

# ALDEBARAN

## Coordination of Ocean medical emergency (30<sup>th</sup> report)

Main personnel & boats involved;

**BIFROST**, with the causality Greg his wife Leonie & sons Ben & Jesse aboard,

**ALDEBARAN**, coordinator at anchor in Niue with Pat & Olivia aboard,

**BEACON**, rescue boat, with David, Alex & Ellen aboard,

**FOUR WINDS**, rescue boat with Greg & Denise aboard,

**ARGONAUTA**, with a Julius a pharmacist and Ian an RNLI inshore rescue crew on board.

**Part one:** On Tuesday & Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> Sept 2001 we monitored, on various long range radio nets, the medical condition of Greg Dickson, an Australian. Sailing with his wife Leonie and sons Ben and Jesse aged 6 & 4 they were on the last leg of their circumnavigation. About half way on the 1,400 mile passage from Bora Bora in the Society Islands, French Polynesia to Tonga, Greg developed a reaction to the “Lariam” medication he took for suspected malaria. His condition deteriorated over the following 24 hours. Greg is a diabetic, and this may have aggravated the situation. The nearest island with medical facilities was Niue, approx. 400 miles or almost four sailing days away. Niue has no marine rescue services.

While conducting my radio net at 0800 hrs on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> September, from our anchorage in Niue, Leonie came on saying that Greg’s condition had deteriorated over night and he was having severe chest pains. He was lying down unable to do anything. I asked if she required assistance to which she replied, “YES”. For the previous two days they had been in radio contact with New Zealand obtaining medical advice. Medical personnel on other boats were also giving advice over the radio.

### **The NZ authorities said it would take four days to get a ship to them and that they were to far out for a helicopter rescue.**

When Leonie requested help they were **220 miles** from Niue in position **18degrees-46minutes south & 167degrees-40minutes** West, which at approx 6 knots would take about 37 hours to reach Niue and help. My initial response was to depart Niue, position **19-03S & 169-55W**, in **ALDEBARAN** with additional crew, of which there was no shortage of volunteers, and rendezvous with **BIFROST**. However due to the 25/30 knot easterly head wind and rough seas we would take almost 24 hours to rendezvous. Three days earlier we had departed Beveridge Reef (20-01S / 167-45’W) a coral reef about 3 miles in diameter with nothing except a wrecked trawler showing above water, **140 miles** ESE of Niue and remembered that a number of yachts were still there and that they would be the nearest to the casualty. I managed to contact **BEACON** and **FOUR WINDS** who having had the situation explained to them immediately weighed anchor and departed **Beveridge Reef** at 0830 hrs. It was hoped that **Beacon**, with David Alex and Ellen, might be able to transfer Alex aboard Bifrost to assist Leonie.

I relayed to Leonie that they were on their way and should reach her in about **14 hours**. She was much relieved at the news. From the information she gave me regarding her course and speed, and estimating Beacon & Four Wind’s speed and with the help of my GPS chart plotter I calculated a rendezvous point at **18-46’S & 167-40’W**. **Bifrost was 80 miles** and **Beveridge Reef 75 miles** from this point. We agreed to keep a radio schedule on **8167 khz** every two hours and that I would calculate any course adjustments required for Beacon and Four Winds. From the outset I was determined to try and keep Bifrost closing with Niue at full speed and have the two rescue boats slightly ahead and waiting for the casualty rather than the other way round. The idea was good but with the many variables in the equation it would not be easy to achieve. Bifrost was using a wind steering system and any variation in the wind direction would seriously effect the calculations.

At 1000 hrs Beacon, the faster of the two rescue boats, was at 19-51'S & 167-47'W while Bifrost was at 18-20'S & 166-37W and steering 246 degrees magnetic, still on course. During this radio schedule Leonie said they were short of the medicines recommended by the doctor in New Zealand who she was in regular contact with. Beacon and Four Winds relayed a list of the medicines each had aboard to Julius on **Argonauta** who was anchored next to us in Niue. It was agreed that Julius would assess the various medicines and we would e-mail Beacon with his proposals. This we did from ALDEBARAN at 1030 hrs. In addition, at the suggestion of Sally on Argonauta, we sent an e-mail to Sailmail, our e-mail server, requesting a possible extension to the allowed daily ten minutes transmission during the emergency. They quickly came back allowing us all the time necessary.

At 1200 hrs and as usual after the three boats gave me their positions and while I was calculating any necessary course changes, Beacon & Four Winds conversed with Leonie as to what might happen when they rendezvoused. The plan was first to get the medicine across to Bifrost and then Alex would transfer if conditions permitted. Ian from Argonauta discussed various methods of transfer with David on **Beacon**. Henry from **Maritime Express** also gave suggestions based on his experience while crossing from the Galapagos to the Marquises when he and Ken from "Someday Is Here" had to transfer to "Argonauta". Due to the severe weather conditions David was unable to retrieve the e-mail with the medicine information for fear of getting his computer wet. We then gave him the necessary information re dosage for the drug "Amoxiallin" over the radio. This was the drug suggested by the NZ doctor as the first choice and which Beacon had aboard.

At this time Bifrost was at 18-21'S / 166-49'W steering **250 degrees magnetic** and doing 5.9 knots, Beacon was at 19-36'S / 167-46W steering **350 magnetic and doing 7.2 knots** while **Four Winds** was at 19-42'S / 167-47W also steering 350 mag. and doing 7 knots. Following my calculation I amended the rendezvous point to 18-34'S & 167-47W, this was **13 miles nearer** than the original point. Bifrost was **56 miles** and Beacon **62 miles** from the new meeting point and **92 miles** from each other.

Prior to our 1400 hrs schedule I estimated **Bifrost** and **Beacons** positions would be approx. 18-23'S / 166-58'W and 19-20'S / 167-46'W respectively and that they would be **74 miles** apart. This exercise, I hoped, would test my calculations.

Their actual positions were, Bifrost 18-23'S / 167-01'W and Beacon 19-21'S / 167-47'W and they were **73 miles** apart with Bifrost **45 miles** from the meeting point and Beacon **47 miles**. My method of calculation proved to be accurate.

The 1600 hrs schedule had Bifrost **33 miles** and Beacon **32 miles** from the waypoint and **52 miles** apart. Leonie unfortunately reported that Greg was having more severe chest pains, which caused concern. At this stage in the emergency, various medical conditions were being suggested by different medical personnel, including dengue fever, possible heart attack, lung infection, malaria and muscle reaction to the Lariam malaria drug.

At the 1800 hrs schedule Bifrost was at 18-30'S / 167-24'W, Beacon was at 18-53'S / 167-47'W reporting 20/25 knot winds with rough seas and Four Winds at 19-01'S / 167-51'W doing 6 knots. From the earlier revised rendezvous point Bifrost was **19 miles**, and Beacon **21 miles** from the meeting point and they were only **19 miles** apart. I recalculated a second revised rendezvous point for Bifrost and Beacon at 18-38'S / 167-45'W which amended the distances to run for Bifrost to **21 miles** & Beacon **15 miles**. This new meeting point was **only 4.4 miles from the original given almost 10 hours earlier**. The reason for the revised meeting point was to ensure Beacon would be there ahead of Bifrost and eliminate Bifrost having to slow or wait for Beacon. At this time I also gave a rendezvous point for Four Winds of 18-38'S / 167-52'W or 7 miles to the west due to them being 8 miles astern and 4 miles further west of Beacon.

**From approx 1900 hrs all our radios were continually listening on the 8167 kHz frequency.**

The 2000 hour schedule had Bifrost at 18-34'S / 167-35'W with **10 miles** to the rendezvous point, they had slowed down a little during the past two hours, and Beacon at 18-39'S / 167-46'W and **2 miles** to go, they were only **11 miles** apart at this stage. Four Winds was at 18-50'S / 167-52'W and 21 miles from Bifrost.

Greg on Four Winds frightened me by saying that his calculations had him 40 miles away. I re-checked my calculation while Greg checked his. After a few minutes he came back agreeing with my 21 miles. The conditions that the rescue boats were experiencing were not conducive to spending a long time at a chart table, while I was sitting comfortably at my chart table in a sheltered anchorage.

Beacon's first task was to transfer the medicine and secondly, if absolutely necessary and weather conditions permitted transfer Alex to Bifrost. The transfer of Alex was not, under any circumstances, to be attempted without Four Winds being present as a rescue boat in the event of difficulties.

David on Beacon had put on his masthead strobe light and at approx 2015 hours we asked Leonie if she could go into the cockpit and look for the strobe somewhere off her port bow.

**At this stage we should try to visualise the conditions under which Leonie was working. For the last approx 36 hours she was, (1) sailing and tending the boat in very rough seas, (2) nursing a very sick husband, (3) communicating on the radio with, the authorities in New Zealand, other yachties, the two rescue boats and me and (4) feeding and looking after two young children. With the exception of her request for assistance at 0800 hrs earlier in the day she sounded and conducted all her radio communications in a cool and clear manner. Just read this paragraph again, slowly, and try to visual the scene.**

Having asked her to go on deck and look for Beacon's strobe, we all waited with bated breath, and when I say all, I include the many other yachties, the "HAM" operated Pacific Seafarers Net and authorities, all of which were monitoring the radio during the day without interfering.

**"I CAN SEE THE LIGHT, IT'S SO BRIGHT"**

I must confess that I became very emotional and in fact shed a few tears on hearing Leonie's shout.

While Bifrost and Beacon then began communicating on the vhf, I continued to monitor and guide Four Winds until they also saw the lights of the two boats.

**Part one of the rescue was now successfully completed.**

**Part two**, the immediate transfer of medicine and at first light the transfer of Alex was now under the control of Leonie and the crews of the two rescue boats.

### **Part three:**

On the following morning, Friday 7<sup>th</sup> Sept at 0700 hrs we spoke with the three boats, Bifrost, Beacon and Four Winds and were told the medicine had been, after numerous attempts, successfully transferred during the night. The idea of transferring Alex at dawn was abandoned due to the weather conditions and the fact that the casualty had not deteriorated. The medicine appeared to be helping. Leonie had got some sleep and was much comforted by the mere presence of Beacon and Four Winds.

From their position, condition and speed reports we estimated they would arrive in Niue at about 2200 to 2300 hours that evening. Leonie reported that Greg was still having chest pains. This I relayed to the authorities in Niue whom I had been keeping informed of the situation. They said they would have the necessary medical personnel etc available when they arrived. Niue, a small independent state with a population of approx 2,000 does not, as mentioned earlier, have any sea rescue facilities.

At 1800 hrs Leonie reported to me that Greg had deteriorated and his temperature had dropped and she asked me to speak to a doctor. At this time I was operating from the offices of Niue radio. They quickly got a doctor on the phone and I relayed Greg's condition. The doctor prescribed some medicine, which Bifrost had aboard and assured Leonie that the drop in Greg's temperature was not a cause for concern.

The anchorage at Niue is very deep and strewn with coral crevices and so the Niue Yacht Club has laid 14 mooring buoys for yachts. As eleven of these were in use we reserved the remaining three for the boats coming in. Niue Dive agreed to attach fluorescent light sticks to the buoys to help guide the boats in.

That evening the majority of yachties, including Olivia and I, were attending a "fish & chip" function at a local resort knowing of course that we would have to return to our boats in time to help the three boats in. During the function I allocated specific tasks to a number of people so as to ensure the smooth arrival of all three boats and the getting of immediate medical attention for the casualty. Malcolm from Muna, using his dinghy, was to get additional crew aboard Bifrost to help in mooring her.

Bringing Bifrost alongside the wharf was discussed but considered to dangerous due to the lack of manoeuvring space and the possibility of swell.

Mike from Nereida and Bert from Tenacious, also in a dinghy, were allocated the job of guiding the boats to their respective mooring buoys. Julius from Argonauta was to ferry the doctor out to Bifrost as soon as they were on the mooring buoy. Terry on Stella was my backup radio link. To say the exercise worked well would be an understatement, everyone performed his or her task to perfection. The additional crew, of Ian from Argonauta and Laura from Muna together with Malcolm boarded Bifrost over a mile from the anchorage. Julius had the doctor aboard Bifrost before they reached the mooring, while Mike and Bert guided each boat in. I worked from Aldebaran co-ordinating the various tasks. When the doctor called for a stretcher, Niue Dive who were on standby at the dock with a stretcher reached Bifrost within minutes. The news of the emergency had been talked about on the island since it began and so a large crowd had gathered on the wharf to see and give additional help if required.

Greg was brought ashore and by ambulance to hospital just after midnight.

The night ended with "Night Caps" of hot Irish whisky being administered, by Olivia, to rescuers, and helpers aboard Aldebaran.

**Thus ended a successful rescue of a "yachtie" by fellow "yachties".**

**With all our "hats" raised to Leonie the heroine.**

After some time in hospital Greg returned to Bifrost, rested, and, with Laura from Muna joining as additional crew, sailed the boat the 250 miles to Vava'u, in Tonga from where he flew home to Australia for tests and treatment while Leonie and the boys remained aboard.

On his return ten days later we were all relieved to be told that the medical conclusion was that initially, he possible had “dengue fever” and that he had reacted very badly to the prescribed “Lariam”.

**Our next report, our 31<sup>st</sup>, will take us from Niue to the Kingdom of Tonga and onwards to New Zealand via the famous North Minerva Reef from where we have an unusual story of being involved with a lost fishing boat. Kava drinking and swimming with whales are only two of the many other stories we will report on.**

**Keep up your e-mails to, we love to get even the smallest bit of news or better still “gossip”.**

**Pat and Olivia  
Yacht ALDEBARAN  
South Pacific**