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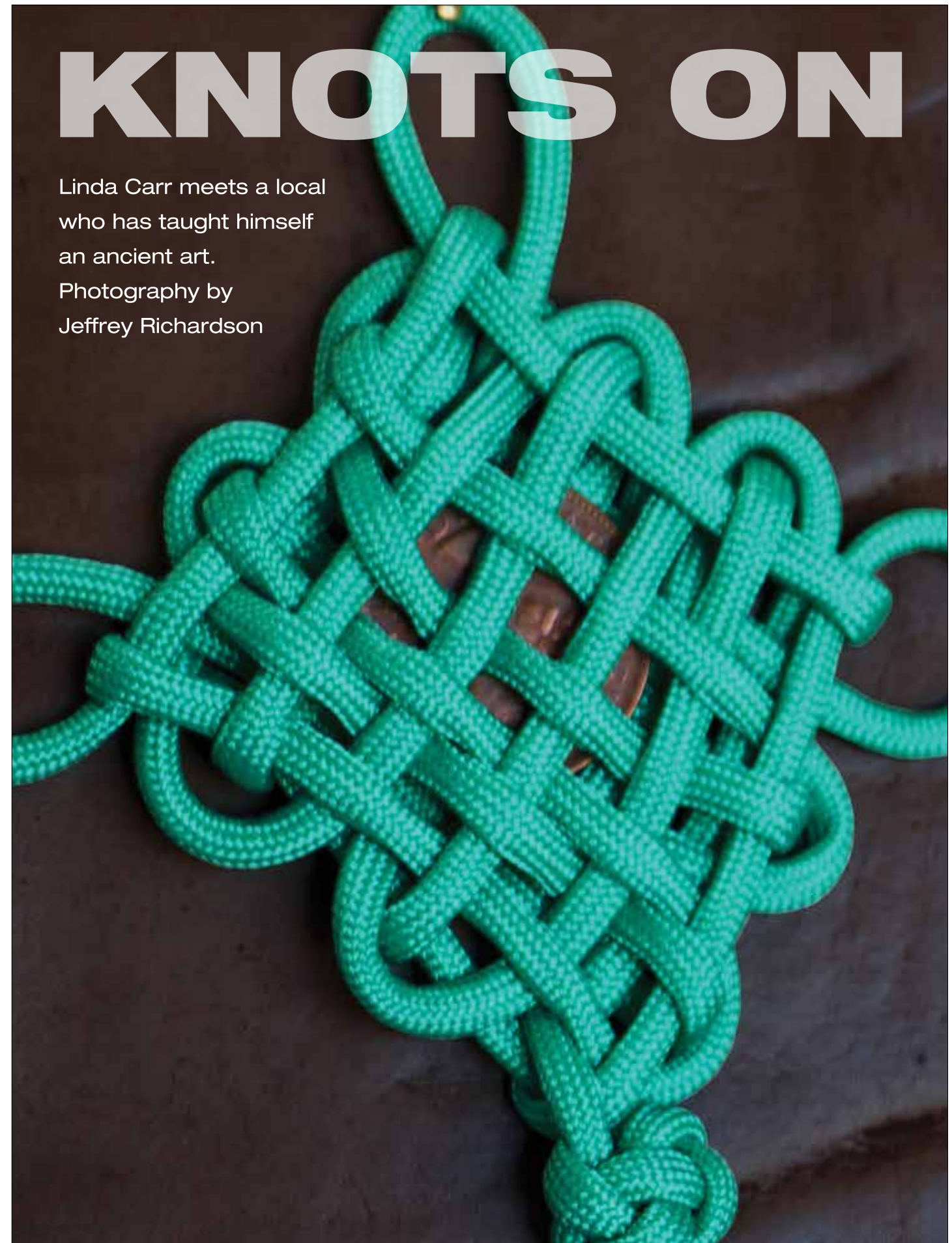
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KNOTS ON

Linda Carr meets a local
who has taught himself
an ancient art.

Photography by
Jeffrey Richardson





There are many occupations in the shipping industry where standing and waiting is a big portion of the job – waiting for the tide, waiting for the right wind, waiting for triggers to action.

Nearly 50 years ago Barry Smith discovered this reality while working on tugs stationed along Geelong's busy waterfront. Like mariners before him, over the centuries and around the globe, he used these frequent downtimes to learn from his more experienced workmates and hone his maritime skills. Thus, a consuming passion for knots was born.

In his early days the functional knots of shipping were the first to draw Barry's interest – the handy ones such as reef knot, clove hitch and bowline – then he spent many hours working with natural fibre ropes until the unfamiliar movements and shapes of advanced knots were second nature to him.

Knots can be a metaphor for life, a single length of rope becomes the knot, winding in on itself, looping around, creating complex beauty while interlinking heartbreak, fascination and grief. Where does one start

to understand it? Barry reflects on this small piece of philosophy

"This has become a self-indulgence," he says. "I have suffered a lot of health issues over the past few years. In treatment sessions you've got to wait many periods of time so I set about tying one knot every day for a whole year, a different one each day. I finished up with five boards of knots, titled 'Another year of Knotting'. The boards were put on display at the National Wool Museum for a month. I really appreciated that and their great support. Geelong Art Gallery and Boom Gallery have supported me greatly also."

This result of Barry's waiting time – a personal attachment to knots – has also come to serve a bigger community whose members he may never meet. He momentarily loses his wide grin as he briefly discusses the loss of his son to melanoma cancer.

He brings forth a beautiful mounted Celtic knotted mat, under the mat sits a small warning that gives the viewer pause to consider the dangers of melanoma and the



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need to take care. This little board is quietly used in his classes.

Waiting also gave Barry the opportunity to explore knotting beyond the functional traditions of Europe. He discovered the magic of Asian knots, in particular those of China, often referred to as stellar knots because of their semi-religious and kinship significance. He took on the challenge of teaching himself many of these intricate, old knots by using illustrations in Chinese manuscripts. One such intriguing knot in which a coin was hidden within the interwoven strands, was used in China as a family keepsake.

Challenge is definitely no stranger in this Geelong workshop where Barry's love of knots moved onto Impossi Bottles – physical puzzles inside bottles, with contents that go way beyond the original tall-ship model we've seen in period movies. In typical style he downplays the skill and patience required to build these models.

"It's a bit of a laugh – there's a knot in there (and sometimes other things too) that doesn't belong in there. It's too big and the wrong shape. How the heck did it get in? This past-time was started by a Chinese mathematician, Harry Eng, to make people think, to use their heads. How do you think

I got those in this bottle?" With such a challenging and artistic field, there must be quite a number of keen practitioners across the country.

"Very sad to say I am the only one in Australia doing this. As an Australian member of the International Guild of Knot Tyers, I chat over social media to international members including Canada and the US. Many years ago I did help a bloke, George Hobbs, to enhance a knot which we have called the Geelong Trilobite. I made two small samples in black leather but the real knots are actually used as fenders on wharfs for tugs, made of huge thick rope using crowbars. The Geelong Trilobite makes a magic small key ring using yachting materials."

Knot tying is an ancient art that has moved with the times and Barry regularly up-cycles materials, using offcuts such as rope and leather from other industries. He makes numerous custom-made pieces, splicing, wire rope and knotting goods in his workshop in Geelong West – decorations for walking sticks, key rings, paper weights, docking lines and even Impossi Bottles.

For Barry Smith, waiting has brought many powerful experiences that cross centuries, countries and causes.

