

Text & Photos by Guest Columnist Robert (Jake) Thornbury

It was a dark, moist, windy morning as the four of us boarded the 38' Polynesian Concept catamaran, better known as the "Pasado Manano," in Barnegat Bay, N.J. I couldn't help but feel a certain trepidation about sailing on the open ocean, something that I had never done before. The uneasiness was compounded by the fact that I didn't know any of the crew members and only the captain, Don Wood, for a short time. Yet the spirit of adventure created small bursts of adrenaline in my system. We were leaving at four a.m. in the morning to enable the boat to clear the bridge south of us with our forty-four-foot mast.

Don Wood's "Pasado Manano":



In preparation for the trip, Don and I stayed on Sandy Island, N.J., his residence at the time. Don was the sole inhabitant of the small island. He gladly assumed the responsibility of being a caretaker since it afforded him the opportunity to live peacefully. The cabin he lived in had spartan furnishings and yet there wasn't a need for anything else. The windows were always wide open to allow the constant sound breezes to infiltrate the cabin, filling one's nostrils with aromas of the sea. The cabin's building was situated so that you had a view of the rising sun in the morning hours, and a view of the setting sun in the evening. It's

foundation was an insulated ice barge that supported a wooden rectangular cabin with a bedroom with bunk beds to the north, and a living room that housed a sturdy wooden rocker and an oil heating stove. The only plumbing consisted of hot water supplied by a black painted tank on the roof and an artesian well outside for fresh supplies of drinking and bathing water. The cabin's lighting was supplied by the soft glow of kerosene lamps. A narrow deck to the south provided ample pilings from which to hang a trap to catch blue crabs. Outlying islands, salt water marshes, and sound waters supplied mussels, oysters, and flounder. All of this suited Don's fierce independence and wishes for solitude. His C.B. radio, his only contact with the outside world, was seldom used. Numerous visits from curious strangers were not taken kindly. One such occurrence saw Don running from the cabin au-naturel, brandishing a shot gun over his head, while yelling expletives at the approaching strangers who made a fast retreat.

Don's Other Retreat — His Houseboat:



Gear was quickly stored in the hulls, orders were given to release most of the cordage that held the sails, and the Honda outboard motor was started. We cast our lines off and slowly entered the blackness of the night. It was pitch dark on the water despite the lights of the mainland to the west of us and the lights of Long Beach Island that twinkled in the east. I hadn't a clue as to how Don knew where he was going since there didn't seem to be any channel marker lights. It had only been a couple of weeks before that he had asked me to take his skiff from the marina and visit with him on Sandy Island. I had been working as a bouncer for a college friend in an old cedar shake two story bar that once was a rum runner's establishment during prohibition. By the time I had reached the marina it was 3:00 in the morning. His instructions were "just head out the inlet, make a right and go to the buoy marker, make a left, and enter the channel to my cabin." I followed his instructions, but soon found myself immersed in total blackness trying to locate the buoy marker light. Feeling uneasy I proceeded north as the sound waters seemed to engulf me. I later realized that Don never gave me anything that I couldn't handle. He knew of my

inexperience as a waterman, my lack of knowledge of the sound waters, and most of all my lack of confidence in my own abilities. Don had unbridled confidence in his ability to be “very competent” at most things he undertook. He did not have the air of a professional person, like what we see today. In fact, his normal appearance consisted of bare feet, hair, full beard that was often trimmed by himself, bleached corn yellow and white by the sun. His Nordic blond hair was often covered by one of the numerous selections of different caps, or hats that he had in different vehicles, skiffs, his boat shop in Ocracoke, or his log cabin in New Mexico. The majority of the hats were purely pragmatic in design to keep the sun out of his eyes, not for special group allegiances, or product labels that people identify with today. He did, however, have a special selection of hand made hats that had been given to him that marked memorable occasions, or gifts from individuals that Don held in high esteem, but were never worn. His confidence was always overshadowed by his seemingly endless thought processes that immersed him in periods of long self absorbed quiet.

Although his mind seemed to be constantly at work, he often exhibited the inquisitive nature of a child in the way he used his right index finger to bend at the first joint and examine whatever it was that he was focused on at the time...the latter was contrary to the appearance of his hands and feet that were calloused, cracked, and yet powerful with fresh signs of what he had just finished working on . . . he was definitely not one to be concerned with the day to day peer group pressure of what his appearance was, how he was dressed, or concern for whose company he was in. He was always Don. If you didn't approve, it was of no consequence to Don, you were either with him, or you weren't . . . no gray areas there.

Captain Don Wood:



Humorous examples of the latter were an everyday occurrence, but two special ones went something like this. One day Don was working in his shop at the marina on an outboard motor when he casually made mention of the fact that he had a wedding to attend that afternoon. A very quick wipe with a dirty rag fulfilled his need to clean his hands, while a quick “quaffing” of his hair with his hands sufficed for a comb. Finally, rummaging about in various nylon sail bags in the sail loft brought cheers of delight in that he had found his sport coat. Indeed, and what a prize it was. In the late seventies a madras sport coat was not at all in vogue. Not being deterred by this, he pulled the badly wrinkled coat out and immediately put it on to see how it fit. The coat had speckles of very dark green mold that stood out despite the varied colors of the coat. A quick rush to the wooden counter to obtain a bright red flower from the Salvation Army was proudly placed in the lapel and presto the outfit was complete. His obvious delight was accompanied by a broad smile and a quick two step of his feet. His addition of a badly wrinkled white shirt and wrinkled khakis from his Bronco completed the outfit. In the years that I knew Don, I never saw him consult

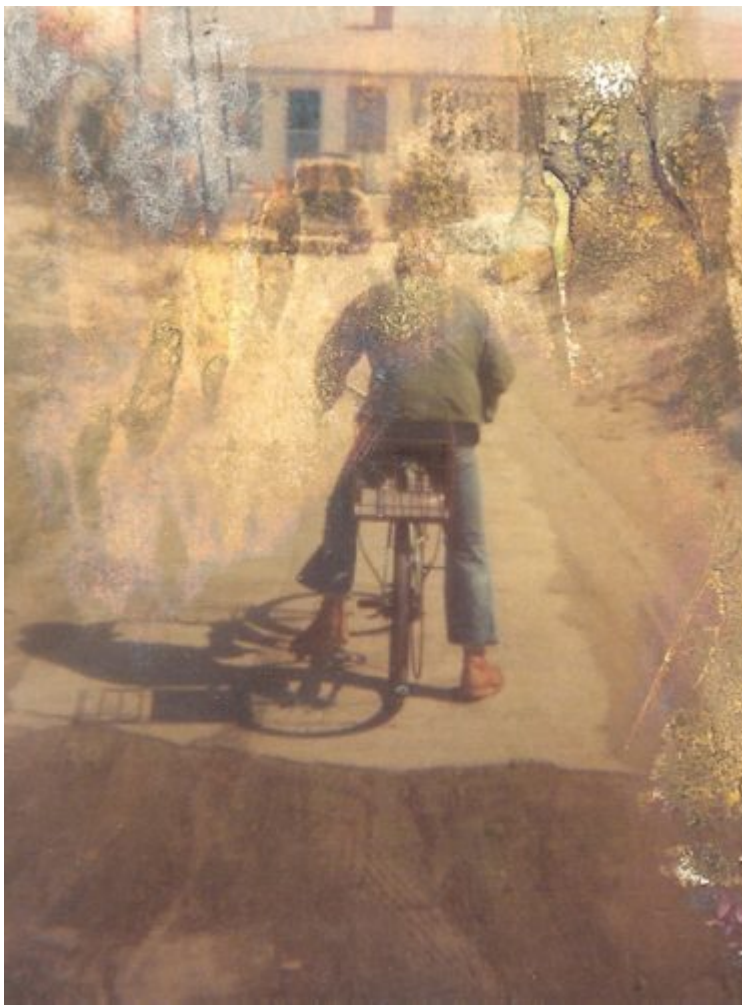
with a mirror to confirm his appearance, nor do I remember him having one. As he departed the marina, still in his bare feet, he let out a whoop of cheer with the Bronco's fiberglass mufflers resonating their sweet sounds as he shifted through the gears disappearing down the road.

Another hilarious episode consisted of Don and me on the ferry from Hatteras to Ocracoke on a bluebird day. We were traveling via an older Saab that had been obtained by building a sea wall for a friend. This type of bartering, without money exchange, was commonplace for Don . . . The Saab's body was rusted off at the bottoms of the fenders, doors, and quarter panels, and its brown paint was faded to the color of sand after spending a great deal of its life at the beach. The Saab's floors had long been covered by a thick layer of sand that contained various pieces of equipment such as oar locks, cordage for boats, various boxed filters, screws and bolts. The driver's sun visor and head liner contained various hand written quotes by Don such as, "The sun don't shine on the same dog every day," and "Peculiar travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God," Kurt Vonnegut. Nonetheless the three speed column shift, front wheel drive, and four cylinder motor made it an excellent vehicle to travel cheaply and on the beach. After a day's hard drive we were lying back in the reclining seats waiting for the ferry to dock . . . Don was behind the steering wheel when a lady, who was walking between the cars, looked down at Don and gave a very disparaging look and comment about the entire entourage. She said, "Does that car still run?" Don, always quick on his feet immediately stated, "Yeah, and we will pass you going down the island." Her dubious looks confirmed the fact that she thought we would most likely have to push the car off the ferry, and we sure as hell wouldn't pass her. Needless to say, as we departed the ferry and gained speed, we spotted the lady ahead, and the chase was on. Don shifted into third and put the pedal to the metal . . . gaining speed, we safely passed the lady while Don gave her the high sign as cheers of enthusiastic laughter reached her ears and we pulled in front of her. So much for the "Dingbatter," Don would later exclaim.

As dawn's first light appeared on the horizon, we passed underneath the bridge with all eyes looking up to assure that we would clear. From our perspective, it appeared that we "just made it" under the bridge structure, but in reality we had plenty of room. Don, in the time I knew him, never "second guessed" anything. He knew and had already thought the process through. In a short period of time, I gained immediate comfort in his abilities and never once felt at risk . . . The sail from the sound and into the blue waters of the Atlantic went smoothly. Despite the fact that there were three crew members on board, it almost seemed as if the crew were "paying passengers," out for a day's sail. Don never moved with haste while steering the cat with a tiller that controlled both rudders. Complaining about the noise, he shut the motor off as soon as we gained steerage from the dock that

morning. The thousand square feet of sail between the main and the jib effortlessly pushed the cat through the water with the hulls only drawing 19 inches of water when unloaded and four and a half feet when the dagger boards were down. The boat had been designed for Buddy Ebsen, the actor, for the Trans-Pac Race from Los Angeles, California to Hawaii. Don was excited about the boat's attributes . It could be beached without hauling at the marina. Its speed and minimum draft enabled it to reach many anchorages close to islands. The boat had an overall roominess on board, and you could lounge or stand straight up while under sail. Its jib furling was controlled from the cockpit, and the main sail and motor controls were within easy reach. Don originally had the two symmetrical hulls and cabin shipped separately on rail cars from California to New Jersey where he assembled them. Don completed all interior wood work, wiring, fiberglassing, and rigging with help from a few friends.

Don on His Bicycle:





One of the crew members was “Funk”, or as few knew him, Jim Callahan. No one thought much about Jim’s absence before departure until we were underway and sailing on the ocean’s waters. While steering the vessel and surveying the coastline from afar with binoculars, Don stated that he wanted to triangulate our position to establish our progress for the day. Jim quipped from nearby that he would do it . . . Jim had quietly and unobtrusively been studying navigation from one of the many books in Don’s cabin. To everyone’s surprise, except Don’s, Jim notably established where we were, our average speed over the water, and the effect of the currents on our progress. Jim was from New Mexico, and had never been on the ocean before, much less sailed. Actually, he had spent the majority of his slumber time under the stars during his formative years, and he could recite almost all of the constellations and names of many stars by heart.

Sailing with Friends:



The sail through the night went off without a hitch. All watches fulfilled their duties with only occasional appearances by Don to assess the situation. I later wondered when he slept, if at all. The following day the winds picked up and storm clouds were quickly developing from the west. We still had all the sail up, but now the port hull was knifing through the water with constant water spray flying through the air. Some of it was going over the cabin

roof despite the high free board of the hulls, and wetting the bottom of the main sail. It was exhilarating and my adrenaline was pumping. We hadn't installed a speed indicator, but we estimated that our hull speed was at least ten to twelve knots, if not more. I went below to make a sandwich when all of a sudden a sound like that of an explosion occurred outside. I rushed up the companionway to see what had transpired. One of the stainless steel wire ropes that supported the mast had parted, and thankfully, no one was hurt. In spite of the worsening weather though, we had to make repairs, and our current location in the ocean was not the place to do it. We hastily checked our position with the charts and ascertained that we were off of Hog Island, Virginia, just north of Norfolk. We duly noted that there was a deserted Coast Guard station situated at the north end of the island. It appeared to be a place with a secure anchorage, and hopefully a dock where we could commence with repairs while waiting for the storm to subside. We decided to immediately change course toward the island as we hastily lowered the sail, and started motoring. With further consultation, the charts noted that shoaling was prevalent on either side of the entrance to the island. This was later confirmed when we saw small waves lapping over sand as we approached. Since we had hastily departed New Jersey, we had installed the depth gauge in the cabin wall, but had not installed the transponder in the hull. As a result, Jim our now capable navigator, had to hang over the stern of the boat while someone held his legs, dangling the transponder in the water, while another read off the depth of the water to Don as he steered the boat. It appeared that, despite the Coast Guard station's location, the approach to the island had shoaled in with sand. It was with a great deal of relief that we negotiated our way in, and the fact that we had a shallow draft boat made our accomplishments much more satisfying.

We tied the "Pasado Manana" up to the Coast Guard dock and celebrated with a long overdue meal. Our food supplies were minimal to begin with. Don's initial exploratory forays into the island's bountiful wild food supplies were eagerly accepted by the crew who helped forage. Don found oysters, clams, blue crabs, mussels, and flounder near the Coast Guard docks, and in the small bay. This was complemented by the fact that a gunny shack was located on a small inland pond. It was early fall then, so the natural migration of birds on the Atlantic Flyway had already started taking place. One of the crew members decided to explore the deserted Coast Guard station where he gained entrance through an open window into the kitchen. He explored the bottom floor of the two story building that revealed unmade beds that appeared to be slept in only once. Various pieces of crumpled up paper, and magazines had been left on an otherwise clean floor. Nothing was taken from the establishment by us other than a half gallon of "Rebel Yell." Eventually, all the debris was cleaned up by the crew to say "thank you" for our "borrowing" of some of the large stainless steel pots and pans that we would use to steam our clams and mussels, and to fry



fish. The latter action was to prove very beneficial to all of us later on . . . The inclement weather continued to make it dangerous for us to depart via the very shallow channel that we had entered, despite the fact that we had already fixed the mast rigging. This delay never bothered Don. He said, "we must have died and gone to heaven," what with the abundant supply of oysters, clams, flounder...and the possible addition of a goose for dinner. We feasted like kings every day. Try as we would, our success in obtaining a goose for dinner was unsuccessful. Don and I would wait with unflinching muscles in the gunny shack for hours at a time. Geese would spot the already placed decoys in front of our shack, circle in their flight as if to land, but at the last moment would fly to the other end of the pond, out of gunshot range. Don's frustration was assuaged by the fact that plentiful oysters succeeded in quelling his hunger. Oftentimes, while savoring the taste of the raw oysters, he would make a comment about how much he would like to take a bucket of these to one or another of the older watermen on Ocracoke Island. The weather cleared and we made plans to depart on the morning's high tide.

Just as we were boarding the cat, an older fishing boat appeared and tied up at the dock ahead of us, somewhat blocking our attempt to leave. Three very rough looking men jumped onto the dock, two brandishing sawed off shotguns, both aimed at us. "Where you boys going," the one individual said as he spat a long liquid spray of tobacco juice on the dock in front of us. Don immediately stepped in front of us all and stared the man squarely in the face. Don explained what had transpired and that we were due to depart on the high tide. Don asked who the men were and what their purpose was. The man stated that it wasn't any of our f- - - - g business what they were doing there, and that we weren't to move a muscle until his two crew members examined the Coast Guard station. He continued to keep a shotgun pointed at us the whole time. He didn't portray any compassion for our plight, or concern for the fact that our departure time was now greatly compromised. Don was not at all affected by this, but grew silent waiting for the men to return. He seemed to have been in this arena before with men of this kind. The two fishermen returned and conversed silently with the captain of the fishing boat. The captain turned and told Don that we were damn lucky that we hadn't vandalized the building, or stolen anything except the half gallon of "Rebel Yell." A slight smile then crossed his weather-beaten face and with a slight adjustment of his watchman's blue wool cap, and a lowering of the shot gun, he approached Don with his hand offered in friendship. He then told Don that they were the caretakers of the Coast Guard station that belonged to "them fellas in Washington" and used the place for hunting in the fall. His smile widened as he shook Don's hand. He said that we were welcome back anytime we wanted. His last comment was "How'd that Rebel Yell treat yuh?" With that they departed and a sigh of relief from all of us reminded us how precarious our situation could have been.

The departure from Hog Island was a relief and yet it saddened all of us. We had experienced the quiet windswept vistas for days with the smell of the sea strong in our memories. The vistas granted us uninterrupted views of active bird life, native trees, and grasses growing on the island unaltered by shopping malls, cars, or people to disturb our quiet thoughts.

Don On the Mast:



Don changed our plans for sailing in the Atlantic because of worsening weather conditions. Don's original plan to enter the Outer Banks via Oregon Inlet into Pamlico Sound was scrapped. As it turned out this was an excellent decision in that the weather conditions continued to deteriorate which made sailing in the offshore waters of the Outer Banks very dangerous. We changed course headings with our new destination being Norfolk and eventually the inland waterway that would take us through the Dismal Swamp and into Albemarle Sound, North Carolina.

Since our departure from Hog Island had been significantly delayed, our approach into

Norfolk was compromised by the out going tide and the unfavorable change in wind. We kept noting our progress in comparison with landmarks, and it seemed like we were just holding our own. This was frustrating for Don since he did not want to be near the shipping channels at night with all the traffic into that major port. Our concerns and thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the roar of an approaching large four engine plane that swooped down over us and then gained in elevation only to circle twice more. Its large red and white bands on the side indicated it was a Coast Guard plane. The plane turned again, while behind us, losing elevation, until it seemed like it was right over our mast. Don picked up his C.B. mike and looked upward at the plane's trailing black exhaust fumes and deafening exhaust noise from the four motors. Radio transmission commenced with the following message; "If you are the sailing vessel "Pasado Manana" and your crew and captain are safe, please remove your horse shoe life preserver from your stern location and hold it in the air." The removal was completed, and radio transmission began again. "Thank you captain, we are glad that all are safe and sound. Your vessel and its occupants had been reported lost at sea recently, with vessels and aircraft having been assigned to the search. "Is there anything else we can do to help you or your crew at this time," the plane's radioman stated. Don, with his normal control over all the incidentals that surrounded him, and with his need to make a potentially serious situation more lighthearted, respectfully stated, "Thank you Capt'n. You guys wouldn't happen to have a spare six pack up there that you could drop to us would ya?" There was a slight pause in transmission and then laughter erupted from the flight crew members with a follow up "Negative on that request Capt'n". As it turned out one of the crew member's Dad was a retired Coast Guard man. His son had only told him part of Don's reply, when Don was asked how long it would take to sail from N.J. to N.C. Don had said that "it might take a week if all goes well, or it might take a month depending on how many stops we choose to make along the way." At that point we had been gone over a week so we were reported lost at sea . . . Had the son conveyed the entire conversation to his father, the worry and the efforts of the Coast Guard could have been eliminated.

Our trip through Norfolk was made extra special since we had a much different perspective of the variety of naval warships as seen from the water. The aircraft carriers, destroyers, troop ships, and submarines were immense in size and shapes, but we were glad once again to taste the serenity and quiet of the inland waterway. Our trip through the Dismal Swamp should have been uneventful, but it was not. The new Honda outboard motor continued to give us problems at the worst possible times. Invariably as we approached the draw bridges we would signal our intent to pass underneath them with a blast from our air horn. Several times as we were motoring underneath the bridge, with automobiles waiting on either side of the upraised bridge, the motor would quit. This elicited many frustrated comments from

Don who had repeatedly tried to find the problem. At best, all of the crew were asked to create ways to help pull the vessel out from under the bridge. Needless to say, the operator of the bridge and the traffic were not happy with us. Inevitably, we reached Albemarle Sound and Don anchored the boat for the night. He stated the next morning that if the wind did not pick up, we would stay there until it did. He was not running the motor again. True to his word, we stayed at anchor for the better part of a week. During that time I was awakened one night by the sounds of music and scuffling of feet on the cabin floor. I crawled out of my bunk and peered around the corner. There, in the dim light of the kerosene lamp, I saw Don playing the harmonica softly against a backdrop of blues music on the radio. With his blond hair matted against his head, and his shoulders slightly hunched over, he danced a jig. He was dressed in a three quarter length herringbone, dark gray wool overcoat, it's collar turned up, without any clothing on underneath, that he had purchased from a garage sale. It's a colored 8" x 12" image in my mind that I will never forget....

One morning the breeze freshened, sails were raised and off we went to the south. Throughout the majority of the sailing I almost never saw Don review the charts. He seemed to know where he was at all times. Two of the crew disembarked in Manteo, N.C. The three of us continued sailing south to Ocracoke. with constant comments from Don about how he couldn't wait to see the "boys" on Ocracoke....

Don Wood's Home on Ocracoke:



In closing, despite the tales of adventure and camaraderie that we shared, Don's thoughts were never far from the love that he shared with his daughters and his friends. Despite his gruff, often times succinct statements, his compassion and understanding of life's difficulties were always in the forefront of his mind. His foresight into events that were going to happen was oftentimes uncanny in all facets of life. Although I desperately miss his

presence in my life, I feel happy in that I know he lived life to the fullest and on his own terms...