

Capt. Ardell Lien Makes History as the First Heart/Kidney Transplant Patient to Sail Solo Around the World

By Gordon Lore

It was a remarkable, even epic, achievement. Fewer people have done it than have ascended to the summit of Mt. Everest. The first person known to have circumnavigated the globe alone in a small sailing boat was Joshua Slocum, who made a three-year, two-month voyage from Boston, MA, to Newport, RI, in 1895-1898. In 1966-1967, Sir Francis Chichester accomplished the feat in 266 days. Two years later (1969), Sir Robin Knox Johnson became the first person to sail solo non-stop around the world.

Sailing Into History

Nearly four decades later, Captain Ardell Lien entered the history books. He set sail in his tiny craft on May 5, 2005, from San Diego, CA. During his epic solo voyage, he visited 19 ports, survived hurricanes, gales, tropical storms, and blistering heat. From San Diego, he journeyed to Hawaii, then on to the Marshall and Solomon Islands and Australia. He traversed the Indian Ocean, rounded the storm-tossed Cape of Good Hope off the tip of South Africa, crossed the Atlantic, and sailed through the Panama Canal and back home via the Galapagos Islands and Hawaii.



Map showing Capt. Ardell Lien's solo circumnavigation of the globe.

Whew! Not bad for a 71-year old man from Caledonia, MN, who was once so sick he couldn't even crawl up the stairs to his bedroom or carry the groceries into the house. What made his voyage so extraordinary, however, was the fact that he is the first heart/kidney transplant recipient to accomplish this amazing feat!

The Early years

The journey was a lifetime coming. Lien attended a one-room country school where he was born in Spring Grove, MN, until the fifth grade, when he and his family moved to Caledonia, where he still lives. In 1955, he joined the US Army and was commissioned a second lieutenant during two tours of duty in Vietnam, retiring in 1981 at Ft. Lewis, WA. For the next 11 years, he and his wife, Maureen, sold real estate in Puyallup, WA.

It was during his stint in the Army that Ardell dreamed of purchasing a sailboat and "sailing into the horizon." He bought a 40-foot boat, *Moon Shadow*. After only a week of lessons in Tacoma, WA, he sailed *Moon Shadow* from Seattle home to Tacoma. Then he and Maureen sold virtually everything they owned and lived aboard the boat to see how they could handle it long-term. They were both determined to live life to its fullest while they still could.

A Sailing Heart

About this time, Lien was diagnosed with congestive heart disease, and their plans were in question. His doctor wanted him around for frequent testing not possible in some locations. He chose to accept the risk and embark upon his journey. He and Maureen sailed to southeast Alaska, and Ardell felt fine. Later, they returned to Washington state. Then it was on to San Diego and Mexico.

Ardell and Maureen lived aboard *Moon Shadow* for six years, staying in Mexico for 4.5 years. They returned to their families in Minnesota during the summer months.

"My Condition Took a Dive"

"In 1998, my condition took a dive, and I had two friends help us return the boat to San Diego," Lien said in an interview with *KidneyTimes*. "I was in really bad shape... We sold the boat and planned to return to Minnesota for what seemed my inevitable passing."

By 2001, Ardell he was losing weight. He slept 18 hours a day and literally "had to crawl up the stairs to my bedroom."

His family insisted that he go to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. In 2002, he was placed on the heart transplant list. In November of that year, the doctors discovered that there was also an insufficient supply of blood to the kidney. He would now need a heart/kidney transplant.

A New Year's Gift of Life

On New Year's night of 2003, Lien's St. Mary's Hospital transplant coordinator called with the news that a heart and kidney were waiting for him. His doctor, Brooks Edwards, MD, gave him a high five and told him that surgery was slated for 3 a.m., January 2. He cried. Maureen shed tears. Even the nurses, who had provided his care for two months,

wept for joy.

The surgery was a long one--12 hours. First came the heart. Then, a couple of hours later, the kidney. The two original kidneys were left in place, and the third one was placed very low in the abdomen. His kidney surgeon told him: "You may not have noticed, but I was in the area, so I also fixed your hernia."

"Before and after the surgery, I had a very positive attitude," Lien remarked. "It never occurred to me that this was a high-risk procedure that might not be successful."

After nine days in the hospital, Ardell joined Maureen at the Gift of Life Transplant House. He had nothing but praise for Dr. Edwards, his primary care physician, and the Transplant House staff, who were always there with their encouragement and support.

Lien's recovery was fast. Six months after surgery, he roofed his two-story house. In the summer of 2004, he remodeled a home from roof to basement.

There was no keeping him down.

A Trip

"While hospitalized, I thought of something I could do to encourage others to help solve the organ donation crisis," Lien told *KidneyTimes*. "With nearly 100,000 people on the transplant waiting list, it is a real 'crisis.' My plan would be to do something that required strength and stamina, including the ability to stay awake for at least two days straight. Something like a solo sailing voyage around the world!"

Initially, Maureen was opposed to the idea because she knew there was much risk involved.

"Did you go through transplant surgery only to risk everything to promote organ donation?" she wondered.

"My reply was to minimize the risk and explain the good that would result if we received the publicity I expected," Ardell countered.

"Maureen later realized we could achieve success and became my greatest supporter. She took care of the many tasks at home, including forwarding and answering my many daily e-mails from people who wanted to know more about the project. She also arranged for my medications."

The Journey Begins

With the assistance of Lifesharing, the organ procurement organization (OPO) in San Diego, CA, Ardell embarked on his epic journey on May 5, 2005, aboard the *Catalyst*, a 27-foot sailboat. He wanted to change the name of the boat to *Gift of Life*, but did not because of an old maritime belief that changing a boat's name would bring bad luck. He did, however, display a Donate Life banner on board the tiny boat, announcing to the world his real mission.

Finding room to store his immunosuppressant and other medications was not a problem. The difficulty came with trying to keep them in a dry place with the humidity at 90% or above. Instead of using a seven-day pillbox, he left his drugs in their more airtight bottles.

The captain had no means to refrigerate his food, and his diet was limited mostly to canned and packaged foods and unlimited fresh water provided by his onboard desalination machine. He had about 50 pounds of pancakes and a lot of canned soup. There was a small stove for heating and cooking the Mahi Mahi, Yellowfin Tuna, Wahoo, and other fish he caught.



The Catalyst's weather-beaten Donate Life banner.



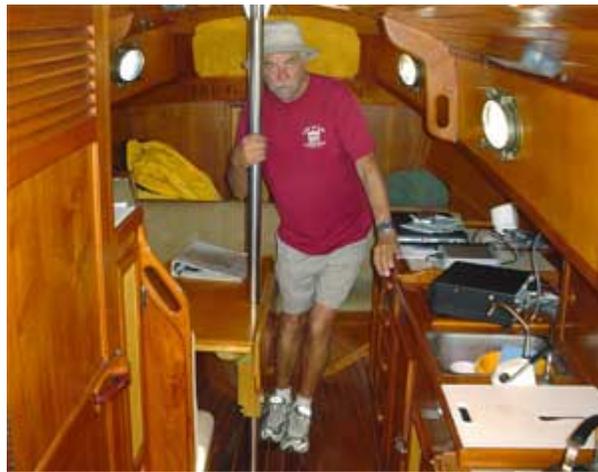
The captain trims the sails of the Catalyst.

The Medication Routes

Getting the required medications to Ardell was a story in itself. He had a maximum of three months' supply when he departed San Diego and planned to have another three months' supply sent to Australia.

"A problem occurred when customs officials in Sydney had many

questions about the shipment and held it for 10 days," Lien explained. "This delayed my leaving when I was already running behind. I crossed the Indian Ocean in November, the first month of typhoon season. Following many phone calls to and from Australia, the package was finally released. In Durban, South Africa, on Thanksgiving Day, I made plans to return to Mayo for my required annual physical and pick up more medications, a condition my Mayo doctors laid down before I started the trip. I flew all the way to Minneapolis. The next meds shipment arrived special delivery when Maureen met me in Panama to transit the canal, and, from there, she delivered a three months' supply to Honolulu."



Lien surveys the "inner sanctum" of his trusty little boat.

The Ports

In the 19 ports Ardell sailed into, he met with numerous organ and tissue transplant patients and was frequently featured on the local news. One of his special visits was in South Africa, when he had lunch with one of his heroes--Sir Robin Knox-Johnson, the first person to sail non-stop around the world alone.

"We mostly talked about the difference between sailing back in 1969 and now," Lien remarked. "It's less daunting now because of the advances made in navigational equipment and better access to weather

maps via the computer and the Internet."

Ardell also communicated via HAM radio and used a laptop computer for e-mails. He delivered daily reports, giving his coordinates, weather conditions, and related any problems that needed to be resolved. He added that all the ports he visited were in some way exotic since there were so many different cultures and languages.

Lien was disappointed at not seeing more whales, however. He did see some whales and dolphins off the coast of Brazil and close to land. Dolphins were plentiful, and they came close to the *Catalyst*.

The Problem Spots

But it wasn't all smooth sailing. There were some problem spots.

"My problems in the Torres Strait [separating Australia from Papua, New Guinea] began with wind increasing to 50 knots plus from the South," Ardell explained. "I could handle the wind, but, with it coming from the south, and the channel running some 130 nautical miles [NM] from the north-northeast to south-southwest, it was too close for me to sail. At nightfall, I decided to sail north until morning and try again. At daylight, the winds had dropped to 35 knots, but remained from the south. I had the same problem as the night before..."

"At sunset, with almost no sleep for 40 hours, I reviewed the charts and made the decision to go west between the reefs and, hopefully, by daylight, I would be in the Prince of Wales Channel, which leads to open seas and 700 NM to Darwin...."

"Later, in the Indian Ocean 600 NM west of Christmas Island, I hit a tropical depression [TD]. The winds increased to 35 knots as the leading edge of the TD affected my space... By the time the trailing edge passed, it was nine days later! While the wind rarely exceeded 35 knots, the

duration made for huge seas... I tied things down and set the sails... I somehow managed to get some sleep, but the seas remained at 20-feet plus for several days."

From Hawaii to Home

Perhaps the most difficult single passage was from Hawaii to the West Coast "for many reasons. First, you must deal with the Pacific high, a large area of ocean having high barometric pressure and little or no wind. This high [reaches] its northern most point during October, the month of my return home. The recommended path is over the top of the high. This, however, would require me to go hundreds of miles out of the way and likely encounter bad weather and gales. Therefore, I chose to go east under the high, knowing I would have to use my motor for a few days."

Another problem occurred at night when Ardell was three days out of Honolulu. A very strong squall blew out his jib and main sails that were already weakened from over a year of exposure to tropical sunlight. He sailed the remaining 26 days to California with a #2 jib and a storm trisail.

It was also during the Galapagos to Hawaii and Hawaii to California stretches that Ardell experienced his worst bout of being alone. This was especially true from the Galapagos Islands, where Charles Darwin first began formulating his theory of evolution during the first half of the 19th century, to Hawaii. During this 43-day passage, he did not see a single ship.

Star Food For Thought

Ardell said "sunrise was my favorite time" of day during his trip. But the moon was also "very important" because it provided a good deal of light at sea.

"Also, the clear night without a moon gives a view of the stars and planets that cannot be matched near or on land. During those times, total darkness, alone hundreds of miles from land, my mind would always lead me to ask how all this came about."

Home is the Sailor

How did Ardell feel as he entered San Diego Harbor on October 16, 2006, the final day of his epic voyage?

"I had mixed emotions, knowing that this was likely the end of my sailing days, at least out on the big water," he admitted. "On the other hand, it had been a long voyage, and I was ready to return to Maureen and visit our wonderful three children and six grandsons."

As Lien closed in on Shelter Island, near San Diego, he saw a media helicopter fly over, and "as I came closer, I saw many people with big cameras." Closer, he saw tents and a podium.

"I had much media coverage in several countries, an essential element for the success of my mission, but I never get used to that, and it frightens me more than the ocean," Lien stated.

In the crowd in San Diego Harbor were his wife, Maureen, and a contingent from the Mayo Clinic, including Brooks Edwards, MD, his primary care physician; Richard Daly, MD, his heart surgeon; and his transplant coordinator, Pat Pagel, RN. Others included Sharon Ross and many others from Lifesharing, the San Diego OPO. Ardell enthused that "it was a grand day to see how many friends, family, and, especially, the press, had an interest in my project."



Lien with his wife and members of his Mayo Clinic transplant team.

The Donor Family

Following the ceremony in San Diego, Ardell flew home to Minnesota and onto the Mayo Clinic for a complete physical. The doctors were amazed at his excellent state of health.

Also, because of the publicity surrounding the trip, Lien discovered the identity of his donor family. He even spoke to his heart donor's mother and looks forward to getting to know her and learning more about her son, whose heart the Captain now carries.

Conclusion

"I plan to use the circumnavigation as a stepping-stone to continue promoting organ donation," Ardell said. "My hope is to target the sailing/boating community by having an organ donation booth at the major boat shows. These shows are attended by hundreds of thousands of the most generous and caring people. Most importantly, we would be able to sign people up as donors on the spot."

What is Ardell's advice to other kidney patients?

"Never, never, never give up," he stressed. "My attitude has always been excellent, and I give a good attitude much credit for my recovery. I feel that, in spite of my age, then 67, my positive attitude was helpful in being selected as a heart transplant candidate. I can say with complete honesty that it never passed through my mind that I would not receive a transplant and that the surgery would not be a success... Sailing is my passion, but increasing the number of registered donors is my mission."

[The author expresses his appreciation for the assistance of Sharon Ross, Community Outreach Manager, Lifesharing, a Donate Life Organization, San Diego, CA, in preparing this article. Lifesharing is proud of the fact that more than one million Californians have now signed up to become organ and tissue donors on the state's Donate Life California Organ & Tissue Donor Registry. The upswell in registrations, which more than tripled during a six-month period, is primarily due to the ability of Californians to sign up as donors when they apply for, or renew, their driver's licenses or I.D. cards at the Department of Motor Vehicles. For more information about the Donate Life California Registry, log onto: www.dmv.ca.gov/about/donateLife/donateLife.htm or www.donateLIFECalifornia.org. To learn more about Captain Ardell Lien's epic voyage, log onto the Lifesharing website at: www.lifesharing.org.]

About the Author

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