

Jessica Watson shares how lessons learnt at sea helped her navigate the waves of grief over losing partner

Australian Story / By [Susan Chenery](#) and [Vanessa Gorman](#)

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Jessica Watson takes us inside her amazing voyage as a teenage sailor, the grief of losing her partner and a new feature film which has thrust her back into the spotlight. (ABC: *Australian Story*)

During her epic round-the-world yacht voyage, Jessica Watson came to appreciate "the beauty of every little detail that makes up every wave".

She watched them endlessly, sailing 24,000 nautical miles across "nothing but empty water".

However, at times, they morphed into towering and brutal shapes, like in the South Atlantic, where mountainous seas pounded her boat and repeatedly knocked it flat.



Jessica faced treacherous conditions on her round-the-world journey. (Getty Images: Brendon Thorne)

"There was a period, a couple of hours maybe, where I was contemplating whether this was it," Jessica told the ABC's Australian Story.

Sixteen years old and alone in a treacherous ocean, Jessica was able to call on extraordinary reserves of psychological and physical strength to push through.

However, nothing — not navigating the notorious Cape Horn, nor scraping along a "wall of steel" as she collided with a cargo ship at night — had prepared her for the debilitating grief she felt after the death of her partner of 10 years, 29-year-old Cameron Dale, in 2021.

Almost two years since the sudden tragedy, Jessica has revealed to Australian Story how it left her in the "alien territory" of bereavement, emotionally adrift and questioning the point of living without him.

It was "indescribable and way beyond what I would have imagined", she said. "I really learned how bad and how scary your head can get."

Sailing onto the world's stage at 16



Before her voyage, there was controversy over the age and ability of then 16-year-old Jessica. (*Getty Images: Sergio Dionisio*)

When Jessica Watson sailed through the Sydney Heads in May 2010, in her small boat, Ella's Pink Lady, crowds lined the harbour foreshore for a rousing and emotional homecoming.

Millions more around the world tuned in to watch the spectacle.

As she stepped on land for the first time in seven months, then-prime minister Kevin Rudd was waiting at the Opera House to greet her.



Jessica became the youngest person to sail solo, non-stop and unassisted around the world. (*Getty Images: Mark Kolbe*)

Three days shy of her 17th birthday, and now the youngest person to circumnavigate the globe solo and unassisted, she had shot to global fame.

She said the years that followed "were just crazy".

"It was book tours around the world and getting involved with the United Nations World Food Programme and all of these amazing experiences and I definitely appreciated them."



Jessica was awarded Young Australian of the Year in 2011 and made an Order of Australia. (*Getty Images: Brendon Thorne*)

She was awarded Young Australian of the Year and made an Order of Australia.

However, for Jessica, getting her driver's licence and finishing school were "just as big a challenge as sailing around the world".

She had to "constantly deal with public adoration and media virtually on a daily basis for the next two years", her manager, Andrew Fraser, said.

"There was a lot of times where she just wished she could be living a normal life, and that was impossible."



Jessica embraces her family after 210 days at sea. (*Getty Images: Mark Kolbe*)

How Cam helped Jessica 'disappear'

In 2011, Jessica was the skipper of the youngest crew ever to compete in the Sydney to Hobart. And that's where she met Cam, who, at 19, was the oldest crew member on the boat. Soon they were inseparable.

Jessica met Cameron Dale when they competed in the Sydney to Hobart together. (Getty Images: Cameron Spencer)

"I really enjoyed being able to just slip into the role of Cam's girlfriend because it was a way to step away from everything else and almost hide behind him a little bit," Jessica said.

Moving to Melbourne to be with Cam was, Andrew Fraser said, "the start of a new normal life" for Jessica.

In Melbourne, she could disappear into the crowd.

"Part of what I enjoyed about Melbourne in the first few years was that I was a little bit more anonymous," Jessica said. "I've got away with not being recognised as much."

Jessica Watson moved to Melbourne to be closer to Cameron Dale. (*Supplied: Jessica Watson*)

Still, every so often someone would ask, "Aren't you the girl in the pink boat?"

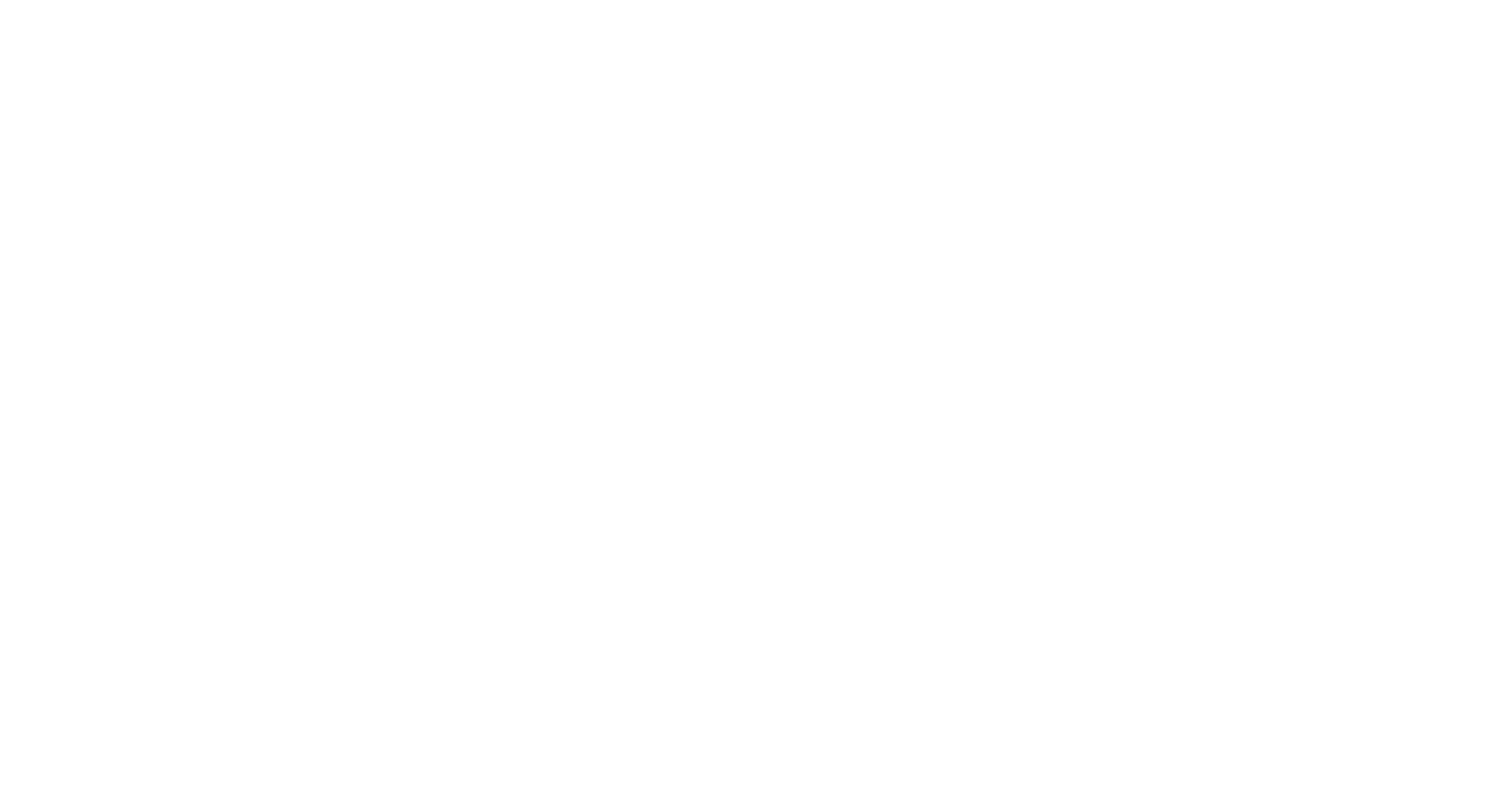
However, she had never done any of it for the fame.

"It is not important to her," her mother, Julie, said. "Jess has never sought fame. It just found her."

The voyage that crowned Jess 'the newest Aussie hero'

Sailing around the world wasn't just the whim of a teenage girl.

Jessica had 10,000 nautical miles of sailing experience before she set out.



Jessica Watson (second from left) has been out on the water most of her life. She and her family lived on a boat for a period of time. (*Supplied: Jessica Watson*)

Her parents and three siblings had lived on a boat for years after they sold their Gold Coast real estate agency and headed north, home-schooling the kids along the way.

Jessica's dyslexia "was a problem for her schooling," Julie explained, "but I didn't want that to define her. I wanted other things in her life that she was good at. And I read her a lot of books."



Jessica Watson's dyslexia made school more challenging. (*Supplied: Jessica Watson*)

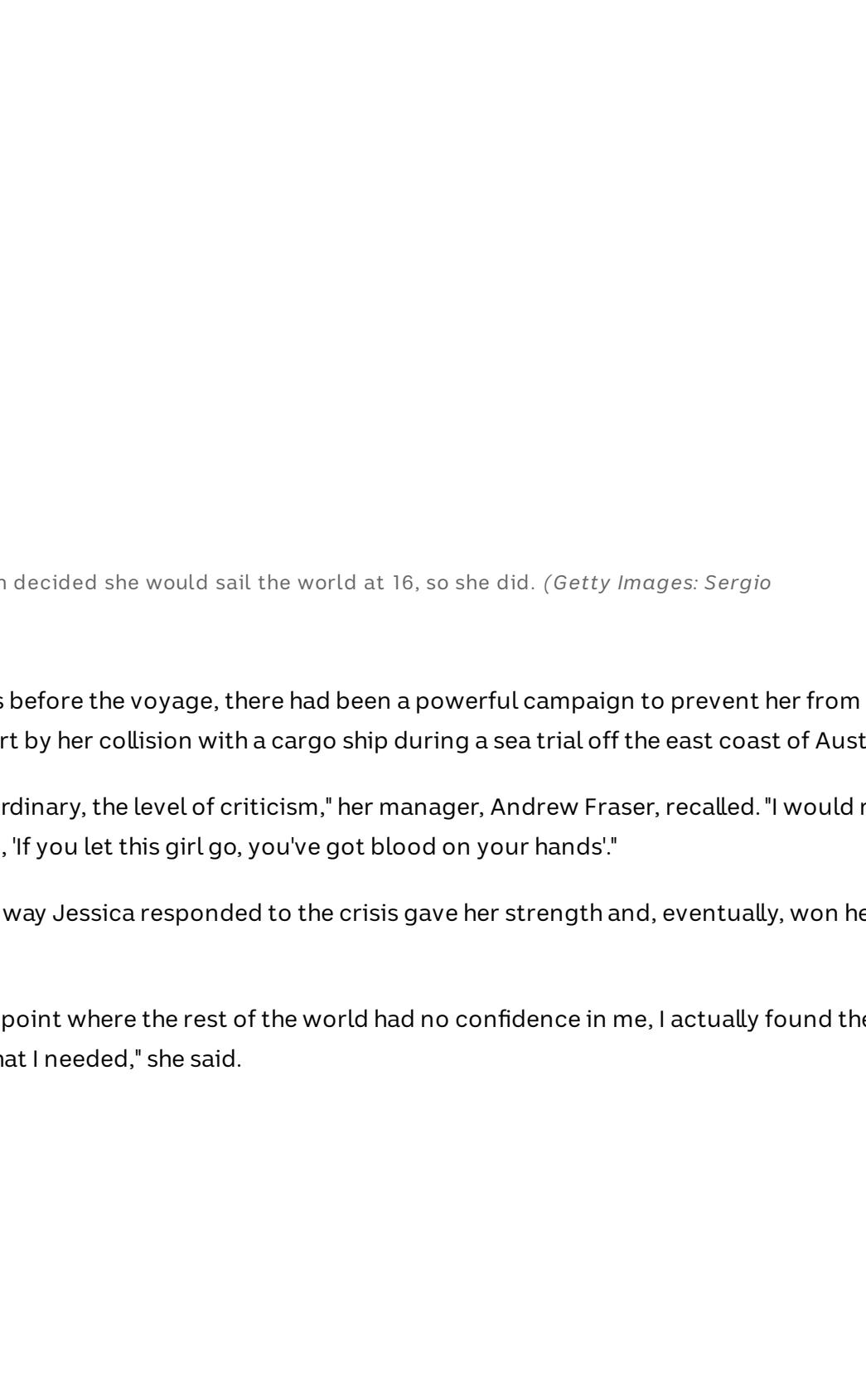
One of them was *Lionheart* by Jesse Martin, who had sailed, unassisted, around the world at 18 years of age.

That book, Jessica said, "did all the damage". At 12 years of age, she decided she wanted to take on the challenge.

"I didn't ask my parents, it was kind of telling them," Jessica said, "and I think, maybe, they realised, too, that they couldn't crush it."

A team of volunteers, including sailor Bruce Arms, helped her prepare her 10-metre pink boat for all the ocean could throw at her.

"Jessica is just so determined, it inspires you," Bruce said.



Jessica Watson decided she would sail the world at 16, so she did. (*Getty Images: Sergio Dionisio*)

In the months before the voyage, there had been a powerful campaign to prevent her from leaving, sparked in part by her collision with a cargo ship during a sea trial off the east coast of Australia.

"It was extraordinary, the level of criticism," her manager, Andrew Fraser, recalled. "I would receive emails saying, 'If you let this girl go, you've got blood on your hands'."

However, the way Jessica responded to the crisis gave her strength and, eventually, won her a legion of fans.

"Right at that point where the rest of the world had no confidence in me, I actually found the last bit of confidence that I needed," she said.

Jessica Watson has "never sought fame, it just found her", says her mother, Julie. (*Dan Himbrechts: AAP*)

By the time she returned through the Heads in Sydney, the PM was declaring her "our newest hero".

"There was a long period where I was trying to escape a little bit of the past and the voyage and being solely remembered as that," Jessica said.

During her 20's, Jessica admitted to being "just sick of my own story."

"You don't want to be talking about that the entire time. I feel like I've had enough fuss made of me to last 50 lifetimes."

She was ready to step away from it all and build another life, one with Cam by her side.

Jessica set out to get a degree, determined to overcome her dyslexia, and is now an MBA who works for Deloitte in management consulting.

"I've got no idea what normal or ordinary is, but there is something really lovely about getting up and having a routine, getting public transport into Melbourne's CBD, being part of the team at Deloitte and just part of the commuter crowd."

And every now and then, up on the 23rd floor of the corporate tower, "I get someone who's just so confused about what that 'Sailor-girl' is doing in this office, in this really corporate environment."

Losing Cam leaves Jess 'cocooned in shock'

In July 2021, Jessica and Cam were on the Gold Coast providing technical guidance for [True Spirit, the Netflix drama about her historic voyage.](#)

A seasoned sailor, Cam had been excited about the film and keen to make sure the sailing scenes were accurate.

Completely out of the blue, he started feeling unwell.

"He had symptoms that we quite quickly worked out were symptoms of a stroke," Jessica said.

At a hospital on the Gold Coast, he was diagnosed as having a minor stroke. While still in hospital, he had a second, this time catastrophic, stroke.

Jessica sat with him, "talking to him about every single memory and going through both of our phones full of 10 years of photos and memories to pour every tiny bit of love into him that I could".

Cameron Dale died after a catastrophic stroke in 2021. (*Supplied: Jessica Watson*)

He had been young and active, a sailor and cyclist. He was just 29. He had no idea he had high blood pressure.

Six weeks later, he died with Jessica and his family by his side.

With Cam gone, so was the future they had planned together and "our imagined baby", Jessica said.

In the wake of his death, she was "cocooned in shock" and eventually reached a point of "not wanting to be here without Cam".

"It's really that simple. What's the point without him? The pain is just so bad that you want it to stop."

She was "really, really struggling and not particularly rational with it". Cam had been the most important part of her life.

Jessica reached out and got help: "I've certainly learned, with grief, to tell people what you need. Don't leave them to guess."

If you or anyone you know needs help:

- [Lifeline \(24-hour Crisis Line\)](#): 131 114
- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467
- [Beyond Blue](#) on 1300 224 636
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890
- [ReachOut](#) at au.reachout.com

Soon she began to realise that "you can be so completely crushed and totally broken" but still be incredibly strong.

- [QLife](#) on 1800 184 527
- [Care Leavers Australasia Network \(CLAN\)](#) on 1800 008 774

"It's a weird thing to learn," she said.

"She's managed to tap into an inner strength," Andrew Fraser said, "and I think a lot of those mechanisms have come from her voyage, which taught her how to overcome adversity."

Jessica Watson struggled with grief after the death of her partner, Cameron Dale.

(Supplied: Jessica Watson)

She finds great solace in being out on the water at the Sandringham Yacht Club with Cam's best friends.

"It almost feels like a way of celebrating him, being with this group of people that are just so Cam that it feels like he is here," she explained.

"And doing it for him because it's exactly what he would want us to be doing. Out in the saltwater, in the wind, the waves. It is hard to imagine something better for grief."

Jessica Watson used the launch of the movie to raise funds for the Stroke Foundation.

(ABC: *Australian Story/Kate Wilson*)

Recently, Jessica stepped back into the limelight to hit the "pink carpet" for the movie of her voyage, True Spirit.

"There's a sense of, 'Oh gosh, what am I getting myself into,'" she said.

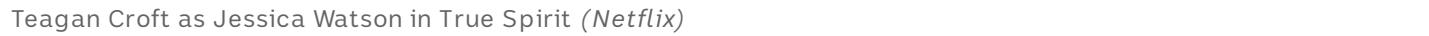
"Here we go again, but so grateful for the crazy and unique opportunity that this is.

"I'm having fun and it's something that I've learned to such an extent since Cam's passing. He wanted me to have fun with this."

Jessica Watson joins actress Teagan Croft at the True Spirit premiere. (*Australian Story: Kate Wilson*)

Jessica Watson
(*Australian Story: Kate Wilson*)



A black and white photograph of actress Teagan Croft. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top and light-colored pants, sitting in a wooden boat. Her hair is tied back, and she is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background shows a calm sea and a clear sky.

Teagan Croft as Jessica Watson in *True Spirit* (*Netflix*)

Besides, she hopes it can make a difference by fundraising for the Stroke Foundation.

She is here to tell people: "For goodness sake, get your blood pressure checked."

Watching the film, she says "it's so weird having someone take some of your story and your life and then make it something else".

"What that 'fake me' was saying wasn't my own words but was the essence of what I really believed I was doing the voyage for."

Jessica is not sure what the future holds but, approaching 30, she has a sense of having "lived a lot" for someone her age, through "absolutely terrible things and so much pain".

"But, also, there's so much beauty and kindness," she said. "They're the things I've really clung to and built on. And they are enough for now."

Watch Australian Story's Charting Her Course 8:00pm (AEST) on ABC TV and [ABC iview](#).