

Fond Memories of The 80th Anniversary Tollgates Classic (Batemans Bay, 19-21 January 2018)

*Skipper Brian accompanied on the good ship Day Off 2 by scurvy crew Anthony & Jon,
a team which was to become affectionately known by us as The Donut Kings.*

Words by Jon Vogel / Pictures by Anthony Heiser & Jon Vogel

The Pre Fish

Having arrived in Bateman's Bay mid-afternoon Thursday with a few hours up our sleeve, I willingly took up Anthony's offer to borrow a rod and join him to explore a local waterway only a short drive from Brian's house.

After a pretty slow start on the ocean side of the sand bar due to weed constantly fouling the hook, what then followed on the estuary side was nothing short of one of my best ever sessions on soft plastics, and certainly one of the most enjoyable flatty catching sessions in a very long time (OK, so I was wading but that's still land based, right?).

Eight flathead between 38.0-46.5cm caught & released in just under an hour, plus a few tiddlers not worth mentioning. And the only reason we stopped was because it was getting late and we needed to catch up with Brian to attend the competitors' briefing at 6pm.







Oh, and just for the record, Anthony caught five flathead of similar size – the largest of which I reluctantly conceded had just pipped me by a skerrick.

First Impressions

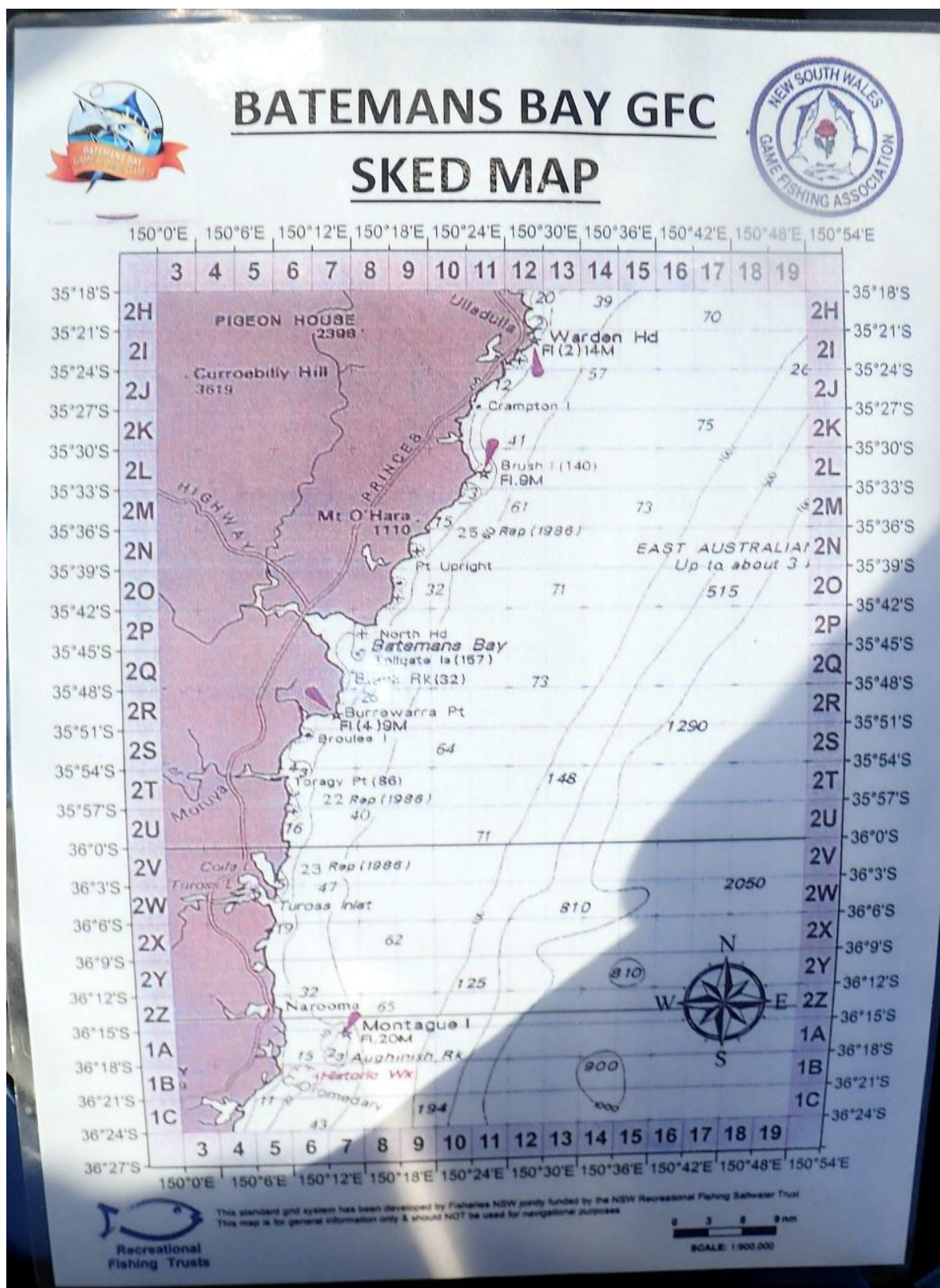
After all that unexpected excitement on Thursday afternoon, when we finally commenced fishing 'for real' the following day it seemed like the exact opposite. This was all new territory to me and definitely a rare opportunity not to be missed, however first impressions were that marlin fishing might be a rather sedate and largely uneventful cruise



But as I should have known, a newbie's first impressions can be very deceptive!

Background Briefing

Each of the 3 days in competition started with breakfast at 4am, a pre-dawn launch in the dark at 5am, followed by an hour or more travelling at full speed of up to 30 knots to the designated marlin hotspot du jour.



Competition fishing commenced at 6am and consisted of trolling skirted lures & natural skip baits (slimy mackerel, care of bait-meister Anthony) on five 15kg & 24kg stand-up rods, at speeds of between 4 and 8 knots (1500-1800 rpm).

Results throughout the day were called in as needed, however formal 'Sked Checks' were conducted every 2 hours when the entire fleet was required to report their present position according to a designated map grid, plus the cumulative boat tally based on a Strike/Fight/Tag numbering system, where no result was often referred to as "all donuts".

Calls for 'Last Marlin' were made at 4:30pm sharp at which point the fleet (apart from those who'd reported as still being in the fight) would return to port at a slightly more sedate pace of 20 knots due to driving into a sloppy, steeply rising NE seas.

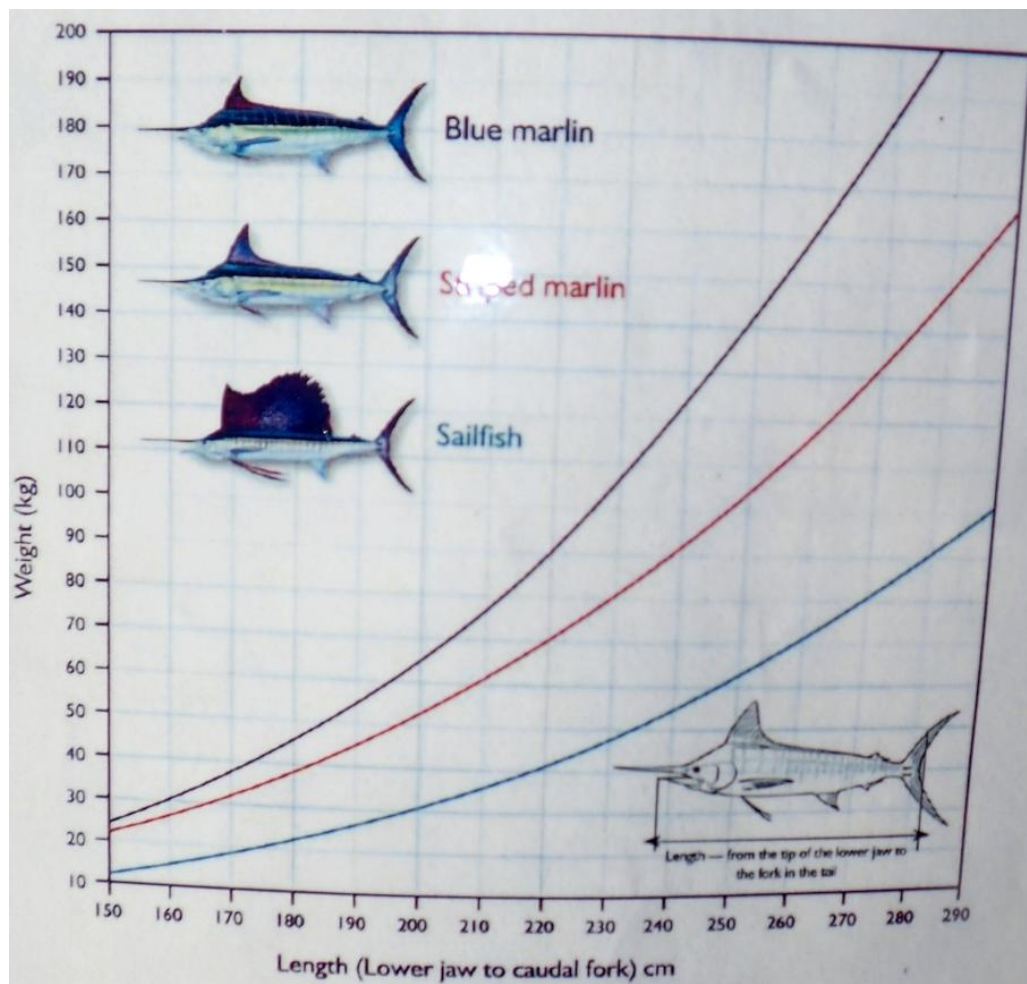
Distance covered on a typical day was about 75nm, which on calm seas equates to about 100l fuel being consumed by *Day Off 2's* smooth running 150hp 4-stroke Yamaha, which thankfully didn't miss a beat all weekend. However rougher conditions, as was experienced on Saturday, resulted in the fuel bill escalating to 140l.

Weather over the entire weekend was hot, with moderate to gusty NE winds. Sea conditions were lumpy at best rising to 'condition red' rough on Sunday, with heavy chop and short period swells of 2.0-3.0m a constant companion.

And since I'm prone to sea sickness even on a mill pond I needing to remain heavily dosed-up at all times. And this tends to dull the senses, especially when also sleep deprived, though this is definitely the lesser of two evils (just ask Anthony!). Apart from dooziness, one of the other less favourable side effects of taking strong anti sea-sickness medication is that an end-of-day celebratory ale or three is highly inadvisable, and so it turned out to a rather dry weekend.

Target Species

Apart from tuna, Striped Marlin are the primary game fish caught along the NSW Far South Coast, though a single Blue and a few tuna were also reported out of nearly 90 captures officially logged across 3 days. In a competition where the vast majority of fish are tagged, measured and released, deemed weight is based on prescribed weight-to-length tables. This means that a typical South Coast Striped Marlin in the 1.8m-2.4m range will be recorded as 40-90kg.



And this is why the drag is always meticulously set at 1/3rd the breaking strain of the line class. The other thing to consider when an 80kg fish is fought on 15kg line class is that the fisho typically won't exert more than 5-6Kg of pressure, which means that where there is no structure, snags, predators, or other boats, the fish can be allowed to dive deep and swim freely as many times at the angler has the stamina to retrieve the line. However when the fish (or fisho) finally runs out of puff, the boat can simply 'back up' so long as sea conditions permit. Mind you, backing up doesn't help much should the fish decide to repeatedly dive deep.

Action Stations

Our well oiled routine established over the first two days (daze?) of untroubled trolling and regular Sked Checks reported as 'all donuts' changed in an instant when Mr S. Marlin finally decide to grace us with an unannounced visit at about 8am on Sunday.

More by good luck than good management I happened to be closest to the port side out-rigger when it went off like a rifle shot, and so I was up and at 'em in a flash. And given the speed of my reactions, it looked like not enjoying a few beers at the presentation dinner the night before was about to pay off in spades.

And, for a time, it did pay off with barely controlled chaos and pandemonium ensuing as Brian expertly manoeuvring the boat while at the same time offering encouragement and much needed instructions, which I could hardly hear above the roar of my own heart wildly pumping blood through an oxygen starved body. And all this time Anthony was quietly packing away rods and clearing the deck, and then capturing the moment.





And then after two deep dives and painful retrieves followed by two less aggressive surface runs, just as suddenly as it all had started, the wild action ceased abruptly with what can only be described in game fishing circles as a piscatorial calamity.

Quite literally I'd put in the hard yards for over 20 minutes with not so much as a hiccup. And with the game almost won with leader in sight and tiring fish on the surface, I sensibly decided to take a brief but well deserved breather before backing off the drag from fighting mode of 5-6kg down to a lighter 3-4kg in preparation for the final manoeuvres of tagging & releasing (which is where the real fun & games is supposed to begin).

And it was then without provocation or forewarning that the 15kg IGFA rated main line just popped under very little pressure other than what was necessary to let Mr S. Marlin know who was boss.

This is simply not supposed to happen given the quality of gear and the attention to rigging. So, was it a suspect knot, or perhaps the line had been damaged over 3 days of continuous fishing, or maybe the leader knot had been pinched as it ran over the roller guides, or ... ???

However the most likely explanation by far is that this was the fish gods sending me a fateful reminder that first impression can be very deceptive and beginner's luck can never be taken for granted.

Anyway, the gig was up and all I could do was take a few moments to contemplate what had just happened and what might have been as I rapidly came back down to earth still gasping for breath.

And all Brian & Anthony could do was retrieve rods from the overhead rocket launcher and set about establishing the next trolling pattern ready to have another go.

Based on Anthony's photographic evidence, my Striped Marlin was estimated to be in the upper range of normal and so probably would have measured about 2.1-2.3m. Or about 60-80kg, which is well over 4x the rated breaking strain of the IGFA approved 15kg mainline.

That's marlin fishing for you, but since a solid hook-up is such a rare event, and certainly something which I'm not likely to get another chance to repeat, it was a real bugger not to have been able to convert this opportunity of a lifetime into a life time of bragging rights. However none of that will cloud my fond memories of getting so close on my maiden marlin voyage.

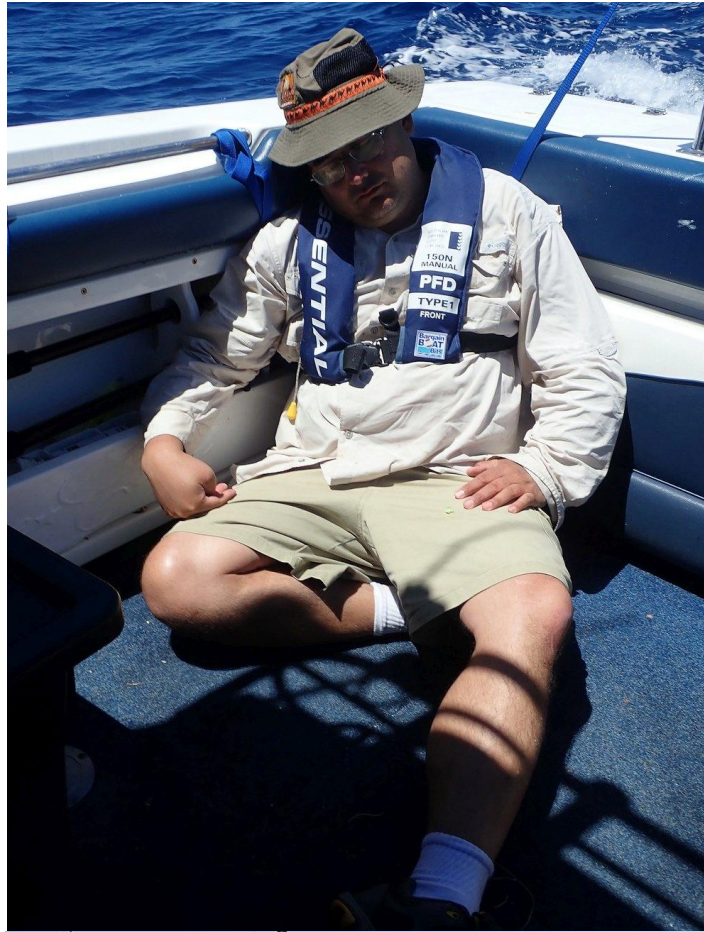
Unexpected Consequences

Despite the loss, there were still some pluses since we were now able to proudly announce to the fleet at the next Sked Check that The Donut Kings – err, Team 6, Day Off 2 – had upped the ante to 1/1/0!

But as elated as we were to finally have runs on the board, there was also an unexpected downside because having experience 'fish on' we were automatically removed from contention from the "Unlucky Boat" prize pool (a free entry to next year's competition) – which personally I think was a very unkind cut.

Lessons Learned

As previously mentioned – and as the pictures below misleadingly suggest – to the untrained eye, trolling for marlin may seem a rather sedentary pastime where the action is few and far between and there is little to do other than burn fuel and search blindly ... and perhaps even catch a few Z's!



But nothing could be further from the truth, as I was to learn over 3 days. In fact there's quite a lot more to trolling for marlin than just sitting around waiting for a rod to go off. For example, one is constantly scanning the rod tips and how the lures or baits are travelling as they skip along the pressure waves created by the hull. And one is also searching for birds, checking the sounder for bait-balls, keeping an eye out for other vessels, as well as monitoring feeding seals and dolphins and being alert to any other sign which may indicate that a piscatorial predator is lurking below.

And of course, once a gaggle of boats forms in a particular location, it definitely heightens the sense of anticipation even if no one is actually hooking up because they must all be there for a good reason, right?

In that respect, one thing which surprised me is that more skippers didn't choose to shadow the 'pro boats' – at a respectful distance of course. Certainly on this weekend I'd have thought a popular tactic would be to stick close to Head Hunter. This vessel was skippered by a professional charter boat captain with professional crew to match which had travelled up from Bermagui at first light on Friday morning. And skipper & crew were complemented by a ship load of very experienced cashed up punters who were very keen to clean up the locals – which they did 3 days running!

Mind you, being a local, Brian also did very well to pick the perfect locations each day, and his choices were invariably proved correct right when the majority of the fleet would eventually turn up there too (within +/- 5nm anyway). So, when push came to shove, it's a shame Brian's crew of game fishing novices weren't able to convert his expertise and local knowledge into something which better rewarded his efforts.

And as if to taunt us, others boats were granted many sightings over 3 days and gleefully logged their multiple hits/fights/catches loud & clear on Ch 80. In fact, Friday's catch of 67 marlin between a field of 40 boats is believed to be an all-time single day record in 80 years of holding the Tollgates Classic. So, with an average of 1.7 marlin per boat carded on the first day alone, this was the surely the best opportunity everyone in the fleet had to get lucky.

But at least I can say I was there for the 80th anniversary of “The Tollgates”, and have the shirt to prove it ☺.

Unsportsmanlike Behaviour

On several occasions over the weekend I was disappointed to discover that game fishing is not the sport of gentlemen I'd been led to believe. For example, on the first day when crossing the small bar which guards the entrance to Bateman's Bay harbour, we were hit by the bow wave generated by a very much larger vessel which just charged passed us at full throttle less than 2-3 boat lengths off our port side, apparently with little regard for the consequences. So it was hardly surprising that Anthony (who, at the time, was queasily perched towards the rear of the boat) got totally drenched.



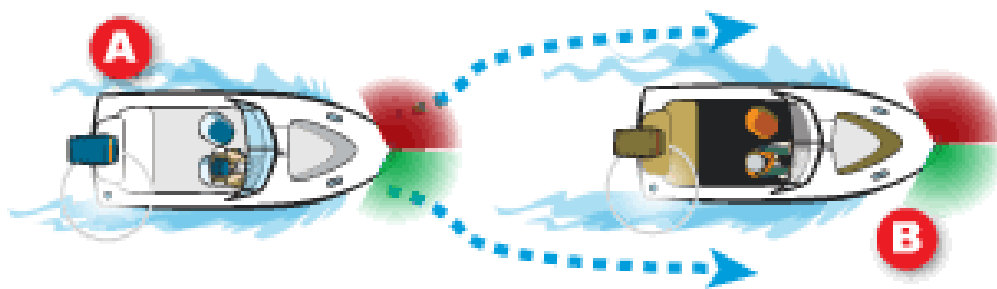
While Anthony eventually dried out, his digital SLR did not and was permanently ruined. That plus his phone was also on the buzz for several hours (though, as we subsequently found out, iPhones do actually buzz when their excess-moisture sensors are triggered). While Anthony's iPhone did eventually come back to life (and stop buzzing), it may yet fail prematurely due to internal corrosion. Mind you, like losing a rod overboard (just ask Tom H and Zane), to me this seems like a perfect upgrade opportunity.

However, as if that weren't enough rudeness for one weekend, on Sunday morning whilst motoring into very heavy sea, we were almost run down from behind by a monster vessel which is owned and operated by a well known ex-Canberra chemist.



And despite us being the stand-on vessel with undisputed right of way, had Brian not correctly assessed the situation and very quickly altered course, I've no doubt we'd all have been testing how reliably our PFDs inflated. And no, this is not a boat 'upgrade opportunity' one would ever wish to exercise.

For the interest of those who might one day find themselves in this same situation, Vessel A is overtaking and is the give-way vessel. Vessel B is the stand-on vessel. As the give-way vessel, A must take EARLY and SUBSTANTIAL action to keep clear of the stand-on vessel B.



If both vessels are power-driven, sound signals are required. Vessel A must blow one short blast and alter course to starboard, or blow two short blasts and alter course to port, and Vessel B must return the same sound signal(s) to indicate understanding.

Positive Closing Thoughts

One thing I really liked when taking my turn at the wheel was the latest improvement Brian has added to *Day Off 2's* already impressive array of navionics – a Raymarine Autopilot, aka drive-by-wire.



Drive By Wire @ 10knts!

(This is no mock up. Check the instruments – speed on left, rpm on right)

Autopilot relieves stress on the skipper from having to constantly monitor the chart plotter and make minor course corrections, but it also makes the whole operation a lot safer. Plus it enables the skipper to more fully engage in the fishing, or take a leak, or perhaps make a chicken sandwich for the rest of crew when the seas are sufficiently benign and the coast is clear of other vessels.

However the most interesting feature of drive-by-wire is the ability to set various patterns, ranging from a circle as might be deployed around the perimeter of a bait ball, to a figure-8, clover leaf, spiral, square, or even a criss-cross search pattern. So, all one needed to do was keep a keen eye on the prevailing waves and a sharp lookout for other vessels while checking for incoming messages.



And then just sit back and enjoy the ride.



So, thank you to the Batemans Bay Game Fishing Club for continuously hosting the Tollgates Classic for 80 years (and counting). And thank you Skipper Brian for generously inviting me on board and putting us up for the weekend. And thank you to my fellow crewman, Anthony, for being there to catch the bait and share the experience ... and for not being too quick to grab the rod 😊.

Over.