Lucky for Some
The Commodore’s First Outing under His New Flag

Paul Heiney

My great grandfather was a longshore fisherman on the Yorkshire coast and by all accounts was the most superstitious of men. If he left the house in the morning and the first thing he saw was either a cat, a priest or a woman, nothing would drag him to sea that day. It’s a wonder he ever got any fishing done.

A little bit of that belief in the irrational seems to have trickled down the generations and although by now it is as dilute a homeopathic potion, it can still surface. It always does when I raise the Club’s burgee at the start of another voyage. There’s much scope for flag hoisting to go wrong as we are all well aware; it can get tangled in the spreaders, be pressed against the mast by the breeze and rendered immovable. All those things have happened to me. But, if it rise to the top of the mast without hesitation and instantly unfurls itself and streams with the breeze, then I know for certain that I am going to have a pleasurable trip. If it doesn’t, there is already a cloud over the future adventure.

This time the stakes were somewhat higher as this was to be my first passage under my new Commodore’s flag and I sensed I was under some pressure to show a modest level of competence. What a shame, therefore, that there was no crowd to see my new flag - still brilliant white and vivid red having just arrived from the flag-maker that week - rise to top of the mast with military precision. If only those lads at the Royal Naval College, which overlooks our Dartmouth mooring, could have seen it, what an example it would have set. Confident that the omens were good and that all would now be well, I dropped the lines and headed south for the Galician Meet with my old friend, Malcolme, on board - my old Cape Horn hand.

We left in the early evening and already we were having to keep an eye on a depression coming up from Biscay; storm Miguel was forecast to be a nasty little piece of work which did eventually take the lives of a French lifeboat crew. My original plan to leave was brought forward a day in the hope of getting tucked up in Brittany before he hit.

It so happened that we sailed on D Day anniversary, and I sensed it as we sailed out of the Dart which, 75 years ago that night, would have been a hive of military activity. And later, heading down to Start Point in the dusk, we saw Slapton Sands where Operation Tiger, a D Day rehearsal, went tragically wrong and the bodies of almost a thousand young American servicemen were washed ashore the length of Lyme Bay. To my generation, which has never known war on our shores, such things are unimaginable. The late Mike Richey (RCC) who I knew quite well in his later years, was the lead navigator on one of the convoys of ships leaving Plymouth.
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He hardly spoke of the war but did admit he was quite grateful to the Germans that night because they had failed to extinguish the lighthouses on the Cherbourg Peninsula and he found the Normandy beaches by taking repeated running fixes.

We found the Channel to be at peace and after an easy crossing we saw
L’Aberwrac’h abeam and we slid in for a quiet night. The next morning revealed Robin of Cowes heading south like us, but planning to seek shelter in one of the Rade de Brest rivers while Miguel blew through. They made the better choice; we opted for Brest’s uninspiring Marina Moulin Blanc, largely because Libby was joining the next day.

The gathering in Camaret was a warm up for what was to come, both in terms of the weather and the company. Spirits were high but the weather was wet and blowy and the thought of the Biscay crossing nagged a little. Nicko Franks was due to give us a talk on the Battle of the Atlantic by the foot of the memorial on the cliff top overlooking the sea, but the weather blew us all indoors into a convenient hall arranged in no time at all by the Vice Commodore who was not only the architect of the entire weeks that were to follow, but also the fireman who had to extinguish problems before they flared up. This he accomplished with no fuss throughout the entire three weeks of the meet.

The good fortune that the smooth raising of my flag had predicted certainly seemed to be coming true, and while it wasn’t a perfect crossing of Biscay it presented no problems. Inevitably, we were headed a little more than we would have liked and made landfall to the east of Cabo de Bares at Viveiro where a lengthy motor up the fjord brings you to a marina in the centre of town. A word about these northern Spanish towns: they are remarkably similar to the point of being hardly able to remember which one you are in. They are victims, I imagine, of a rather bland era of Spanish architecture in the 1960s which gave us, in southern Spain, the infamous hotel developments of the Costas. The towns in the north can supply all you wish for in terms of food and drink but you will not leave with much sense of charm: they had it all knocked out of them years ago. Cedeira was our next stop, then another anchorage under Cabo Prior before La Coruña where the fleet was already gathering.

This was where my luck seemed to run out, not in a serious way but enough to niggle. I confess I failed to show my new flag sufficient respect. While ploughing into the harbour, from astern appeared an RCC yacht later identified as Jeremy Vines on Pickle. They overtook us, as most boats seem to do, but I was distracted by his crew on the stern who was fiddling around with his ensign. What was the man playing at? Of course, he was saluting me! This had never happened before and I was totally unprepared. I think my flag took offence from that moment onwards for the following day, when we dressed overall, I had carefully prepared my signal flags in the correct order for a prompt hoisting at 0800, only to find that as they reached the top of the mast, the knots that were holding them to the halyard came undone and they cascaded around my shoulders leaving the halyard at the top of the mast. But bad luck turned to good, though, when who should be wandering past but Mike Griffiths whose son was an army mountaineer and was up the mast like something rocket propelled. Surely, that was just a little blip in what was going to be an otherwise cruise blessed with good fortune.

We sailed west and south, now picking up a decent north easterly, calling at Muxia to anchor, rounding Cape Finisterre, eventually making our way to Portosin...
for the next gathering, now realising that at every stop on our way to Baiona the parties seemed to get better and better. Portosin gave the added opportunity to visit the pilgrimage site of Santiago de Compostela, but as is often the case with cruising the mundane must take precedence over the sublime, and instead of marvelling at the cathedral I spent the day hunting down a shop to sell me a new phone, my old one having been left under the hatch in pouring rain the night before. Another bit of bad luck.

I was sailing alone from Portosin so I crept out of the compact marina mindful that it is one thing to scrape a fellow member’s boat when you are flying the burgee, but another when you are flying the Commodore’s flag. I shuddered at the thought and took great care.

I found anchorage that night from the north east wind on the south side of the Peninsula de O Grove at San Vicente and anchored in flat water off an endless sandy beach with plenty of chain out, just in case. The following morning, I had planned to make my way down to the Islas Cies where the fleet was to gather for the next party; a barbecue ashore hosted by the Lagos family of Vigo who are great friends of the RCC. But as I lifted the anchor, something went ping and the windlass no longer turned. I hauled the rest of the chain overhand and went, gasping, back to the cockpit. Another a bit of bad luck as it was anchorages all the way to Baiona now. However, I had a new friend called ‘WhatsApp’. I have never embraced social media but I did now. Using the app I could let everyone know that my windlass had let me down and I only had to mention that I was heading for Praia de Barra and David and Jill Southwood tapped out a message telling me they were already there and I could come alongside for the night to be fed and watered in grand style. As signalling goes, WhatsApp is something of an improvement on semaphore.

When I eventually arrived at the majestic Islas Cies, on a day of bright sun and moderate breezes, I swear I put out sufficient chain although I suspect a fair number of members thought I had been mean, mindful that I was going to have to recover it hand over hand. I was in three metres shortly before low water and put out twenty. Surely enough with no strong wind forecast. I went ashore and climbed the hill to the Lagos holiday home where mussels were being boiled, food was being brought ashore from every boat, chilled white wine was flowing under the hot sun until…

‘Is that your boat?’ somebody asked.

Indeed it was, adopting that depressing attitude that all boats have when they are dragging their anchors. The reaction was immediate. A gang of cadets had joined us as part of their three boat cruise out of Vigo, and like a lifeboat team they were sprinting to the beach to launch their RIB. I jumped into a dinghy under the command of Emily Chavasse and we were soon, assault style, clambering aboard my boat which was now well on her way to Baiona under her own steam. The useless chain was quickly hauled aboard and in the nick of time for ten more minutes and she would not have been far from the rocks. Embarrassed now, I asked Emily if she thought anyone had seen my predicament to which she replied, ‘Oh yes, they surely did.’ I wanted to put my head in my hands and have the world go away.
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The bad luck must be behind me now. The meet ended in grand style at the yacht club in Baiona, and with fresh crew I headed north. We spent a night at anchor behind Cape Finisterre and the following morning motored out into a flat calm. But good fortune was again to desert me. While carrying a cup of coffee to the cockpit for the crew, I slipped, flew across the cockpit at high speed, and landed with the sharp edge of the coaming precisely on my hip bone. It was beyond painful and was getting dangerously worse once we were alongside in Camariñas. An early morning visit to the nearest hospital found no fracture, which was good news, but the fact that I could hardly walk was less welcome. I was in Camariñas a full week, denuding the supermarket of bags of ice and the pharmacy of painkillers, before I was mobile again. When it came time to leave, even though the sea was slight, I was as sick as a dog for the first twenty four hours, which is unusual these days.

Anxious to be home now, I thought we were never going to leave Spain behind. A couple of long tacks over 24 hours took us more or less back to La Coruña, but the wind became light and whichever tack we chose we were headed and couldn’t shake off the Spanish coastline. Just before that point where despair sets in, came a light breeze from the west and suddenly we were on our way, released, sailing fast on flat water, eventually leaving Ile de Sein to starboard before shaping up to the southern end of the Chenal du Four where we caught the very beginning of the flood tide. This welcome boost carried us into the Channel where the freshening wind had us reduced to jib only which hauled us all the way back to Dartmouth where my flag came down with as much style as it had been hoisted.

So had my superstitious reliance on my new flag as being a harbinger of good fortune been misplaced? At times it certainly had. But anyone who was on that Spanish Meet will tell you that it was hugely memorable, greatly enjoyable, and a fine testament to the great truth that the RCC is at its very best when it gets together on the water under the red and white flag, even if the flag itself cannot be entirely relied upon to guarantee a good time every inch of the way.