

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2189

Cottee, Kay

(1954 -)

Born 25 January, 1954

Occupation Yachtswoman

Summary

In June 1988, Kay Cottee became the first woman to sail solo, unassisted and nonstop around the world. In the course of her voyage she set seven world records. Cottee was named the 1988 Australian of the Year and was awarded the Order of Australia.

Details

The daughter of Jim and Joy McLaren, Kay Cottee was born into a yachting family and was taken sailing for the first time when just a few weeks old. With her parents and three sisters Linda, Elaine and Jan, Kay would race in Sydney Harbour on board her father's self-built yacht, the *Joy Too*. It was here, on the water, that she felt most at peace. Kay disliked school and remembers, 'I spent a lot of time gazing out to sea from my classroom window, or sitting on the Heads at Botany Bay, dreaming I was setting off across the ocean'. She left school half way through fifth form and, like her three sisters, went to secretarial college. At seventeen she was engaged to her father's best friend's son, Neville, who was nine years her senior. They married after her eighteenth birthday.

Kay lived with Neville in Bondi next door to his parents' home where they both worked for his father's plumbing business in the backyard. Finding the job lonely, she relished the opportunity to talk to the plumbers at morning tea and lunch, but was soon told that this was not proper behaviour. The couple did share a love of sailing, and after their second wedding anniversary bought an old gaff rigger and spent a year fitting up the interior. They sold it to buy a '22-footer' and set off on a cruise. The joy was short-lived as Kay suffered from appendicitis 24 hours into the trip and had to return to land. Back at sea, the voyage had not long recommenced before the pair hit bad weather. The rudder snapped and they were 'blown helplessly before the storm' for three days, attracting a great deal of media attention in their plight.

With sailing plans temporarily on hold, Kay worked for her sister's ferry business before she and Neville bought the mould of a 'Roberts 35' – a 10.6m yacht – and named it *Whimaway*. This time Kay worked solely on the boat for 13 months. She writes, 'I guess not many females were boat builders then, but the publicity was good and got our bareboat charter business going'. The business was based in Pittwater and Kay was happy there, but having 'realized there was a whole new world out there beyond listening to plumbing complaints and co-existing with the in-laws', she moved aboard *Whimaway*, living in her car or at her sister's house when the boat was on charter. Neville moved in with his parents and returned to plumbing.

At 27 years of age, Kay took on the charter business at Pittwater assisted first by Jeanine Thompson and then by Shirley King, who became her close friend. She was forced to sell her beloved *Whimaway* to settle debts, but was able to manage it for the new owner as part of her business, which she ran for six years. All the while Kay was burning to build and own a yacht, one that she could keep, and 'my eyes were set on what seemed an impossible goal – to be the first woman to sail around the world, single handed and non-stop'.

So it was that she set about building the 11.2m Cavalier 37 Sloop originally christened the *Jimmy Mac* in honour of her father. She obtained sponsorship from Blackmores Laboratories Ltd to compete in the Two-Handed Trans-Tasman race to New Zealand and the Solo Trans-Tasman race back to Australia in 1986, sailing the first race with her friend Linda Wayman. Product sponsorship for the race meant that the yacht had to be re-named *Cinnamon Scrub*. The Two-Handed race began on 8 March 1986, and Kay and Linda won their division. Kay made her return to Mooloolaba, Queensland, in 10 days and 17 hours, arriving on 5 April.

By now, Kay's taste for solo sailing was highly developed, and she set about finding sponsors for her round-the-world trip. After several disastrous attempts to impress corporate executives, she found sponsorship with Blackmores again on the

understanding that the trip would be used as a fundraising event. Kay's chosen charity was the late Reverend Ted Noff's Life Education Program – a drug education program for young people. For this monumental voyage, her yacht was re-named again as *Blackmores First Lady*.

After enormous preparation and great cooperation from family and friends, Kay Cottee set off on her voyage on 29 November 1987. The Guinness Book of Records for 1989 notes that she completed:

A singlehand nonstop circumnavigation eastabout from/to Sydney, Australia, via St Paul's Rocks in the North Atlantic and south of the five southernmost capes, west to east, commencing November 29, 1987, and finishing June 5, 1988. Total sailing time 189 days 0 hours 32 minutes, logging 22,100 miles at an average speed of 116.93 miles per day. The voyage was completed without touching land, and without any form of outside aid apart from radio contact.

The five southernmost capes referred to are Good Hope, Leeuwin, South-East Cape (Tasmania), South-West Cape (Stewart Island, NZ), and the Horn.

During the voyage, Kay's yacht overturned off the coast of southern Africa in 100-knot winds and 70-foot seas. She was washed overboard and saved only by the two safety lines that harnessed her to the boat. Having just missed collision with a tanker, she recalls in her book *First Lady*:

My life flashed before my eyes for the second time in an hour as I was washed just over the top of the leeward safety railing before my harness lines pulled me up short. I held my breath under the water until my lungs felt they would burst, willing my lovely *Lady* to right herself and praying that the two harness lines did not give way. She took her time, but true to form gracefully rose once again, this time with me dangling over the side.

Kay returned to Sydney Harbour to great fanfare on the morning of June 5, 1988. Cheered by 100,000 people at Darling Harbour, Rear-Admiral Tony Horton took her hand as she made her first step ashore and she was officially welcomed by Hazel Hawke (Prime Minister's wife), Nick Greiner (NSW Premier) and Sir Eric Neil (Commissioner to the City of Sydney). She was given the Key to the City of Sydney. Asked by a female journalist, 'How does it feel to have conquered a man's world?', she answered, 'I was brought up believing there is no such thing as a man's world or a woman's world. It's everyone's world!'

Kay was bombarded with 'civic receptions, balls, more press conferences and interviews that one could count, dinners, lunches, seminars and parties. We met visiting heads of state, government ministers, senators, admirals, royalty and thousands and thousands of lovely people'. A 'Welcome Home to Pittwater' day organized by the committee of the Royal Prince Alfred Yacht Club attracted over 500 boats. 2000 guests attended the auction and party held at the clubhouse and raised over \$35,000 for the Life Education Program. In subsequent years, Kay was able to raise over \$1 million for the program.

Kay Cottee's numerous records include: the first woman to complete a singlehanded nonstop circumnavigation; the first woman to circumnavigate nonstop west to east, south of the five southernmost capes; the fastest time for a solo circumnavigation by a woman; the fastest speed (average speed 4.87 miles per hour during her round-the-world voyage) for a solo circumnavigation by a woman; the longest period alone at sea by a woman; and the greatest nonstop distance covered by a solo woman.

Among her many accolades are the 1988 Australian of the Year; the Order of Australia; the Advance Australia Award; indictment into the Hall of Champions by the NSW Government; the Bicentennial Award for Excellence in Women's Sport; New South Wales Sportswoman of the Year; and the Confederation of Australian Sport Special Award for Outstanding Personal Achievement in 1988.

Today Kay Cottee is married to television producer Peter Sutton and has a son, Lee. She has launched a business building luxury yachts. Kay is chairman of the National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour where *First Lady* is now housed.

Events

2001 - 2001

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

Published resources

Book

First lady: a history-making solo voyage around the world, Cottee, Kay, 1989

All at sea on land: and first lady ten years on, Cottee, Kay, 1998

Videorecording

Kay Cottee: first lady, Cottee, Kay, 1989

Sound recording

Museum gives Cottee pride of place over American Cup winner, O'Brien, Kerry, 2000,
<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/>

Site Exhibition

She's Game: Women Making Australian Sporting History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2007,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/sg/sport-home.html>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Kay Cottee address at the National Press Club on 20 June 1989 \[sound recording\]](#)

[Interview with Kay Cottee, adventurer and author \[sound recording\] / interviewer: Diana Giese](#)

National Library of Australia

[\[Biographical cuttings on Kay Cottee, yachtswoman, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals\]](#)

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Papers of Kay Cottee, 1965-2009 \[manuscript\]](#)

Author Details

Barbara Lemon

Created 13 November 2006

Last modified 20 November 2018