Report on textbook rescue of six crew after yacht sinks

24 Apr 2012

TROUBLE AHEAD

At 2:00pm on Good Friday, 6th April 2012, the yachts in the annual Melbourne to Port Fairy ocean race (the M2PF Race) had been underway for 14 hours. The fleet consisted of 14 yachts, including Inception, a 10 year old 50' Beneteau with its crew of six and **TryBooking.com, a 43' Elan Impression 434** crewed by Grant Dunoon (skipper), Peter Fetch, Ross Fisher and Kim Walker.

Grant (48), the owner and skipper of TryBooking.com, was taking part in his second ocean race, having participated in the Melbourne to Stanley event in November 2011. He had developed good situational awareness through many years as an airline pilot and this would be crucial later in the night.

Ross (66) was the most experienced member of the crew. With decades of experience behind him, Ross could be relied on to remain cool and calm at all times. His unflinching resolve would be essential as events unfolded.

Kim's (49) previous ocean race had been the Melbourne to Stanley on board TryBooking.com. The rough conditions of that race had given him an extreme case of sea sickness, but he was determined not to let that get the better of him. When darkness robbed him of the horizon, the constant movement aggravated his sea sickness once again. However, when the time came, he would ignore his own condition and give everything he had to the work at hand.

Peter (53) had also previously sailed in the race to Stanley on board TryBooking.com. He had an implacable resolve to "get the job done, no matter what". His quiet "can do" attitude and his strength and agility meant he would play a key role in the way the crew responded to the events that were to come.

Meanwhile, in the early afternoon of Good Friday, the crew of TryBooking.com had no inkling of what was ahead of them. The conditions had been fine and sunny with a light northeasterly becoming a 15kt northwesterly for the first stage of the race from Queenscliff. However, as the fleet approached Cape Otway, conditions began to deteriorate. The forecast indicated a front would move in from the west at about 1900hrs on Friday causing the wind to swing around to the West and intensify to 35kts by 2200hrs. It promised to be a rough night, but crews were looking forward to the chance to compete in the challenging conditions. They were also hoping for some abatement early on Saturday morning when winds were expected to back around to the southwest and moderate to 20-25kts with the seas dropping from 5m to 3m.

On board TryBooking.com, Ross checked the wind at 23kts and the crew decided to prepare for the coming weather by taking down the number 1 sail and setting the number 4, their heavy weather sail. Once round Cape Otway, the fleet would cross the boundary between Bass Strait and the Southern Ocean. This area is known for its treachery in storm conditions when large swells from the deep Southern Ocean meet the shallower water in Bass Strait. The crew wanted to be ready when the coming darkness coincided with the storm front in the region of turbulence.

As expected, TryBooking.com encountered the weather front just after rounding Cape Otway in the late afternoon. Wind speeds reached 35kts and the seas rose and became choppy. However, after about an hour of this, the wind dropped back to 10-15kts. Grant and his crew discussed the possibility of changing back to the number 1 sail. It was a better racing option in the lighter conditions, but the brevity of the front was a concern. They were expecting storm conditions for at least five hours. Had it really passed or was there more on the way?

The answer appeared in the fading light and made up their minds immediately. They put aside any further thoughts of changing the storm sail as the main weather front loomed in the west. The conditions they had experienced for the past hour were just the prelude. The main event was about to commence.

At 1800hrs, the second front hit them with full force as the wind blasted in from the northwest at 40 to 50kts with gusts up to 70kts. Grant's first thought was to reduce the number 4 sail, but the tension was so high due to the wind that it could not be furled. For the next five hours, they battled

the conditions. Determined to stay in the race, they believed that if they could get through the night, they would be able to make the most of the somewhat lighter southwest winds that were expected early on Saturday morning.
They were sailing as close to the wind as possible to minimise the load on the sail. Nevertheless, the boat was leaning at 45O and drifting significantly. Whilst holding a heading of 315O, their track was 360O.

The crew discussed the possibility of turning downwind to relieve pressure on the sail so it could be furled, but they decided to maintain their course because they were managing the conditions and they did not want to lose several miles when there was a chance the tactic might not work anyway.
The whole time, Grant was very aware that they were sailing off the Shipwreck Coast. His wife, Delma, had reminded him that "It's called the Shipwreck Coast for a reason!". In fact, there have been over 700 wrecks on this coastline since white settlement. Grant was allowing an extra safety margin to act as a buffer in case of GPS error.
However, pitching and tossing in the rough conditions was making it difficult for Grant to helm. He briefly tried tying himself to a cleat, but even this would not arrest the slipping and sliding. The unsteadiness, coupled with the constant spray, wind and frequent washes of green water coming over the side made it impossible to see any detail on the chart plotter. Not wishing to unwittingly cross his safety boundary, Grant switched position. Moving to the centre of the boat made it easier to stand steadily. He found he could see the compass with its large white characters on a black background, but the smaller black characters on the white background of the chart plotter were still unreadable. Eventually, he called Peter to read out the numbers from the screen.
The boat was knocked down a number of times that night, Kim who was once seated was now on his back and sliding towards the lifelines. Grant was not sure if the wind speed sensor was destroyed when the mast tip clipped a wave or in one of the many gusts.
All the while, Grant listened intently to the sail. He could not allow it to flap or it would be shredded by the wind, but he could not allow it to carry any excess wind or they would be blown off course due to drift.
They tacked and headed away from the coast for an hour on a heading of 240O. Whilst gripping the helm with both hands, Grant asked Peter to rinse his glasses with a bottle of fresh water. Finally he could see the green line on the chart plotter screen and was able to quantify their drift. They were holding a heading of 240O but their actual track was in the range 180O – 210O. It was obvious that the best they could achieve in these severe storm conditions was to hold their ground!
Grant's aim was to hold on and stay in the race, losing as little ground as possible whilst waiting for the main part of the storm to pass and for the wind to back from the northwest around to the southwest.
At one point, Grant noticed a 60cm deep pool of water welling up at his feet. Green water was washing over the rails and the 45O lean of the boat was not allowing it to drain. Grant was concerned that it would infiltrate the engine's starting panel and short it out. Losing access to their engine if needed in these conditions would have been problematic to say the least. Grant steered into wind to reduce the lean of the boat and allow the water to drain, but he could not hold this heading for more than a moment as it put the sail at risk of tearing as it flogged in the gale.
They were now about 7nm off the coast. Grant's coast proximity boundary was a line that paralleled the coast at a distance of 5nm. He held a heading of 280O, giving a track of 300O – 320O, which was almost parallel to the coast. If the wind started to back to the west, or at least if it did not swing any further to the north, they might be able to maintain their track without having to put in another tack.
Suddenly Grant noticed that the chart plotter display dimmed for a moment. "Oh no", he thought, "we can't lose this screen now!". Without the chart plotter, TryBooking.com would have to steer out to sea to ensure they kept clear of the coast. The display held for about 10 minutes then briefly dimmed again. Frantically, Grant ticked off a list of possible reasons in his mind. His first thought was

that battery power was running low. He turned the engine ignition key to commence recharging and was relieved to see the tachometer needle jump as the diesel fired, but his heart sank as the screen dimmed again. What could be causing the problem? In his fatigued state, in the dreadful conditions, was he imagining it? He recalled that the chart plotter on the sister ship of TryBooking.com had failed and had had to be replaced. Could TryBooking.com now be having the same problem?
His next thought was the bilge pump. If it was periodically switching in, the intermittent spikes might be causing the screen to dim. It was good to know the pump was working but, at the same time, terrifying to think that there might be water below. Peter immediately went below to check under the cabin floor. Fortunately, he soon reported that he could find no water.
They put together a contingency plan in case the plotter failed. They would tack out to sea for 90 minutes then take up a heading of no more than 280O for up to 3 hours. This would keep them on a track that was parallel to the coast, but well away from the dangerous shore. They would tack again out to sea for 60 – 90 minutes and reassess their position as dawn broke. At that time, they would be able to safely revert to visual navigation. Doing this would cause them to lose time, but it was the safe option in the terrible conditions.
At about 2330hrs, they were 6.5nm off the coast and gradually encroaching on the 5nm safety boundary when they sighted Inception about 300m ahead of them. They saw the green light on the mast and the white stern light as TryBooking.com passed 50m behind. At this stage, unknown to the crew of TryBooking.com, Inception was taking on water and probably not moving very quickly. However, it appeared to the crew of TryBooking.com that Inception was tacking out to sea. This made Grant question his judgement about holding his heading. He believed he was maintaining a safe distance off shore, but seeing Inception apparently heading away from the coast caused him to re-evaluate the situation.
The sighting of Inception was one factor, but he was also thinking of an impending radio call (a "sched") that was set for 0005hrs. Grant was going to hand the helm to Kim while he went below for the sched, but Kim was suffering from severe sea sickness. In the circumstances, Grant decided it was prudent for Kim to be steering away from the coast. Despite his condition, Kim took the helm confidently and held the new course expertly. At 2350hrs, Grant went below to prepare for the sched. The radios were switched on in case special warnings were broadcast, although the incessant noise meant there was no chance of hearing anything from the cockpit. However, as Grant made his way below he realised the ORCV was calling TryBooking.com ahead of schedule. On hearing the call, he immediately went over the race rules in his mind. "Did I infringe?". He recalled the recommended minimum clearance of 3nm off Cape Otway and wondered if there was a similar figure for the Shipwreck Coast. As he keyed the microphone to acknowledge the call, he was expecting to be disciplined. Instead, he was horrified to hear that Inception was taking on water and her life raft had been blown off the deck two hours before. The ORCV then asked if TryBooking.com "was available to assist".

THE SEARCH

It was now approaching 2400hrs. Grant immediately agreed to help and requested a bearing and distance to Inception's position. Peter Clancy was handling communications for the ORCV over the HF radio and was monitoring the boats' progress throughout the race. He replied that the last position they had was 30 minutes old, but a fresh update was expected momentarily at 2400hrs: "Just wait", he said.
Grant darted up the steps to the cockpit and alerted the crew that Inception was in trouble and it looked like they would be asked to locate her and shadow her to port.
As he returned to the radio, Peter (ORCV) advised that they had received a position update from TryBooking.com, but not from Inception. He added that Inception was speaking by mobile phone to the Port Fairy Yacht Club (PFYC). Grant decided to go with the information he had. He went up to the cockpit, started the engine and steered in the general direction of Inception's last known position. As they turned downwind, they tried unsuccessfully to furl the headsail. It flapped uncontrollably for some minutes and caused two ropes to become tangled and knotted. Grant feared the furler would

break under the strain and dreaded the thought of someone having to go forward and cut it free. However, Peter (crew) managed to winch it in manually.

As they approached the position where they believed Inception had been just over 30 minutes before, the crew of TryBooking.com was vigilant and mindful of avoiding a collision. However, nothing could be seen. The sea was black and empty. Grant went below to check in by radio with ORCV who reported that Inception had lost all electrical power. Grant assumed they must still be communicating via mobile phone to the PFYC.

Going topside again, Grant suddenly caught sight of a flare arcing across the sky behind TryBooking.com. He called to Kim to get a bearing, but he was unable to get a fix on the compass. However, Kim did have a sense of the quadrant where it had been, despite the lack of directional reference points. They immediately turned and steered towards the area from where they believed the flare had been fired. Moments later they saw distant lights. These turned out to be the town lights of Port Campbell, but with the crashing waves and sheets of flying spray, it appeared to be a row of people in life jackets along the rail of a boat!

The initial excitement of seeing the lights gave way to doubt once the TryBooking.com crew realised they were not gaining on the lights, so after about 10 minutes, they concluded the lights were on-shore, and they turned and tracked back.

Grant went below once again to the radio. He reported seeing the flare and offered to fire a flare from TryBooking.com. He still believed Inception was afloat and had contact with PFYC via mobile phone, and so messages might be able to be relayed between the boats through ORCV and PFYC. He also asked for Inception to turn on any torches they might have.

At this point, Peter (ORCV) asked Grant to wait as more information was coming in. Signals from Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs) had been received! After what seemed like a long wait, Peter read out the latitude and longitude that marked the position of the EPIRB. Grant carefully wrote the numbers down then read them back to confirm. Satisfied that he had the correct figures, he raced upstairs to the chart plotter and keyed them in, double checking to ensure no errors. They immediately set course for the latest position fix.

About 15 minutes later as they reached the position, it became apparent that they were too late on the scene. The area was in total darkness. There was nothing. As a hollow empty feeling came over them, TryBooking.com turned downwind in the belief that the EPIRBS must have drifted in the wind and waves. As they came around, they saw the lights of Port Campbell again. Once again they ruled them out after about 10 minutes, and they turned and made their way back to the original EPIRB fix.

Grant radioed Peter at the ORCV again and received a new EPIRB position fix. Again he raced upstairs and keyed the latitude and longitude into the plotter. This time he marked the position with a circle to differentiate it from the "x" that notated the first point. With two points on the chart plotter now, Grant projected a line from the first to the second and beyond. Being mindful of the time between fixes, he then estimated the EPIRBs' current location. They were drifting very quickly. Without delay, TryBooking.com turned and tracked to a point just past the calculated position.

The idea was to go slightly beyond where the Inception crew ought to be, then turn and track back along their projected line of drift. If TryBooking.com could not locate them this time, the plan was to commence a systematic grid search.

Just as TryBooking.com approached the point where they were turning onto the projected line of drift, Peter shouted, "Whistles! Whistles!" He was standing at the head of the cockpit and steadying himself by gripping the frame of the dodger cover. Back at the helm, Grant yelled back in reply that the sound was a gas detector alarm rather than whistles. (For over three hours, the gas-leak warning alarm had been sounding below. The crew had thoroughly checked the gas line and were satisfied it was just a malfunction of the alarm, probably due to water infiltration. The high-pitched beeping sound was faintly audible at times in the cockpit above). However, Peter turned back excitedly to insist that he could hear whistles.

A moment later as Grant peered ahead into the darkness, he saw a single light. Simultaneously, the other crew members shouted "Light! Light!" but as they dropped into a trough, it disappeared. It

was just a glimpse but it was enough. Another large wave passed in darkness then, as they crested a second, they suddenly saw a row of lights strung out on the rising wall of the next approaching wave. It was like standing in an arena and looking up into the grandstand.
Plotting the line of drift had worked. The crew of Inception had been found!
THE RESCUE
The elation of finding the missing men in the tempestuous seas and darkness quickly gave way to the realisation that, somehow, they had to be brought safely on board. Up until this point, Grant had been able to draw on his extensive experience and training in aviation navigation. However, a sea rescue in these terrible conditions was something for which none of them could have prepared in any meaningful way. Grant began to cross off various options that flashed through his mind. A wave suddenly jolted the boat, knocking it sideways and reinforcing the need to approach the rescue with great caution to avoid injuring the men in the ocean whilst trying to save them.
Bringing the sailors up and over the side of TryBooking.com was not going to be possible. Simply put, the exhausted crew of TryBooking.com would have been too exposed on the slippery deck. They had not trained in using the halyard in this way and may not have had enough energy for the physical task of winching the sailors aboard.
Bringing the crew of Inception in over the landing at the stern looked like the best option, but great care would be required. In the darkness and confused seas, there was a real risk of injuring the sailors if they went under the stern. What was the best way to approach them?
Sailing forwards to the group then stopping would be problematic because holding the boat into wind would be very difficult. When the boat was stationary, the wind would push the bow off its line almost immediately. On the other hand, turning Trybooking.com around and reversing towards the group with the bow downwind would be very dangerous. The huge seas could swamp the stern and wash the sailors under in such a configuration.
They needed to point TryBooking.com into the wind and be able to control the bow whilst stationary. They steered about 6m to the left of the group in the water and went about 6m past them. Grant then turned 60O to the right and the wind immediately pushed them sideways towards the sailors. The intention was to apply power to control the bow and oppose the wind so that the boat sideslipped. If it worked as intended, Grant would hold the direction of the boat and allow it to approach the sailors in a reasonably controlled way.
As he manoeuvred past the men in the water, they shouted “Over here! Over here!”, thinking TryBooking.com was moving away. Grant was in such a high state of concentration and focus on the task at hand that the omnipresent sound of the wind and water momentarily faded. The world was now in black and white. For a brief period, he heard only the engine and the cries of the men in the water. He called out to reassure them.
As TryBooking.com manoeuvred into position, a large wave suddenly lifted and pushed the boat sideways towards the sailors. Grant slammed the throttle to neutral, fearing the boat would land on top of them. As they went under the rail amidships on the starboard side, they disappeared from sight and Grant thought they were going under the boat. He felt helpless as he could do nothing but wait.
Suddenly, a head and shoulders bobbed up just behind the landing at the stern. In a split second, Grant let go of the helm, turned and seized the top of the man’s life jacket with both hands. Using all his strength, he hauled the man upwards, but due to the weight of the water-logged clothing and the tether to the others in the water, he could not lift him into the boat.
By this time, the wind was nudging TryBooking.com’s bow around and pushing them away from the sailors. Grant shouted for his companions to hold onto him from behind but after short struggle, the dragging force became too great and he had to let the sailor go.
Disheartened, Grant resumed his position at the helm and realised that he would have to stay there to maintain control if they were going to have any chance of bringing the sailors on board.

In the meantime, one of the crew shouted to lower the ladder. All three immediately began untying the various items of equipment fixed about the stern. Once they were removed and taken forward, the ladder was clear and could be lowered.

He applied power and circled to the right to come around for a second attempt. Mindful of how the boat and the sailors had met amidships on their first encounter, Grant approached with extra clearance this time. He passed about 10m to the left of the group and continued about the same distance beyond them. Then he steered 50O to the right and carefully adjusted the power to control the bow whilst allowing the boat to drift towards the sailors.

By now, the men in the water had separated into two groups. This made it easier to bring the stern of the boat into position to meet the first group. Having the line of the boat parallel to the waves whilst throttling forward against the wind provided the stable platform they needed to get the men aboard. Kim threw a rope to the first group as they drew near. Once they had gripped the line, he was able to bring them alongside and thence to the stern. The first man unclipped and Peter called for him to place his feet on the lowest rung of the ladder. This provided the purchase they needed to haul the sailor onto the landing and up into the cockpit.

The crew were delighted with their achievement. Despite their early doubts, they had worked out a technique for getting the sailors safely out of the water. Buoyed by their success, they made another orbit and once again manoeuvred into position.

It was a huge physical effort for everyone involved, especially the crew of Inception who had been in the water for about 90 minutes. As well as the cold sapping their energy, they were struggling the entire time against the wind. It pushed against the collars of their lifejackets in such a way that their faces were exposed to a constant barrage of spray. In order to breathe without taking in salt water, they had to fight against the wind to keep their faces in the lee. Although rescue was now at hand, they were tapping their last reserves of strength, and the effort to get on board was almost too much for one of them.

The third man aboard was still daisy-chained to the second. The crew dragged him over the landing but he was unable to move any further. It took nearly 15 minutes to pull him clear of the landing, with his two shipmates imploring him, and TryBooking.com's crew using all their strength to help him in the confined space of the cockpit.

By now they had their technique down pat with each crew member understanding the role they were playing. The remaining three sailors were brought on-board swiftly as they circled to a position slightly upwind and manoeuvred with throttle adjustments to pick them up in quick succession. Instead of dragging the last three men across the landing, the rescuers brought them up onto their knees so they could catch their breath in an upright position. They were then able to crawl forward and get clear of the stern more quickly.

The last one on board was the Inception skipper, Jeff. He had experienced a terrible shock when Inception went down, but he had shepherded his crew throughout their ordeal, keeping up their morale in dire circumstances. In the final stages of the rescue, he had unclipped himself from his companions and swum to one of the sailors who had drifted apart from the others. Only when his shipmates were safe did he come forward.

However, as Jeff gripped the landing, the bow of TryBooking.com fell into a trough. Ross watched on in horror as the stern lifted, carrying Jeff out of the water as he clung on tenaciously. Peter had taken hold of Jeff, but as the rising stern tipped him off balance, he was flung forward into the sea. Fortunately, he was able to hold onto Jeff as he went over, so he could grip the ladder and climb aboard only slightly wetter than he had been moments before.

The rescue helicopter arrived overhead as the third sailor was brought aboard. Grant feared they might illuminate them with their spotlight and ruin their night vision, but they held off and swept the surrounding area looking for survivors. Once the Inception skipper was aboard and Grant had ascertained that everyone had been picked up, he flashed a light and waved from the boat to let the helicopter know "all OK".

Grant cross-checked with the rescued sailors to be sure that no-one was missing. The Inception skipper, Jeff, and his father, Ken, remained in the cockpit but the other four made their way below with the crew of TryBooking.com breaking out blankets for all. The third man aboard, Doug, was placed on the floor so he could not fall, then Grant did a quick check on the condition of the other five sailors. He didn't want to focus on the sick man and miss a problem with one of the others. Although Doug was not moving, he was verbally responding to questions.

Grant then contacted the helicopter on marine channel 16 (VHF) and reported on the condition of the six rescued sailors. Although all had vomited sea water as they came aboard and several times afterwards, five were now in good spirits with one who appeared to be suffering from hypothermia. The helicopter replied that a ship with "medical facilities" was being diverted to their position. At this news, Grant went up to the cockpit and advised Ross and Kim to hold TryBooking.com in its current position, motoring as slowly as possible, while they waited for the ship to arrive.

Grant then radioed Peter at ORCV:

"We have all 6 crew from Inception". He added that there were now 10 persons on board TryBooking.com, but, "for information only, our life raft is rated for 8 people".

Grant also advised the ORCV that they were holding for a ship. Peter (ORCV) asked for details of Doug's condition and advised on suitable treatment, which the TryBooking.com crew had already initiated. Five minutes later, Grant questioned Doug again and reported to Peter (ORCV) that he was showing signs of improving.

Grant them spoke with the helicopter again. They wanted the latitude and longitude of TryBooking.com so they could relay a position fix to the ship. However, the chart plotter display by the radio had been damaged. It had split in two and was hanging from the cabinet by a few wires. Clearly, it would be of no further use. Grant tried to get a fix from the HF radio display, but before he could complete the button sequence, another station reported "We have you on the AIS position", and they relayed the numbers to the helicopter. He was referring to the Automatic Identification System on board TryBooking.com.

(Until that moment, Grant thought there was only a helicopter in the area. He was unable to identify the second voice and believed it was coming from another vessel in the area. It was subsequently learned that the Dornier aircraft was overhead. It is now unclear whether Grant was speaking with the helicopter or the fixed wing aircraft or both).

Shortly afterwards, the helicopter advised that the ship was about 45 minutes away. However, after some deliberation, a message was relayed from the ship. They were very concerned about attempting a ship-to-ship transfer in the prevailing weather. This was enough for Grant. He asked Kim to power up to 1,800rpm and take up a heading of 300O. This would give them a safe track to the closest port – Warrnambool.

It was now about 0300hrs on Saturday 7th April and Warrnambool was about 6 hours away. Peter (ORCV) radioed to request position reports every 30 minutes. Grant was now feeling extremely tired and, given that there was a tracking device on TryBooking.com, he agreed to contact ORCV at least once an hour, but he could not commit to a 30 minute schedule.

On route to Warrnambool, Grant spoke further with members of the Inception crew. What he heard caused him to think Doug might have been suffering more from severe shock than hypothermia. However, as they monitored his condition, it seemed that whatever the cause, he was continuing to improve.

During a radio sched at about 0400hrs, Warrnambool Coast Guard reported that the swell was very dangerous in their vicinity. So much so that the Coast Guard was not prepared to leave port. At this news, Grant concluded that it would not be safe for TryBooking.com to enter. Accordingly, they changed course for Port Fairy, with an ETA of 1000hrs.

EPILOGUE

As things settled down, Grant and Peter put out some sail. The jib was a mess from earlier events and could not be deployed, but putting out a little of the main sheet helped stabilise the boat to some extent.

As dawn broke, the wind eased to about 30kts which allowed them to extend a bit more of the mainsail. This increased their speed from around 4.5kts to 6kts, and conferred more stability. The wind had backed to the southwest, which was ideal for TryBooking.com's heading. By 0800hrs, the men below began to stir. They grew more conversational as they munched on muesli bars and drank Gatorade. Doug was able to stand and move a little, albeit gingerly.

They spied the Norfolk Pines of Port Fairy just before 1000hrs and were met at the Turning Buoy by a PFYC boat that guided them past the breakwater and into the Moyne River. When they saw the Channel Seven chopper circling overhead, they had some idea of the attention they were about to receive. A crowd of more than 150 people had assembled in front of the yacht club and along the path across the river to welcome them with cheers and applause. Amongst them were friends from Port Fairy, sailors from the other yachts that had arrived earlier and were rafted up on the wharf, and many PFYC members. It was a great feeling to hear the cry go up: "Three cheers for TryBooking!"

Once tied up, all on board were able to leave the boat without assistance to be met by the ambulance, the police and several news media outlets. As a precautionary measure, the Inception crew were ferried to the hospital for checks, but the crew of TryBooking.com made their way to the PFYC for a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs, followed by the awards ceremony. Although only one boat in the fleet, Dry White, had completed the race, all participants received commendations for seamanship in the horrendous conditions. TryBooking.com was presented with a haul of beer and wine in appreciation of their actions the night before.

The crew of TryBooking.com spent the rest of the day drying their gear and resting. Everything had been drenched as a result of the storm, but they did what they could to dry out clothes and blankets. At 1730hrs, after organising fuel, they slipped off the wharf, motored to the mouth of the river and set sail for Melbourne.

TRIBUTE

A lot of things went wrong for participants in the 2012 M2PF Ocean Race. Of the 14 starters, only one boat, Dry White, officially finished. The storm that hit the fleet at dusk on Good Friday pounded all the boats mercilessly throughout the night, but Inception was singled out for the worst possible treatment. After having their lift raft torn away in the screaming gale, the crew were forced into the heaving seas in darkness when their yacht sank suddenly, giving them barely time to scramble free. Even with modern safety aids, their prospects for survival that night were slim. Only those who have experienced such trauma themselves will truly understand and appreciate the horror of their ordeal. However, the skipper and crew of TryBooking.com intervened to prevent an awful situation developing into an unimaginable tragedy. Through the skill, resourcefulness, courage and perseverance of Grant, Peter, Ross and Kim, six men, who could so easily have perished that night, are alive today.

Bravo, gentlemen! Bravo!

By Grant Dunoon as told to Dr Peter Ball