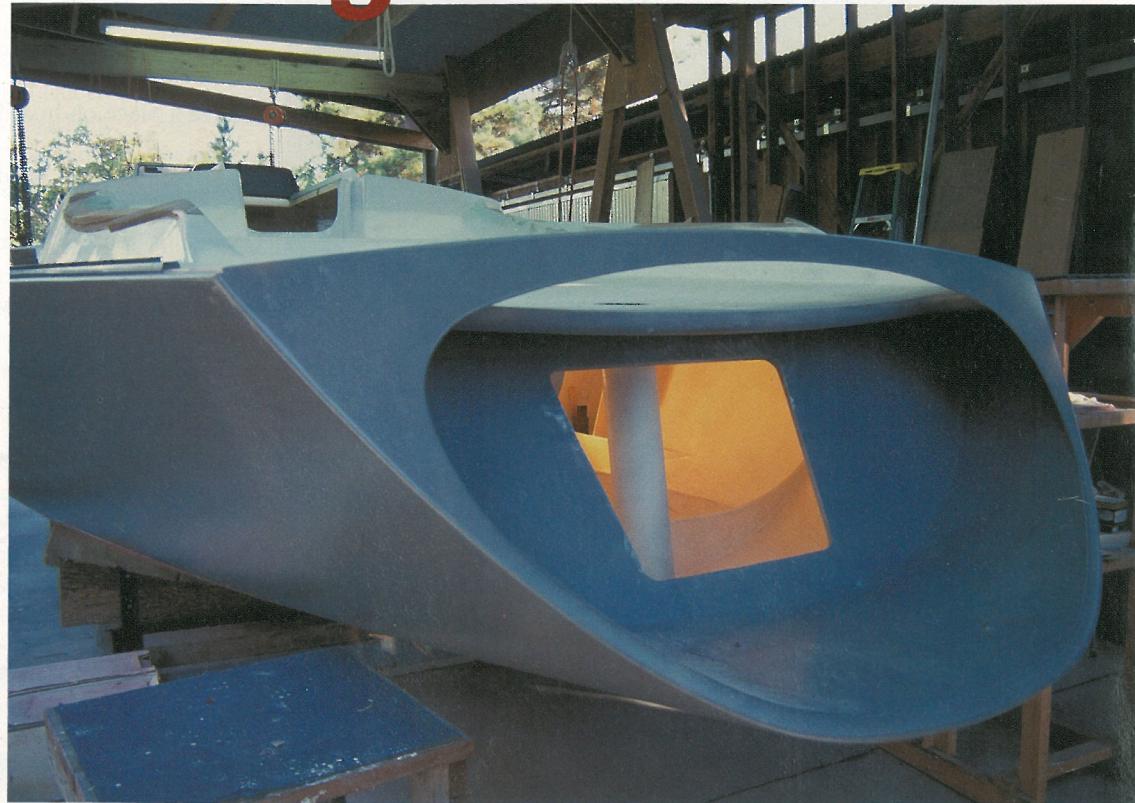


# Flashgirl

A fast, artfully designed sloop for world voyaging



Dieter Loibner photos

by Dieter Loibner

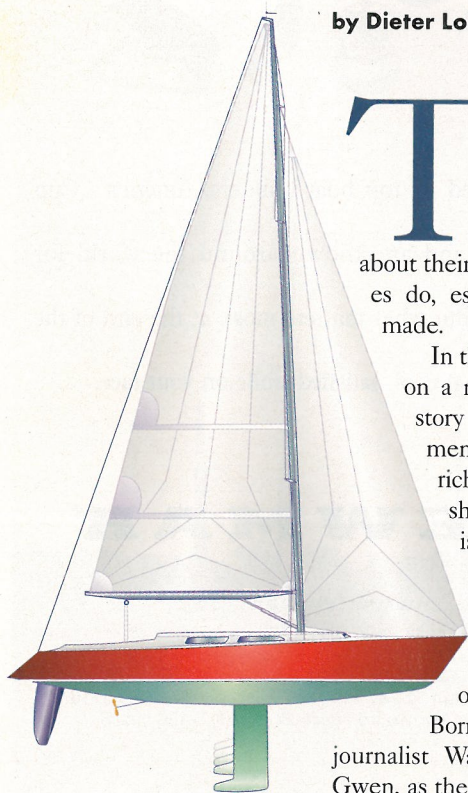
**T**ell me what you sail, and I'll tell you who you are. Put differently, sailboats are like shoes. A good pair just looks — and feels — right. And they tell more about their owners than cars, clothes or houses do, especially when they are custom-made.

In the case of *Flashgirl*, which is based on a modified hull of a Wylie 39, the story told by its appearance, appointment and performance is elaborate and rich in nuances. All of that, of course, should not surprise, since its master is Warwick "Commodore" Tompkins Jr., one of the most experienced sailors alive today, who looks back on seven decades of adventure under sail and 500,000 ocean miles.

Born on Feb. 6, 1932, in Boston, to journalist Warwick Tompkins and his wife Gwen, as the younger of two children, he grew



*Flashgirl's* transom, top, is designed to permit light and fresh air, as well as a chance for a quick swim from the aft cabin. Bottom: Warwick Tompkins shows off the first ball-screw arrangement, designed to lift the keel.



up a globetrotting toddler aboard *Wander Bird*, the 1880 German pilot schooner his father acquired in 1928 and turned into an oceangoing family home and charter operation. By age four he had 13 Atlantic crossings under his belt and a trip from Gloucester, Mass., to San Francisco via Cape Horn, chronicled in his father's book and film *50 South to 50 South*.

Tompkins Jr. went on to become a professional and, as such, one of the most respected yachtsmen of the 20th century, sailing and racing everything from dinghies to large oceangoing yachts. His record includes prominent finishes in trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific races, Fastnets, Southern Ocean Racing Conferences, Kenwood Cups, Admiral's Cups, the Sydney-Hobart and a win in the inaugural Melbourne to Osaka race in 1987, on a Farr design that was built and modified to his specifications. He also became a proficient rigger, sailmaker, project manager and boatbuilder.

*Flashgirl*, a modest-displacement vessel with a fair amount of rocker, is Commodore's first personal boat in a quarter of a century. It took a decade to complete and is refreshingly devoid of a bean-counter's approach to budget matters. "At 60 bucks an hour times 8,000 hours, this equals nearly half a million dollars," Tompkins estimated. But dol-

double bypass surgery, which did not put him out of commission, but required a more leisurely pace in life and on the water.

The very first impression of the half-finished product as it presented itself in the building shed on the outskirts of the wine town of Sonoma, Calif., a 45-minute drive north of Tompkins' Mill Valley home, was that of a performance-oriented boat, especially for a short-handed world cruise. But Commodore quickly put that into perspective. "I was not looking for the last word on speed, but something fun and safe that could be sailed short-handed and offer a decent level of comfort."

have a clean relationship with wind and water." Wylie remained close to the *Flashgirl* project over the years it took to complete, lending his expertise to structural engineering and load calculations that became necessary through the extensive modifications that included water ballast and a lifting keel.

*Flashgirl's* hull and deck, like so many of Wylie's boats, was built at Westerly Marine in Costa Mesa (now in Santa Ana), Calif., using E-glass and vinylester resin over divynyl core, as well as carbon reinforcements on the inside above the waterline. The freeboard was reduced by 1.5 inches, which adds to the sporty look of the package.



Bob Greiner photos



↑ Tompkins fiddles as Nancy Potter lounges in the aft bunk. The black bar visible in the foreground is the carbon-fiber ladder.  
← *Flashgirl's* interior is tastefully minimalist. The vessel has no sole boards.

Tompkins insisted on water ballast (2,000 lbs on each side) for two reasons: He saw the advantages during a delivery of *True Blue*, a winner of the 50-foot class of the 1994-'95 Around Alone race, and he learned more about the technology from builder Eric Goetz.

The slim lifting keel is a concession to Tompkins' love affair with the South Pacific, especially the Aitutaki Atoll in the Cook Islands, which requires a draft of 6 feet or less to make the pass. *Flashgirl* draws 9 feet with the keel down and 5 feet 6 inches with the foil retracted.

Like all functional elegance, the clean execution of the lifting-keel concept required a lot of research and some fancy engineering to get it right. In *Flashgirl's* case, the learning curve was steepened by a near-catastrophic failure during the shakedown phase.

lars and cents aside, *Flashgirl* is the artful distillate of a man's experiences and desires that have been shaped by a life on and for the ocean. It brims with elegant functionality and practical details that should inspire designers of production boats. Despite its eloquence, there is one story that *Flashgirl* does not tell. It is the one about Tompkins' heart attack and

Designer Tom Wylie has known Tompkins since sailing together on a race to Acapulco in 1966 on a Cal 40. This acquaintance has resulted in several joint projects over the years and is considered by Wylie a major influence on his design philosophy. "Commodore taught me to feel the elements, which I think is reflected in my work. I like my boats to

"Hydraulics or a block-and-tackle system may have been cheaper and more obvious alternatives, but they would have imposed an agricultural look above and below decks," Tompkins mused. So he opted for a ball-screw system that requires only 15 lbs of muscle force on the winch to lift a 4,000-lb keel three feet.

The first incarnation of this ball screw corroded badly and failed when the keel

rials. The new screw is made from Pyromet 718 alloy; the nut is made from precipitation-hardened 17-4 stainless steel, and the balls inside are also stainless steel. Oil, poured into the keel cavity, protects the screw from the corrosive marine environment.

As evident during the test sail, which had to contend with low water in the Richmond channel, the system works like a charm, requiring approximately

you a bottle of lesser wine." Nancy Potter, Commodore's wife and sailing companion, expressed a slightly different opinion about the sophistication of the vessel: "Commodore always needs something to do, so having a lot of systems to maintain is like therapy for him." The Pardeys' maxim of "go small, go simple, go now" does not figure in his philosophy.

The perfectionist's obsession drove Tompkins to custom-machining the fittings for the runners on the aft corners of the deck and the backstay tackle system he installed on the swimstep. The blocks are angled to avoid twist and friction from the lines, and the counter plates are laminated into the structure, invisible from the outside, to maintain the clean look.

He even built a dummy mast to assure a perfect fit of the step and the collar, as well as the angles of the control lines to their turning blocks. Tompkins enlisted the help of a race-bike builder to construct the companionway ladder that ends in midair, right above the engine cover, which doubles as table and centerpiece of the sculpted and airy space down below.

The shallow, dinghy-like cockpit is a custom structure that leaves enough room for the master cabin right underneath. The four-part mainsheet, the traveler and the winches are set up for fingertip control from the helmsman's position at the

tiller. Tompkins built custom winch bases so the cleats can be positioned for easy and safe operation. The cockpit coaming is designed for level seating when heeled and allows the jib sheet to pass underneath to the primary winches. In the puffy conditions during the test sail, the advantages of this arrangement were immediately obvious, as they required minimum movement and effort



Bob Griener photos

was in its up position in the shallow waters of Kaneohe Bay, before the delivery back to San Francisco after the Pacific Cup 2000. The crew tried to overcome resistance with brute muscle force, which caused the keel to drop down into the casing and nearly out on the other end. "I was naïve and trusted the salesperson," Tompkins explained the loose screw, which he traced back to inappropriate plating.

With a lot of ingenuity and little help, he devised a lever combined with a block-and-tackle system to bring the keel back up and secure it with the bolts. This setback notwithstanding, he proceeded with the delivery, but was forced to abandon it 700 miles out from Hawaii with engine trouble and a leaking stern hatch. So the boat was shipped back on a freighter and put up in the yard for repairs.

The skipper, too, was in need of a serious overhaul in the form of a hernia operation, so the keel repair got off to a slow start. Tompkins and the assisting engineers Derek Baylis and Don Shipley concocted an artfully machined space-age solution that used non-ferrous mate-

↑ *Flashgirl* is the culmination of knowledge and style achieved by Tompkins over 500,000 miles of ocean sailing.  
→ *Flashgirl* is equipped with 10 different sails, all North/Spectra. There is no roller furling, a fact that reflects Tompkins' belief in rig simplicity and versatility.

172 revolutions on the cabin-top winch to achieve the three-foot lift.

The extravaganza of design and implementation does not stop with water ballast and lifting keel. "Looking at this project and the budget spent thus far, the average customer would have opted for a 55-foot boat," Wylie noted. "But Commodore is one of the rare owners who opt for smaller size with more art and finer features. It is like drinking a glass of a rare vintage when the same money could buy



to adjust the trim while steering the well-balanced boat with two fingers on the tiller, which drives the custom carbon rudder, built by Advanced Composites of Santa Cruz, Calif. Waterballast intake and discharge are controlled by push buttons and a hydraulic valve on the bridge deck. To reduce glare and reflection of sunlight, the entire deck was painted in dark gray, a rather utilitarian color, but one that contrasts well with the bright-red hull.

The hatch board is laminated for extra strength and features lips to funnel away water that comes over the deck. It slides into a stainless-steel frame that was manufactured to stand up to the wear and tear that customarily is imposed on this spot on every cruising vessel.

The most noticeable features on the foredeck are the two collars for the pole of the asymmetrical spinnaker and an uncluttered bow section, sans windlass or cumbersome anchor storage. Instead, *Flashgirl's* ground tackle — when in use — is operated through a hawse pipe that exits the stem above the waterline.

## Flashgirl

designer  
contact  
builder  
contact  
description  
dimensions  
displacement

Thomas Wylie Designs, Canyon, Calif.  
Tom Wylie: 925-376-7338  
Westerly Marine (hull), Santa Ana, Calif.  
Lynn Bowser: 714-966-8550  
Fractional sloop  
LOD: 39' 2" B: 8' 9" D: 5' 6" (keel up); 9' (keel down)  
11,000 lbs (light)

### Navigation and communications

△ Furuno GPS  
△ Icom SSB and VHF radios  
△ Pactor PPC modem (SSB)  
△ Icom AT 130 antenna tuner  
△ B&G instruments  
△ Danforth magnetic compass

### Aux. engine and propulsion

△ 28-hp Perkins diesel

### Capacities

△ Fuel: 24 gallons  
△ Water: 14 gallons

### Electrical

△ Alpha Marine/NKE autopilot

### Galley

△ Force 10 two-burner stove/oven  
△ Glacier Bay reefer

### Deck and rigging

△ SeaTek spars  
△ Lewmar rope clutches  
△ Harken deck hardware  
△ Spinlok cleats

### Sails

△ North/Spectra  
△ Area: 770 sq ft

### Other

△ Advanced Composites custom rudder  
△ Spectra watermaker  
△ Givens liferaft  
△ Werner's Welding custom stainless

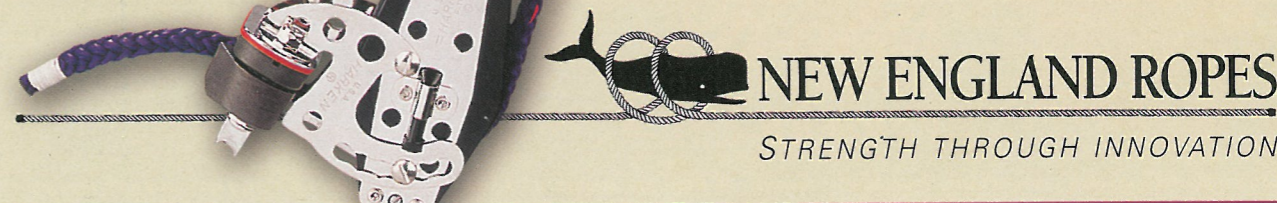
## KNOW • THE • ROPES

Do you know which rope is best for each application on your boat? Mainsheets are more likely to suffer from wear and dirt absorption than other sheets. A spinnaker halyard needs a little "give" to take the shock of loading and losing the sail. A roller furling Genoa halyard can be made up of two different sized and types of

rope to save weight and clutter at the winch or cleat.

As the leading US rope maker for the marine marketplace since 1967, we are the innovators in materials application, rope design and manufacture. From Opti prams to maxi cats, there's a New England Rope made for every application.

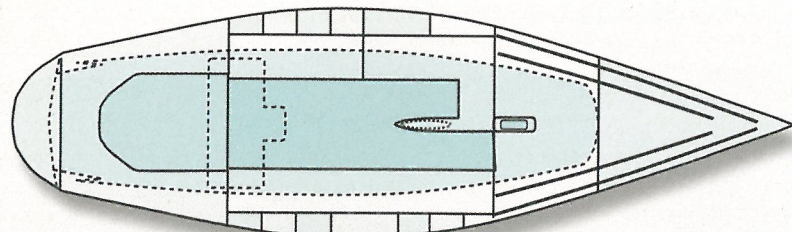
Learn more about rope and select the right one for every application on your boat by visiting our website [www.neropes.com](http://www.neropes.com)



## NEW ENGLAND ROPES

STRENGTH THROUGH INNOVATION

The rig is aluminum with a slim, 54-foot four-spreader mast, provided by Alan Blunt of SeaTek. Here the racer in Tompkins took over. He intends to bring 10 different North Spectra sails to be equipped for all conditions. Conspicuously, roller furling is absent. He maintains that "roller failing," as it was called by artist Jim DeWitt, has improved dra-



↑ *Flashgirl's* interior plan is simple and unadorned. The shallow, dinghy-like cockpit allows for the placement of a double berth in the stern. A transom hatch provides daylight.

matically in recent years, but still is not reliable enough for him to trust on a long-distance voyage. "Most boats sail their best speed in about 10 knots of wind with 15 knots apparent," he said of the extensive wardrobe of canvas. "Not having enough sail means you'd be under-

powered a lot of the time, and that is not an option."

And if there is no breeze, a three-cylinder, 28-hp Perkins diesel springs into action. It exhales through two valved exhaust pipes that are led up to deck level before they dip down to waterline level at Station 6. This construct was necessary to avoid the intrusion of noxious

exhaust gasses through the stern hatch.

That hatch is another concession to life in the tropics, offering baffling views from the owner's cabin aft, admitting a much-needed dash of daylight in the normally pitch-dark corners in the stern of the boat. But its most important func-

tion, along with the three skylights in the main cabin, is ventilation, which makes the difference between a sultry sleepless night and a good rest with a cool breeze wafting through the cabin. Artificial light is provided by rotating halogen lamps above each bunk. Flashlights are ubiquitous, clamped into every corner where one could possibly ever need them.

The settees on both sides of the cabin double as sea berths. "Sleeping here while under way reduces the possibility of motion sickness, since your head is close to the cabin sole and right at the center of pitch. It is the most comfortable spot in a seaway on any vessel," Tompkins explained, adding that he learned that the hard way during the Melbourne-Osaka race. Technically, *Flashgirl's* longitudinal center of displacement is 13 inches behind Station 5 when fully equipped and outfitted, allowing it to float exactly level on the waterline.

The bunks in the main saloon are the only two straight lines down below; everything else is curved — not just for optical reasons but also to eliminate bruising effects that corners have on

passing hip bones. "It was a labor-intensive and a structural design issue, but its practical appeal and elegance justified the effort," Tompkins said. The keel case is the vertical divider between the galley, with a forward-facing sink to port, and the passage to the forepeak and head forward of the main bulkhead. Opposite on starboard is the workbench that houses refrigeration and five Gucci-looking storage drawers. Throughout the entire boat, sole boards appear to be missing. That's because there aren't any. It requires some time to get used to this fact, but it adds headroom and ultimately won't matter underway when the world is on its ear anyway.

Under sail, *Flashgirl* quickly made it clear that it is fleet-footed, although Tompkins, ever the critical perfectionist, hoped for more speed. "I expected to see her surf at 16 knots but all we got was 14 thus far." On the test day, the westerlies on San Francisco Bay doled out puffs of up to 22 knots, which propelled the boat to 7.5 knots upwind under No. 3 jib and one reef in the main. While Mr. and Mrs. Commodore cud-

dled up at the weather rail, laughing, less hearty souls on the boat fled behind the canvas dodger or down below. While jib reaching, the speedo climbed to 9.5 knots. When it got lighter inside Raccoon Strait, the asymmetrical spinnaker made a brief appearance, mostly to show that, at age 70, Commodore can still balance on the bow pulpit, untethered.

Potter and Tompkins handled most of the chores by themselves, as they would during an ocean passage, but did not mind a helping hand to speed up sail handling in the traffic and confined space of the Bay. The drawbacks of *Flashgirl* are far and few between, but one has to be the relative lack of storage space, which is mandated by the presence of water ballast and lifting keel. It will require traveling *schooner rig*, as a merchant mariner would call it, limiting the luggage to the essentials and the frivolous items next to nil. Still, Tompkins carved out enough room in the back of the boat to install bookshelves, which will be visited frequently on those leisure days at sea or at anchor in Aitutaki.

During our day on the water, the custom cockpit seats were not rigged, and the life raft, which doubles as a foot rest in the center of the cockpit, was not onboard, making it hard to find a wedged-in position in moments of intense heel.

But after 10 years of plugging away and the keel drama, *Flashgirl* has turned into the functional toy its owner had always envisioned. "I accepted that it would take a long time, but now it is enormously gratifying to look back on the process from the conception to the miracle of having her," Tompkins summarized the emotional roller-coaster ride. "[Getting there] took me 70 years and countless boats that all lacked the finish or the details I wanted on my perfect boat."

Looking at the boat as it gently tugs on its dock lines, *Flashgirl* is just that, the perfect vehicle for Commodore's next adventurous journey off into the wild blue yonder.

AYR

*Dieter Loibner is a freelance writer and sailor based in San Francisco.*

An AeroRig with a hydraulically operated dinghy garage in the transom makes *Blue Sky Messenger* a unique new Sparkman & Stephens design. Built

## Blue Sky Messenger



by the CNB shipyard in France, the composite yacht is ultramodern, right down to the 14-foot-6-inch jet-propelled ski boat/tender. The owners wanted a fast, fun boat that could be sailed with a minimum of effort, and they got just that. With the yacht's AeroRig sail and rigging, one sheet controls the entire sail plan. The entire rig is freestanding and uses only one permanent backstay. According to the yacht's captain, Jeremy Bowen, the rig works as expected, but special attention must be paid to the adjustment of the boom preventers when tacking. All of the hardware is from Lewmar, and the mast is from Carbospars.

The American-designed, French-built yacht is also full of amenities, such as a custom-built Glacier Bay refrigeration system, a Sea Recovery Aqua Whisper watermaker and a Kariba WD802 washer/dryer. Climate control is by Marine Air and Espar.

Powering all of this is a 170-hp Yanmar 4LH-DTE diesel fitted with a 25-inch Max-Prop on an Aquamet SS shaft, a Northern Lights generator and a Solara solar-power system. There is a forward owner's cabin and a twin aft cabin, located on either side of the "garage." Bowen said that because of the space sacrificed for the garage, the boat feels more like a 50-footer below.

Based in Chicago, the owners plan to use the boat for summer cruising on the Great Lakes. After a season or two of freshwater sailing there, *Blue Sky Messenger* may find itself doing some saltwater cruising.

Below the waterline, *Blue Sky Messenger* also reflects a high-tech pedigree. There are twin rudders and a custom hydraulic lifting keel with a stainless-steel foil and bulb, giving it a shoalwater draft of 6 feet.

designer Sparkman & Stephens Inc.  
contact 212-661-1240  
builder CNB (Construction Navale Bordeaux) France  
contact 011-33 (0) 557 80 85 50  
dimensions LOA: 65' LWL: 57' 11" B: 17' 5"  
D: 6' (keel up) 11' 5" (keel down)

sail area 1,957 sq ft  
displacement 69,300 lbs  
description AeroRig (fully hydraulic furling) sloop

# Rolls ... Chosen By The Best

Oyster Marine installs Rolls Batteries as standard equipment in its world-class Oyster yachts.

"Our customers around the world expect the very best. That's why we choose Rolls Batteries. With Rolls' unsurpassed cycling, dual-container construction and ten-year warranty, we know we are delivering reliable on-board power."

Alan Brook  
Joint Managing Director  
Oyster Marine

## Rolls

**MARINE BATTERIES**  
**1-800-681-9914**

Rolls Battery Engineering Ltd. 8 Proctor St., PO Box 671, Salem, MA 01970 Email: sales@rollsbattery.com www.rollsbattery.com