

In the Line of Fire by Jackie Zanetti

We were looking forward to our first sail through the Dennison Canal to east coast of Tasmania, with its warmer waters and pristine beaches. With Christmas celebrations over and *Chaika* provisioned for 10 days, we looked for a good weather window. The first week of January looked good so we set off for Murdunna in Norfolk Bay on the 2nd of January, expecting to go through the canal the following morning.

Thursday, 3rd Jan., we set off, only to find strong westerly winds in Norfolk Bay. Being cautious in nature, we decided to postpone the trip through the canal until the next day. After puttering around Norfolk Bay for the day we spent a quiet night tucked into the western corner of Sommers Bay. On the way there we saw smoke in the distance to the north.

Friday, 4th Jan., we checked the forecast and saw it was to be very hot with northerly winds and decided that Murdunna would be more sheltered so we motored back around into King George Sound. By midafternoon we noticed the smoke getting much closer and local ABC radio was sending out warnings for Dunalley. The wind started to pick up (WNW) and ash started falling all around us. By 3pm, the wind was quite strong at over 20 knots funnelling up the sound, the smoke denser and closer and we noticed we were dragging our anchor in a soft mud patch. With ash falling on *Chaika*, long charred strips of bark falling in the water around us, a dead bird with singed wings floating past and finally the first spot fire on shore, we were faced with a decision whether to stay or leave. With the twin risks of embers hitting the boat and dragging we decided to leave, but where to go? Winds were now northerly, gusting over 30 knots, so we decided to head back to Sommers Bay which is southwest of Murdunna.

After a wild ride back to Sommers Bay we dug our anchor into a good sandy patch, put out 50m of chain, and prepared ourselves to stay and defend *Chaika*. We put a couple of buckets with water and rags out in case of embers. As evening came on, we could see the local residents evacuating to the waterfront. Cars and utes with dinghies on trailers lined one side of the shore and a few people with sit-upon kayaks waded out from the beach. One kayak had a toddler inside with three adults standing in the water with survival back packs – they stood in the one spot in thigh deep water for over two hours. As the smoke grew thicker a water bombing helicopter flew over several times to fill up from a nearby dam. We could see that the fire was moving quickly southward to the east of us and just around dusk the top of the ridge to the east started flaring up with flames rising high into the sky. The heat and the roar of the fire, even though it was on the other side of the ridge, was frightful. We sat in the cockpit, drinking lots of water and waiting to see whether the fire would come down the hill towards the bay. We were prepared to take people on board if they requested or it became necessary.

Around 11pm it seemed to be easing and moving further south. Alex went below to get some sleep while Jackie kept watch. Occasional gusts would whip up the flames or a tree falling would cause a shower of sparks and embers over the hill, but the flames came no closer.

At 12:50am the wind suddenly shifted to the south and within 15 minutes the temperature dropped by 10 degrees and a strong fetch started to roll into the bay. *Chaika* began to pitch and swing wildly. Alex came up to review the situation. He saw that we were now dragging toward the shore so he quickly started the motor and began driving slowly upwind to take the strain off the chain. He maintained this from 1am till nearly 5 am. Eventually, when the winds eased and Alex worked out how to “hove to at anchor” in a more stable position - the rudder hard over to turn away from the wind, the anchor chain pulling into the wind and the wind blowing the bow away from the wind.

By 5am on Saturday, 5th Jan., the winds had eased further and in the predawn light we decided it was time to head home. We could see fires still smouldering over the hill, but it looked like Sommers Bay itself would be spared. We were very fortunate in that our lives were never at risk although we felt sorrow and distress for the folks we’d seen who still didn’t know whether their homes were spared.

After that long night and five hours crossing a choppy bay we tucked ourselves into a quiet little bolt hole called the Duck Pond for a much needed sleep. A further quiet day and night in the Channel convinced us that, despite the dramatic events of the 4th of January, overall it was a good trip that we'll remember for a long while.

About us:

Jackie Zanetti and Alex Papij:

Jackie grew up in New Jersey, but has lived in Australia since 1995. Her experience with sailing started with crewing on a 40ft Nordic in Wednesday night races in Adelaide. Alex is an electronics engineer retired from CSIRO's marine research labs with many research ship cruises under his belt, including one to Antarctica a few years ago. He owned sailboats in the 1980's, starting with a Mirror dinghy that he built, then a Compass 28 and a Duncanson 29, which he was in the process of fitting out when jobs and house moves got in the way. After a long sailing drought and many years of dreaming and talking about boats, he was told to either shut up or get one! Alex and Jackie now own *Chaika*, a 36ft Jeanneau fibreglass sloop. Together they're enjoying exploring their home waters of Tasmania



The beginning of the fire approaching Murdunna



Escaping Murdunna and the fire front.



Evacuees in water at Sommers Bay



Water bombing near Sommers Bay.



Refuge, the Duck Pond



Hazy morning, the Duck Pond