THE LOSS OF TAMARIND
Mervyn Wheatley

(*The introduction is condensed from a piece written by OCC member Colin Drummond to introduce a talk by Mervyn to members of the Royal Cornwall Yacht Club*:

I first met Mervyn Wheatley 43 years ago when we were both competitors in the very first Azores and Back Race in 1975. Mervyn has now completed seven solo AZABs, and I'm sure that he would have completed all eleven except that, as an officer in the Royal Marines for 33 years, Her Majesty sometimes required him to do some work and sent him off to defend the realm.

On the morning of 10 June last year, when the news got back that a 73-year-old singlehanded sailor had been rescued by the Queen Mary 2, *there must have been plenty of journalists whose first thought was, "What on earth is a 73-year-old doing sailing the Atlantic singlehanded?" No doubt they started sharpening their pencils to write a critical review. Then they would have done their research and found that Mervyn is one of the most experienced sailors in the UK, if not in the world. He has sailed well over a quarter of a million miles, more than half of them in* Tamarind, *including five Singlehanded Transatlantic Races and five Round Britain and Ireland Races. He skippered one of the eight boats in the first Clipper Round the World Race in 1996 and also skippered various yachts on several legs of the 2005–2006 Clipper Race.*)

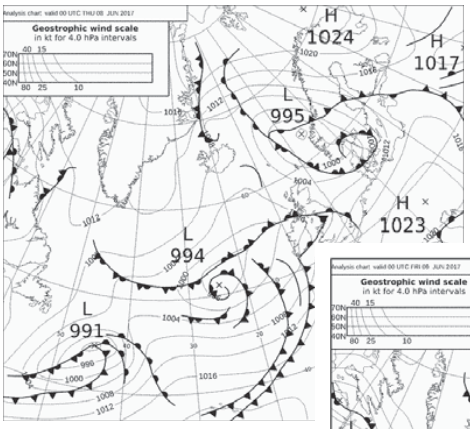
We had a good start in a southwesterly force 4–5 and fine weather. *Tamarind* was a Formosa 42, designed by Perry and built in Taiwan in 1985. I had sailed some 135,000 miles in her and this was our fifth OSTAR* and, for those who enjoy their superstitions, our 13th Atlantic together. I hoped it was going to be my 19th and 20th Atlantics.

***Tamarind* at the start of the 2017 OSTAR**

The first week was fairly benign for an OSTAR –

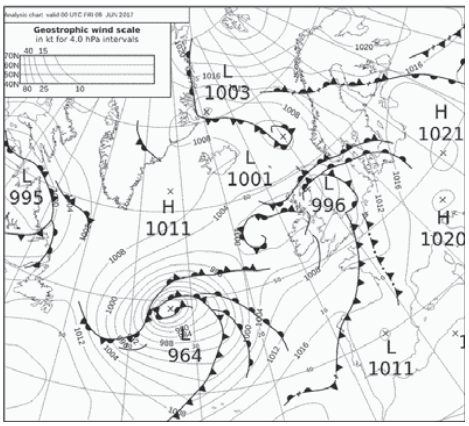
* For many years the Observer Singlehanded Transatlantic Race, now the Original Singlehanded Transatlantic Race, which takes place every four years over a course from Plymouth, UK to Newport, Rhode Island, USA under the auspices of the Royal Western Yacht Club of England.

hard on the wind but with a satisfactory VMG (velocity made good) and nothing over a force 6. On day 9 (Tuesday 6 June) it began to freshen, and I received a text from a Master Mariner in my village with a detailed synopsis of Atlantic weather. I had a Toughbook laptop on the chart table which I did not want to move, and as the alternative was the saloon table which had no fiddles, and as by then it was blowing a force 7, I did not bother to plot it. These charts shows what my friend was trying to tell me. As a basis for comparison, the Fastnet gale of 1979 was 980mb.

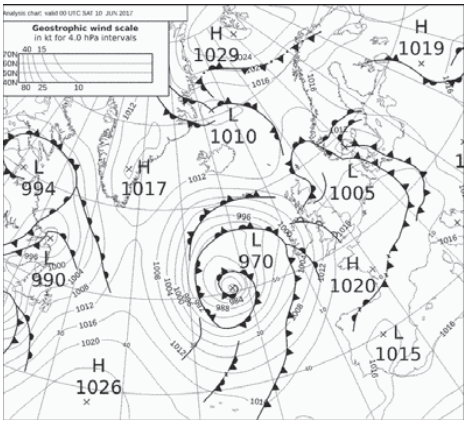


00 UTC Thursday 8 June …

By the evening it had freshened to force 8 gusting 9, and I handed the sails, started the engine to charge the batteries, and went to bed in a saloon bunk. At about 0200 I was woken by a violent lurch of the boat and a deluge of water over me. We had been rolled to, I think, about 150°, and the window above my bunk had been smashed by something very solid from inside the boat. I had put in one of the two washboards and closed the hatch, but that had also let in a considerable amount of water.



… and Friday 9 June



00 UTC Saturday 10 June

I stepped out of my bunk onto what I hoped were going to be floorboards but found instead a water tank. All the boards had moved, in spite of being jammed in hard. All the electrics had failed but I found a torch and surveyed a scene of chaos. *Tamarind* had a deep bilge, but the water was above the cabin sole and was awash with food, clothing and detritus. I had a quick thought about priorities but fell back on the maxim that, in any vessel, the fundamental plan is to keep the salt water on the outside. I was worried about what would happen if we were struck by another large wave, and started pumping.

It took 3½ hours to clear the bilge, by which time it was dawn. I went up top and found the sprayhood at the back of the cockpit and, caught in it, the EPIRB – transmitting. It had been torn from its bracket and immersed, and that had activated it. It had not occurred to me to activate it and I tried to turn it off. I failed and, eventually put it back in its bracket and it switched off! However, after some thought I realised that this would give the impression we had sunk. I also thought that, after four hours, the rescue would be well underway and it would be better to keep it running while I assessed my position.

I examined the vane steering which was at a strange angle, and thought I could repair it until I found some cracks in the main transverse stainless bar, so I left that for the moment and went below to start sorting out the shambles. I then heard an aircraft, a C130 of the Royal Canadian Air Force, and called him on my handheld VHF which, fortunately, I had charged before the start. I told the pilot that I was worried about the endurance of the VHF and he said he would try to drop one on a long line. He missed on both that and the next try, so he then tried two liferafts with a line between which also failed. I asked him what the wind strength was and he said between 60 and 70 knots. Hurricane force 12 starts at 64 knots. It is hardly surprising he missed!

He was relieved in succession by two other aircraft, and the third one told me a ship was on the way. I asked for its ETA and he said 15 hours. At about midnight the bulk carrier MV *Labrador* arrived, and asked how I proposed to get aboard his ship! He manoeuvred to within about 30m and it was

still blowing hard. There was no apparent means of boarding – no ladder, no net, no rope. I realised that any attempt to board would result in the destruction of both *Tamarind* and me, and told the C130 pilot so. He agreed, and said not to move until morning by which time the weather should have moderated.

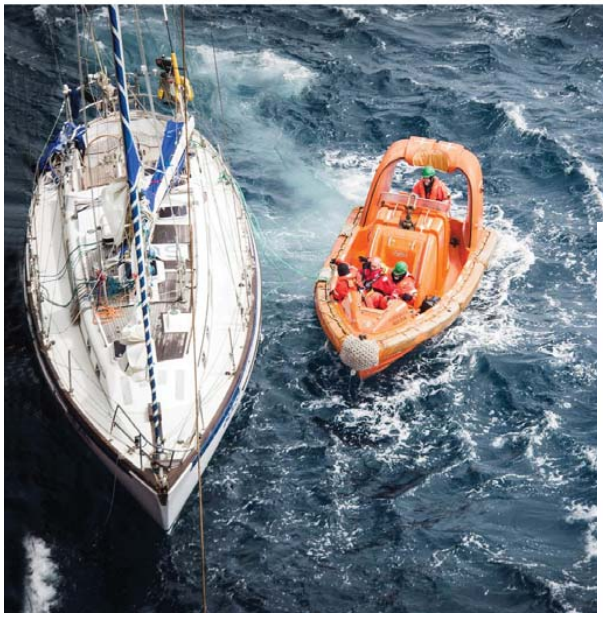
I gave some thought to my position. I could repair the window easily and I could probably repair the vane gear. The steering cables had parted, but I had spares and had repaired them before on a previous OSTAR. I considered the best plan would be to sail downwind for the UK, but this left three problems. First, what would happen when the next gale hit and the boat and I would be in a fairly parlous condition? Everything was not just wet but soaked, and the only usable food I had was freeze-dried. Second, when we arrived in the Western Approaches, we would have no communications, no power, no AIS, no lights and, in the likely event of calm, would be a sitting duck. Finally, and the clincher, it would take me at least three weeks to repair the boat and return, during which my family would have no idea of what was going on. That seemed unreasonable when I did not have to subject them to it. I decide to continue with the rescue.

The Queeen Mary 2, with Tamarind alongside

In the morning there was no aircraft or ship, but soon a C130 arrived and told me that the *Labrador* was still there but, not far behind, was the *Queen Mary 2*. I said, "If I have any choice in this, I would prefer the *QM2*". This was not because of her luxurious appointments, but because I knew that a transfer onto her would be a much safer option than with the bulk carrier. The *QM2* arrived and the Captain made a lee to launch their pump jet rescue boat. The *QM2* was blowing down on *Tamarind* and eventually we T-boned the ship, then went broadside-on and the spreaders started to knock divots out of her paintwork!

The rescue boat arrived and I threw my backpack into it and then went below to scuttle *Tamarind*. I had already decided that there was no alternative to this. I would have been extremely annoyed if I had hit a derelict boat but, more importantly, I realised that if a merchantman saw her, the Master would feel obliged to investigate and this would cost him time and money at best, and at worst endanger his crew.

The rescue boat comes alongside to take Mervyn off …



… and Tamarind starts to drift astern

We were hoisted on a single cable up seven decks and I disembarked, after thanking the coxswain, and was met, inevitably, by the Security Officer, an ex-Royal Navy Petty Officer. After an examination

by a very pleasant female doctor and nurse I was taken by the hotel team to my stateroom. It was a surreal contrast with what I had just left! Captain Wells and his crew could not have been more considerate and generous. The Captain offered to block out the considerable media interest, but I pointed out that I had little else to do and, if I could achieve

Last sight of Tamarind as she is left astern in the wake

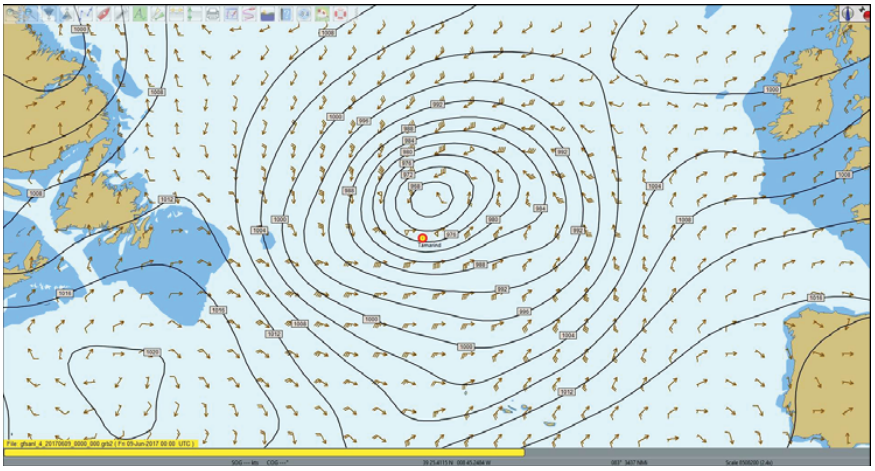
publicity for the ship and Cunard, I was happy to do it.

I was issued with a dinner jacket, dined at the Captain's table, attended cocktail parties, and Captain Wells and I did a Q&A session for 1200 guests. After three days, we arrived in Halifax and after a press conference ashore I flew home that evening.

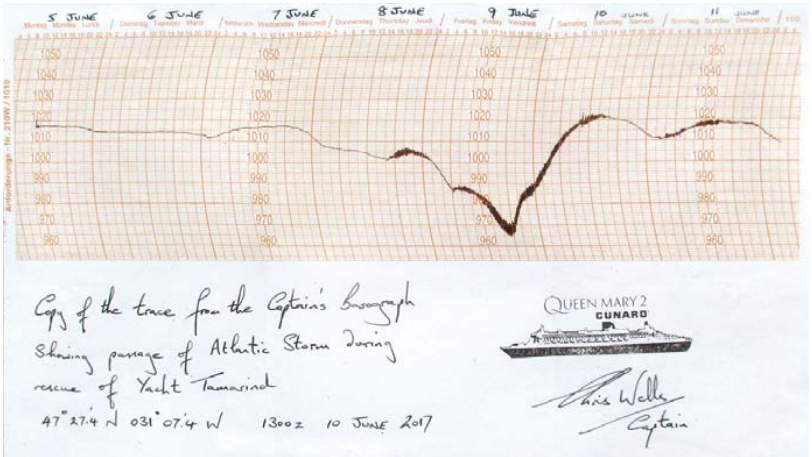
Coming in to land, seven decks up

Mervyn with Security Officer Laurence Pilbeam

My stateroom aboard the Queen Mary 2



The trace from Captain Wells' baragraph. He later wrote: 'The barograph trace is very interesting, particularly as we were skirting round the edge of the hurricane. Mervyn was in the middle, where the pressure was even less than our recorded 967mb – maybe as low as 950mb'.



Mervyn with the Queen Mary 2's Hotel Manager and Captain

The many photos which illustrate this article are courtesy of Mervyn's friends and family at the start of OSTAR 2017, the pilot and aircrew of the Royal Canadian Air Force C130, and the passengers and crew of the Queen Mary 2. The photograph below is by Kathy Mansfield (www.kathymansfieldphotos.com).

Captain and Mrs Wells were guests of the Club at our 2018 Annual Dinner aboard the SS *Great Britain*, where Captain Wells was presented with an engraved plaque thanking him and his crew for their seamanship in carrying out the rescue.