

LOVE & WAR

a grand old champion

David Salter uncovers some little-known aspects of a legendary ocean racer



Love & War, the 39 year-old wooden boat that won the Rolex Sydney Hobart for the third time in 2006.

One of our most celebrated Australian offshore yachts was nearly never built.

When shipwright Cec Quilkey began construction of the Sparkman & Stephens 47-footer *Love & War* at his Taren Point yard in late 1972, owner Peter Kurts felt confident he had commissioned a boat that was very similar to the all-conquering first *Ragamuffin*, an earlier S&S design, but just a little quicker. His dual aims were to win the Sydney-Hobart race and gain selection for the 1975 Admiral's Cup team.

But during the selection trials sailed in Sydney for the 1973 series the new, lighter displacement Bob Miller boats *Ginkgo* and *Apollo II* were clearly much faster than Syd

Fischer's *Ragamuffin*. Kurts immediately called a halt to the build and wrote to Olin Stephens in New York demanding answers.

As his son, Simon, now remembers, "Dad thought: 'What am I doing here?'"

So for a month no further work was done on *Love & War* and it seemed likely the whole project would be abandoned.

Finally, S&S flew a representative, Andy McGowan, out to Sydney to placate the owner and convince him that L&W was "a really good boat" and that two others were being built to the same lines (*Prospect of Whitby* and *Saudade*). Peter Kurts

relented and the shipwrights resumed work on the Oregon and Queensland maple masterpiece that became one of the most famous yachts in Australian offshore history.

Perhaps the most distinctive features of *Love & War's* graceful profile are the pairs of slanted rectangular portholes just below the sheerline amidships. They make her instantly recognizable, yet were never part of the original Sparkman & Stephens design.

Simon explains that while the yacht was being built, Vince Walsh, a sailing mate



Simon Kurts- owner/skipper of the three-time Hobart winner.





Pedestal primaries are linked by tie-rod.



Original winches at the mast.

of his father's, visited the Quilkey yard. He reckoned that with no coach house and a varnished interior, the boat would be too dark below. What was needed, Walsh said, were some portholes in the topsides, and he drew where they should be, directly onto the raw planking. Kurts agreed and the shipwrights promptly cut those four small openings.

For any doubters, there are two apparent proofs that this alteration to the original design (often mistakenly thought to be a unique S&S aesthetic 'touch') was an afterthought.

The construction drawings for the boat supplied by the Sparkman & Stephens office were recently enlarged to form the wall decoration behind the new coffee bar

at the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia. The porthole outlines were clearly drawn onto the original blueprint. And the fact that, in close-up, we can see the frames of the boat through those apertures confirms that they were added late in the build.

None of this is to say that *Love & War* is not one of the world's great classic racing yachts. To step aboard her cambered teak



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Traditional berths are secure in a blow.



Interior retains original rich varnish. Simon below.

deck is to instantly feel the might and power of ocean racers built to the IOR rule during its glorious 1965-75 decade. Fourteen and a half tons of displacement gives a yacht real presence.

Simon Kurts, who has commanded the boat since his father passed away, still recalls the awe of his first encounter.

"We thought it was the biggest thing we'd ever seen," Simon said. "I was sailing Flying 11s, and took a day off school to see the launching. I did a few races on her when I was still at school. I remember doing a Wollongong race and it got a bit windy. Dick Norman stuck me in the quarter berth and said 'Don't get out!' but I did sneak out."

Despite already being a slightly old-fashioned design, *Love & War* soon fulfilled its racing potential by winning the 1974 Sydney-Hobart race, then finishing as the top-scoring boat in the 1975 Admiral's Cup selection trials. L&W won the Hobart again

in 1978, before Kurts decided to chase trophies in a succession of more modern racers – *Once More Dear Friends*, *Drake's Prayer* and *Madeline's Daughter*.

"Dad kept it just to go cruising," Simon says. "He retired the boat from racing and kept it on a mooring out in front of the house in Parsley Bay."

Later, Peter Kurts amazed the offshore community by repeatedly sailing the big masthead sloop over to Lord Howe Island and back – single-handed.

"He did that on his birthday, nearly every year. Just by himself. Off he went. Waited for Roger Badham to tell him when to go.

"It was an extraordinary achievement for a small-framed man in his late 70s. He did put a furler on it and the autopilot, but that's all he had, really. No powered winches. It's not an easy boat to take out by yourself – maybe we're a bunch of wimps now!"

The gear on *Love & War* is daunting. Massive primary winches sit on pedestals in the middle of the boat, linked by a tie-rod so that four crew can combine their strength to grind in the overlapping headsails. Most of the original hardware has survived 'in situ', including a cast spinnaker pole bell fitting at the mast made by Alspar whose chrome plating shines as brightly today as it did 45 years ago.

During a deck re-fit Kurts decided to replace the corroded alloy toe rails, then discovered that the original section was no longer available. So, rather than compromise with a more recent product, he had a special die made and then extruded a stock of exact replicas of the rails first fitted in 1973. An electric anchor winch was added at the bow for cruising but the cluster of heavy halyard winches around the mast base remain as robust reminders of the pre-jammer era.

Below, every surface is deeply varnished and the traditional fit-out has hardly changed. The sail-bin forepeak area was converted to a cabin for cruising and a shower added to the head. The galley is of generous proportions to feed a racing crew of 10 and the original three-burner metho stove is still going strong. Modern instruments now dominate the nav station but the bunks are traditional "racks": awkward to get into, but secure in a blow.

Peter Kurts died in January 2005 on the day *Love & War* returned to Sydney Harbour from the Hobart race.

Two years later, and now 33 seasons old, the yacht won the Sydney-Hobart on handicap for the third time. She remains only the second boat, after *Freya*, to achieve that remarkable feat. Simon was not aboard – he was in Melbourne watching his sons compete in the national Sabot championships – but stand-in skipper Lindsay May talked him through the final few hundred yards to the finishing line over the phone.



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Distinctive portholes were an afterthought.

Kurts campaigned the boat for the 50th Hobart, and will be heading South again this year to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the race. He's considered acquiring a contemporary ocean racer, but keeps coming back to L&W.

"It has been thought of, but not now. I just want to go out and enjoy the water. I got sick of it when we had to get weighed. As soon they said everyone in the crew had to be weighed I thought, 'This is getting a bit ridiculous.'"

But what is the origin of the boat's name? The words are beautifully painted onto the wineglass stern of *Love & War* in gold lettering. Variations of the line – "All is fair in love and war" – have been common in poetry and prose since the late 16th Century. The version quoted on a carved bulkhead panel beside the companionway is from the 1623 play *The Lovers' Progress* by John Fletcher, but this was added well after the launch.



The name that has intrigued generations of sailors.

Nobody seems certain how the name first arose, but according to offshore veteran and early L&W crewman Peter Shipway his old skipper chose the words as an expression of the sport itself.

"Basically, Kurtsy saw ocean racing like love and war. You're at war with the ocean when racing, and in love ashore."

Simon Kurts feels a similar emotional connection to the yacht. "I'm glad Dad never sold it. It's a beautiful boat. Everyone seems to love it. It connects me to my Dad. I think of him a lot when I'm on board."

And to keep that connection alive, Simon has named his Sabre 42 power cruiser *All is Fair*. ⚓

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