

WITH 64 PAGES OF PHOTOGRAPHS

# DOVE



The true story of  
a 16-year-old boy  
who sailed his  
24-foot sloop  
around the world  
to discover adventure  
and love

ROBIN LEE GRAHAM  
WITH DEREK L.T. GILL

"A notable feat of stamina and adventure....Wonderful entertainment."

— *Washington Post*

# Dove



## Author's Note

I would like to thank Derek Gill for all the hours he spent in helping me write *Dove*. Without his help this book would never have been written.

I would also like to thank my father, Lyle Graham, for having enough faith in me to make this trip possible and my mother, Norma Graham, for having the courage to stand by his decision.

My sincere thanks go to the many people who prayed for me along this trip, for I now know that it was their faith in God that saw me through safely.

And last but not least my loving thanks to my wife, Patricia, for all of her encouragement.

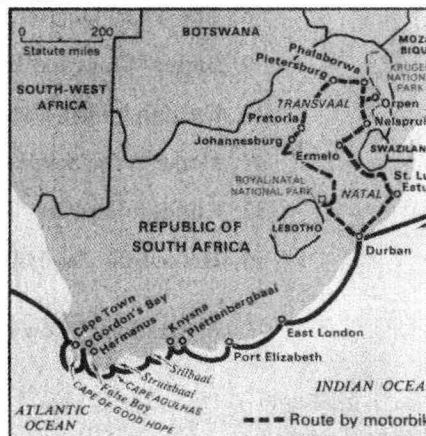
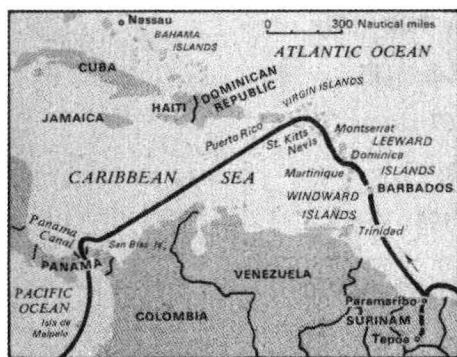
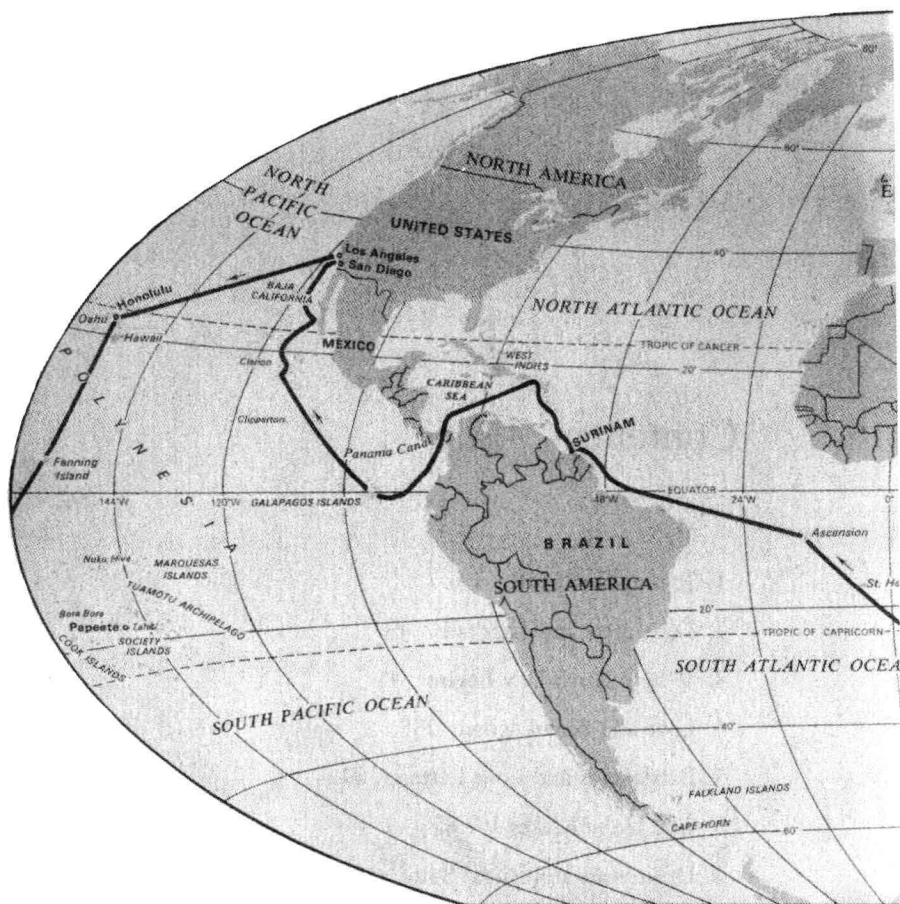
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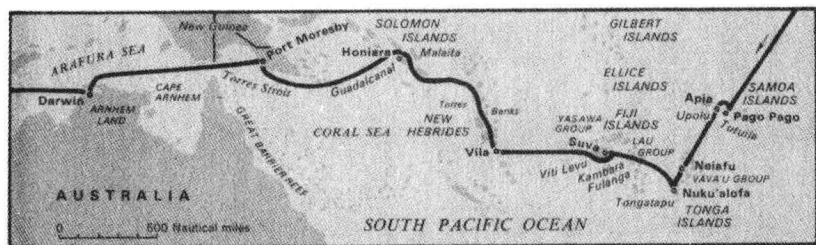
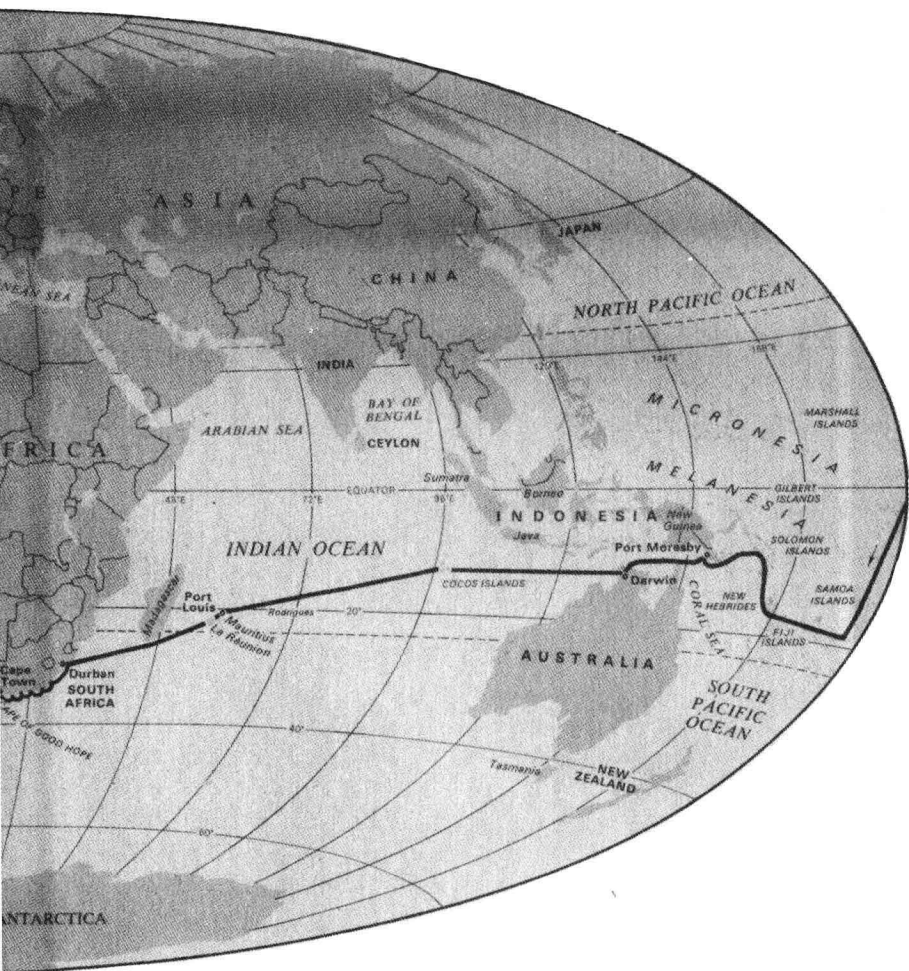
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## Joining the Circle

DOVE nosed into her slip at the Long Beach marina, her sails furled like a bird resting its wings after a storm. I wasn't thinking about the voyage at all. My mind was on Patti. I was yearning to hold her again. She was standing there among the reporters and television cameras, and laughing—her long wheat-colored hair blowing across her face in that familiar way, her body swollen with my child.

As Dove was being tied up, so many newsmen came charging down the floating slip that it threatened to sink and to throw them into the April-chill water. I sat on the cabin roof waiting for the customs officer, and a dozen microphones were thrust into my face. Then the questions came at me like stones.

"What does it feel like to be the youngest sailor to have circled the world single-handed?"

"I haven't given it much thought," I said—and that was true.

"Would you do it again?"

"God no! I've done it once. Why do it again?"

"How did Patti become pregnant?" This from a woman reporter fluttering artificial eyelashes.

I urged her to read a book on birds and bees. She was closer than she knew to a love story that I wasn't yet ready to tell.

"What did you think about when you were alone and a thousand miles from land?"

"Perhaps the things you think about when you're alone," I parried, "but mostly about the next port."

"How far have you traveled since leaving California five years ago?"

"About thirty thousand and six hundred miles," I said.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Take a hot bath."

"Did you do it for a stunt?"

"A stunt! Hell no!"

Patti was making signs to me, trying to tell me to keep my cool. She knew how short my fuse was when people asked damn-fool questions. But how could I tell these people, all thinking of their copy deadlines, why I had made this voyage?

Couldn't they leave me alone? Couldn't they guess that all I wanted was to be with Patti, to get away from this damned boat, to be among trees again, and in front of a blazing hearth and in a bed that didn't lurch with every wave and wind?

Actually I had seen Patti half an hour earlier. She and her father and my parents had come out in a launch at dawn to meet *Dove* at the breakwater. Patti had leaned perilously over the launch's rail to give me a breakfast of fresh melon, hot rolls and a bottle of champagne. I had drunk the whole bottle before reaching the marina and my mood was reasonably mellow. The reporters were safe. I even grinned at them. The television cameras zoomed in.

Many have sailed long and dangerous voyages for the sake of personal glory. Others have sailed for personal adventure. I fall into neither group. I have tried to answer honestly when people have asked me what made me do it—what compelled me at the age of sixteen to take a twenty-four-foot sailboat out of San Pedro harbor (it flanks Long Beach) and to tell my family and friends, "I'm going around the world."



Shakespeare, who seems to have had an answer to most questions, had Hamlet say, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." That was an answer that fitted pretty closely.

I'd never heard of Shakespeare and understood nothing about destiny when I went to school at the age of five in California. The classroom was close to a forest of yacht masts, and while other kids crayoned pictures of automobiles, airplanes, flowers or their Uncle Harry wearing big glasses, I drew only pictures of boats—boats with scores of portholes, top-heavy boats, small boats, wind-filled mainsails, mizzens, genoas, jibs and spinnakers. Then, when I was ten and a lot more resentful of homework, I pressured my father into giving me an eight-foot dinghy—beat up but beautiful. We were living then at Morro Bay, one of the more attractive of California's coastal towns. On launching day my father said he would teach me how to sail. He was full of wisdom because the previous night he had been reading a manual titled *How to Handle a Small Craft*. We got out two hundred yards from the shore and he lectured me on the danger of jibing (page 16 in the manual). Hardly had he lowered his finger than the boat jibed and both of us were thrown into the water.

But how I loved that little boat. Every day when school was over my brother Michael would dash off to the back yard and tinker with his beach buggy, but I would run all the way to the little wooden jetty beyond the reeds near our house. Sailing already meant much more to me than "mucking about in boats," as the neighbors used to call it. It was the chance to escape from blackboards and the smell of disinfectant in the school toilet, from addition and subtraction sums that were never the same as the teacher's answers, from spelling words like "seize" and "fulfill" and from little league baseball. It was the chance to be alone and to be as free for a while as the sea gulls that swung around Morro Rock.

One night when I should have been asleep I could hear my parents talking about me, their voices drifting down the passage from the living room. "I'm worried that he's such a loner," said

my mother. "He needs more company. More friends. Perhaps we should ask Stephen or David to join us for the vacation."

A loner? Was I really different? I had friends. But I liked being alone, and a boat gave me the chance of getting away from people.

Was I different just because history didn't turn me on and boats did? Perhaps sailing is in the genes. Ten years before I was born, my father and his brother had started to build a twenty-eight-foot boat, intending to sail it around the world. They had the hull finished and were beginning to study the charts of Polynesia when the headlines blazed Pearl Harbor. When I was thirteen my father still had ideas of fulfilling his boyhood dream; or at least part of it. He had made out well with his house construction and real estate business. One day he took me to the Long Beach marina and as we walked past a thirty-six-foot ketch with a "For Sale" sign pinned to its stern I crawled under the green canvas. When my father called me I invited him to climb aboard. I don't know whether it was at this moment that my father decided to buy the *Golden Hind*, but a few days later he told the family that he had sold his business and that we were all going sailing in the South Seas.

My father is a quiet man, wiry, not by appearance the adventurous type, and his decision seemed on the surface out of character. Anyway, at the age of thirteen I was not going to analyze his motives or his personality (although I guess my mother did). For me the prospect of missing school for a year and sailing over that horizon was not one to be questioned.

We spent three months equipping the *Golden Hind*, provisioning her with six hundred cans of food, and then, without fanfare but with much head shaking from our kin, we sailed south to Nuku Hiva, the port of entry to the Marquesas islands. Fortunately bad memories fade fast and the happiest stay in the forefront of our minds. I can barely recall, for instance, our eighteen days in the doldrums or my being doubled up with a flaring appendix about 120 miles from the nearest surgeon in Papeete. The appendectomy wound failed to heal, and I spent three weeks in a primitive hospital where huge cockroaches crawled up the wall.

But I did remember, and always will, the deep blue of the coral lagoons, the Tahitian girls wearing pereus in Gauguin colors. I remember the girls running down golden beaches, their arms filled with exotic flowers and fresh fruit wrapped in palm fronds.

On one of the islands, Rangiroa, a Tahitian family called on my parents and, straight-faced, offered to trade me for two of their daughters, Joliette and Suzette. The barter proposal boosted my ego, and I did my best to persuade my parents to accept the offer, figuring that surfing in the Tuamotu Archipelago and living off coconut milk and manioc roots amounted to a better life style than learning geometry and eating hamburgers.

But my parents shook their heads and we sailed the *Golden Hind* to Huahine, Tahaa, Bora Bora, the Cook Islands and Pago Pago before heading northeast to Hawaii. At fifteen I was back in a California classroom, my spelling still lousy, but I was almost as useful with a sextant as a veteran sailor. On our eleven-thousand-mile voyage I had seen lands of unbelievable enchantment.

It is hard to believe that my parents, having allowed me to sail the South Seas at a most impressionable age, could ever have expected me to be a typical American schoolkid, to go on to college and graduate to a walnut office desk, a home on Acacia Avenue and membership in the local golf club.

I am sure Corona del Mar's high school is a good one. For me it was a return to prison. Beyond its asphalt playground and wired fences there were sun-splashed, palm-fringed shores waiting for my shadow.

A chance to take to the sea came again when two school friends—Jud Croft and Pete Tupas—and I pressured a Costa Mesa yachtbuilder to allow us to deliver a new boat to a buyer in Hawaii. But three days before we were due to set sail on the 2,200-mile voyage the yachtbuilder called off the arrangement. I think he was afraid of bad publicity if our voyage failed.

Aware of my bitterness, my father invited me to be his mate on a voyage to Hawaii on his new boat, *Valerie*, a thirty-foot ketch. Keeping watch turn and turn about and weathering half a dozen squalls, we made the trip in twenty-seven days. One incident of

this voyage stays in my mind. A bagged genoa, poorly lashed, broke loose and slithered across the forward deck into the ocean. We turned Valerie about but just as we came within grappling range the bag began to sink. Under a few inches of clear water the bag looked like a human body. A portion of the sail had escaped and took the form of a face, white and quite terrifying.

I had never seen a person drown (and pray heaven I never will) but in watching the sinking canvas bag I gained a great respect for the sea. I understood for the first time that blue water is not an innocent and sparkling playground but that it can destroy mercilessly.

We arrived in Hawaii without further incident and I was packed off to McKinley High School. My mother was to join us in a month or two. This was my sixth school and I had to make new friends again. At McKinley I found two brothers, Jim and Arthur, who loved sailing as much as I did. Jim and I were fifteen and Art a year younger. Together we invested our savings of one hundred dollars in an old sixteen-foot aluminum lifeboat. During the school lunch break the three of us would meet secretly in the shade of a palm tree and talk about our boat, which we named *HIC*—for reasons we need not go into. One lunch hour, the idea was born of sailing *HIC* to the Hawaiian island of Lanai. Jim had been reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as a class assignment and I contributed stories of the South Sea island girls who wore hibiscus in their hair. The upshot was a top-secret plan to sail to some distant isolated cove. To provision *HIC* I made a few dollars by diving in Ala Wai harbor and salvaging material from a sunken yacht.

As our plans developed, school became almost unbearable. It wasn't so much that I disliked learning—for I realized the need to be at least partially civilized and my grades were average—but that I detested the routine of school days, the unchanging pattern from the brushing of my teeth to learning English grammar. I came to hate the sound of the bell that summoned me to class, the smell of tennis shoes and sweat in the gym, the drone of history lessons, the threat of tests and exams.

Down at Ala Wai harbor it was all so different. I loved the smell of rope and resin, even of diesel oil. I loved the sound of water slapping hulls, the whip of halyards against tall masts. These were the scents and sounds of liberty and life.

It was the week that Winston Churchill died that Jim, Art and I decided it was time to sail. Maybe that old warrior had something to do with our decision. The radio and newspapers poured out stories of the "Man of the Century"—the swashbuckling statesman-soldier with a bulldog jaw who had defied Fuzzy-Wuzzies, tyrants and convention. My own tyrants were peanut butter sandwiches and people in gloomy offices who insisted I wear shoes, people determined to arrange my life in tidy patterns, prodding me this way and that until I could be safely sent out into society, wearing white collars and gray suits, credit cards in my billfold, golf clubs in the closet under the stairs and a half-paid-for car in the garage.

Yes, I think Winston Churchill can take some responsibility for what happened next.

HIC's hull was as patched as a sailor's pants, and where some rivets were missing we filled up the holes with chewing gum, which was a lot cheaper than the filling material on sale in the marine shops. To change the craft into a sailboat, we bolted on a plywood keel, stepped a salvaged boom for a mast and stayed it with bits of rigging found lying around the yacht club. The sails were old, cut-down throwaways from a ketch.

On the evening of Thursday, January 28, 1965, Jim, Art and I tore pages from our school notebooks and wrote letters to our parents. The letters, we made sure, would not be received before we were on the high seas. To my father (my mother was visiting in California) I wrote:

Dear Dad,

Sorry for leaving without saying good-bye. But if I had done so you would not have let me go. I want to thank you for raising me as you have done. I think a father could not have done a better job. Sorry, too, for taking some of your goods. I have written to Mom to

ask her to send you my money in my savings bank at Newport. Don't worry about me. I'll be all right. I miss you and love you very much.

Love, Lee

(My parents usually called me Lee.)

My father had been suffering from a cold so I added: "Hope you feel better real soon."

The veteran sailor knows better than to leave on a Friday. We were not veterans and immediately after school we rendezvoused at the yacht harbor. An hour later we cheerfully turned *HIC* toward the breakwater. Occasionally we looked astern to make sure no one was following. Then Art shouted an alarm as he spotted an outboard racing toward us. But we had not been betrayed. It was a yacht harbor friend, Chuck, the only other person who knew of our plans. He had come to wish us bon voyage and to take a couple of photographs. Chuck was shrewd enough to guess that his picture of us might have commercial value. Just before he left us, Chuck pointed with his thumb toward the small craft warning just hoisted on the breakwater.

"Should we turn back?" Art asked nervously.

"Looks like a nice day to me," said Jim, "and anyway nothing usually happens when the small craft warning is up."

"How would we explain those letters to our parents?" I asked, and that was the clincher.

I turned *HIC* toward the buoy at Diamond Head. The wind on the quarter was fresh, warm, inviting, but over the horizon there appeared an ink-black cloud, sinister as the smoke from a witch's brew. We were now too far from the harbor to see the hoisting of a second red pennant, nor did we know that the radio was putting out a full gale warning for the islands.

With a sense of high adventure, we swung *HIC* into the Molokai channel. Here the placid sea was filled with whitecaps. Art now had the tiller, but his face soon looked as green as the water. He was thoughtful enough to lean over the leeward side. In ten minutes the wind lifted from fifteen to twenty-five knots and the jib

ripped along its main seam. Jim tore away the strips and hoisted a second sail. For a while *HIC* bounced jauntily across the white-caps, but when the wind continued to mount I ordered Jim to furl the mainsail.

I had had much more sailing experience than my shipmates and it seemed natural for me to take command. So far it had been the wind that had worried me, but now I began to take in the height of the swells. They were getting much too big—twenty feet from trough to crest. The second jib was suddenly torn to ribbons, and bits of canvas flew downwind like a dozen kites. The tattered stay-sail was all we had, and I had to keep *HIC*'s stern to the sea by working the rudder. By holding this course I hoped, we would at least drift toward Maui, where we could take our chances with the surf.

By late afternoon the situation was serious. Wind was gusting between twenty-five and forty knots and swells were averaging thirty feet. Jim was now lying in the bottom of the boat, wrapped about in the wet third jib. He was vomiting and crying. *HIC* was sturdier than she looked and slithered down the surface of the combers. Every now and then a big comber would smack into her stern and twenty gallons of water would thud over my back and pour across the bottom boards.

Lashing the tiller, I helped Art bale with plastic buckets. We knew well enough that another big comber would put the boat dangerously low in the water. Although *HIC* had been built as a lifeboat, the flotation tanks had long since been removed, and our funds had not allowed us to buy a raft.

There was nothing exciting about the situation now. The sense of adventure that we had carried across the harbor mouth had quite gone. Wind-whipped gray clouds scudded a few feet above our heads and our homemade rigging cracked like pistol shots as it lashed the mast. Darkness fell quickly and with our loss of vision our sense of hearing increased. The sea began to sound like a fleet of locomotives and the cold pierced our flesh like a thousand needles. I kept thinking of the plywood keel. If it broke away we

would have no hope, for *HIC* would roll right over with the first broadside.

It was neither courage nor, I think, stupidity that prevented me from thinking about drowning. It was simply that all my energy and thoughts were concentrated on keeping *HIC* afloat. Art, seasick though he was, volunteered to take the tiller, but at the moment of handing it over to him a huge comber thumped our stern with a jar that threw the three of us to the floor. We jumped up spluttering and baled with all our strength.

The wind, I guessed, was now fifty knots. It was Art's idea to rig the mainsail across the boat as a spray guard. He tied one end to the mast while I lashed its edges to the gunwales. So we huddled in the darkness beneath our awning until another big comber hit and crushed the canvas to the bottom. We baled until our bodies ached with pain.

Perhaps it was the bitter cold and weariness that dulled my mind, for strangely fear never overwhelmed me. From the tiller I could see the moonlike faces of my friends as we waited for the final wave that would send us to the bottom. Sometime between midnight and dawn we heard a plane, one of several out searching for us. But by the time we had found and fired a flare, the aircraft was far away.

An hour after dawn the wind dropped sufficiently for us to hoist the spare mainsail, and our spirits rose. It was enough just to know that we had somehow survived the night. Art remembered his small transistor radio and switched it on. For a while we listened to some music and then the announcer came through with news. The first story was about us. The announcer said:

"The Coast Guard is conducting an extensive air and sea search for three teen-age boys feared to be lost at sea. The Coast Guard spokesman reports that because of the extreme weather conditions last night the chances of their survival in a sixteen-foot boat are very slim."

The report went on to give details of our families and school, and promised to report any further developments.



We listened in stunned silence, unable at first to realize that we were on the news. Then perhaps to our credit we were worried about the anxiety our families would be feeling. I wondered if my mother in California had picked up the news. It hurt me to think what she was going through. We did not then know that our adventure was the main story in the Hawaiian newspapers. It had even swept the Churchill headlines from the top of page one.

Our situation was now much better. We had food and water for several days. Then Art pointed over the side with an exclamation. Our keel had finally broken away and was drifting past the stern.

Had the keel snapped off the previous night in the height of the storm, we certainly would not have been still afloat this warm morning. But by now we knew we had made it.

By midmorning *HIC* drifted on the lee shore of Lanai. With a reefed jib we managed to steer around narrow coral heads, and before the sun had dropped the bow crunched into a sandy beach. We threw out our only anchor and staggered up the sand.

Hearing a picnic party along the shore, we stumbled over rocks and thorns to reach the circle of their firelight. The party guessed who we were at once because hourly radio bulletins had been giving ever gloomier reports about the missing teen-agers. One member of the picnic party volunteered to drive us to Lanai City, about eight miles inland. He properly urged us to report to the police.

At the police station the reception was mixed; the officer on duty was obviously pleased to see us and pushed mugs of hot coffee into our hands while telling us we were crazy. He called up the Coast Guard and reported our safety. We spent that night in jail. No drunk had ever slept better in my bunk.

Next morning a plane chartered by Jim and Art's parents flew us back to Honolulu, and it was at the airport that I first experienced a full bombardment of news reporters' questions and learned what it feels like to look down the barrels of television cameras.

My father was there too. He had his own opinion of our adventure. But he did remind me of the seafarers' superstition never to start a voyage on a Friday.