

SAILBOAT TO GRENADA

James Muggoch

(‘Selfie’ photos by High Viz Media using a Go-Pro time-lapse camera.)

I first sailed the Atlantic Ocean more than 49 years ago at the age of 18, one of a 16-strong crew on the 180 foot luxury yacht *Camargo V*. I well remember the feeling of awe and fear at the sheer vastness and relentless power of the sea, and vowed never to go near it again. So quite why, two years ago, when my wife Louise asked, “What do you want to do for your 65th birthday?” I heard myself saying “I’m going to buy a small sailing yacht and cross the Atlantic singlehanded” I have no idea!

The idea stuck, however, and after three months of Louise saying I couldn’t do it, she changed her mind and, in front of witnesses, told me I should. This, of course, put me right on the spot, and within a very short time plans were in place to find and purchase a small yacht, sail the Atlantic, run her up the first beach I came to, and give the keys to the first local I met on condition they drove me to the nearest airport so I could fly home! Then Ian Joseph, a close friend who comes from Grenada, suggested that if I was going to give the boat away, I should give it to the Sea Scouts in St George’s, Grenada. This idea, together with a feeling that since being a youth leader in Hounslow I had not done much for other people, made me think that maybe I could help youngsters again and have my possibly last big adventure at the same time...

Within a few months I had been introduced to the Grenadian High Commissioner in London, His Excellency Joslyn Whiteman, and also the Deputy Commissioner of Scouts, Tim Kidd. With their full support and encouragement, Louise and I started looking for a suitable yacht that would not only handle the passage but would be the right yacht



*Annie of Orwell before James
bought her. Photo by
Boatshed, Cowes*



*Before leaving Cowes.
Photo S Liebenberg*

for the Sea Scouts in Grenada. We had a great time trawling the internet, scouring yachting magazines and visiting many of the smaller boatyards of southern England. We saw some lovely boats, some honest-to-goodness death-traps, and finally stumbled across a lovely looking (but very small) David Sadler-designed Frigate 27 in our old sailing area, East Cowes on the Isle of Wight. She was called *Annie of Orford*. The broker, Corrine Willard of Boatshed, proved to be an expert in her field and later became a good friend – in fact her husband Simon did the singlehanded delivery to the Canaries, and had to be restrained from doing the whole trip! Then the seller, Phil Washington,

knocked £2000 off the asking price because the boat was going (I hoped!) to a good cause, and threw in every spare he could find – we were on our way!

My experience of boats is quite varied as I've sailed all my life, but more as a cruising



chap than a 'gung-ho' type. My family moved on to a large houseboat when I was 14 (I'm writing this on the same boat 53 years later) and my boats have been everything from canal boats to barges, RIBs to sailing yachts, plus I've worked on large motor yachts, oil exploration vessels and film location pirate ships. I hold various qualifications including RYA Yachtmaster and Ocean Yachtmaster (shore-based) and for the past 20 years or so have owned the ex-RN steam tug COB, in which we led the vintage tugs in the 2012 Queen's Diamond Jubilee Pageant, of which I am hugely proud. However, I'm very short on ocean sailing experience and, due to time and business commitments, only managed a few weekends aboard *Annie* in the Solent before the 'off'.



A pre-departure sail in the Solent. Photo Myk Heald

Louise and I spent Christmas in Australia, visiting our children James Jnr and Natalie (married to a fine fellow called Andrew, who set up a tracking device called 'SPOT 3' which gave my position every 10 minutes to anyone who cared to watch on their computer), so I engaged Corrine's husband Simon Judge to sail *Annie* down to Lanzarote in the Canary Islands for me to pick up later in the year. This he managed with consummate ease, leaving *Annie* in Marina Rubicon at the south end of the island.

Louise drove me to Gatwick Airport at a stupid time in the morning of 29 January, the early start and cold, pouring rain only adding to the feeling of being 'once removed'. After a strangely subdued and unemotional farewell I found myself, four hours later, being hailed by Mike and his wife Jean – friends of friends of friends, who had offered to help – and help they did! They met me at the airport, took me to Mike's radio station (The Mix) for a two-hour local radio chat show, then down to the marina to find *Annie*, safe and sound, complete with two dozen 8 litre containers of Evian water for the voyage – who says I don't travel in style! Supplied by Mike and Jean as their contribution to the cause (locals don't drink the mains water), they had carried it all to *Annie* and stored it inside, out of the sun.

All of a sudden I was on my own... The first thing I had to do was decant the water into the main tanks – 70 litres into the original flexible tank under the port side quarter berth and 120 litres into the newly-installed flexible bow tank. This freed up some space, and I could not only get my bags aboard but also lift the floorboards to check for water in the bilges – where to my horror I found not only water, but running water! A quick taste check and some relief – it was fresh! But where from? First I found a leak

on the pipe under the sink, but having fixed it, the water kept coming. It seemed to come from the new tank in the bow, and after a night's sleep, I emptied the tank (into the bilge – all that 'Evian'!) and, having given the tank to some new friends in return for their help, found that it had been installed without a hose clip on the filler pipe!

I filled the 8 litre containers with 'undrinkable' local water (it tasted okay to me!) and, hiding the remaining containers all over the small cabin (no headroom and not much bilge space – only 3 inches between the hull and floorboards – I went to start the 7hp Volvo engine, but despite an expensive service before leaving the UK it remained inert. Three days later, having been informed that the spares would take two or three weeks to arrive, I asked the marina to tow *Annie* out of the harbour, engineless! I felt that, being a sailing boat with a range under power of only 200 miles, I should be able to sail her all the way. I had a solar panel and a wind generator – enough, I felt, to produce sufficient power for the navigation lights and the GPS, AIS and VHF. Then I had to wait for two days while the forecast 38 knot winds blew themselves out and used up the last of my euros on ten lemons and a Mars Bar!

At 0800 on 2 February 2016 I raised the sails and we made our way slowly southwards down the coast of Fuerteventura. I had been told of the 'funnel effect' of the northeast winds, but my lack of experience showed in that I left the sails up far too late and, as darkness fell, found that I was going far too fast. I had stupidly secured the preventer on the boom so had to cut it loose, and the plan to do without roller reefing on the genoa meant that I had to go forward to change headsails. I no longer have full use of my left eye following an accident, which means that I am, to all intents, night blind, plus a motorbike accident four years ago injured my right shoulder (an unhealed break was diagnosed just two weeks before the trip) which was causing considerable discomfort! Even so I managed to lower the sails, catch my right hand in the mainsheet track which runs across the cockpit at knee level, fall from the deck into the cockpit onto my head (which still hurt three months later), and have my first, but not last, totally sleepless night of the next forty-one.

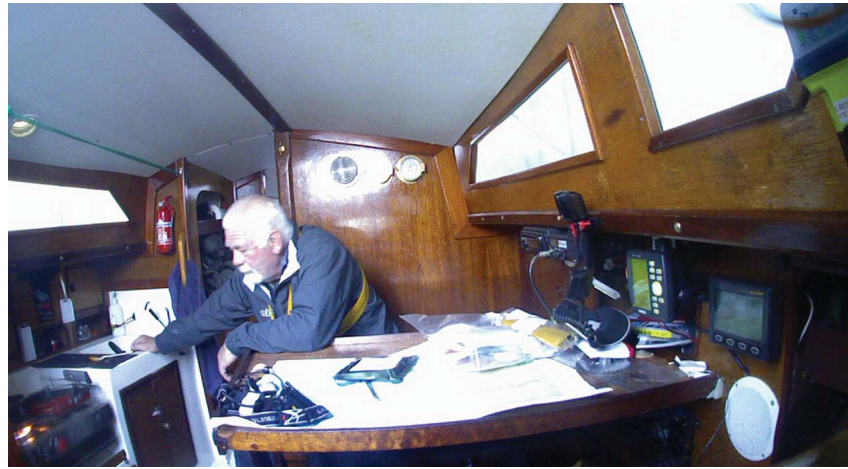
Next morning found *Annie* and me very tired and a bit battered but still (I thought) on course. I was experimenting with various sail combinations in an attempt to get the Windpilot 'Pacific Light' windvane self-steering to behave itself,



A couple of days into the voyage. I soon stopped wearing a harness as I wouldn't have been able to climb back aboard in any case!

*Waiting for
the kettle
to boil!*

but then
the wind
dropped
and we
were totally
becalmed
for about
five hours –
so I went to



bed, waking to sail for the rest of the day in calm conditions and light winds. My head was very sore but had stopped bleeding, though I felt quite sick (not sea-sick – I don't suffer from that). I felt that all was going well apart from the GPS being unable to raise any coverage, so when I saw a large mountain far away on the port bow I thought I'd strayed too far east and was looking at Africa, many miles away. The wind came up, darkness fell and I found myself being blown onto what I thought was Africa – a lee shore, as tired as I can ever remember, and sick with pain. The self-steering came apart, and for about 6 or 7 hours I fought to clear the land, hand-steering and unable to get to a drink or food. Realising that I was in deep trouble, I cut my losses and, ignoring the 'voices' which were starting to haunt me, came about onto port tack, managed to fix the self-steering and went below, leaving poor *Annie* to fend for herself.

Dawn brought me to life, a calm sea and the knowledge that I had survived a very bad and ill-prepared start to an Atlantic challenge, coupled with a very good breakfast and a Co-codamol for my head, making me feel much better. Then I looked up and saw two large islands dead ahead, where there should have been nothing but ocean! I shot below and turned on the GPS – *now* it works! – to find the Canaries dead ahead! I couldn't understand (and still can't) how it happened, but we were right back where we had started two days earlier.

It still remains the single most confusing situation I have ever found myself in on a boat, but I pulled myself together and sailed on. By the time I reached the open Atlantic darkness, which I was beginning to dread, was upon me and once again the wind came up with some force – 25/30 knots over the deck. Out of the shelter of the islands the sea came up too, along with the heavy cloud cover which was to remain for the next eight or ten days. My eye problem meant that I couldn't see the compass, the sea, or the sails, and with no stars to steer by I just lowered the sails and went to bed – not the most seamanlike approach, but the best I could do.

At about this time I started to hallucinate quite badly, with imaginary voices and shadowy shapes about the boat. They lasted for about two weeks and became very real and worrying. All were people I knew as friends, but saying the worst possible things you can imagine – it made things much more difficult than they needed to be. Days and nights merged into a blur, and controlling little *Annie* seemed much more difficult than I'd imagined back in London. I was managing runs of over 100 miles a day, but with great effort and little sleep as the self-steering needed a lot of attention. About



Chartwork at sea – early days, as still have clothes on! (Note the Tesco bags doing duty over the sink)

500 miles southwest of the Canaries I was sitting in the cockpit, wet but warm, thinking ‘I haven’t seen a ship

for six days’ when I realised I was looking straight at what turned out to be the ‘biggest iron ore transport ship in the world’. My thanks to Captain Catalin for that information, and also for e-mailing Louise in Australia and for the weather forecast: ‘force 8 becoming 9, sea 8 metres becoming 12 to 14 overnight’. As I said, thanks for that!

I had to make a decision between bailing out and going to the Cape Verdes or turning right and going on to Grenada – so I tossed a coin, then did the opposite. Carry on it was! By this point my hands were very sore with rope burns, my left shoulder had reacted to the fall a week earlier and was killing me, plus boils and/or salt water sores were making life very uncomfortable when I sat down ... but I must have had a good day, so on we went. Annie’s log for the next two days reads:

10/02/16: 35 knots of wind over deck, lost a jib halyard up the mast, where it became tangled round the radar reflector. Jib sheets on No 2 jib caught round bows, scared they will get round the steering gear. Making 4/5 knots with just storm jib – too gusty to stand on deck – hope I can sort it out when (if) wind drops...

11/02/16: everything soaking wet – sleeping bag and mattress hit by large wave – lot of water in boat – mainly coming in through main hatch and possibly through leaking seam where deck meets hull – hope it’s not the keel bolts! Wind dropped to 20 knots – played my son’s ‘Rammstein’ CD very loud – fantastic with waves – also shut the voices up!

Monday 15th was quite a day! I’d just opened the main hatch and removed the top splash board when the largest breaking wave so far came aboard. It washed me back into the cabin, loads of water, floorboards washing around, all electrics out and the sound of rushing water behind the cupboards over the sink. I was bailing like mad, with no 12 volt pump and the hand pump out in the cockpit. Waves were breaking over the boat, seemingly from another direction? I sprayed the electrics with WD40 to dispel the sea water and carried on bailing, though I was tiring quickly. Suddenly I could smell burning, and to my horror saw smoke and flickering flame from the electrics! I had an extinguisher to hand, but thought it might make things worse, so turned the batteries off, which seemed to do the trick. Annie was still sailing, but more and more water was

finding its way below, via the deckhead over the sink. I went outside, choosing my moment with care, and realised that, as *Annie* had gybed under the force of wind and wave, the preventer had ripped a stanchion clean out of the deck leaving a triangular hole big enough to put my fist through. I was at a fairly low ebb and, thinking I was sinking, put out a Pan Pan call to see if there was anyone about. I really had had enough, and after more bailing changed it to my first (and I hope last) Mayday call. After several repeated calls there was still no response – not surprising, as I was about 800 miles from Africa and 1800 from the West Indies. I realised it was down to me.

Pulling myself together I lowered the sails, which stopped a lot of the driving waves over the deck and, taking the claw hammer, smashed out the cupboards and headlining over the sink. Then I cut up two 'Bags for Life' from Tesco (very apt!) and wedged them in place so that any water coming into the boat went straight into the sink – they stayed there, stopping me sinking, for the next four weeks. Suddenly peace and quiet returned, the wind dropped and the sun came out. I pumped *Annie* out and tried to tidy up, noticing that the cooker had come off its gimbals (no more hot drinks or food) and the chart table had collapsed. I caught my sleeping bag as it drifted past and wondered if it was too late to take up smoking! The seas had gone down a bit, so I tried to block the hole with Plastic Padding by tying my feet to the starboard handrail and lying across the boat, but the waves and the difficulty mixing the paste with both hands while gravity was trying to pull me overboard proved too much and I had to leave it.

Bye the bye, this was the third time I'd thought I was going over the side. The first was on the third day when I just caught the starboard shroud with one hand (the sore one!) as I went, the second when I forgot the 'routine' for changing course with the self-steering, slipped, and just saved myself by grabbing the ensign staff as I went – the staff broke, but not before it had given me enough purchase to fall back into the cockpit! After the first two days I'd given up wearing a harness or lifejacket, as every time I went up on deck I got tangled up in something or other and it had dawned on me that, even if I had ended up attached to *Annie* by a tether, I would never climb back up unaided even with the emergency ladder that we had installed back in Cowes. After all the problems of the day I deployed the sea anchor and took the night off, going to bed to lick my wounds.

From then on things got slowly better. The trade winds kicked in – not the benign soft breezes I'd hoped for, but robust, force 6–7 with warm sunshine and clear skies so I could,

The hole in the deck, finally fixed with resin and Plastic Padding



***Sailing into St George's.
Photo Brian Everest***

at last, steer by the stars. The self-steering and I had come to an arrangement – I used just the genoa and stopped mucking about with the mainsail with two reefs in, and he (or she) steered very well with the wind about 20° off the stern, making about 5 knots but earning me the nick-name (from the Sea Scouts and others) of 'Captain Zig-Zag'.

With the better weather came more sleep, and with more sleep came an end to the 'voices'. I've since learned that I'm not alone in being visited by these things and I hope I never am again. There were ups and downs over the next few weeks



during which I was becalmed for three days, which was worse than the storms. I saw dozens of flying fish and dolphins, and the spouts from whales (but not the whales themselves), and refrained from killing the big fish that stayed close to Annie's side for two days – after all, I had loads of Army rations (cold) and the fish was the only friend I had! Sea birds are great fun during the day, coming in low to have a good look at you, but at night when they try to roost on the deck or land in the cockpit or, even worse, land on the wind vane, they can scare the heck out of you!

***Annie's arrival at Grenada
after 42 days at sea. Photo
Brian Everest***



Being towed into St George's. Photos Robin Swaisland

In the calmer conditions I rewired the VHF radio and managed to re-install the cooker for the last week ... COFFEE! One last surprise – and not a good one – came when I was two days out from Grenada. I saw a yacht about a mile off my port beam, with her sails down and no one on deck. I called her on the VHF, but there was no response and by the time I got back on deck I had lost sight of her. With no engine there was no way that I could turn and get closer to her so I continued on my way.

I held back for the night 25 miles off Grenada, so as not to make landfall in the dark, and at about 0500 got under way for the final day's sailing. At 0730 much to my surprise the radio, which I had left on down below, came to life with a girl's voice





*With the Grand Anse Sea Scouts, local worthies and my wife Louise.
Photo Robin Swaisland*

saying: “Morning Grenada – this is Yachtnet radio – come in please”. I was beside myself with joy and listened to Prickly Bay, Secret Harbour, St George’s and many others checking in. During a silence I called in: “Grenada, this is *Annie of Orford*” and was blown away by the huge response “Hello Annie – welcome to Grenada, we are all waiting for you...”. After the first few calls someone asked if anyone had seen the solo yachtsman who was ten days overdue from Trinidad. I called in with my sighting of the yacht the day before (I’d noted the time and co-ordinates) and they sent out the coastguards. I understand the boat was found five days later, without the sole occupant and his EPIRB smashed.

On a happier note, *Annie* and I sailed the last few miles at speed. Helped by a 2 knot current we shot past all the marinas on the south coast, turned to starboard for the last 5 miles or so into St George’s Bay and tacked (for the first time in 41 days!) towards *Annie*’s new home. I must have looked a bit mad as I put the banners reading ‘SINGLEHANDED ACROSS THE ATLANTIC – DONATED TO THE GRAND ANSE SEA SCOUTS’ back on the hand-rails, as every time I put the cable-ties through the eyelets *Annie* turned through 180°. About half a mile out a police launch came up behind us. I couldn’t make out what the officer was shouting and called for them to come closer, to hear, “Put some bloody clothes on!” I’d forgotten I’d been naked for over four weeks!

Annie positively raced into the harbour and I was amazed to see, in a large RIB coming up behind, my best mate Brian. “What are you doing here?” I shouted. “I’m with her,” he said, pointing to my wife Louise, who I’d failed to recognise! The actual landing, the emotional greetings, the slight stagger from yours truly and, later, first beer and the best hamburger in the world, all passed in a dream. But one thing I did know – I had made it!