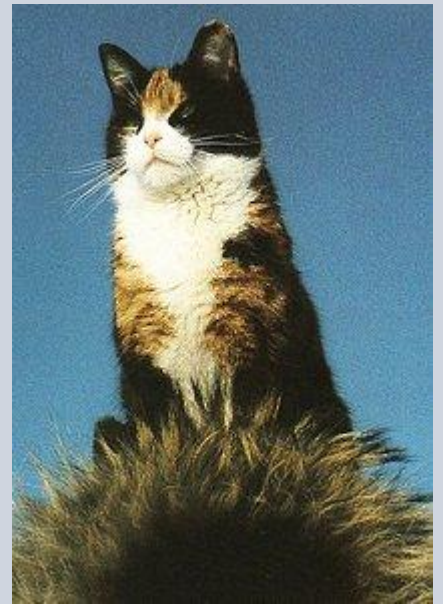


Featured Felines: Cats' Adventures & Travels 10

(page checked May 2026)

Halifax of the North

Arctic adventurer
(2008)



Alvah Simon is an American-born explorer and adventurer who has undertaken various odysseys in different parts of the world, accompanied on some of them by New Zealander Diana White, who subsequently became his wife. But there was an adventure he had a burning ambition to accomplish, which was to spend a winter on a boat embedded in the ice in the Arctic, above the Arctic Circle and as far from civilisation as possible.

Eventually he persuaded Diana to accompany him. They spent two years on finding a suitable boat, the 36-foot (about 12 metres) steel-hulled cutter *Roger Henry*, then meticulously planning every detail and acquiring everything they thought they would need, plus reserves. They finally set off sailing northwards from Maine in June 1994. Stopping in Halifax, Nova Scotia for supplies, they came across two kittens in the local market. One seemed placid and lovable, while the other was a wild little minx of a creature who hissed and scratched. They felt this latter one would be a fellow survivor, and so took her on as companion, bed warmer and possible polar-bear detector, naming her **Halifax**.

Kitten escapades

Although later the kitten became absolutely invaluable, to Alvah in particular, Halifax's first actions on board were to tear up their charts with her claws, and pee in their bunks. Several times she led them merry dances when they made landfall and she would run off, with them in pursuit.

On one occasion she missed her jump to the shore and fell into icy water, from which she was fished out shivering with cold and shock. But gradually she settled down. As a bear detector she wasn't much use, though — the first time a polar bear approached the boat she slept through the whole episode!



The *Roger Henry* was over-wintering in Tay Bay, Bylot Island (off Baffin Island). On 6 October, Diana's birthday, they received a radio message relayed from her father in New Zealand, saying that he had terminal cancer and only about three months to live. An agonising decision had to be made. They finally agreed Diana must get home to be with him: but Alvah remained doggedly determined and after much heart-searching decided to continue with his plan. Apart from occasional radio contact with the outside world, he would have only Halifax for company, and he promoted her to First Mate. He had a last chance to change his mind about staying when Canadian coastguards arrived in a helicopter with extra supplies and tried to persuade him to leave with them, but he was adamant.

Life with Halifax

During the next few months, especially after 3 November when it became dark for 24 hours a day until early February when the sun rose again, there were all kinds of difficulties, adventures and problems, many of them potentially life-threatening. At times Alvah found himself becoming delirious, so he told the cat he would be talking to her constantly. He ran short of fuel, having used more than anticipated in reaching where they were; sometimes they spent days in the dark to save what fuel they had.

The cabin became icy, even inside. Halifax snuggled deep inside his sleeping bag until she heard her milk being thawed, when she would emerge, but after a while she became alarmingly thin, as she wouldn't eat the smoked meats he had thought they could share. Alvah found a new, improvised way to bake bread; when it was soaked in butter and tuna oil this was something the cat enjoyed, and she began to regain the lost weight. They had special feasts at Thanksgiving, and on Christmas and New Year's days. On one occasion Alvah went temporarily blind, from reading too much in very low light; on another he woke one day to find his legs totally frozen and encased in ice (*inside* the sleeping bag).

On a more positive side Halifax loved to accompany him for treks out on the ice, clambering on his shoulder or into his parka for a while when she became tired or her paws got too cold. But one day she stopped following him as she usually did and sat whining in the snow — at 45 degrees below zero. He went on for a while, feeling annoyed with her, until he came to his senses and realised that if he left her much longer she would certainly freeze to death. In his haste to pick her up and warm her in his coat he heard a crack — her frozen right ear had snapped in half. The icy wind had freeze-dried her ears. Recovery took time and was very painful, but eventually the ear healed, although with a permanent droop. Alvah was full of remorse, cursing himself for being so stupid and subjecting his companion to the ordeal.



Diana's return

In spite of everything, the pair survived through the long, dark winter. Alvah acknowledged that Halifax's presence had quite probably saved his life by keeping him sane; without her he might well not have lasted out.

One day in March two Inuit arrived on a snowmobile, bringing fresh meat — and a letter from Diana saying that her father had died and she would be returning. After a journey of several weeks she arrived in mid-March; Halifax was first to hear the snowmobile, while it was still a long way off. Diana brought a huge can of diesel — and 35 lb (about 15 kg) of cat

food! Perhaps that was why, as they became a family of three again, the cat transferred her affections and preferred Diana's sleeping bag.

As the ice gradually melted, Halifax became more and more confident about going outside the boat. She saw off an Arctic fox by fluffing herself up, emitting an unearthly scream and chasing it away; she came back looking very pleased with herself and purring loudly. The boat was finally released from the grip of the ice that had held it captive — but this meant that to relieve herself the cat could no longer just jump out onto the ice: she had to be taken to the beach in the dinghy. She got used to jumping into the dinghy and meowing loudly when she wanted to go; but if no one came she would jump on passing ice floes and go drifting off. Her humans would have to go looking for her, and when they arrived she would jump imperiously into the dinghy, for all the world as though she'd just ordered a taxi!

Homeward bound



Finally, in August 1995, they decided it was time to leave, and turned *Roger Henry* southwards. Although not everything had gone according to plan, Alvah had achieved his goal, and both he and Diana had succeeded in experiencing the peace, the silence, the wildlife and the mystery of the high Arctic. On 20 October they anchored at the same dock in Maine from which they had set out nearly 17 months earlier.

Alvah has written a fascinating book about his Arctic experience (see below), although in it he doesn't mention what became of Halifax afterwards. However, from his [internet blog](#) (Oct. 2008) I learned that in November 2007, the last time he mentions her, she was still on board with him and Diana and they were then in Vanuatu, in the Pacific — a rather warmer clime. The boat *Roger Henry* remained home to the three of them, and they were still travelling.



Farewell, Halifax

It was very sad to report that Halifax passed away, after an unspecified illness, during June 2009. Alvah Simon, her 'captain', has written a moving tribute to her, from which a few excerpts are reproduced.

... Our beloved friend, crew member, and fellow adventurer, Halifax of The North, is dead. I have been writing for many years, but that last sentence was the hardest I have ever written, and our boat and our lives will ring hollow for a long time to come.

Of his time alone with her in the Arctic, he writes:

... she was a friend when I needed one like no other time in my life. Darkness and isolation are a formula for human disaster, and I shudder at the thought of the outcome had I been truly alone ...

I promised her that if we made it through that adventure I would take care of her for the rest of her natural life. I did not promise her it would be an easy life. In the years that followed she amassed more sea miles than the average admiral. She sailed from the chill winds of the Arctic to the balmy breezes of the South Pacific. She had her narrow escapes. There was that 12-foot crocodile in Panama, and the time she fell overboard at night.

And of her life on board the Roger Henry, he says:

Sailing boats are small. The incessant proximity can test even the strongest of relationships. When Diana and I retreated to opposite corners of the boat in pouting silence after a perceived slight, Halifax would visit both camps, acting as a referee and bringing us both some comfort. ...

She knew the rhythm of my rowing and the particular sound of our outboard. For 15 years, no matter the darkness, wind or rain, every time Diana and I returned to the *Roger Henry*, Halifax would be perched on the toe-rail, waiting. She would give one howl of protest at our long absence and then relent into a homecoming purr.

Readers might like to take a few minutes to read the whole tribute at Alvah's [Cruising World blog](#) (June 2009): note that there are three pages.

The book

Alvah Simon's book is *North to the Night*, published by International Marine (a division of McGraw Hill) in 1999, ISBN 0-07-058052-9. It is not, of course, a book about the cat Halifax; I have picked out parts relating to her. It is an extraordinary chronicle of his experiences, but much more than that: he describes the Arctic, its wonders, its beauty, its unforgiving nature, its wildlife and its indigenous inhabitants, among whom he had various contacts. Few non-indigenous people can ever have experienced this amazing region at the top of the world in the way Alvah did, and I should think even fewer have written about it so graphically and so lovingly.

The last sentences in Alvah's acknowledgements at the end of his book read:

And finally, inexpressible thanks to Halifax the cat. It is entirely possible that I owe her my life, and that's always worth an extra can of tuna.

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Featuring Felines: Cats' Adventures & Travels 11

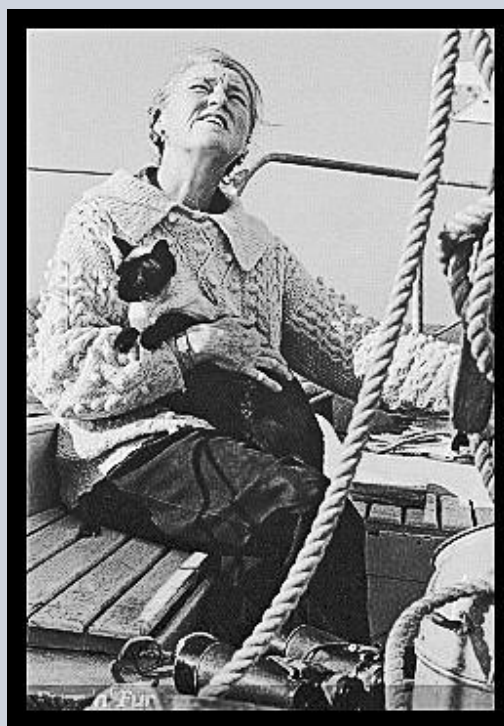
(page checked May 2026)

Pwe's High-Sea Adventures (2009)



In 1956 Miles Smeeton and his wife Beryl were in Melbourne, Australia, for the summer Olympics of that year, having left Canada in September the previous year and sailed via Hawaii. They were on their 46-foot (about 14 metres) ketch *Tzu Hang*, crafted from teak and made in Hong Kong in 1938. On board also was ship's cat **Pwe**, a blue-eyed Siamese female; her name derives from the Burmese for 'dance'. Pwe had been taken on to succeed two earlier Siamese, Winnie and Cully, that had died. She was not supposed to go ashore, owing to quarantine regulations, but loved to sneak onto the quay when no one was looking and try to catch sparrows. Melbourne sparrows were too quick for her, however.

There had been a ship's dog, too, but she'd been flown back to Britain with the Smeetons' daughter Clio. The Smeetons themselves planned to sail *Tzu Hang* back to Britain, halfway round the world, but taking the unusual and — for a small sailing vessel — dangerous route around Cape Horn. They set off on Boxing Day, 26 December 1956, in the company of a friend and fellow sailor, John Guzzwell



A cat's life aboard

Pwe was quite used to the ocean life; she was at home on the sea, never became seasick, and seemed to consider that she was mistress of the boat and in charge of its humans. There was plenty of cat food on board, and as a special treat she loved bacon rind — as long as it was fried! She had a large, blue plastic bowl (to match the colour of her eyes) filled with sand as a litter-box; it was emptied overboard daily and if Beryl forgot to do the task, the cat would complain bitterly. Pwe disliked being left below on her own, but as long as the weather was not too cold, too wet or too windy (she was quite particular!), she would join the crew on deck by jumping up from the chartroom table. When the engine was running, or had been recently, its wooden access cover was a favourite resting spot, as it became comfortably warm. She would chatter in frustration at the albatrosses that settled on the surface of the southern oceans, but of course couldn't reach them. She didn't seem to like porpoises much.

Disaster

Pwe's world nearly came to an end one night when an enormous freak wave engulfed the boat during a storm, 'pitchpoling' it (turning it through a somersault end over end), half-filling it with water and smashing most of the masts and rigging. The interior fittings were significantly damaged and many of the stores rendered unusable. Beryl, who had been at the wheel when the wave struck, was swept overboard, but she had been attached by a line and was soon rescued, although she had a painful shoulder injury.

The situation was dire, but as the weather cleared the water was bailed out, everything possible was salvaged, and emergency repairs made. It was fortunate that John was a skilled and resourceful carpenter. Eventually the boat was jury-rigged and able to proceed again slowly — but continuing the planned voyage was obviously impossible and they headed for Chile, where proper repairs might be effected. That was almost 1500 miles (2400 km) away and it took 37 days to reach.



Pwe's distress

Pwe was bedraggled and complaining; even after most of the water had been bailed out she was listless and miserable, refusing to eat. All her warmth, comfort and security had vanished, and the crew feared that she was going to give up. Gradually she rallied, though, and dried out; one day she even wanted to play, so they knew she was on the mend. When she finally ventured up on deck she seemed horrified by the changes to the boat and made her opinions known vociferously. By the time they were approaching Chile, some three months later, she was much better, putting on weight and thriving on a diet of freshly caught fish.

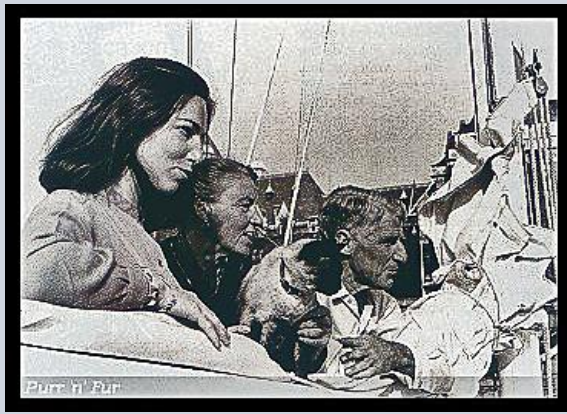
A spell on land

The blue-eyed cat fascinated employees at the dockyard where *Tzu Hang* was to be repaired. Pwe had to be moved off the boat during the repairs, along with the crew, first to a house close to the dockyard, and then to a bigger one near the town of Concepcion. The second house had a large resident ginger tomcat, who ferociously defended his guest against all comers, no doubt hoping for her favours — but not understanding that she was spayed! The maids of the house were enchanted by the cat *con los ojos azules*.

It took many months of delays and frustrations before *Tzu Hang* was fit to go to sea again and resume the voyage. It was thought the cat wouldn't want to leave her comfortable house — indeed, she screamed all the way when picked up in her basket, yelling even more loudly in the launch on the way out to the yacht. But as soon as she was back on board her home, Pwe sat and purred and purred.

History repeats itself

Almost unbelievably, a second disaster struck, quite similar to the first, causing the boat to somersault again. Damage was slightly less severe than the first time — just as well, as John the carpenter had left to return to Australia — but they were left disabled, engineless, and with no means of accurately finding their position. This time Pwe, although wet and cross, didn't seem to be in shock; indeed, she seemed comparatively happy on the boat as long as she was given plenty of love and attention. But to continue with the voyage as planned was clearly out of the question, and the Smeetons had no choice but to limp slowly back to land once again — and again it was a 1500-mile journey. This time they reached Valparaiso, from where *Tzu Hang* was ultimately freighted back to Britain.



Further voyages

That was far from the end of Pwe's seafaring adventures. Over the coming years she accompanied the Smeetons on numerous other voyages, such that Miles remarked once, 'Pwe must be the saltiest cat on record.' During her lifetime she sailed with them for the astonishing total of some 130,000 miles altogether (208,000 km), circling the globe one and a half times and sharing numerous adventures with them. She survived a three-month overland journey through the African bush; made landfall at a hundred ports around the world; and even survived falling overboard a thousand miles (1600 km) from the nearest land, being rescued by Beryl, who dived in after her. On a 1961 trip they were in the Indian Ocean, where she caught flying fish that landed on deck — 'For Pwe, life in the tropics was one long meal,' remarked Miles. He once told a reporter, 'That cat is like my wife; she wouldn't mind if we never saw land.' Late in 1968 the couple did finally succeed in rounding Cape Horn under sail, from east to west; clearly once had not been enough for them (see book title below). Presumably Pwe accompanied them on that trip, too.

End of story

Details of the unsuccessful attempts on Cape Horn in *Tzu Hang* are recorded in Miles Smeeton's book *Once is Enough* (published by Rupert Hart-Davis, London 1959, no ISBN). Other information has been gleaned from Miles Clark's book *High Endeavours* (Grafton Books, 1991, ISBN 0 246 13563 8), which records the lives and adventures of Miles and Beryl. The last mention of Pwe in the first book is that she became 'stout and placid' in quarantine; probably that was in Canada, as the Smeetons had taken Canadian citizenship and residency. The photograph (*above left*) was taken in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1965 upon their arrival from a voyage to Alaska. Certainly by 1970 the cat was settled with the Smeetons in Alberta, Canada, and still catching mice at the age of about 16. A few years later, in 1975 and while Miles was away from home, Pwe fell painfully ill. The kindest thing was to put her to sleep; with tears streaming down her cheeks, Beryl held her for the last time. So ended the career of a truly remarkable seafaring cat; she'd reached the age of about 20, a long life for a cat at the time.. Her companions Miles and Beryl Smeeton died in 1979 and 1988 respectively.

Note: Part of John Guzzwell's account of the first capsizing of the *Tzu Hang* while he was aboard was published in a 2007 issue of *Good Old Boat* magazine. This was available as a PDF document at Guzzwell's website which seems to be no more, but there's a copy of the PDF at the [Internet Archive](#). It includes a fleeting reference to Pwe: see the second and third text pages (marked as pp 45-46).

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