

Note: Let's talk to those people again who want to have minimum engine. The weather came up quick. Due to the changing channel widths and geographics we had to power.



Mufasa finds good water in the Virginia Inside Passage and ties up while others are kedging off.

Cruise Notes:

1. Pour on the speed early and do this leg on the rising tide if you plan to do it in one stretch. We spent too much time moping along in the first part of the day. An alternative is to split the day, anchor in the vicinity of Gargathy Inlet and enjoy the beach.

2. Remember that the tide has some range in this area. The Coast Guard Station is the only show in town with a floating dock; the others are all fixed.

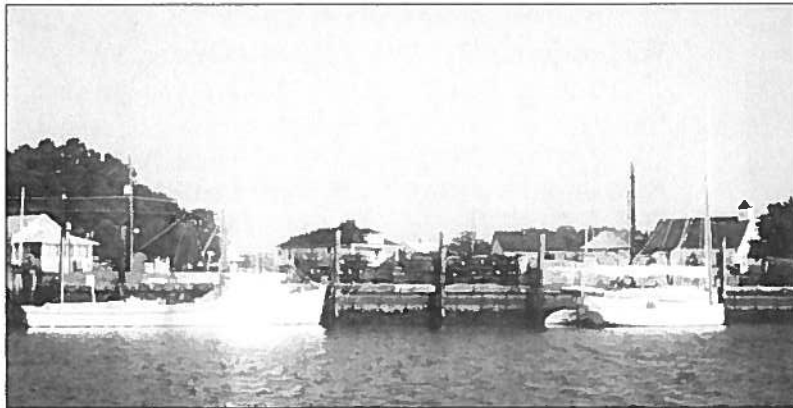
3. Always bring a dinghy, so you have a way to get an anchor out to kedge off when you're aground.

Best Sea Story: From *Gull's* log: Bad frustrating day all around. In the middle of this my starter failed (later I found out the bearings were shot). I was left astern, but finally I got engine started on the third try. Manual start was used for the rest of the trip; no cabin lights. Great!

Kid's Log (Matthew): It was very shallow. I didn't take my eye off the centerboard. When I looked ahead, I saw the



Matthew gets ready for mosquitoes and green heads .



Mufasa and C'est Moi find a dock at Oyster, VA.

Raising our sails and tacking in the narrow channel would have been laughable. Insufficient power would have made us permanent navigation marks on the surrounding "oyster rocks." Successfully anchoring would have been the only fallback.

By 1700 we were all safe and briefly tied up at the launching dock in Oyster, only to promptly be kicked off, as the sportfisherman were returning from their day trips. We promptly anchored elsewhere and dried out, while regrouping over some rum. *Mufasa* tied up to the sea wall. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that if no change was forecasted in the wind direction, we would stay put and wait.

Cruise Notes:

1. A summary of BMC Haynie's local knowledge, as applied to Chart 12210: between flashing green No. 169 and green No. 171 use PVC poles as the western boundary of channel when heading south.

2. Give red No. 176 a wide berth, as a shoal continues parallel to the channel, so don't round it close.

3. Keep to the south side of North Channel between red No. 178 and red No. 180, and keep clear of the single PVC pipe to starboard.

4. Between red No. 180 and red No. 186, keep the stakes to port.

5. At the bottom of Great Machipongo Channel, double back west to Ramshorn Channel via "the deeps" to continue south.

Note: Charts 12210 and 12224 have not been updated, and incorrectly show the marked channel in Spidercrab Bay. This area has silted in. Corrected Chart 12221 shows the marked passage as it currently is; in the more westerly Ramshorn Channel. Oyster, VA is at the end of this channel.

6. When the wind is on the nose, consider waiting another day.

7. If I could have taken my outboard to bed, I would have made love to it!

Best Sea Story: From *Gull's Log*: Watching John in his big 24 ft., 8000 lb. boat riding serenely through these seas was disheartening to us smaller boats. Pete and the Mystics were safe, but the going was rough and uncomfortable for 2-3 hrs.

Kid's Log (Matthew): We started with flat water, but it got worse. I was on a roller coaster. We went up and dropped flat. We made it to Oyster safely. Oh, and I found a shell for a hermit crab.

Thursday, 6/22: Day Thirteen – Destination: Waiting on Weather – Oyster, VA

Weather: Sunny and clear with winds building to 20 kt.+ from the southwest.

It was a windy night on the hook. I went ashore at about 0530 to use the facilities and clocked 10-12 kt. on my handheld windmeter. I started pancakes for Matthew and me at about 0600. The weather forecast was for continued southwest winds and a low pressure system approaching with thunderstorms. At 0630 I made the command decision to lay in for the day. It just wasn't worth fighting 15 kt. of wind-driven seas on the bow again, much less crossing the bottom of the peninsula, which would be open to the ocean. If



Seafood feast aboard *Mufasa* during the lay day in Oyster, VA.

the front came through as scheduled, the weather would ease for tomorrow.

I spent the morning working with Matthew to clean up the boat and restow gear in the cabin. We hung all the wet clothes out to dry, until the boat looked like a "bum boat." Matthew took off in the dinghy exploring ashore with Danny. Then they came back and both went swimming off *Sylph* before heading back ashore. At about 1130, Bill Hoover and John Brown visited me. While we discussed the weather and the decision to stay put, I clocked 18 kt. on the windmeter. After the visit I made lunch. Matthew was still ashore so I started another Patrick O'Brian novel, caught up all logs and called home by cell phone.

Finally ashore, I checked out the sole seafood distributor – crabs, clams and oysters galore. As I walked the road I checked out the derelict boats, including at least three deadrise hulls put high ashore during nor'easters. I meet the dockmaster, who related the interesting history of Oyster: A seafood industry run by political interests. Oysters grow only so big and then die. They've never really come back. Watermen that don't squander what they earn can still make a good living at it. The University of Virginia is building a research center in Oyster that will probably have all the wrong priorities. Kindly, he drove me back to the town dock.

John and Liz announced a seafood feast onboard *Mufasa* at 1700. A front was starting to come through, with light rain and thunder. The wind was easing. Back on *Mufasa*, the group was enjoying steamed crabs and clams. Sighted a large skate in the harbor. All day long it kept breaking the surface with its two dorsal fins. Hoping we'd get underway tomorrow, I retired to the boat.

Cruise Notes:

1. Good lay over spot if for nothing else but fresh crabs and clams at the local distributor; a land untouched by time.

2. Steer buoy to buoy in the VIP and stay in the channel.

Best Sea Story: From *Gull's Log*: Saw our first pelicans at Chincoteague and more as we go south. They were quite dark in color. Natives say the birds are recent; only in the last ten years. Gulls would land on my transom while I read.

Kids Log (Matthew): Today was the funniest day yet. Dan and I went fishing and caught an eel, minnows (big ones) and two toadfish. After that we accidentally caught a seagull, which is probably dead by now. Then we had dinner – crabs! Later we were very close to catching a terrapin turtle.

Friday, 6/23: Day Fourteen - Destination: Cape Charles, VA

Weather: Stalled front in the Carolinas; wind west at 10 kt. becoming northwest and then north, sunny and clear.

At 0630 I made dinghy rounds after listening to the weather. Told all we were a "go" for departure at 0700. Pulled anchor and helped *Gull* with cold engine hand start. We were away under power and out of Oyster at about 0715. Abeam green No. 249 at about 0900,



Sylph back in the Chesapeake and boiling along enroute to Cape Charles, VA.

completing Mockhorn Channel and the Thorofare, starting Shallow Channel. The tide was just starting to flood. By 0930 we were abeam of red No. 256 in Magothy Bay, on a solid southerly course. Set sail but kept the engine on to stem the tide.

At 1000 we were abeam of red No. 262, turning to starboard between Skidmore Island and the mainland. This gave us a view straight out to sea. Also we had the Cape Charles towers in sight. Passed Skidmore Island at about 1020, sighted another break to the ocean, then went back on the engine at green No. 265. At 1050, we went under the "low rise" fixed bridge between the southern tip of the Delmarva peninsula and Fisherman's Island, re-entering the Chesapeake Bay. The wind came around to the northwest, so we started tacking. At 1215 we were abeam Kiptopeke Beach and sailing between the concrete ships, (approximately eight vessels) now serving as breakwaters in front of the old ferry pier. Matt tossed his cookies and was unable to make lunch.

Abeam flashing red No. 2 at 1300 and abeam Elliot's Creek at 1345. We found flashing red No. 4 at the channel approach to Cape Charles at 1425, tied up behind the Coast Guard Station at about 1500, and arranged showers for all. We moved to the town dock, where the rest were tied up. Met the "schooner



Mufasa, Gull, C'est Moi, Sylph and *Torby* at the Cape Charles, VA, town dock.

wench" dockmaster, who helped *Gull* get a new battery. It was brought right down to the dock. Ah, lights again! Also a Herreshoff 18 that wandered in off the bay from a Norfolk-based sailing club, joined us. He was as surprised to find us, as we him. We talked catboats and compared notes.

After everyone cleaned up, we went into town to have dinner at Rebecca's (now the Watch House). Excellent broiled seafood including flounder, shrimp, scallops, crab imperial, and she crab soup, with the usual side of hushpuppies and corn bread. As the self-proclaimed food critic, John passed off the she crab soup as the best he had ever tasted. Nobody argued.

Cruise Notes:

1. Only anchorage is in the Coast Guard basin.
2. Another very active skate was in the harbor, just as in Oyster.

Best Sea Story: Hoover tiller casualty, otherwise known as "unplugged and seated." With the spare rigged, *Gull* was fit for duty again.

Kid's Log (Matthew): "Today after I woke up from my nap, I went outside for awhile. Soon we came up on some 300 ft. concrete boats!"

Epilogue – Part III

So ends the second major segment of the trip, but with some unexpected and certainly interesting twists. We had made it around the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, thereby joining that small circle of CCBA catboaters that had made the trip before us: Tut for his solo circumnavigation. Others including Jim Wagner and Dave Bleil, who had on the George Pacharis Expedition of 1994, although not circumnavigating, approached these southern reaches from the Chesapeake side.

This leg left us with a unique experience we will not soon forget and will certainly treasure as the years go on. We follow in Tut's place as the novel icons that will be able to say... "Remember the cruise of 2000 in the VIP when..."

After leaving Cape Charles, the weather started to moderate slightly, but the fun wasn't over yet. The *Fall Bulletin* will carry the final chapter of "Delmarva Circumnavigation" where we will be found "rope starting and gooseneck breaking" our way up the Chesapeake Bay via Tangier Island. We'll make a quick stop on the western shore and then up through the cut at James Island on a picture perfect day and finally back to our home sailing grounds.