

# Ships wait for nightfall to elude flotilla

by Henk Haazen,  
the skipper of the protest yacht *Tiama*

**T**wo ships loaded with plutonium deliberately waited until nightfall to pass through a small flotilla which sailed to the mid-Tasman Sea to protest against their passage.

The flotilla skippers decided at a mid-ocean meeting on July 18 not to hinder the ships' passage in any form, "and to just be a presence on the water to bear witness to the passage of the ships through the region.

"By 0900 hours (on July 21) we were starting to think that maybe the plutonium ships had slipped into the Economic Exclusive Zone of Australia, or had come past us already."

By late afternoon it was clear the ships had slowed right down, almost going in circles to wait for darkness before they came close to the flotilla of 10 small yachts, which were spread eight miles apart from each other across an 80 mile line.

The flotilla decided to maintain their positions and keep their eyes wide open during the night. We agreed to keep a good radar watch, and in doing so became a radar screen 80 miles wide. We settled in for the night, again expecting them to come through at the darkest and most sleepy hour.

True to form, these guys showed up at 0100 hours on July 22, when a crew member on the aft deck of one of the yachts saw two lights appear on the horizon. It was a bit of a surprise because nobody had seen them on radar yet.

Their plan of sneaking through our line in the dark did not work very well, as it was a nice, clear night with lots of stars and a 3/4 moon illuminating the scene. One yacht got to within 1.5 miles of the ships as they increased speed from nine knots to 13 knots when they knew they had been sighted.

We called them up on the radio, stating again that we did not intend to interfere with their passage, but that we were here to bear witness to the passing of these plutonium shipments and that we wanted them stopped. In typical fashion they refused to acknowledge any of our calls.

A big inflatable launched from one of the yachts was the only vessel able to keep up with the ships. During the night the weather changed for the worse, with heavy rain squalls and 15 to 20 knot sou'westerlies.

This meant a head wind for the small boat, and it was not a pleasant ride on the fast inflatable. It became more a matter of hanging on tight and staying with it, which they did.

At first light the crew on the inflatable were able to photograph the ships, which is of course exactly the thing that they had been trying to avoid by coming through at night. In the end the two plutonium ships changed course so that they were 13 miles apart. In that way we could not take a picture of both ships together.

At about 0800, two volunteers from the flotilla jumped in the water on the port side of one of the ships (in this way making sure not to get in their way) and held up a banner with the nuclear-free seas logo and the slogan Nuclear Free Pacific on it. So in the end we did get some good pictures that were used worldwide.

After the protest, three boats sailed to New Caledonia, three to Australia, one to New Zealand and one to Vanuatu.



Here on *Tiama*, we're heading for Norfolk Island, and then on to Fiji to be a flotilla presence at the Pacific Island Forum in Suva between August 13 and 16. All the heads of government in the region will come together, and we will try to help make the plutonium shipments a topic of conversation during their meeting. 