

Some of the 39 starters in the 1959 Swiftsure Classic cross the line off the Victoria waterfront. Photo by James A. McVie, FPSA.

ORIOLE'S GOOD TRY

"The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong . . ." (Ecclesiastes)

THE FINAL preparations for the Swiftsure Classic were completed on the day before the Race. The last minute adjustments to the *Oriole's* rigging had been accomplished and finishing touches were being applied to the paint work.

Her regular crew of six men plus 21 *Venture* cadets had been working up for the race for two weeks. The arduous training schedule had been designed to give them confidence in their teamwork and served also to heighten their anticipation for the coming contest. For the cadets, it was quite an honour to be chosen for the race.

THURSDAY, May 28, 1959

The City of Victoria rendered her traditional welcome to the competing

yachts, which assembled in the Inner Harbour on "Swiftsure Night", the eve of the race. The *Oriole* came round from Esquimalt for the ceremonies and made a suitable entrance, dressed overall, with her cadet crew aloft manning the four spreaders. Her commanding officer, Lt.-Cdr. C. A. Prosser, manoeuvred her (under power) into the crowded haven very gingerly, having in mind the precarious perch of those in the rigging overhead. The cadets, some of them 65 feet above the deck, had a grand view of some forty yachts, pennants flying, nestled together in the cove at the foot of the ivied façade of Victoria's Empress Hotel. Amid the forest of masts some old friends from previous years' races were soon recognized. The *Diamond Head* was there,

a majestic 72-foot ketch, which was last year's winner of the Victoria Cup. Her dogged rival *Maruffa* was there as well. There were other tall craft with poetic names such as *Sea Fever*, *Troubador*, *Circe* and *Spirit*. Little ones were clustered around. The *ONO* was there, last year's winner of the race and although a comparative midget (38 feet) she was a strong contender, as she carried almost three times the time allowance of the *Oriole*.

After the welcoming speeches, and the Sunset Ceremony performed by the Navy, the *Oriole* returned to Esquimalt for the night.

FRIDAY, May 29, 1959

The race was to begin at 0930. The *Oriole* slipped and motored out about

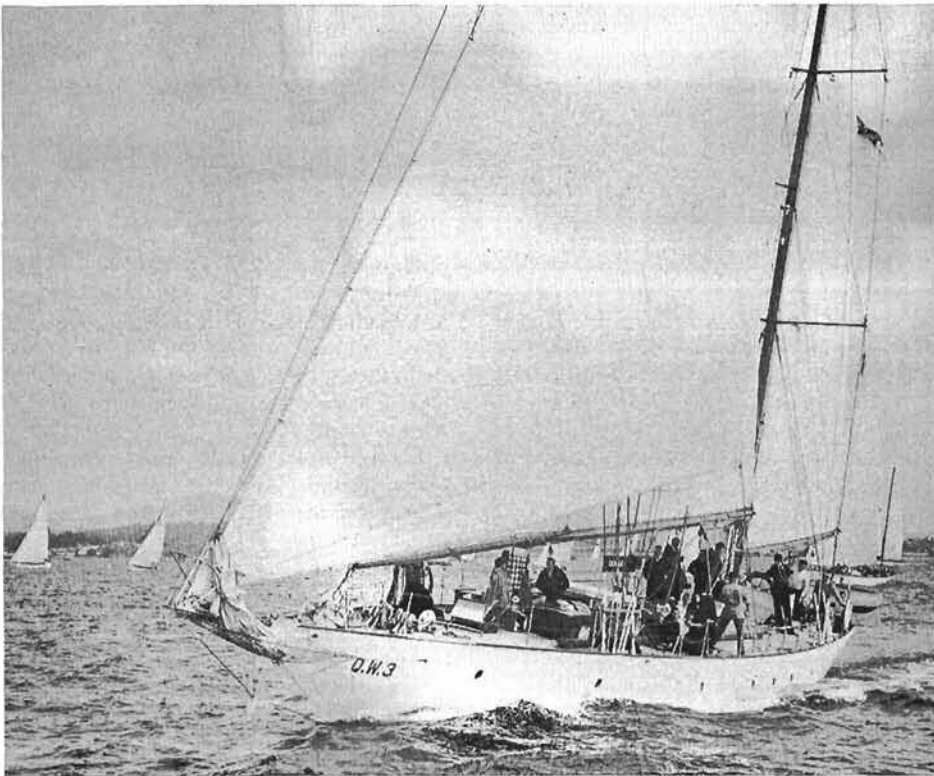
an hour beforehand and exchanged courtesies with the ships alongside. On board the *Skeena*, a gigantic placard was displayed saying, "WE HOPE YOU WIN". We hoped so too.

The *Oriole* set her working sail off Brochie Ledge, which marked the landward end of the starting line. A light westerly at right angles to the starting line filled her canvas and gave her five knots with which to manoeuvre. Thousands of townspeople watched the spectacle from Beacon Hill Park as the yachts tacked and tacked again behind the line awaiting the start of the race. The ten-minute gun was fired from the committee boat, the tug CNAV *Clifton*, which marked the seaward end of the starting line. The yachts in unison came about onto the port tack and paraded down the starting line. They continued on, intending to return on the starboard tack in a nicely-timed manoeuvre which would carry them back over the line with the starting gun. This dense pack of boats was no place for the *Oriole's* 90-foot bulk, so she lay well behind the line, sailing easily. At a carefully calculated moment she came about and made for the line, close hauled on the starb'd tack. The freshening breeze bore her along at six knots. Now the tight group of yachts were returning on their timed manoeuvre, all heeled over, each vying with the other for a favourable position on the line.

The *Oriole's* wake boiled behind her as the seconds were counted off. With 20 yards to go the *Oriole* was out in front—it looked as if she was too soon.

There was no possibility of delaying now, as the yachts were funnelling in on all sides. The *Oriole* held on, and sliced over the centre of the line as the starting gun went off. The tension was eased but there was hardly time to express relief as the course was immediately set, and sails trimmed for the first time. The 136-mile Swiftsure Race was on.

Diamond Head and *Maruffa* cut over the line together a few seconds later—they were followed by *Cotton Blossom* and a multitude of smaller boats. *Oriole* held the distance between herself and the boats astern and then, to everyone's immense satisfaction, almost amazement, she began to draw ahead of all those magnificent greyhounds astern of her. Was she really the oldest ship in the Navy? This was her one brief moment of glory in the long race. With her lee rail almost under and her bow cutting away the wake at a spanking eight knots, and with her counter showing to 37 other yachts, the prospects looked very bright indeed. Her crew was in lively spirits. The events that soon transpired however, changed the situation into a very unfavourable one for the RCN contender.



The *Oriole*, skippered by Lt.Cdr. C. A. Prosser and with her crew augmented by Venture cadets, is first across the starting line in the 1959 Swiftsure race. All 39 starters were over the line in 50 seconds. (Photo by James A. McVie, FPSA.)

Heeling over in the 15-knot westerly, the *Oriole* was being sailed harder than she liked. The large Yankee jib was providing the main driving force, enabling her to hug the wind, but the nylon sheet on this sail was stretching. The *Oriole* had to be luffed repeatedly to enable it to be taken in, and each time she did so the large boats astern gained on her. The *Diamond Head* and *Maruffa*, fighting a duel between themselves, clawed their way to windward, closed to the straits. Their mainsails luffed untidily but, on board the *Oriole*, it was their large Yankee jib which drew them powerfully to the windward.

The wind continued to freshen until it became too heavy for the light Yankee jib, and it had to be struck. The *Diamond Head* and *Maruffa* followed suit. The *Oriole* now sailed under jib topsail, working Genoa, staysail (jumbo), mainsail and mizzen sail.

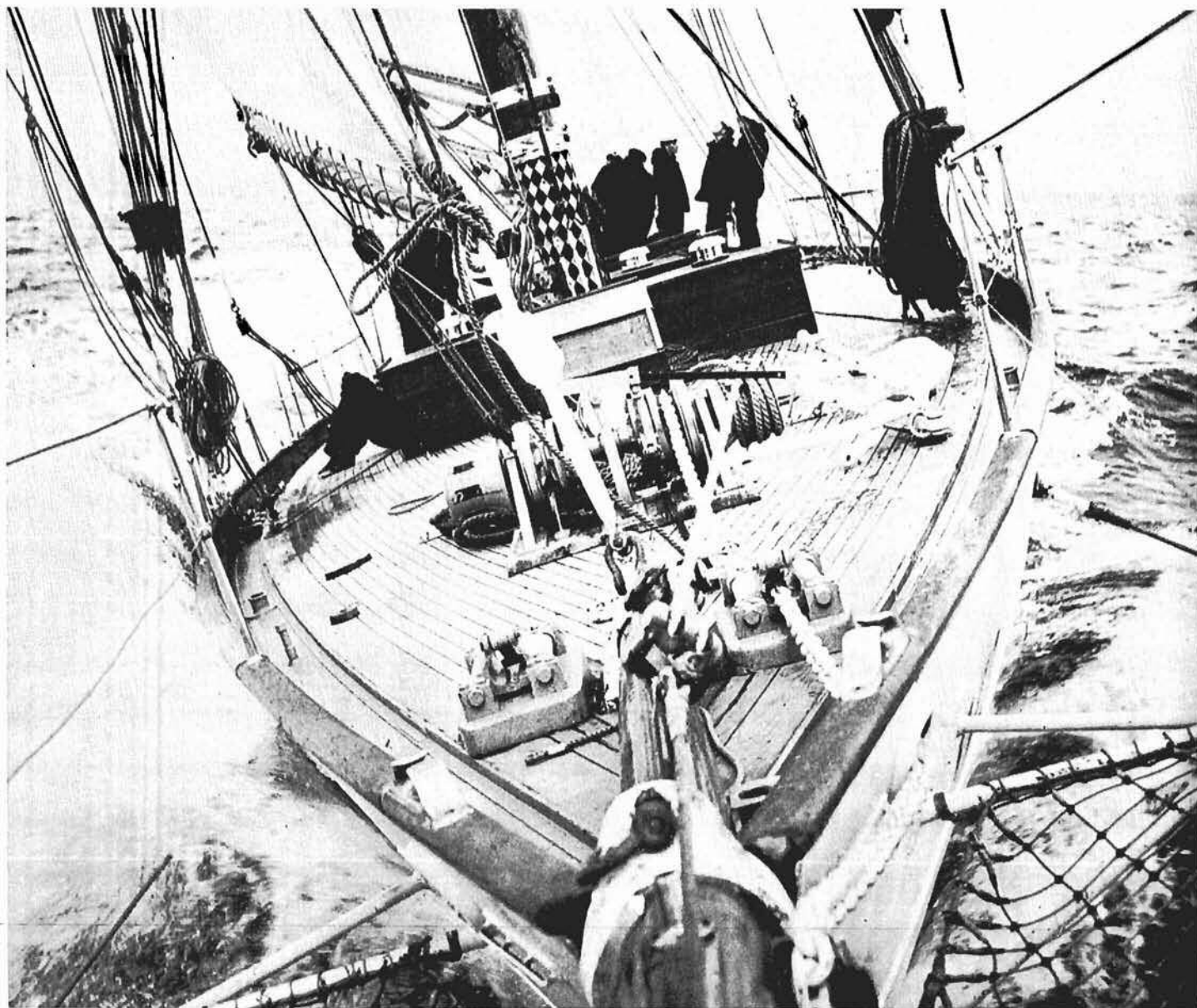
At 1145 the watch on deck was startled by a loud "BANG" from aloft. The topsail had burst and was streaming in tatters. A second topsail was hastily brought up to replace it. The other large yachts seemed to be sailing closer to the wind than the *Oriole*, so in an effort to pinch her even more the Yankee jib was sent aloft once more. Five minutes later an ominous split appeared at the leach, and it was quickly struck. The working Genoa was set again in its place.

By 2 o'clock the westerly, coming straight off the Pacific, was putting the *Oriole's* lee rail under and forced her to reduce sail again. She followed close along the American shore, picking up the ebb tide.

At 1700 another minor accident beset the *Oriole*. The watch on deck was heaving in on the nylon sheet of the Genoa when a ring bolt parted under the strain of the lead snatchblock. The watch was sent sprawling over the deck and the snatchblock lashed viciously amongst them. The *Oriole* was luffed hastily as the sheet was brought under control, and her rivals gained a few more yards to the windward.

The sheet was hardly secured before the wind burst the jib and tore it right out of her. The *Oriole* was immediately reduced to six knots. There was no replacement, and frantic efforts were made on the sail with needle and palm as her opponents drew further ahead.

At 2300 the repaired sail was hoisted, and the *Oriole* picked up again. However, the breeze slackened before she could reach the light vessel at 0100 on Saturday May 30, she was becalmed. She remained so during the night, lying 15 miles east of the light vessel.



HMCS Oriole was logging a good ten knots when James A. McVie, well-known Victoria marine photographer, clambered out on the bowsprit to take this picture during the yacht's 1959 Swiftsure "shakedown".

SATURDAY, May 30, 1959

Morning heralded a dull day with not a breath of wind. All around yachts were seen drifting on a glassy sea, their sagging sails held hopefully aloft. A few smaller boats ghosted by on their way home, having made it around the lightship before the wind had died. The *Oriole's* sails slapped back and forth in the gentle rolling swell.

At 1230 a Westerly breeze sprang up, wafting the *Oriole* along at two knots. (This was "trolling speed" to the coxswain who set his line and caught a very fine Cohoe.) She sailed over to the Canadian shore and tacked back again to round the Swiftsure Light vessel. Shortly after 1700 the *Oriole* rounded the light ship and her crew exchanged

pleasantries with the Coast Guardsmen on board.

Her spinnaker was hoisted in stops, released, and allowed to billow ahead. This gigantic canopy, 6,216 square feet of nylon, drew her along at four knots in a barely perceptible breeze. The mizzen staysail and mainsail were added to lend what additional assistance they could, and her speed increased to six knots as the breeze picked up.

Later in the evening the crew heard that the first yachts, carrying this breeze all the way, had crossed the line. The *Cotton Blossom*, a class AA boat of 49-foot length, won the Victoria Trophy for the first yacht over the line and the *Rebel*, a class BB yacht won on corrected time. However, the *Oriole's* crew, having entered the race, was in

favour of completing what it had started.

SUNDAY, May 31, 1959

The wind slackened during the middle watch; it veered to light northerly and fog descended at 0500. HMCS *New Glasgow*, the race guardship, felt her way by shortly thereafter, checking on her charges. The light breeze held until 0730 when the *Oriole* found herself becalmed three miles off Sooke Bay and 22 miles from the finish of the race. Fortunately the tide was flooding, which at least kept her heading in the right direction, although it was soon found that she was drifting inshore.

The navigational aids available in the sailing ship suddenly seemed very few,

and a certain amount of imagination was required in determining her position. The navigating officer had several sources of information to choose from—some of them perhaps not too traditional. The direction of Sherringham Point foghorn was roughly determined and a DF bearing taken of Race Rocks with a home-made DF set, which was lined up with the planks of the *Oriole's* deck. A rough bearing was taken of the sound of shotgun blasts coming from the Victoria Skeet Club, which had chosen that time on Sunday morning to have a competition at its range on Sooke Spit. The inn-keeper's dog at the Sooke Harbour House added corroborating information. All this information was carefully plotted on the chart and, yes, a sounding taken which produced, if not a 'fix', at least an "area of probability". The *Oriole's* crew was watching these proceedings with some amusement and dubbed this "the Barking Dog Fix". Fortunately for the Commanding Officer's state of nerves, the *New Glasgow* approached warily once more and confirmed the *Oriole's* position by radar. She was one mile off shore.

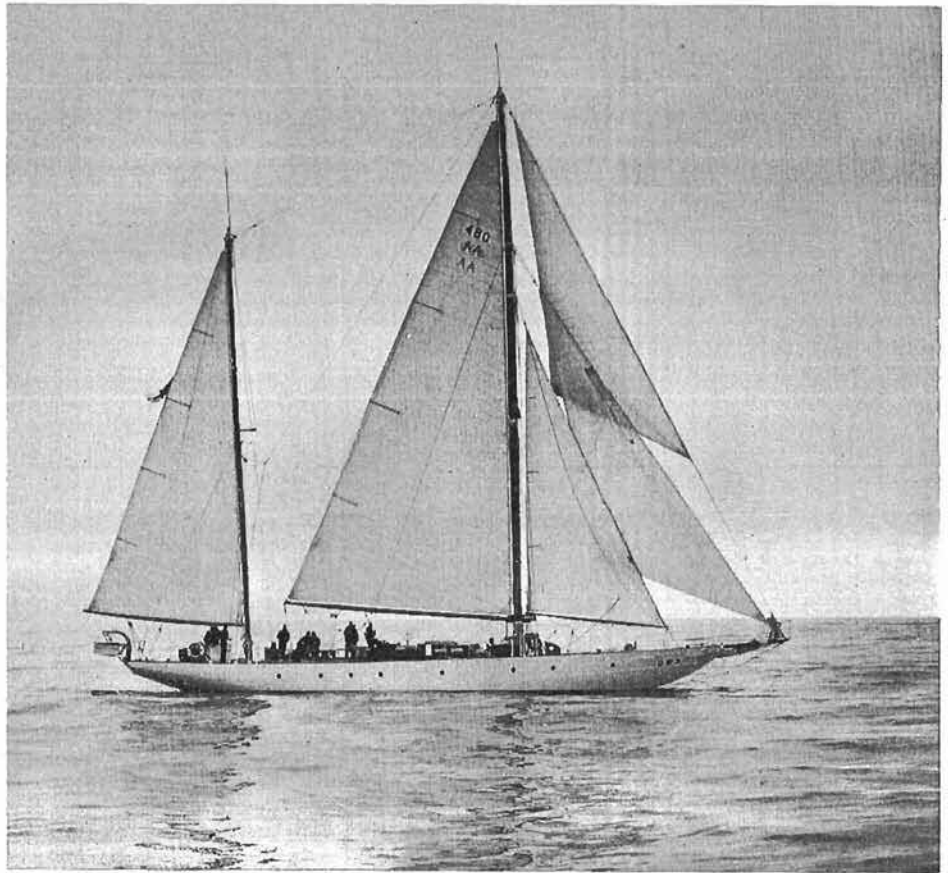
The *Oriole* remained becalmed for six hours, until at last a strong southeasterly breeze overtook her. The fog had by this time lifted and the *Oriole* could see Race Rocks light quite clearly which was the last point to round before heading on the last leg to Victoria Harbour and the Finnish Line.

At 1315 the *Oriole* set off under mainsail, mizzen sail and Yankee jib at 6½ knots in the 15-knot breeze. The wind direction was disappointing, as having beaten out of the straits against a westerly, the *Oriole* had now to beat her way home in an easterly.

She sailed for the short-cut through Race Passage but again ill fortune attended her. The wind slackened as she nosed back into the passage and the ebb tide threatened to send her back. Discretion was favoured so she was headed south back into the straits again, at 1600. An hour later she tacked clear of Race Rocks with nine miles to go, her speed now down to four knots.

The wind abated, and at 1800 she was making two knots under Yankee jib, mainsail, mizzen sail and mizzen staysail. The mizzen staysail was the *Oriole's* second largest sail and was made of light nylon. It enveloped a good portion of the mainsail and was ideal for this light air which could barely fill the sails.

The crew could now clearly see the Finish Line and short of that, a wind



The thrill of showing her heels to the rest of the yachting fleet faded with the wind as the *Oriole* found herself becalmed off Cape Flattery. (Photo by James A. McVie, FPSA.)

line where the breeze lifted off the water leaving a glassy surface beyond. The *Oriole* eased into this area and as anticipated the sheets slackened and she came to rest once again. The prospect of spending the night drifting aimlessly four and a half miles short of the finish was not relished. Another yacht could be seen off the harbour mouth, also becalmed.

The *Oriole* was not expecting any favours from the elements. However, her only break in the race arrived an hour later in the form of the merest breath from the northwest. It stirred the sails enough to give the *Oriole* crawling speed.

At this point the Flag Officer Pacific Coast came out in his barge and hailed the *Oriole*, offering much needed encouragement.

The *Oriole* continued her painfully slow progress on the last four miles, the crew not knowing at what point the wind might die and leave her stranded. The yacht ahead, the *Blue Wave*, gave up the struggle and motored away. Time dragged on—1900, 2000, 2100, 2200. At 2205 she crept past the breakwater—two cables to go. The wind inside was even lighter. The harbour was dark and quiet and for the *Oriole's* crew somewhat cheerless. The Race Com-

mittee at the Finish Line had long since ceased their watch. Then quite unexpectedly on the end of a breakwater a beacon fire was lit and a loud cheer rang out—"WELCOME HOME *ORIOLE!*" It was the *Oriole's* dependents, bless their hearts.

Twenty anxious minutes later she inched her way over the Finish Line and the race for her was over. A gun was discharged on deck to mark the occasion and the sails were dropped. The commanding officer of *Venture* was on hand to flash a welcoming message from shore.

Back in Esquimalt, the *Oriole* was secured to her berth at the *Venture* floats. The crew gathered on deck for a lively résumé of the race and one heard quite often—"If only . . .", and then "Next year . . .".

A messenger arrived with the following message from the Flag Officer Pacific Coast:

"WE ARE PROUD THAT ONCE AGAIN YOU HAVE FINISHED THE COURSE IN THE FACE OF DISAPPOINTING CONDITIONS. WE WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOUR SORTIE FROM ESQUIMALT AND ENTRY TO VICTORIA THURSDAY NIGHT. WELL DONE ALL."

—K.