

# FAMILY FINDS ADVENTURE ON HIGH SEAS

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HEBER SPRINGS - They fought off pirates and battled 40 foot waves. They escaped Panamanian police and met up with a 39-foot white shark. On a yacht named the Betty J, the Pratt family of Heber Springs conquered the high seas in a four-year around-the-world odyssey.

Leonard and Betty Pratt, and their sons, Michael and Landon, set sail in May 1974 from Miami in their 40-foot yacht. Michael then 15, and Landon, 16, left their schools for a different kind of education.

Pratt, now 72, a retired airline pilot, and Mrs. Pratt, 51, decided to take the trip after very little contemplation.

"After I retired I asked Betty where a trip around the world would be on her list of things to do," Pratt said. "She said it would be around the middle. She wasn't very sure at first, but after considering the \$100,000 it would take to make the voyage, we decided to go."

So the Pratts loaded up their yacht with provisions and left behind the comforts of home for the adventure of a lifetime.

They set sail from Miami and headed for the Bahamas. From there they sailed to Haiti, Jamaica and then to Panama where 'they restocked their supplies at a United States military base.

"We converted the refrigerator on board into a freezer that ran off the engine. This made it pretty easy to have fairly normal meals like home," Mrs. Pratt said.

The only thing that wasn't like home was the lack of modern conveniences, such as bathroom tissue. A major problem was keeping their clothes clean.

"I started off washing our clothes out in sea water because the water on board was used only for cooking and drinking. But that didn't work, because once they dried there was salt all over them. The only time we could wash was either on one of the big U.S. military vessels or in an island stream," Mrs. Pratt said.

While the Pratts were docked in Panama, restocking supplies, they had their first adventure.

"We found out from a local military man that had befriended us that the government had planned to illegally confiscate our boat along with some other American (boats) in the bay where we were anchored. The government there often did this for no reason," Pratt said.

"In the middle of the night we escaped to the Panama Canal, which was then owned by the United States, and were able to avoid being arrested and having our boat taken."

From Panama the Pratts sailed to the Galapagos Islands, which are west of South America, where they stayed for three months. From there they headed for the Marquesas Islands. This was the longest passage of the voyage.

"It was 3,200 miles between the two sets of islands. There wasn't even a shallow spot. We didn't see anybody, and didn't bother to wear clothes because it just wasn't worth the effort of getting them all wet and dirty," Pratt said.

"We did see what looked like a Taiwanese fishing vessel at one time. They were so shocked to see us out there that they shut down their engines and got up next to the railings with binoculars to stare at us," he said. The Pratts set a record of 21 days between the two islands. It usually takes a yacht 60 to 65 days to make the trip. They covered 180 to 190 nautical miles a day, with a sustained wind at 40 knots.

"Usually boats follow the Equator to get to the next set of islands. We veered south away from the islands instead, and when we picked up stronger winds, we headed back toward the islands with full sails all the way," he said.

From there they sailed to the Tuamotu Islands, the Society Islands (which include Bora Bora, Tahiti and Hoolahini), then to the Cook Islands, Samoa, Wallis Islands, New Hebrides, Solomon Islands and the Laughlan or 'Love' Islands, which are all in the South Pacific.

"The natives on the 'Love' Islands, I guarantee you, had never seen a tourist before. They wore nothing on top and just grass skirts," Mrs. Pratt said. "But they were lovely people, even though they still didn't know where babies come from."

One of the more beautiful sights the Pratts saw on their trip was a school of about 20 blue whales swimming alongside the yacht. On another occasion one of man's more feared water dwellers paid the Pratts a visit.

"I know it's hard to believe, but we were sailing along one afternoon and I looked down and saw a shadow next to the yacht," Mrs. Pratt said. "As it got closer I realized that it was a shark. It swam right up to the side of us and it measured the full length of the yacht, which is 39 feet on the water line. Then it just swam away. It was really terrifying."

During the next six months the Pratts docked their boat at New Guinea and sat out the hurricane season. They anchored their boat at a friend's house, which was on the water, and flew back to the United States for about three months, where Michael decided to stay behind.

"They were at a critical age for young kids. They felt like they were missing out on some things," Mrs. Pratt said. "The next year Landon flew back to the U.S. from Singapore to be with his brother."

After the hurricane season ended, the Pratts set sail for Indonesia, which turned out to be one of their least favorite stops of the trip.

"Indonesia was the worse area we sailed through. The government and people are very corrupt there. You have to have all the correct papers and visas when you dock. If you don't, they will confiscate your boat and more than likely you'll never get it back. Boats around there just sort of disappear," Pratt said.

While the Pratt's vessel didn't disappear, they narrowly escaped losing it on a small island outside of Indonesia.

"The island was supposed to be uninhabited, but much to our surprise, when we went ashore we were greeted by the island's police who wanted to see our papers, which we did not have," Mrs. Pratt said.

"We had just bought a Polaroid camera, the kind where the pictures develop in front of your eyes. We took pictures of everybody and told the police we were going back to the boat to get our papers," she said. "We left them to watch the pictures develop while we snuck back to our ship and pulled up anchor. The police had already called the patrol boat to come and get us. We motored out of the cove and got away."

The Pratts said the Indonesian police also liked to confiscate guns and ammunition. "Most of the people on yachts like ours hide their guns and don't claim them at port. If you do, the police just take them and you never see them again. So, the rest of your voyage you're without protection," Pratt said.

"The police there also like to do spot checks on the boats that are docked. They just want a bribe from whoever they are harassing to get them to leave," he said.

"On one particular occasion, an American (whose boat) was docked there, who had claimed his guns and ammunition, was arrested during one of those 'surprise' checks for having one bullet that the police found in a drawer on his boat. We heard they sentenced him to 20 years in prison."

Shortly after setting sail from Indonesia, Pratt became seriously ill and they had to return to the eastern nation. They were able to get an emergency permit to stay in the country for six weeks while Pratt was in the hospital. By that time they were behind schedule and a lot of bad weather had moved into the area.

"I told them in Indonesia that there was no way we could sail because of the weather. But they said, 'tough,' and threw us out of the country anyway," Pratt said. "It took us over 32 days to cover the 800 miles from Indonesia to Singapore. We ran out of food and by the time we got there we had salt water sores all over us from being wet all the time. It was really a lovely trip," he said, laughing.

But the worst was yet to come, he added. "We were so tired from fighting the bad weather that we anchored near an uncharted island outside of Singapore to get some rest. About 2 or 3 a.m. we were attacked by pirates. Landon, Leonard, and a boy we had picked up in Australia fought these guys off with a butcher knife, hunting knife and an iron bar. There were six of them," Mrs. Pratt said.

"Betty was trying to get the guns out of our hiding place under the boat while we were fighting. We held the pirates off during a first attack. Then they came at us again and we continued to hold them off. They backed off again and were talking things over, which gave me time to get to one of our semi-automatics and load it full of buckshot. I knew the next encounter was gonna be a bit more loud. We were ready for them. But I guess they didn't think it was worth the hassle and took off," Pratt said.

The Pratts had two other encounters with pirates during their trip, but managed to escape without injury those times also.

One of the more frightening things they faced, other than the pirates, was the weather. “The worst storm we encountered during the trip was in the Indian Ocean. We just took all the sails down and locked ourselves inside the cabin,” Mrs. Pratt said.

“There were 40-foot waves and a constant 80- to 90-knot wind. We had to just lay on the floor the whole time because we couldn’t stand up, and if we laid on our beds we fell off,” she said.

“That storm knocked out the steering on the boat. But Leonard managed to rig partial steering that got us to South Africa, which was five days away from where we were.”

After spending six months in South Africa to repair their boat, and allow Mrs. Pratt to recover from a bout with malaria that left her weighing a mere 85 pounds, they set sail on the last leg of their voyage.

From South Africa, they sailed through the Atlantic Ocean to the West Indies and back to Miami, finishing the trip in June 1978.

“During the voyage, one of the more rewarding experiences that we participated in was at St. Helena,” Mrs. Pratt said. “We were asked by the port captain in Capetown, South Africa, to take some food to the people on St. Helena, who were having a drought at the time.”

“They only gave us about two crates of food to take. So we went down to town and bought about \$500 worth of fruit and meats and just packed our yacht full. When we got to the island the people were so grateful and good to us. It was really a wonderful feeling,” she said.

The Pratts said they loved the trip so much the first time around that they are doing it again this year. They have a yacht that they’ve been working on for the past five years to get in shape for the voyage.

“We’ll be setting sail this time from the Arkansas River some time in October. That will lead us to the Mississippi, to the gulf and out into the open sea. We plan to head for the Caribbean to spend the winter,” he said.

“After that, we’ll see.”