

TO SAVE A SOUL

Philippe Jamotte

Introduction by Randall Reeves

"Someone at the Singlehanded Sailing Society of San Francisco said I should meet you". That and an invitation to tour his Class 40, *Changabang*, was how I first came to know of solo sailor Philippe Jamotte and his project. It was the summer of 2020 and by this time Philippe was in the final stages of outfitting at the Sugar Dock in Richmond, California. I remember climbing aboard *Changabang* and being struck by how different a vessel she was from mine – light, lithe, powerfully-rigged – a rocket ship. And as Philippe described his plans – for a non-stop circumnavigation east to west and against the prevailing winds – I marvelled too at how different his challenges were from my own. Torres Strait, Cape of Good Hope and then the Horn, all the wrong way. The idea still makes me shudder.

Singlehanders are a unique breed. Except for their shared exploits, Tetley, Moitessier and Knox-Johnston had as little in common as do contemporaries like Bill Hatfield, Bert ter Hart, and Jon Sanders. Each were, to some degree, chasing a record in a line of work that gave them, and a few other sailors, intense satisfaction. The risks can seem crazy to those who don't share the vision.

As it turns out, Philippe wasn't successful on his first attempt. Early mechanical failures and country closures due to Covid caused Philippe to decide it was better to return home than risk an illegal landing in the south. Failure has a rich tradition among solo attempts, extending at least as far back as the first Golden Globe Race in 1968. But the point is to learn and return safely in order to try again. Just so, here is the first chapter of Phillippe's story.

But it's so big...

In *La Longue Route* (The Long Way), Moitessier tells us that he's dropping out of the first Golden Globe Race because he's happy at sea, and maybe to save his soul. Instead of sailing back into the hustle and bustle of a busy cosmopolitan humanity, he pointed his bow towards the Pacific Islands. What was he saving his soul from?

I can't be Moitessier, I can only be *moi*, and my story doesn't weigh much in comparison to Bernard's exploits. Even so, allow me to write a short story about my attempt to sail around the Earth.





A chapter ends, a new chapter begins

The backstory

Where did it all begin? And why? I've given these questions much thought and I think I've finally nailed the answers. I wish I could say that I grew up in a sailing family, or that I met a sailor who became my mentor, or that I love sailing so much that I sail at every occasion possible, but that's just not true. I came into sailing by way of a poster, an advert for a sailing school. Sailing for me is escapism. I came close to understanding this when I read *Alone Around the World* by Naomi James before my departure, though it was only after being back on land for a few months that I truly realised my motivations.

I'm originally from Belgium, born in the Belgian Congo in 1971. In 2001 I emigrated to the USA with an engineering diploma and a woman strong enough to tolerate me, and have lived in the San Francisco Bay area ever since. Like most of us I toiled in the business world, aspiring to great future milestones of business successes. Unfortunately these didn't materialise – instead what became clear is my addictive nature, which got me in trouble at every occasion when alcohol or pot were present. This plagued me from my early twenties all the way to my early thirties. A clear pattern haunted me: work hard, abstain, binge, despair, repeat. Simply put, I wasn't able to cope too well with my human nature and the nature of my humanity: I was regularly seeking oblivion. It all came crashing down one day and now, when I think about my time in the USA, it's clear to me that the most beautiful gift I received from America was sobriety.

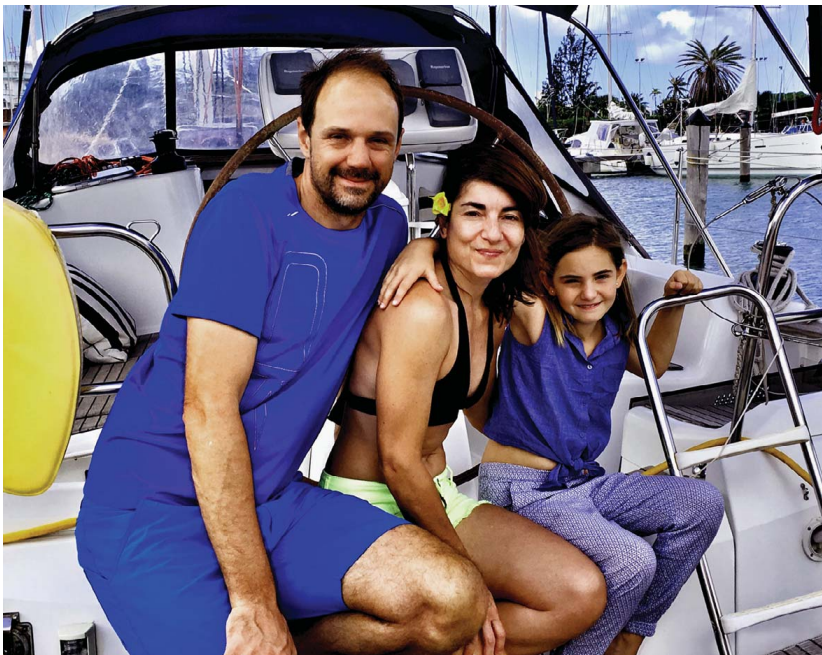
After the removal of the safety valves that alcohol and pot provided I could no longer escape – I was with me at all times. Some serious build-up was corroding my insides. When you know what man is capable of doing (murder, rape, torture, war and more), when you know you're nothing but a man, how can one look inside and not be desperate at what one sees? How can one not desire to escape from oneself? I can't. I didn't know then that I was trying to escape – I told myself that I was just trying to learn new stuff, stay active, interested. That's when another pattern emerged for me – I began

Learning to sail in South San Francisco Bay

picking up activities to escape from my reality. I tried writing, pottery, triathlons, diving, motorcycling, hiking ... but I couldn't find peace. At the end of each activity I'd be back where I started. So when 2013 came along and I saw an advert for a sailing school I decided to give that a try.

Baby steps

At the Spinnaker Sailing School in Redwood City I went through my first American Sailing Association (ASA) certification. Then for a year or so I joined cruises with the school as a crew member. I followed that with my second certification, which gave me the option to charter a small sailing boat, a Merit 25. I sailed with fellow club members for a while, but the complexities of scheduling and most importantly those of social dynamics on a small boat led me to singlehanded. It was not easy – at that point I was still just trying to learn to sail. But one day I was sailing with my wife and daughter on a typical San Francisco Bay afternoon with winds in the 15–25 knots range. We started from the



*At the end
of a two-
week family
charter in
Guadeloupe*

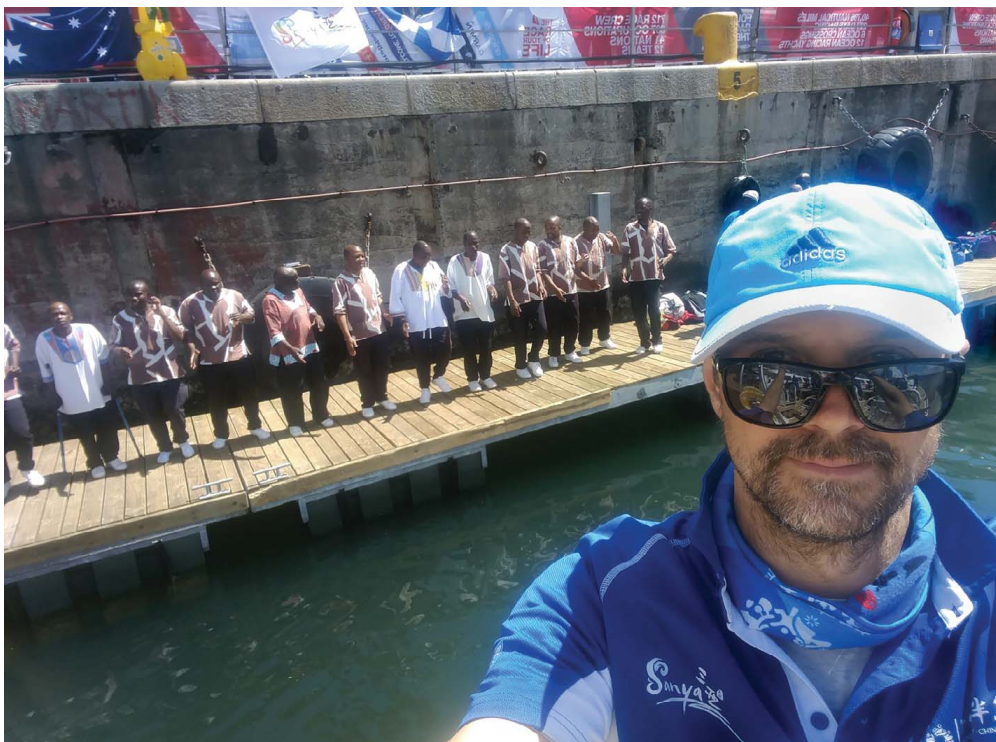
Redwood City Marina, slipped under the San Mateo-Hayward Bridge, and continued a little while before turning around. San Francisco proper was on the horizon, the boat well heeled as we beat our way north, spray coming over the bow and the air fresh and salty. And that's where I was hit by the promise of the horizon ... come to me, leave all behind! I was so excited – I didn't know what I know now. The call of adventure, that's what it was ... and still is, but now I know better.

Of course we soon had to turn around to get home before sunset, but that afternoon marked a step change in my sailing aspirations. I started reading more than ASA course books, and dove into everything I could find about solo sailing and heavy weather sailing. In particular, I started reading stories of sailors who'd embarked on grand adventures. I went through all the classics, all the while continuing to sail. I even became an instructor! Not that I'm a good teacher, but I saw it as an opportunity to learn more about sailing. Even so, I knew I needed to get offshore experience and started looking at my options.

High seas

In my quest for offshore experience I landed on the Clipper Round the World Race. I also discovered that a solo yacht race from San Francisco to Hawaii happens every two years. Both were costly propositions! I had to make a choice and, after much ruminating, opted for the Clipper Race. I planned to do two legs – the South Atlantic crossing as a 'warm up' to the North Pacific crossing. My goal was to experience heavy weather with an experienced skipper. I went through Clipper's four weeks of training and waited with great anticipation for the day on which I'd leave for the high seas. Sadly,

Arriving in Cape Town with the Clipper Round the World Race



The day I met Double Espresso

I should have known better. Relationships between skipper and crew aboard even a 70ft boat can be difficult, and a crew of 22 is not a happy environment for me. I'll skip the details, but when I came back home, with much relief, I chose to opt out of my second Clipper leg. Then at some point, I can't remember exactly when, I decided that I needed to do the solo race to Hawaii too!

I made connections with the Singlehanded Sailing Society of San Francisco Bay (SSS) and explored my options for buying a boat. I didn't want to spend hours, weeks, months preparing a boat for an ocean crossing so I was looking for a boat that was in good shape. Of the cruiser/racers that I was seeing, the ones I liked best were those that leaned towards racing, mostly because they appeared simple to me – no cabinetry, no plumbing, no complex engine etc. I was tempted by an Olson 30 that had been prepared for the Pacific Cup, and after much debate and dropping more money than I should have, I was good to go sailing.

I dry sailed *Double Espresso* out of Santa Cruz for a year, spending a lot of time heeling off the Pacific coast in 20+ knots of winds. I progressively became familiar with all the weirdness of sailing solo and how much control you have to give up. I also became familiar with the harshness of being alone when one is tired, cold, wet, sick and stressed out. I strongly recommend any aspiring singlehander to read Andrew Evans' *Singlehanded Sailing: Thoughts, Tips, Techniques & Tactics**. I still think the second chapter is the most important.

My experience of solo sailing is that it's not much about sailing. It's about taking care of the skipper to make sure that a relatively fresh body and mind are ready when needed. It's about taking care of the boat – being a mechanic, plumber, electrician (who's also good with electronics), sailmaker, fibreglass repair amateur, and all the other little jobs that pop up along the way. It's about staying out of harm's way and getting good speed from the boat by analysing weather charts and routing software

* Published by International Marine / Ragged Mountain Press in 2014.





Dead downwind under twin jibs with the backup generator charging the batteries

projections. And finally, yes, it's also about sail trim and sail changes, but outside the context of a race this is not important. It's rarely about helming as the autopilot is going to do it better (at least for me). The ultimate lesson for singlehanded sailing is not much different from what a life coach would say – take it easy, stay healthy, stay sane, and take care of what you see when you see it.

With all my outings and reading, the pull of the horizon kept growing. I was not even through with this race to Hawaii project and I was already looking for a bigger boat, one to sail around the world...

We have a winner!

The race started in June 2018. The 16 or so competitors battled to get as far west as they could, as an area of light to no wind was due to plague the fleet 24 hours after the start. Despite my best efforts I got stuck in it for a few hours and found myself trailing behind the leaders. Originally I hadn't planned to actually race – my reason for participating was to make an ocean crossing within a safe(r) environment, surrounded by other skippers, should something go awry – but under peer pressure I caught the racing spirit. I put in a lot of mental preparation, mostly due to my fear of losing, or more precisely to my fear of feeling like a loser should I do poorly. An oh so familiar feeling – regardless of how well I do something, I'll always feel like I'm not good enough.

I'll skip the details of my twelve days at sea, which I thoroughly enjoyed once I got over the sea sickness. I was lucky in that race and finished first overall and in several other categories, coming home with five trophies. For anyone interested there is a long thread about this race and the preparation leading to it on the SSS forum.

The big leap – *Changabang*!

Back home after selling *Double Espresso* to the Kauai Yacht Club, I continued my search for a new boat. After much consideration I had settled on a Class 40. They are designed for fast, safe, short-handed, long-distance offshore sailing, with valuable safety features. My budget didn't allow me to buy a recent generation boat, so I was looking at older boats when I discovered *Changabang* was for sale in France. She was designed by François Lucas and built in a barn by her first owner, Pascal Doin. With red cedar strip-planked construction she is solid, light and stiff. Inside, there is plenty of head room for this 6ft 6in (2m) sailor. After a bit of negotiating, the seller and I found common ground and by January 2020 *Changabang* was hoisted onto a cargo ship, transported to San Diego, and dropped into the waters of the Pacific. With friends we sailed her

to Half Moon Bay, where she resides today. I have to say it, I like *Changabang*. She definitely feels like a home to me – sparse and bare but a home nonetheless.

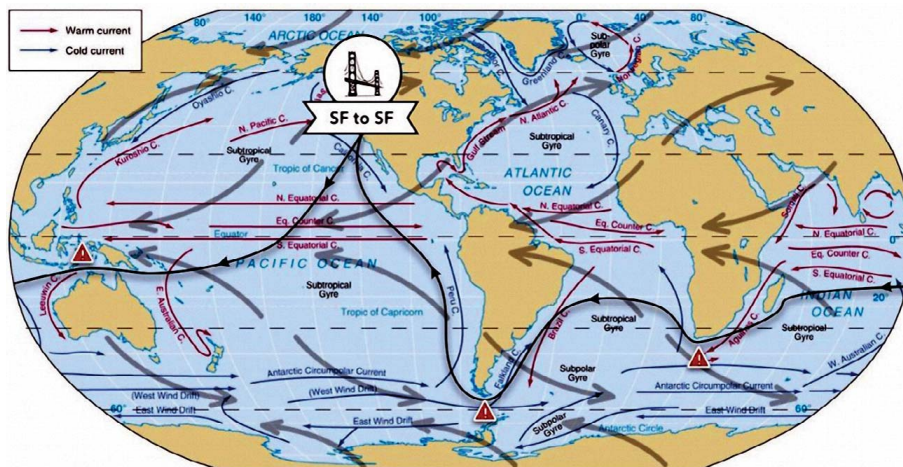
Changabang in France where I found her

Throughout her life *CaB* had been run on a small budget and I was not about to change that tradition. I invested what I could, reached out to companies for in-kind donations or product discounts, and was the lucky recipient of an OCC Challenge Grant (yeah!), but for the most part this was all self-funded.



But why go West?

I'd like to stop a moment and share how I came to settle on a San Francisco to San Francisco westabout solo non-stop unassisted voyage. In researching boats and voyages, I discovered that Chinese sailor Guo Chan had set a baseline for the 40ft and under



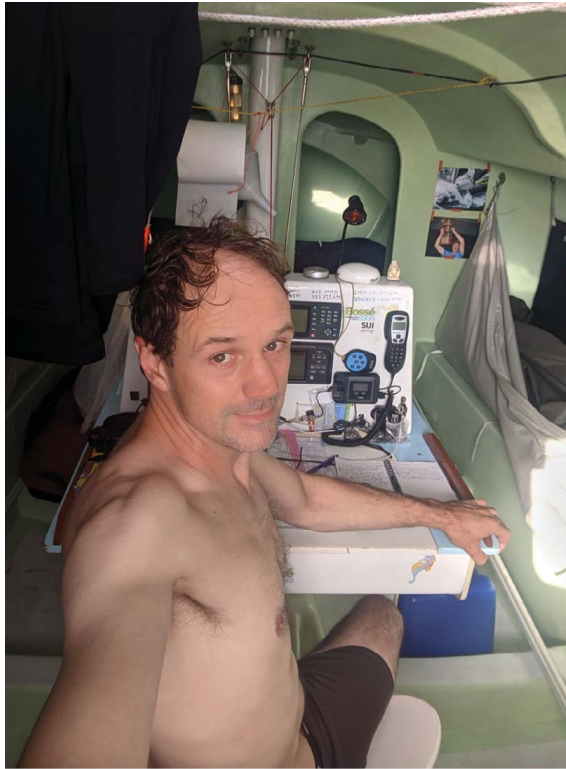
The intended course of my round the world escapade

solo round the world record (per WSSRC* guidelines). I dug a little more and learned that Christian Dumard had been his remote navigator. When Christian realised I was in San Francisco he quickly suggested that I should go west instead of east – and it made perfect sense! Granted Torres Strait, Cape Agulhas and Cape Horn are no easy feats going west, but for the rest it could be lots of tradewind sailing. Sign me up! The next thing I knew, Chris Tibbs had my journey all charted out. All that was left was

* The World Sailing Speed Record Council

A practice day, proudly showing the OCC Challenge Grant's investment





Changabang's nav table, galley, sleeping quarters ... well, everything

to get ready, which meant training, provisioning, loading back up plans for backup plans, and more ... much more.

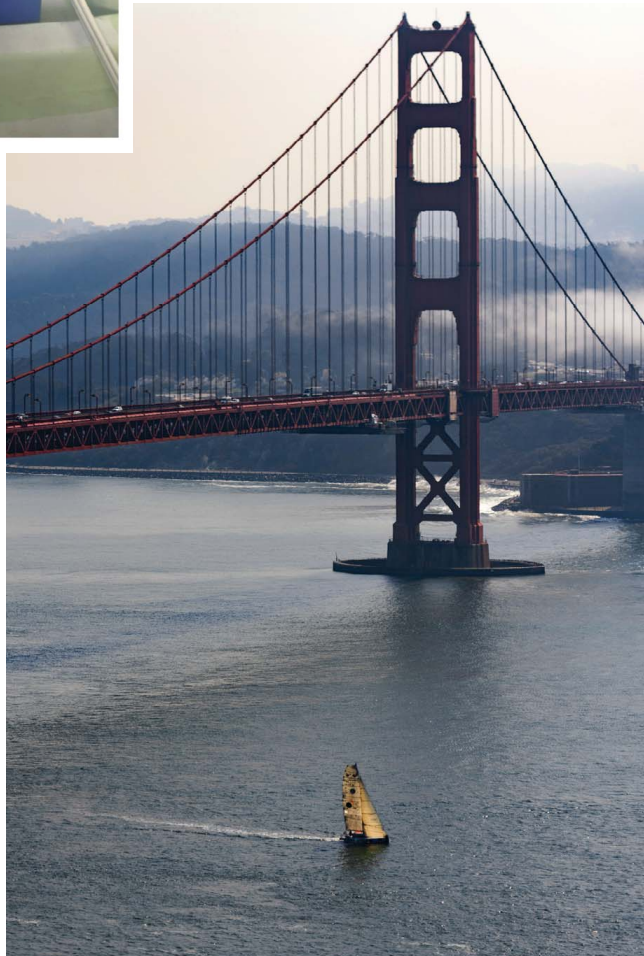
Who's Marie?

I have limited space to tell you the rest of the story so it may feel a little rushed from now on, but I have a blog at <https://pjsails.com> which has tons of information about my journey, describing the different steps I took and sharing progress updates. I'd encourage the nerdy reader to check it out for additional details. For this story,

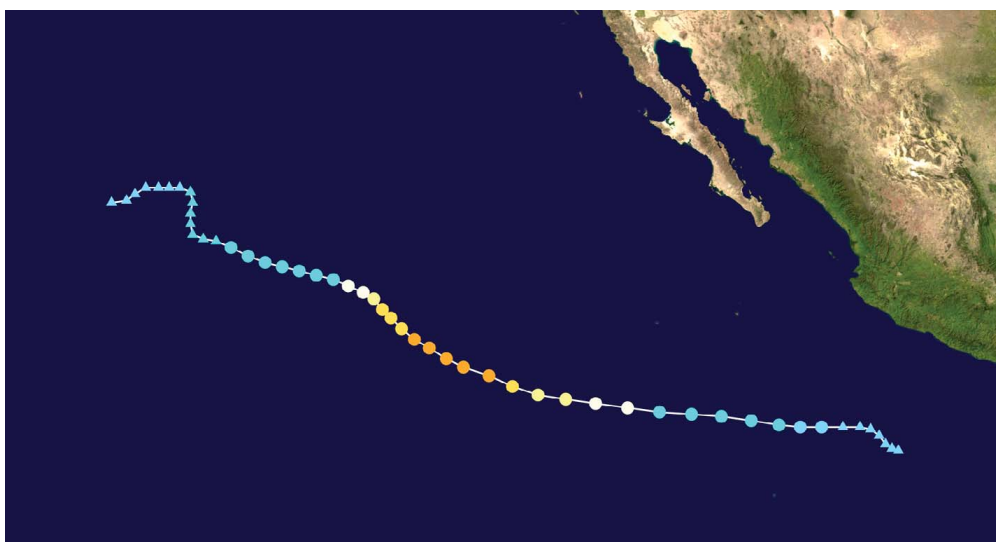
I'll skip over a good deal and take us to the day I left – 30th September 2020.

By now I was quite nervous and anxious to leave. Again, using hindsight, what I was really anxious about was to 'get it done with'. There are so many reasons why a project like this can fall short of accomplishing its intended goal that I truly wanted to have accomplished what I set out to do and be done with it. I had completely forgotten why I wanted to leave in the first place and, to be fair to myself, back then I didn't know it clearly.

*Departing from
San Francisco, 30th
September 2020. Photo
Keaton Hare Photography*



The weather wasn't looking very attractive. In the turbulence left behind by Tropical Storm *Lowell* another depression was brewing. I could have waited, but there was a risk of seeing no wind along the Pacific coast after the depression cleared, which could have delayed departure several weeks. And there could still have been additional depressions after this one, so I decided to give it a go and benefit from the pick-up in wind we anticipated. About the time I left the depression was designated as Tropical Storm *Marie*, and it would escalate all the way to category 4. Most often, late in the season as we were, tropical storms and hurricanes tend to go west for a bit, then back east to Baja, but this one was set on seeing *Changabang* up close. So it was a game of hide and seek as I tried to make my way south and *Marie* moved west.



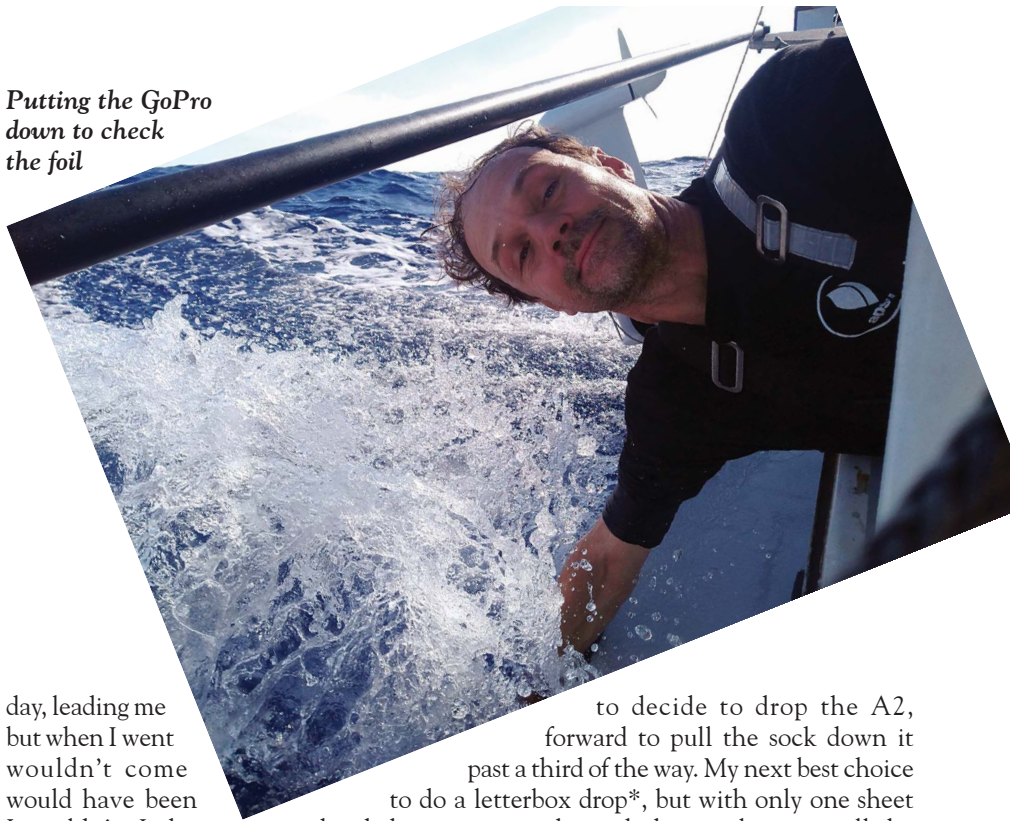
Tropical Storm Marie's path as shown on Wikipedia

Can you say bang?

Although I managed to sail around *Marie* unscathed (with much help from land, including Christian, Skip, Randall and Tom), my lack of true long-distance offshore solo experience started to take its toll. I began to ignore small signs and that abdication of seamanship cost me. First I damaged the big spinnaker, then lost a spinnaker sheet, then procrastinated to repair a halyard, then damaged the big spinnaker again (as in completely tore it apart), then an autopilot failed, followed by a hydro-generator, then I damaged the boom and lost two spinnakers. After two weeks and crossing the doldrums, I decided to turn around and sail home.

When sailing solo, it is important to realise that small mistakes add up – I'll give an example. My spinnaker halyard had chafed so I took it down and replaced it with a new halyard, just as strong but of 9mm diameter instead of 11mm. Being new, it was a little more slippery and wasn't holding as well on the winch as the old 11mm rope. I also lost a spinnaker sheet, which I didn't think I needed to replace as I'd be on the same tack for a very long time. So now I'm flying my A2 with a different halyard and only one sheet, which is fine ... except when things go wrong. The wind picked up later that

*Putting the GoPro
down to check
the foil*



day, leading me
but when I went
wouldn't come
would have been
I couldn't. I then

spinnaker through the slot between the mainsail and the boom. This worked fine until I needed to ease the halyard, but with the new halyard not showing much friction on the winch it slipped, and in a moment the sail was in the water. As I tried to get it back aboard the weight of water tore the sail. None of this would have happened had I repaired the spinnaker halyard and replaced the lost sheet. Small things with big consequences – the usual outcome for the procrastinating solo skipper.

There had been many things to be proud of. We had made very good progress, mostly making 200–240 miles a day. I had not been injured. I like to think that I was doing a good job keeping my blog updated and, for the most part, attending to *Changabang's* needs. But I became increasingly concerned that, at the rate things were going downhill, I would find myself in an isolated place having to disburse large amounts of money to fix up *Changabang* so I could limp back home. There were also concerns that with the Covid crisis ongoing, finding a safe port could be an issue.

And so, after two weeks going southwest, I pocketed my dream and started my

to decide to drop the A2,
forward to pull the sock down it
past a third of the way. My next best choice

to do a letterbox drop*, but with only one sheet

decided to try to use the sock dousing lines to pull the

* When flying a loose-footed mainsail, one can use the slot between the foot of the mainsail and the boom (the letterbox opening) to squeeze the air out of the spinnaker. To do this you bring the lazy spinnaker sheet round and lead it through the letterbox opening, then pull the spinnaker through and into the cockpit, cabin or bag (you don't want it to inflate again) by letting go of the tack and progressively easing the halyard at the same time.

journey back home – which proved to be my hardest sailing. For the better part of three weeks I sailed upwind in a lightweight boat which loves to bang hard off the back of waves. After a couple of weeks of that ungodly treatment we were approaching the Pacific coast, and the wind started dropping as a low pressure system caught up with the Pacific high. A day or two away from home I was parked for half a day and half a night, but finally the northwest winds filled in and carried me home, power-reaching with two reefs in the main and the gennaker pushing *CaB* to speeds regularly above 10 knots. It must have been around midnight when I made landfall to meet my wife, daughter and a friend.

And? What then?

After landfall I went through a flurry of activity to take care of *Changabang*'s wounds and empty all the stuff that was aboard. But after a Christmas had passed I retreated from sailing. *Changabang* was left on her own for the better part of three months while I took coding classes and tried to find gainful employment. I was depressed, sad and not in a good place, but with spring things started to get better. As I write this in May 2021 I'm again in preparation mode, fixing up some of the leftovers from my first attempt. I need to acquire more spare parts and maybe get new spinnakers*. I'm afraid more money will be spent on this not so ultimate (more like foolish) escape plan, but I have high hopes that I will find my stride again. I know two important things now – why I want to do this, and what not to do while at sea (ignore that little voice inside that tells me to take care of things). I just need the stars to line up again, to float up my cruising kitty, and well, cast off. I've set a new departure date for October 2022. Follow me at <https://pjsails.com> and reach out if you would like to support, comment, donate, share – anything!

Thank you to the OCC and to all the members who supported *CaB* and me in this adventure – Randall Reeves, Lauren Henry, Bill Hatfield and Bill Strickland – and to the companies who helped us in kind – PredictWind, apsu nutrition, ATN, Pelagic Autopilot Systems, Backpacker's Pantry, Hammer Nutrition, Ronstan, Leading Edge Sails, BMC, UK Sailmakers, Bainbridge International and PYI. And last, a big thank you to my wife, mother and daughter for their ongoing support.

About the OCC Challenge Grants

OCC Challenge Grants were established in 2020 as a way to support sailors in pursuit of world-class sailing and sail exploration, or those looking to make a difference with a conservation or environmental project centred around the ocean, marine or maritime environment. Grants are open to both members and non-members, although non-members must satisfy the minimum requirement for membership. Intended to help with project costs, they range from £250 up to £3000. Visit <https://oceancruisingclub.org/Challenge-Grant> for more information. If you think that you, or someone you know, might qualify we encourage you to contact us at challengegrant@oceancruisingclub.com.

* See page 108.

