

FETCHING PANACEA

Peter McCrea and Doug Theobalds

(This is the voyage for which the 2015 Rambler Medal has been awarded – see page 28.)

‘Arrival – underway – Stream sucks – go West – wind is up – 0300 knockdown! – chaos & smoke – assess – regroup – jury rig 12V power – Stream crossing – Smiles’

... this cryptic passage summary was transmitted from *Panacea* to family using a handheld DeLorme inReach communicator, which utilises the Iridium Satellite constellation to transmit e-mail messages and current location. The 160-character limitation of this remote messaging system, every key stroke counting, made it a challenge to convey the complex sets of circumstances we had experienced during the six-day passage.

Some seven weeks prior to this Haiku-like transmission, *Panacea*, a Freedom 32 cat sloop, had been left on a storm mooring in Bermuda following the solo leg of the biennial 2015 Bermuda 1-2 Race, after skipper Peter McCrea and son John received debilitating injuries in a moped accident while sightseeing prior to the start of the second, two-handed leg. Following the mishap both flew back home to heal broken bones and, while recuperating, Peter sought a crew member who could help deliver

Panacea back to mainland USA before the hurricane season. Doug Theobalds, President of Epifanes NA Inc, was the first to offer his time and extensive offshore experience, an offer quickly accepted. The two men had served on committees together for a decade, and a few years previously had delivered



*Preparing
Panacea in
Bermuda before
departure*

Doug's boat from Mystic, Connecticut to Thomaston, Maine, so the critical 'crew chemistry' imperative on a small boat at sea had been proven.

The boat retrieval mission started off with a hiccup when the pair arrived at the local regional airport only to learn the early morning Cape Air flight was cancelled, the assigned pilot not having shown up. Fortunately one of the passengers, coincidentally a Senior Vice President of the company, saved the day. Without missing a beat he personally rented a vehicle to deliver several passengers to the Portland Jetport and ferried Doug and Peter to Boston's Logan Airport to make missed connections. After an overnight stay in Boston paid for by Cape Air – great service! – and a 0300 wakeup call, they headed to Bermuda via an 0530 flight to NYC with connections to Bermuda ... a long day.

Long-time friend Verna Oatley, together with husband Bobby, owners of Captain Smokes Marina and the Godet & Young Hardware Store in St George's, had looked after *Panacea* and assisted with transportation (avoiding renewed moped challenges) during her brief stay at their marina while provisioning for the 635 mile passage to Newport, RI.

The Summary...

'Arrival' By the morning of Thursday 6 August, a scant 2½ days after arrival in Bermuda, captain and crew felt ready to depart – having provisioned, scrubbed the hull, checked out all vessel systems, conversed with Gulf Stream and weather-routing advisors, paid bills, etc. In the haste of leaving the marina, topping off diesel, making last-minute provisions (beer and olive oil) and clearing out with Bermuda Customs at Ordinance Island, we missed the 0730 single-sideband (SSB) weather chat with Chris Parker, the Florida-based meteorologist and vital element in a safe passage home. Plenty of time to catch it tomorrow, we thought, confident in the knowledge that the forecast was for benign weather for several days ahead. Had we listened, Parker would probably have tried to discourage a departure at that time.

'Underway' at last, with great relief to be heading homeward with full water tanks and extra diesel, unlike the light-ship configuration *Panacea* usually has when racing. The SSB long-range radio was used to contact a cruiser in Onset, Massachusetts who was asked to send an e-mail to Parker stating we were underway and would contact him at our scheduled radio time the next morning. At sunset seas and wind moderated from showery rainsqualls in Bermuda to quieter conditions, and by midnight we were motor-sailing with the engine providing gentle thrust, moving the boat along at just over 5 knots. At that RPM the diesel consumes less than 0.4 US gallons per hour, giving us 500 miles of motoring range. A watch schedule was agreed upon of two hours on, two off during the night and unstructured rest periods in daylight, with someone always awake and alert for alarms (bilge, AIS, radio schedule, log entry, etc) and visual watch-keeping.

'Stream Sucks' was our paraphrase of what Chris Parker had to say on Friday morning. A massive, energetic system akin to a nor'easter would create untenable sea states in the region of the Gulf Stream for which *Panacea* was heading, some 300 miles to the northwest. No immediate alternative other than turning back to Bermuda was offered, and we signed off to rethink options. We decided to slow our 7+ knot rate of progress, so doused the main after securing first and second reefs as a precaution, and reached



northwest under the small jib at 4.4 knots. We advised Parker of our new 'go-slow' strategy with a brief InReach message. Respond he did, with a three-page imperative!

'Go West' was the essence of his advice, warning us *not* to go above 36°N until reaching a Gulf Stream entry point at 36°N 72°W – a long way off the rhumb line course one normally takes. But this was not normal weather. He also cautioned that building southwesterlies with squalls would be upon us by Saturday on our way west. This option was preferable, however, as it offered a path of avoidance of very nasty Gulf Stream weather at the expense of extra miles travelled, while still heading for home – eventually. Soon after 1630 on Friday the double-reefed main was raised and the Monitor wind vane set to maintain a course heading west along 34°40'N, doing 6 knots through the water.

'Wind is up!' By 1830 Saturday the winds were 28–33 knots apparent, increasing to high 30s in squalls. The double-reefed main was handed, with Doug doing the deck work while Peter advised the sequence and worked the cockpit. Continuing under small jib alone with the Monitor steering, *Panacea* was doing 5.4 knots over the ground, heading slightly north of west. By midnight Parker's Gulf Stream entry waypoint target was 132 miles distant, bearing 323°M. Wave action was increasing but did not appear to be threatening, and *Panacea* was comfortable and not overpowered despite the deteriorating conditions.

'Knockdown!' At 0300 squally conditions saw Peter on watch, sitting on the perch in the companionway, just inside the 'offshore slider' which closes off the below-decks space from the cockpit with a 5 x 24in (12.5 x 61cm) opening at the top. Doug was

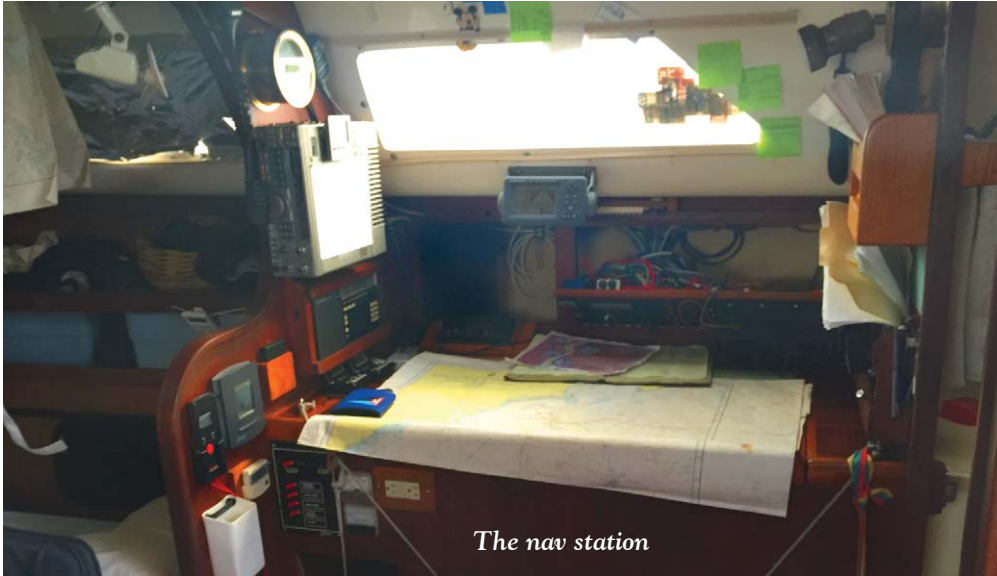
off watch in his bunk in the aft cabin. As quick as a blink and with no breaking sea pre-warning roar, Peter became horizontal with water pouring in through the small slider opening, accompanied by a cacophony of sound as loose objects followed parabolic arcs across the cabin to land on the nav station and leeward berth. Doug awoke lying on a hull-mounted port light, and emerged quickly from aft as *Panacea* righted herself and resumed sailing with an added load of seawater and flailing jib, its top third severely compromised.

‘Chaos & smoke’ The bilge alarm sounded as the 6in or so of sea water in front of the nav station began to filter below, while we tried to capture and bail as much as possible with a dish pan. A dozen eggs in their container had mysteriously appeared on top of the nav station, along with much of the contents of the spice rack from the opposite side, but none of the eggs appeared to have suffered from the 12ft arc across the galley from *inside* the ice chest.

A serious new threat quickly emerged when acrid smoke appeared at an access slider adjacent to the 12V electrical panel. A search for the ignition source proved useless as the fumes quickly became thick, black, acrid and absolutely impossible to breathe, forcing both of us out into the cockpit. Without a lot of discussion but with a shared belief that something had to be done, *and soon*, Peter, with fire extinguisher in hand, dove back into the cabin and shut off the three battery switches in three different areas of the boat, thereby nipping the source of the electrical fire at its origin. A second trip below left an open galley hatch to windward, resulting in rapid clearing of the cabin atmosphere in order to regain the shelter of the cabin to assess the damage. Doug deployed the cockpit-mounted manual bilge pump and drew air after 150 strokes.

With all electrical power off we were basically a ‘dead ship’, but with the Monitor steering and the damaged jib still pulling, albeit noisily, we were still making westing and slightly north. It was agreed that little more could be done after the cabin sole





The nav station

had been cleared of detritus and trip hazards, and we both retreated to our berths to think through the situation.

‘Assess’ Little sleep took place over the next few hours as we separately, and later, jointly worked through the possibilities of bringing lost functions back online. Daylight brought a slight moderation in conditions and a sense of optimism when it was discovered that the engine start battery and circuits, as well as the independent SSB/Tricolor/GPS battery and circuits (a Bermuda 1-2 requirement), were unaffected by the electrical fire. Only the main house bank and its 20 breakers were inoperative – including chart plotter, all three electric autopilots, nav lights, cabin lights, propane solenoid, bilge pump, wind instruments, radar, VHF and AIS. A visual inspection of the engine compartment was carried out, paying close attention to the engine mounts. Then the engine was started and run in gear to ensure that no lines fouled the prop and that the shaft was not bent. The SSB circuit was gingerly energised, but though its functionality was intact the radio itself appeared unusable. Fortunately, the inReach communicator continued to operate for text communications.

‘Regroup – 12V jury-rig power’ With an improving sea state and the waves now on the quarter, Doug handed the dying jib while Peter engaged the engine. An electric autopilot was necessary to hold a satisfactory course, so a jumper 12V feed from a live ‘good’ circuit was run to the nearest autopilot with inelegant but adequate results, considering. A similar patch soon had the stove capable of receiving propane so that an accustomed morning jolt of dark roast was assured. When the nav station lid was lifted, containers of olive oil and wasabi from the spice rack, along with a second egg carton with ten eggs, were discovered sitting atop seawater-saturated charts. Only two eggs were cracked. This was obviously the first carton of eggs to have landed, as the nav station lid was forced open either by water pressure or by the rotational energy in the knockdown. Makes one wonder about the Newtonian mechanics of full egg cartons at sea!

*Smiles from
Peter and Doug
on arrival in
Newport*

Another strange flight path was the one taken by a copy of *Vertue XXXV*, a slim volume describing a noteworthy transatlantic passage in a 25ft sloop written by Ocean Cruising



Club founder Humphrey Barton. The book was found wedged into a centreline overhead handhold – as if the author wanted it to be the last item to remain dry.

‘Stream Crossing’ Chris Parker predicted good stream-crossing weather “just around the corner to the North”, and sail was soon added to the engine to reach the waypoint. By 0800 Monday *Panacea* was reaching at 6+ knots with no engine, heading across the Gulf Stream in bright sunshine. Parker warned, however, of increasing winds and strong convection with squalls to 60 knots the following day, on the track to Newport. And then there was a further surprise. Some of the largest mature waves Peter had seen in his 24 crossings of the Gulf Stream were encountered – monsters that we were both sure spanned 25ft from crest to trough. The scene was both awe inspiring and humbling.

Early on Tuesday morning both the first and second reefs were set as the southerly wind increased. A third reef was added two hours later, the small sail area which resulted being quite compatible with the Monitor steering on a broad reach. The weather worsened, making the third reef the right choice for most of the day, but by dark it was clear the bullet had been dodged and we had been spared the worst part of the predicted system.

‘Smiles’ The wind was down by the time we arrived just south of the Nantucket shipping lanes, so with 58 miles to Brenton R-2, the entry buoy to Newport, the engine was engaged. *Panacea* passed R-2 close aboard at 1010 Wednesday morning, 13 August, six days and 796 miles after leaving Bermuda.

Observations and lessons learned

A conclusion to any story is essential, and this one is no less deserving. There are always lessons learned:

- First, the time prior to the ‘incident’ was reviewed. We both agreed that *Panacea* had not been over-canvassed for the conditions. Had the wave intensity risen to a severe state we could, and probably would, have dogged the leeward heads hatch, typically kept ajar for some cabin ventilation, fastened the latches on the ice chest

and nav station lids, and installed the top closure panel on the offshore slider. These actions would have kept most of the water out of the interior of the vessel, thereby preventing the electrical fire. Loss of the jib would not have been prevented.

- By far the greatest asset during recovery was Peter's intimate relationship with *Panacea*. His mental picture and thorough knowledge of the workings of the vessel proved critical time and time again. With this level of familiarity, and a well thought-out toolbox, we were able to repair essential systems and continue in relative comfort and safety.
- The sea state and wind conditions were challenging at best during the passage. There was temporary relief a couple of nights and, at last, a glorious morning the day landfall was made. Despite the considerable challenges, we both remained calm and were able to share ideas, suggestions and opinions. In spite of the incidents experienced and chaos below, voices were never raised or harsh words spoken.
- It is good to remember that most boats can withstand far more than their crew. Skippers must know their boats inside and out, remain clearheaded and calm, and regain control as quickly as possible after the unexpected happens. *Panacea* was fortunate to have two good seamen aboard – needless to say, Peter was extremely pleased with his choice of Doug to help fetch *Panacea* home.

