

Chapter 2 Under Weigh

2.1 Discovery Club: Action at last.

The day had arrived for the planned exploration of the Bass River in a way that had never been done before. At the brief activity planning session the tasks for the day unfolded: Prepare the boat, all the guys. Make a lead line, Chris. Put the roof-rack on the four-wheel-drive, Tristan and Phill. Collect all the boat safety gear, Chris. Wheel out the Tohatsu five-horsepower motor, Chris.

There was also a requirement to discuss the magnetic compass; compass bearings; wind directions; the moon and its effects on tides; and the current tide. This would be done with the aid of short, easy-to-read printouts on the subjects taken from the internet. It all sounded simple, but ...

"Okay, guys, let's assemble the boat. Tristan, pull that side open and hold it in place."

"I can't, it's pretty hard to keep in place; it keeps on wanting to spring back."

"Quick, Phill, help me pull this side up then put the wooden springer in place to hold the sides open," Chris said between deep breaths.

"I can't, Tristan's side is slipping."

"Stand on your side, Tristan, quick-my side's slipping down as well."

Phill called out: "Quick, shove the end of the springer into the top of the boat."

And so it went for some time. Tristan slipped over the side and lay spreadeagled on the floor of the boat, so he put his hands under his head and pretended to snore.

Boat captain Chris was not too happy. "It was easier last time. Now that we have placed the seats in it to spread the sides and make it look like a boat the seats are banana-shaped."

"You are right, if the correct seats are in place it shouldn't look like that."

The boat was a portable one. It looked like four old-fashioned surfboards without fins, lying on top of each other. The thin poly boards were joined together at the edges lengthways with a semi-rigid plastic tube. The tubes joined the four pieces together and were waterproof but necessarily tough to bend. The four pieces, 3.5 metres long by 0.90 centimetres wide, made a boat with two surfboards acting as the floor joined in the middle, and the other two forming the sides.

Because the plastic tubes were semi-rigid a lot of energy was required to pull all the sides apart. They then had to use a notched spreader—a piece of wood—to hold the boat open across the middle until the three plastic seats and backboard transom could be bolted in place.

Chris suggested pulling out the securing pins to release the seats so they could reverse them. "Oh no, not again!" Tristan sighed.

The seats or thwarts were properly secured. The next step was to lock the backboard or transom in place.

"Remember the special washers on the port and starboard wing nuts at the bottom. That's where water can come in," Chris reminded his crew.

"Okay, Tristan, flip over the solid piece of poly so that the motor is on the outside of the boat," Phill requested.

"The poly has to go on the outside also, so we can screw the retaining bolts into it. One of my dad's friends didn't do that and nearly wrecked the back of his boat."

Tristan's reminder saved the day for all the guys.



The portable boat ready for assembly



More effort required



Ready to go

Now the boat was correctly assembled But, there were still things to do.

Chris had the task of making the lead line to measure the depth of water when required. He needed a 500-gram teardrop fishing sinker with its bronze swive to connect to the 20-metre yellow clothesline cord and some coloured electrician's tape: red to mark every 50 centimetres, and blue every metre. He was then to put the sinker upside down in a vice, flatten the end as flat as a

20 cent coin and dig out of the flat end a hole as big as a 5 cent coin. This was to collect sand or mud or whatever else when the sinker hit the bottom when it was dropped.

After stretching out the cord, Chris put a nail at both ends in the driveway sleepers to hold the line straight while he measured the cord and wrapped the electrician's tape around it. No problem.

Meanwhile Tristan and Phill had lifted the roof-rack into the shed and had fastened a roller block to the roof of the shed about five metres above ground. The idea was to run a rope through the roller block, fasten it to the four corners of the roof-rack and hoist it into the air higher than the roof of the four-wheel-drive. Phill would then run the Discovery underneath so the others could lower the rack, locate it properly in the gutters, then fasten the bolts in the side clips so the rack would not come off. Easy.

Even apparently easy things don't always go to plan, though. Chris fixed the lead line, but while flattening the sinker bottom, the vice slipped and the connection swivel came out. Tristan and Phill found it difficult to get the length of the hoisting rope corners exact, so the rack was being pulled up lopsided and swaying all over the place.

The fellows held a crisis conference. They decided unanimously to help each other. Chris was to drill a hole into the sinker near the top to attach the cord, and Chris and Tristan were to get on ladders either side of the disco and hold the roof-rack while Phill hoisted.

The lead line was finished, and although some of the bolts were lost for a while in the hay on the floor, the rack was fixed in place. Time was running away: they had to launch the boat at Bass River, nearly at the top of the rising tide at 3 p.m.

The guys had to look at compass bearings, wind directions such as North North East, and East North East, look at the demo of the effect of the moon on tides, and fill in the proposed activities log while eating their sangers. It was too short a time, but the need to record the information would become clear later on.

At the river launch site, everyone realised the bank was very high and steep. Wow. The discovery was parked about five metres from the bank. The guys quickly released the boat ties then dragged the boat backwards and down off the roof-rack. It wasn't difficult then to set the boat on its keel, bow pointing to the river.

Phill gave the instructions: Chris, tie that length of rope to the bow rope and drape it over the stern to the back of the disco. Tristan get all the gear out of the disco and lay it on the edge of the bank.

The guys' idea was to loop the rope around the disco tow ball so they could let the boat down slowly. Chris sang out: "Ready. Start pushing Tristan, let go the rope slowly, Phill."

Whoosh, down it went.

Tristan was worried "Hey, stop it going further, the bow is going to go under the water. I'll hop down and lift the bow up a bit. Okay! Let it down further. That's better, it's starting to slide across the reeds into the deeper water."

Chris jumped down to join Tristan and push drooping branches out of the way.

" Okay, fellows, here is the motor."

It was easy for Phill. He just let it dangle down the bank then, when the guys had their hands on it reaching upwards, he let go. Chris and Tristan had quite a struggle to stop it falling over and into the muddy bank.

Finally they had all the gear on board, life jackets on, motor screwed onto the transom and tilted upwards clear of the water. Tristan took his position in the bow with the anchor, Phill his in the middle with the food and drawing gear, and Chris the driving position in the stern.

After a bit of shoving and branch-pulling the boat eased into the middle of the river. Phill started rowing slowly so all could get the feel of the boat. The river at this point had banks about six metres high and at the edges thick reeds about one metre tall were clumped. At the top of the banks grew thick, small shrubs and trees.

According to the map this part of the river had many tight turns over a kilometre, then it gradually widened and the turns were wider for another two kilometres to the entrance. Apart from the occasional farm and farming fences to keep stock from the river and a little bit of erosion, George Bass would have recognised the river.

Some 100 metres down the river, it was time to go quicker. Tristan was in the bow to examine the river and indicate the best way to Chris. Chris was to be prepared to slow or stop and lift the motor if they came into very shallow water.

From the front of the boat Tristan called out: "Hey, see those big deer at the fence near the water. They must think we are crazy. Arrgh! Chris!!, steer left at the bend; watch that big log."

"If we take it easy we should miss it," Chris said in hope.

They made way downriver towards the bay at about 2 knots. Every so often they all took out their own compass and practised taking bearings on big things miles away.

Tristan got Chris to stop the boat about every 200 metres and swung the lead line into the water a read off the depths. Surprisingly, if Chris followed in close to the banks the average depth was about three to five metres, while everywhere else it was anything between 20 centimetres and three metres deep. The currents must cut deeper into the riverbed when the water goes around the banks.

The river started to have wider, longer curves and straight stretches. The banks got smaller, and farm fences were close to the water's edge, preventing the stock from going into the river. Even so quite a few bones of carcasses were lying in different places.

It came up straight in front. What was the best way to go-to the right or to the left, or is the river blocked? After a bit of arguing the guys decided to point the bow at the second left-hand indentation.

Tristan was kneeling with his head over the bows looking for depth changes. "Slow, over that way, no, turn a bit right. Over, over, that's it."

Steering the boat, Chris called: "Hey, guys, sometimes the revs keep high, but we don't go forward much. We must be going in the shallows and picking up weeds."

The part of the river they had chosen turned to the right, ploughing through lots of shallow weed. Everyone was hoping they wouldn't get stuck.

"Hey, I think we have been here before." Tristan sounded confused.

"Yup, looks the same. I think the channel is that one to the left. It's the only way to go." A few metres into the arm and we should be in deeper water.'

" We did a small circumnavigation, like Bass and Flinders, only they went around Tasmania."

"Hey, fella's," Tristan called "See how the river is broader. There are two blokes fishing on that far bank. Don't get too close, Chris."

The fishermen and the crew exchanged waves. Chris, ever on the alert for good fishing, spotted several black-coloured fish. All the guys agreed that one day they would come back here and do some fishing on high tide. The riverbank had now disappeared and in its place they saw a covering of tall mangroves. At this point the river was sometimes as wide as 100 metres.

"There it is: the river entrance." Tristan in the bow had a clearer view.

The Port was slowly appearing as the forest of mangroves thinned out. Time for Phill to remind everyone of the requirements. "Stop the boat, Chris. Tristan, take the drawing book and do your navigation chart plot."

Tristan got really busy. On the drawing paper he wrote down the time and date, the compass bearing to the large shoal about 600 metres away, and the depth of the water using the lead line. He then very carefully drew the outline of the view to 90 degrees to his right and left. While he was doing those things Chris and Phill looked at the small version of the map and tried to find the entrance pole and where all the dangerously low water depths started.

When Tristan had finished, Chris motored gently into the bay to help locate the entrance marker that was drawn on the map. Time was moving on so Chris turned the boat around and began the return journey. When they had passed the fishermen, who were having a BBQ, Chris felt the motor slowing.

"We are out of petrol"

"Couldn't be, Chris, we had about two hours of fuel."

Splutter, cough ... silence.

"You were right, Chris. Now we have a problem. We have to row about two kilometres, and with an ebb tide coming. Give me the oars, Tristan. We had better get cracking, it will be dark in about 45 minutes.'

Phill put his back into the rowing to get some distance upstream before the outgoing tide began to push against them. Chris had to look past Phill and direct him about how best to keep the boat tracking to go the shortest way. Tristan was trying to prevent them running into shallows.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the boat passed recognisable points. It started to rain. Chris took over rowing from his position in the stern, rowing with a forward motion. Tristan then swapped with Chris. Then Phill had another go and so on until disaster struck. The starboard oar lost a screw in the middle and became useless to row with.

There was only one thing to do. Phill rowed with one oar and Tristan paddled with the paddle end of the other, with Chris giving directions from the bow. It was remarkably effective.

The riverbanks started to get higher and higher, the rowing slower, and the darkness darker. Chris, being alert, announced: "There it is, past that big tree. Row harder and push the boat into the reeds and onto the bank."

With a screech, the boat stopped, bows into the bank. All quickly scrambled ashore, and with teamwork passed all the gear up the bank to the top.

"Why don't we pull the boat up the bank with the disco?" suggested Tristan

"What, with motor still attached?"

"That would be okay. Tristan and I could go down the bank and stand on either side of the boat to guide it;"

"All right, but safety first-no horsing around. Remember, it will be hard for me to hear if anything goes wrong."

Phill backed the Discovery to within a metre of the edge. With the bow tied to the back of the disco, which Phill moved slowly forwards, the boat flopped gently over the edge of the bank. As it turned out, it was very successful, although the boat motor came within 10 centimetres of pushing Chris over and into the river.



Exhausted, lucky to be back. How to get the boat up the bank, when tired?

The fellows arrived at Phill's about 7.30 p.m. Their Nan made some hamburgers, and they settled down to watch the ABC re-enactment of Captain Cook and his voyages. The first part of the movie series gets as far as Lieutenant Hicks being the first reported white person to see land on the eastern side of Australia. Cook named it Cape Hicks in his honour. By this time Tristan's Dad had arrived to take the young fellows home, and because

there was another two hours of the series left they all agreed to resume the viewing another day.

Just as he was going out the door, Tristan's Dad noticed the big mariner's map of Westernport on the dining-room table. He then spent some time telling the guys that when he studied for his coxswain's ticket he had had to remember the map was drawn to polar north. The magnetic north calculations that were on the bottom of the map had to be taken into consideration when drawing a sailing line from point to point. It was the last thing the guys learnt that day.